CHAPTER THREE

The Door

Well now, after that burst of excitement I bet you can't wait to get on with the story and find out what's happened to Dad. I can hardly wait myself, and I already know what's happened to him. It's rather unpleasant, actually, but let's not worry too much about that right now. I'll try not to hold you back long, but I need to quickly check a few things before we continue.

Firstly, I sincerely hope you have an open mind, and that you will dismiss nothing you read in these pages out of hand. Up until this point things have been relatively normal in the lives of Ben and Claire, but that's soon to drastically change. I'd hate to think of you sitting there casting doubt on the events detailed in this story, so those of you of a cynical nature would do well to close this book now, because between you and me, things are about to get a little freaky.

Likewise, those of you with a weak stomach are advised to find something else to do rather than continue to read on. Aside from Dad's rather unfashionable pyjamas there has been nothing overtly grotesque in the story thus far. Again, this

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is soon to change, and if you're the type of person to get queasy at the sight of blood, to feel nauseous at the thought of beheadings, or to projectile vomit at the first suggestion of someone being cooked and eaten, then the rest of this tale is almost certainly not for you.

Finally, I'm going to assume that you have at least a basic grasp of the concepts of Transdimensional Astrophysics. Those of you who do *not* have an understanding of this most important scientific field are advised to go and read the excellent and informative *It's a Bit Like a Big Banana, Really* by Brunt Thrushtap of Ing, which should help clarify things somewhat.

Supposing, however, that you are an open-minded, strong-stomached student of Transdimensional Astrophysics, then I am delighted to announce that there is absolutely nothing whatsoever standing in the way of us pressing on with the story.

Nothing, that is, except the bathroom. Remember earlier I said the bathroom was important? Well now I'm going to tell you why.

Despite being a doctor, and despite knowing each of the many reasons why he shouldn't do it, Dad smokes. This is the reason why he took so long to get to the bedroom after hearing Ben's scream for help, being locked in the bathroom having a sneaky cigarette at the time and not wishing for either of his children to find out about his secret filthy habit.

In his rush to find out what all the commotion was about, though, he forgot to stub out the cigarette properly. It's still in the bathroom burning away now, in fact, in an ashtray shaped like half an oyster shell.

In an ashtray shaped like half an oyster shell which is sitting on the windowsill.

In an ashtray shaped like half an oyster shell which is sitting on the windowsill directly below the highly flammable bathroom curtains.

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I told you the bathroom was important.

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Claire's head shook microscopically as she gaped into the gap below the bed, her mind trying, but failing, to come up with a rational explanation as to where Dad could have gone.

"Is this a joke?" she blurted, turning to look up at her brother. The expression of chill panic on Ben's face answered the question on his behalf. Claire peered back into the underbed shadows and chewed her lip like she always did when she was nervous. "Well he can't have just vanished," she reasoned, trying her best to convince herself as much as she was Ben.

Something on the floor glinted in the moonlight, and Claire summoned the courage to shuffle forward a few inches to take a closer look. Her eyes and mouth formed three perfect little circles as she realised what the light was reflecting off.

"There's a handle," she gasped. "There's a handle on the floor!"

"Maybe it just got kicked under there," Ben suggested in a whisper. He thought about the powerful powder-blue hands which had reached out and grabbed hold of Dad. "And maybe you shouldn't get so close," he fretted.

"It's not sitting on the floor, it's *attached* to the floor," Claire explained, as she got to her feet. The legs of the bed groaned on the rough floorboards in protest as she shoved it out of the way, revealing absolutely nothing at all. "There was a handle," she insisted, her eyes locked on the bare and unremarkable expanse of wood at her feet. "There was a handle. I saw it."

Although still too scared to move any closer, Ben took a deep breath and bent sideways at the waist. Now it was a little further from the window, the angle allowed more light to spill under the bed, and even from several feet away Ben could see not just a handle, but an entire small door.

"It's still under the bed," he whimpered.

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"What?"

"The handle," he continued, as he slowly turned the upper half of his body the right way up again. "It's still under the bed."

Claire dropped to her knees again and peered into the gloom. Sure enough, the handle was still sticking up from the floor in the same position it had been just a few moments ago. But how was that possible?

She heaved the bed another few feet across the room, revealing yet another bare patch of floor. Ben and Claire both bent to peep under the bed once again. The shiny metal handle of the ornate little door peeped back out at them.

"Okay," Claire declared, "this is freaky. How can it just move like that?"

