

Whatever size his enemies,
the winner's always...

Hercufleas



SAM GAYTON

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Also by Sam Gayton

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The Snow Merchant

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Also by Sam Gayton

The Snow Merchant
Lilliput

Herculefleas



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For Rita, both of you



For want of a nail, the shoe was lost...
Proverb



Prologue

Greta hurried over the bridge, autumn leaves crunching under her clogs like beetles. The full moon shone in the sky above and wobbled on the water below. She stopped for as long as she dared and stared down at the river's silver ripples, trying to make herself see the past: Mama chopping wood, Wuff with his paws crossed by the fire, Papa stirring soup on the stove. He had told her once about the magic in a full moon's reflection. If you looked long enough, it made a mirror to times long gone. Greta only ever saw her own face stare back. Green-brown eyes, freckles like sawdust, wild brambly hair she never bothered to brush.

She shook her head and blinked until tears rolled down her nose and into the river. It was tradition to cry when crossing the bridge called Two Tears that led to the jetty linking Tumber to the wide world beyond. Her salt mixed with the town's salt, so even though she left, part of her would always be there until she came back. If she made it.

Across Two Tears, the trees began and the rows of little boats bumped against each other in the shallows. Greta untethered one and lowered in her axe and satchel, checking over her shoulder each time. No one chased across the bridge after her. On the far side, the town lay empty and dark. Only in the ruined Church of Saint Katerina on the Hill were the tinderlamps lit. Tonight was a good night to be a thief. By the time the funeral ended, Greta would be halfway to Avalon with the florins.

She unfurled her fist to look at them again. Three glittering coins. The last of Tumber's gold.

Slipping her heel from one clog, she tucked the florins one by one under the leather insole for safe keeping. Then, clonking her feet into the boat, she turned to push herself out onto the river.

Tap tap.

Greta froze. At the end of the jetty stood Miss Witz in a black mourning dress, leaning on her cane. The minuscule copper bell hung from her ear on a hoop. A gypsy had charmed it so lies made it ring. When Miss Witz had been her teacher at school, Greta had set the bell chiming many times.

'Those florins are kept in the stone vault below the mayor's house,' Miss Witz said, her walking stick rapping on the wooden boards, 'which can only be unlocked by the golden key he wears on a chain around his neck. They cannot have been easy to steal.'

All the old babushka had to do was shout. The Tumberfolk would come running down from the church and Greta would be caught. But for now Miss Witz's voice was just a whisper. Greta kept her hand on the jetty, feeling the current pulling at the boat, but she did not let go. She did not do anything except sit very still and listen to Miss Witz, the way she had in school.

'I suppose you waited until tonight because the mayor is in the ruined church, mourning with the rest of Tumber. And since he is only wearing black, I imagine he left his key in the hidden drawer of his desk. But you wouldn't know any of that. Unless, of course, you've been spying on him.' She cackled softly. 'And I wouldn't know any of it either. Unless, of course, *I've been spying on you.*'

As she spoke, Miss Witz hobbled closer. Her hair was like a roll of chicken wire and her eyes shone the same steely colour.

‘So I suppose what I want to know first,’ said Miss Witz, ‘is where you are going with all that gold.’

‘What gold?’ Greta said.

The copper bell gave a tinkle. Miss Witz raised her eyebrows that were drawn on with charcoal and gave Greta a very long stare that seemed to say, *And now the truth, please.*

Greta felt her cheeks go hot. ‘I’m not stealing it.’ The copper bell rang again. ‘Well, I am stealing it, but for good reason, miss. I’m going to Avalon, to buy Tumber another hero.’

‘The mayor chooses which heroes will guard us,’ said Miss Witz. ‘Not you.’

‘The mayor chooses wrong,’ Greta blurted.

Miss Witz frowned, but this time the copper bell did not ring. She half smiled. ‘So you believe what you say. But that does not mean you are right. It means you are either a very astute girl, or a fool.’

‘I tried telling him,’ Greta said, ‘but he doesn’t listen. The heroes he brings back—’

‘Are the strongest in all Avalon, child. And the strongest in Avalon are the strongest in the world.’

‘We don’t *need* the strongest,’ said Greta. Why was she the only one who understood? ‘It isn’t about being strong. Papa was strong. Mama was stronger. But the strongest will always be Yuk.’

At the sound of his name, Miss Witz flinched. She looked away, pulling at a wispy hair on her chin.

‘Remember the Crimson Knight?’ Greta said quietly.

‘With his sword of boiling lava? Yuk guzzled him, then used his sword as a toothpick. Remember the Stone Golem, chiselled from granite and brought to life with alchemy? Yuk crushed him into gravel with his heel.’

In the Church of Saint Katerina on the Hill, the mourning bell began to toll from the broken spire. It rang once for every life Yuk had taken. Greta sat in the boat, counting

each faint chime. On and on the bell went. Even when the tolling ended, Greta knew it had not. It would never end. Next month when the moon was new Yuk would come again – and only one thing could stop him.

