

# BROWNIES VS. BLONDIES

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**A** CONFLAGRATION RAGED IN THE PIT OF HIS STOMACH. It was an ancient recipe: a generous helping of fear, a pinch of angst, and a double shot of the most beautifully aged gooseberry brandy. Not the kind that was brewed in a dank cellar. The good stuff. With a hint of mint. And a bow affixed to the bottle. He reached into his shirt pocket and removed its contents, nestling it in his palm. A candy cigarette. He'd tried lighting it at least half a dozen times. It never proved very effectual, though, so he stopped wasting precious matches. He put the butt in his mouth, pinching it with his teeth. Sugary goodness powdered his tongue, but his mind couldn't be tricked so easily. Recruitment attempts had not gone well. If he didn't receive some good news soon, his nerves would be permanently frayed.

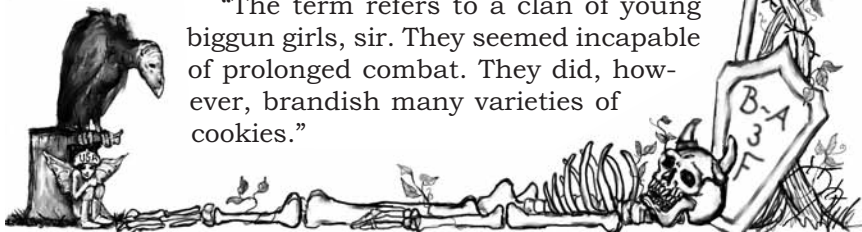
"Sergeant Stonejaw!"

"Ah, Kneecapper. Please tell me ye be a-having good news for me." The sergeant took a long draw from his candy cigarette before pulling it from his mouth, his tongue reluctant to relinquish the delicacy.

"Afraid not, sir."

"How? How can 'brownies' not be brownies?"

"The term refers to a clan of young biggun girls, sir. They seemed incapable of prolonged combat. They did, however, brandish many varieties of cookies."



“Cookies! How did me life be a-turning to this?”

“The ‘bigguns’ simply don’t believe in the fae as they once did, sir. Now they mock us by passing our name around irreverently.”

“Oh, to harken back to the olden days. I’d be a-giving up a whole pack of candy cigarettes . . .” A surreptitious glance at his underling revealed the raised eyebrows that signaled piqued curiosity. It wasn’t the first time a reference to his stash of sweets was met with similar interest. Clearly, the members of his regiment exhibited a covetousness not normally seen in the faerie. Overexposure to bigguns, surely. The bigguns, or humans as they were known to other faeries, were a concern, to be sure. They were peaceful cohabitants in the days of yore, but in the last few centuries their influence on the fae was one of pure perversion. Still, despite their bad influence, they weren’t the true enemy. The immediate danger was from other fae. And if the ranks of his little battalion didn’t swell with new recruits soon, their vulnerabilities would be exploited. It was rumored that kobolds had been spotted in the area. The lawn gnomes in front of the Anderson household weren’t just a set of pretty faces, after all. They were invaluable spies.

Sergeant Stonejaw scratched his stubbly chin with browned and knobby fingers. The stern look on his face could have been carved in stone. “Little biggun girls a-carrying cookies, eh?” he snorted.

“Are there no more liaisons out in the field, sir?” asked Kneecapper with temerity. He was not a young brownie, but not nearly as old as his Sergeant. A patchwork of whitened scars was hidden beneath his uniform, a keepsake of his years of service. But even experience pales in the face of an adversary as grim as a contingent of kobolds.

“One,” huffed the Sergeant. “Just one, old friend. The sun be a-setting. And our hopes be a-clinging desperately to its fiery tail.” Sergeant Stonejaw clapped the veteran brownie on the shoulder and forced a mirthless smile to surface from somewhere deep within his soul. “It all be a-coming down to Anklebiter, then. For now, though, there be nothing more to do than to be a-waiting. Come. Be a-joining me for a glass of gooseberry brandy. It be an abrasive for the soul.”

“So it’s like soap?” Kneecapper quipped.

Sergeant Stonejaw laughed deeply for the first time in many, many months. He realized he didn’t recognize the sound as his own. “More like Brilo.”