"Maybe it's the bed," pondered Ben. "Maybe the door only exists underneath the bed."

Claire looked at him for a moment and sighed. "Remind me to tell Mum you're reading far too many comics," she told him.

"What's that smell?" Ben asked, ignoring her. His freckled nose rumpled as it pointed upwards and sniffed the air. "Smells like--"

"Something's burning!" Claire exclaimed, springing to her feet. She ran to the bedroom door and immediately recoiled from the heat. Angry tendrils of fire stretched out from the bathroom, licking the opposite wall and blocking the route down the stairs.

"What is it?" Ben asked, as Claire leapt back into the room and slammed the door closed behind her. "What's wrong?"

"The window," Claire hissed, as she rushed across the room and tried to force the window open. "We've got to get out the window!"

"Why?" Ben pleaded. "What's happening?"

"The house is on fire!" Claire shrieked, as she fought in vain against the window frame, which looked like it had been painted shut years ago. "Help me get

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this open," she barked, the urgency in her voice startling her terror-stricken brother into action.

Together they struggled against the stiff, unmoving metal frame, both pushing with all their might as a carpet of black smoke began to creep under the bedroom door. Despite their efforts, the window steadfastly refused to budge.

"It's no use," Claire coughed, her aching muscles sagging as they stepped back from the window. "We need to find another way out!"

"The door," Ben choked, pulling the neck of his pyjama top up to cover his mouth. "We can go through the door!"

"Are you crazy?" Claire spluttered. "That's where the fire is!"

"Not that door," Ben retorted, as he dropped to his knees in front of his bed. The handle still sat waiting patiently below it, poking out from the layer of smoke which now covered the whole of the bedroom floor. "*That* door!"

The smoke nipped Claire's eyes as she frantically tried to work out the best course of action. The window was made up of six small panes of glass divided by strips of metal, so even if they broke every pane they still couldn't get out. The stairs and the other bedrooms were blocked by the inferno in the hallway. There was no escape. They were trapped.

"O-okay," she stammered, her stinging eyes not the only reason for the tears streaming down her cheeks. "Let's do it."

The siblings scrambled under the bed as Ben struggled with the handle. Now they were closer they could make out a grotesque, demon-like face bolted to the door, which held the metal ring handle in its mouth. Ornate and unfamiliar symbols were carved into the wood all over the hatch. Unfamiliar, but still somehow sinister.

They screamed as part of the roof in the hall gave way, splintering the bedroom door and allowing a wall of flame to rush in towards them.

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“Turn the handle!” Claire sobbed, as the fire hit the tins of paint and erupted with renewed fury. She grabbed hold of the metal ring along with her brother and gave it a twist. “Turn the--” she began to shriek, before the floor opened up beneath them and cut her sentence short.

Still screaming, Ben and Claire plunged into the yawning chasm of darkness which had suddenly appeared below, as above them the door quietly swung itself closed with a self-satisfied *click*.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Gurt Theeg's Bad Day

Gurt Theeg was having a very bad day. This was not, it should be said, an unusual state of affairs. If asked, Gurt himself would be hard pressed to recall the last day he'd had which had even remotely passed for good. When pushed, he would most likely vaguely recollect the time, several years previously, when for one whole day nothing terrible had happened to him.

In such a situation Gurt's mind would be playing tricks on him, however. That day never took place. Terrible things *always* happened to Gurt Theeg.

Gurt's spindly green legs creaked as he pushed himself up from the crudely fashioned table and picked up his dirty dinner dishes. His sandals *clack-clack-clacked* on the bare flagstones of his kitchen floor as he shuffled over to the wooden barrel he used as a sink and dunked his chipped plate and scuffed cutlery in and out of the cold water. A quick wipe on the rough sackcloth he wore dried the dishes off, and Gurt sat them down on the kitchen counter next to his single bowl, single cup and single saucer.

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Before his very eyes the kitchen counter collapsed, sending his crockery crashing to the grimy stone floor where each piece smashed into a thousand smaller pieces. Gurt sighed and shook his head, his long, pointy nose continuing to wobble for several seconds after his head had stopped. He stooped to pick up the pieces of his dinner set and winced as his spine gave a series of painful cracks. Sometimes – in fact all the time, now he came to think about it – Gurt *really* hated being a Bad Luck Goblin.