‘Every month that passes, there are fewer of us left,’ Greta said. ‘Fewer florins. A little less hope. It has to be me who goes to Avalon. Tumber doesn’t need a *strong* hero, it needs a *giant-slayer*.’

Miss Witz snorted. ‘What a ridiculous idea.’

But Greta smiled, because below her teacher’s words, she heard the tintinnabulation of the copper bell.

‘You believe me too—’

‘*Enough, child,*’ snapped Miss Witz. ‘You are being very foolish. And making me very ashamed. Who was it that taught you to steal in this way? Not I.’

Greta scowled.

‘You were clever in taking the florins,’ Miss Witz continued, coming right up to the boat, ‘but you did not think through your escape.’

She twisted the fox-head handle of her walking stick. With a click, a small silver tongue sprang from its mouth: a hidden blade. ‘Did you think no one would come for you when your thieving was discovered?’

Before Greta could move, Miss Witz stabbed the cane down, slicing the ropes tethering all the other boats to the jetty. With sharp kicks, she sent each one spinning in lazy circles across the river, where the current took hold and swept them away.

‘How will the mayor chase after you now?’ With a wink, she tapped her cane on Greta’s hand that still gripped tight to the jetty. ‘You can let go now, child.’

Greta looked up at her teacher, searching for words.

‘You are right,’ Miss Witz said. ‘Go to Avalon. Go. Bring us the hero we need.’

‘I will,’ she whispered. ‘I promise.’

'I did not see you,' Miss Witz said, her copper bell tinkling mischievously. 'I was not here.'

Then Greta pushed out on the river, paddling downstream with clumsy strokes, carrying the last of Tumber's gold, and the last of its hope.

Towards Avalon, the island of heroes.
To bring back a giant-slayer.





1

It was no ordinary top hat. It was tall, made of stiff black velvet, with a red silk band above the brim. And sticking out the top was a tiny chimney. The chimney was made of miniature red bricks, stacked tall as a little finger. On frosty nights, smoke wafted up from the flue, hanging over the top hat in grey wisps.

Below the chimney were three rows of square windows. During the day, black velvet shutters kept the windows hidden, but in the evenings the shutters were drawn back. Then the inside of the house-hat lit up with a warm and cosy glow from flickering candles no thicker than matchsticks, and through the windows could be seen the silhouettes of furniture, the glimmer of tiny fireplaces and the flitting, shadowy shapes of the fleas that lived there.

There were twelve of them in all: the biggest, rarest fleas in the world. They looked just like raisins – raisins with extra-long folded-up legs, and squashed little heads with twinkling eyes, and mouths filled with pointy teeth.

All their short lives, the fleamily (just like a family, only smaller and jumpier) had resided together in their fabulous house-hat. There was Min the mummy flea, Pin the daddy flea and their four sons, Burp, Slurp, Speck and Fleck, and their five daughters Itch, Titch, Tittle, Dot and Jot.

Min, Pin, Burp, Slurp, Speck, Fleck, Itch, Titch, Tittle, Dot and Jot.

And of course there was Egg too.

Who was just about to hatch.

'Can't wait to have a new sister!' Dot cried, hopping around the kitchen.

Burp and Slurp rolled their eyes. 'Egg's not a girl!' they said together.

'Yes, she is!'

'No, he isn't!'

Dot turned to the little fluff of cotton wool where Egg sat by the stove to keep warm. 'Yes, you are,' she whispered, 'aren't you, Egg?'

There in the nest, Egg sat - small, yellow and hard like a rice crispy.



And wobbled.

Dot blinked. 'See that?' she said, wide-eyed. 'I asked Egg, and she just *nodded!* She is a girl!'

Burp and Slurp stared open-mouthed for a moment, then glanced at each other. 'Egg wasn't nodding,' they hissed back. 'He was shaking his head!'

'She never, she nodded!'

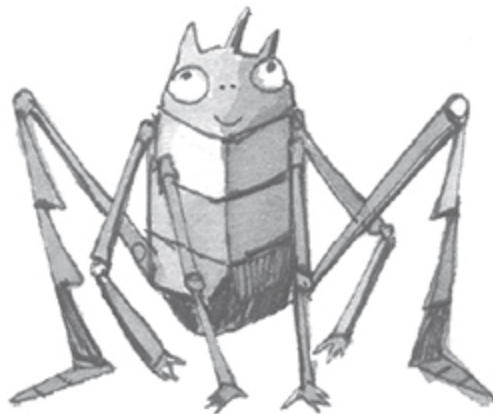
'He shook his head!'

'She doesn't even have a head!'