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Those of you fortunate enough to be unfamiliar with Bad Luck Goblins will most likely be wondering what one is. Allow me to explain. A Bad Luck Goblin is like a Good Luck Goblin, only in reverse. Ironically, though, in many respects a Bad Luck Goblin is actually luckier than a Good Luck Goblin, despite what the names suggest.

Good Luck Goblins are highly sought after by almost everyone, and most find themselves captured and imprisoned by those wishing to take advantage of their luck-bringing abilities. Granted, many captive Good Luck Goblins tend to find the locks fall off their cages more often than could be reasonably expected, or discover their cells contain secret passages which no-one was previously aware of and which are *exactly* big enough for a full size adult Goblin to fit through. By and large, though, a Good Luck Goblin can generally look forward to spending more of its life locked up than it can roaming free.

Bad Luck Goblins, on the other hand, have no such worries. No-one has ever tried to capture a Bad Luck Goblin, because in the main, most people want to keep them as far away as possible. Many of them, like Gurt, actually make their living as misery-bringers for hire, since sometimes the only thing more satisfying than having good luck for yourself is inflicting bad luck upon your enemies.

A truly ill-fated Bad Luck Goblin can make a lot of money bringing bad fortune to the enemies of rich men. Sadly, Gurt is only an averagely unfortunate Bad Luck

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Goblin and as a result can only scrape a modest living at best. In many respects this makes him *even unluckier* than the unluckiest Bad Luck Goblins, since they can at least afford to call the builders in every time the roof caves in or the toilet explodes. So you could argue that Gurt is both the unluckiest of Bad Luck Goblins, and yet more lucky than some of the other Bad Luck Goblins, who are luckier as a result of being much unluckier than he is.

Say what you like, they're a confusing species, Luck Goblins.

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"Ah, forget it," Gurt groaned, coincidentally echoing the sentiments of most people after a couple of minutes spent trying to figure out the finer details of Luck Goblin society. The broken dishes could stay where they were for now. A series of involuntary *ooohs* and *aaahs* escaped his thin grey lips as he carefully cranked himself back into an upright position.

When the room had stopped spinning, Gurt *clack-clack-clacked* his way through to the small, shabbily decorated living area which made up the bulk of his humble little stone cottage. His oversized hands clutched the arms of the room's single chair as he lowered himself down into it. The seat creaked ominously below him but, for once, stayed in one piece. He cautiously raised first one foot, then the other, onto the wooden crate he used as a makeshift foot stool. That, too, remained surprisingly intact.

Maybe things were looking up, Gurt thought, then screamed as two flailing children crashed through his thatched roof and landed heavily on him from above. With a *crack* the chair beneath him finally gave way and all three of them thudded to the cold cobbled floor.

"Marvellous," he clucked, as he untangled himself from the shattered remnants of his seat and crawled out from under the squirming children. "That's just marvellous."

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Ben and Claire jumped to their feet and gaped at the small figure before them in disbelief. The creature's big, bloodshot eyes stared up at them, wide and round like two cracked dinner plates on a bumpy green tablecloth. It scratched its dirty fingernails on its bare, blotchy scalp and muttered to itself as it shuffled over to two lengths of hose with funnels on the end, which protruded from the far wall of the room.

"Told me they'd sorted this," he mumbled as he picked up the funnels, held one to his mouth and placed the other next to his ear. "Yes, hello," he spoke, his voice louder. His eyes fixed on the unmoving children. "Pest control, please."

Across the room, Ben and Claire still stood stock still, unable to believe what they were seeing. The creature they'd landed on was shorter than Ben, but with stick-thin arms which reached all the way down to the floor. Were they to compile a top five list of strange things about the tiny figure, though, neither its height, nor its arms, would top the chart.

The number one position would most likely be reserved instead for the creature's green, greasy skin, which would not look out of place covering a toad, albeit one with some serious dermatology issues.

Alternatively, the skin might be beaten to the top spot by those saucer-like eyes, each one of which easily took up one third of the thing's head, leaving only a tiny amount of space for its thin-lipped mouth and the long, narrow nose which protruded from the middle of the rugby ball face like a withered, mouldy carrot.

Or maybe the creature's hands and feet were the strangest elements of all, each one being the size of its massive melon skull, and each attached to limbs which looked far too feeble and flimsy to properly support such sizeable slabs of meat.

Whatever the creature was, neither of them had ever seen anything like it before, which was why, almost two minutes after they'd come tumbling through the ceiling, they were still rooted to the spot in fear.

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"Hello, this is Gurt Theeg, of… Yes, Binkin's Lane, that's the one," the figure spoke into his antiquated telephone system. "I seem to have another human problem," he continued, as he looked Ben and Claire up and down. "Two of them, smaller than the last one." He hesitated, listening to whoever was on the other end of the line. "Male or…? Well how should I know? All look the same to me. Look, just send someone, will you?" he spat, before a worried expression broke out across his face. "Sorry, sorry, I didn't mean to…" he stammered. "No, I know, it's… There was no need for… Thank you, that's much appreciated. Thank you."

Gurt hurriedly hung up the phone and gave it a fearful look. "Probably shouldn't have said that," he fretted, regretting his sharp tone. He clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth a few times, then shrugged and began to *clack-clack-clack* his way through to the kitchen.

When he was out of sight, Ben and Claire exchanged a mystified glance and began to nudge each other.

"Say something," Ben whispered.

"You say something," Claire answered, quietly.

"Like what?"

"Well I don't know, do I? Something like--" Claire quickly shut her mouth as the goblin leaned round the doorframe and eyed them both, suspiciously. His gaze lingered on them for several long moments, before he leaned back into the kitchen. The children could hear him muttering to himself as he began to hammer nails into something in the next room. "Something like 'hello' might be a good start," concluded Claire, quietly.

"Right," Ben nodded. "I will then. Here I go."

"Right," Claire agreed. She watched her brother, expectantly.

"'Lo," he squeaked, his voice even quieter than it had been during the previous conversation.

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"He's hardly likely to hear that, is he?" Claire hissed.

"Didn't you *see* the size of his ears?" Ben asked in a whisper. "He can probably hear an ant walking on the moon with ears like that!"

"There *are* no ants on the moon, idiot. Say it louder."

Suddenly the hammering stopped and the strange little figure shuffled back into the room, barely paying the children the slightest bit of attention as he began to gather up the broken pieces of his chair. Claire gave Ben a jab with her elbow and nodded in the muttering creature's direction.

"H-hello," Ben spoke, his voice unsteady and scared. The wooden pieces of the chair clattered noisily on the stone floor as they slipped from Gurt's grasp. The siblings took a small step backwards as he slowly turned to face them, his wide, staring eyes staring even wider as he shambled a few paces towards them.

"You… You can *talk*?" he gasped. Both children nodded in reply. "Say something else," the goblin demanded, doubting his own ears, despite their enormity.

"Er…something else," Ben offered, smiling uncertainly.

"By the Great Hnngs of Ythur!" Gurt exclaimed, as he put one hand over his mouth and effectively concealed his entire head. "A talking human. An actual talking human! I can hardly believe it!"

"Actually, I can talk too," Claire chipped in, her confidence boosted by the fact the little man had not yet made any attempt to eat them. "Most of us can, really."

"But that's… No, that's…" Gurt stammered, as he tried to make sense of what he was being told. He wrung his giant hands together, nervously. "Lord Volgorth says that humans are unfeeling rodents to be exterminated," he fretted, his wide eyes looking up at the children, imploringly. "That's right, isn't it?"

"No, of course not!" Claire protested. "We're not unfeeling!"

"Or rodents," Ben added, helpfully.

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"Or rodents," agreed Claire.

"But… But… In that case," Gurt gulped, as tears welled at the corners of his eyes. "Oh my."

"Have you seen our Dad?" Ben interjected. "He came through this way a minute ago."

"Another human?" the goblin asked. "Like you?"

"Bit bigger, but yeah," Ben nodded. "Wearing clothes with a horrible pattern on them."

"Yes, yes I did," Gurt responded. "But weeks ago. I heard a great clattering on the roof and called Pest Control. They went up and got him. I didn't realise," he sobbed. "I didn't realise you could all talk!"

"Well that couldn't have been him," Claire said, shaking her head. "He only came down a few minutes ago."

"He looked like you. Both of you," Gurt insisted. "Wearing clothes like yours, too, only… Brighter."

"It definitely sounds like him," Ben agreed. "What happened to him?"

"I am sorry, I didn't know, you see?" Gurt wept. "Forgive me. Lord Volgorth said you were all vermin. Lord Volgorth told us what to do should we find any of you. I did not know!"

"What happened to him?" Claire asked, panic in her voice.

Suddenly a loud hammering shook the cottage's heavy wooden door on its hinges.

"Open up in there," a gruff voice demanded.

"I'm sorry," the goblin choked. "I've done a terrible, terrible thing."

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