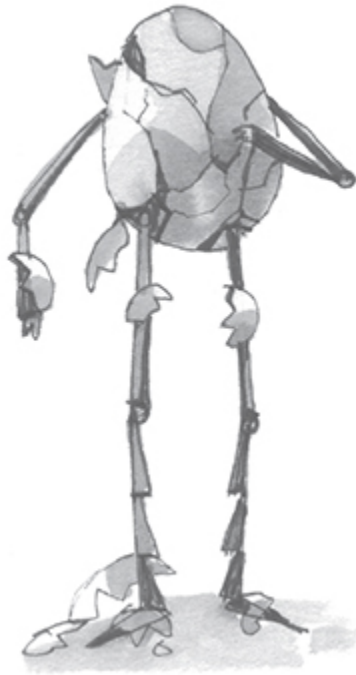
Egg wobbled again. Crack! A thin black line scribbled down its shell from top to bottom. The three fleas jumped so high they thumped their heads on the ceiling. When they landed, they stopped squabbling. Finally they could agree on something.



‘Egg’s hatching!’ they shouted together. ‘Egg’s hatching!’ At once, Min and Pin hurtled in through the door, followed by everyone else. Egg cracked again and again, as two long and powerful legs burst from the bottom. Tiny flakes of shell skittered and bounced across the kitchen’s pebble floor.



The whole fleamily watched as Egg stood up, teetering on new feet, legs crouched... and leaped into the air.



'Watch out!' yelled Min.

The fleamily dived beneath the playing card on matchstick legs they used as a table. Egg ricocheted around the room like a bullet, slamming against windows and walls, knocking over chairs, clattering into the thimble pots and pans. Min and Pin hugged each other with pride at their hatchling's first jumps, while bits of shell and plaster rained down onto the floor around them.



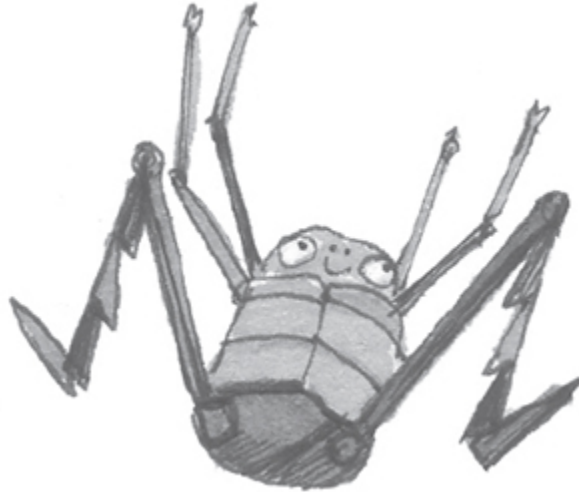
With a hollow *thunk*, the commotion stopped.

The fleamily crept from under the table to find a little hatchling flea stuck headfirst in one of the thimble pots on the stove, legs kicking in the air.

Grabbing hold of one foot each, Min and Pin gave the little flea a yank. With the sound a wine bottle makes when the cork comes out, the hatchling popped free and landed on the table, blinking and grinning at the ceiling.



The fleamily crowded round. Burp and Slurp elbowed each other, and Dot gave a sigh of disappointment: the newest member of the fleamily was indeed a new brother, not a sister.



‘Hello, little one,’ said Min, very slowly and carefully. ‘I am your Min. This is your Pin. These are your brothers, Burp, Slurp, Speck and Fleck. These are your sisters, Itch, Titch, Tittle, Dot and Jot... We are your fleamily.’

Everyone waved.

The little flea looked at them shyly. He waved back. Then he stared at his hand in amazement and made it wave again. ‘So *that’s* what waving looks like,’ he said, then gasped and said crossly, ‘Oh no, I just spoke my first word, and it was “so”! “So” is so boring! I wanted it to be a really interesting word. Like nunchucks, or gazebo, or conker...’ He stamped his foot in a tantrum.

(Any human readers might find it strange that baby fleas can talk. But newborn fleas are not really babies at all. Inside their egg, they have spent a great deal of time listening to the world outside. And because their shells are strong but very thin, unhatched fleas hear their fleamily talking for months and months and quickly learn how to speak themselves.)

‘Never mind about your first word, little one,’ said Min gently. ‘How about we give you a name, to cheer you up?’

‘Call him Tot,’ said Jot.

‘Call him Little,’ said Tittle.

‘Call him Peck,’ said Fleck.

‘But I’ve already got a name,’ said the hatchling, and it was the truth. Inside his egg, he’d wondered about many things: mostly questions he could not answer until after he hatched, like ‘What does red look like?’ and ‘Do I like hugs?’ and ‘What happens on Tuesdays?’ But he hadn’t ever wondered about his name. Not once.

‘You already have a name?’ Min repeated in astonishment. ‘Where did you get that from?’

The little flea shrugged. He’d just always known it, as if it was floating around inside the egg before he even got there.



‘Well?’ Pin leaned close. ‘What is it?’

The little flea smiled, because this would be the first time he would say it out loud.

‘I’m Hercufleas!’