

Chapter 3

“Can you please try to kick the ball in a way that is not so expectable?”

Baley easily caught the soccer ball under her right foot before booting it back in Yacob’s direction.

It was Saturday morning and the two siblings were in their backyard playing soccer. They had made a deal. Yacob would help his sister practise goaltending before her indoor soccer tryouts next week. In exchange she had promised to battle Slip Sliders with him after lunch. But standing in wet leaves while his sister yelled at him made Yacob wonder whether the deal had actually been a good one. He was also very tired this morning. Last night he kept waking from restless dreams, as his brain continued to grapple with the extra peculiar and unexplainable events of the previous day.

After they had arrived home from school Friday afternoon and their mother had used the kitchen sink without disaster, Yacob and his sister had quietly made their way to the bathroom and locked the door behind them. Their mother was too busy complaining to the kitchen walls about the chunks of wet toast she had to clean from the bottom of the dishwasher to notice their strange behaviour. Yacob was glad for his mother’s sake that the kitchen walls were such good listeners.

Standing with her back almost touching the bathroom door, Baley had nodded at Yacob and then at the sink. Yacob wasn’t sure why he was the one who had to try the taps again. In most of the stories he read, older people were supposed to take care of younger ones. As he prepared to be swallowed up by a giant bubble and carried away through a portal that maybe humans could pass through after all, he guessed his sister hadn’t read those books.

With one hand gripping the Slip Slider in his pocket for courage, Yacob had reached forward with the other hand and had very gently turned the tap on. He leapt back as the same tummy-gurgling noises came from under the sink and then, very slowly, three small bubbles were released out of the end of the spout. After that there was a short pause of nothing, followed by the gush of regular water pouring from the silver spout.

In silence Yacob and his sister Baley had watched the three bubbles bounce around the bathroom. The bubbles were so strong that the two children could actually hit them back and forth to each other. But then, once again, when Baley opened the door, the three bubbles burst at the same time. And for the rest of the evening, when Yacob or Baley had tried the bathroom taps, only water streamed out. Yacob was both slightly relieved and very disappointed by this turn of events.

The slap of the soccer ball against the wall of the house on that cool Saturday morning let Yacob know he had missed another kick from his sister. He turned to watch as the black and white sphere rolled along the yard's gravel edge and came to rest under the outdoor tap for the house.

"Yacob, hurry up," he sister nagged in an irritated tone that older siblings only used with their younger siblings. Even when they were doing them a favour.

Responding to his sister's command, Yacob started walking across the lawn. However, before he reached the soccer ball, another player entered the game. And this uninvited member of the opposing team started rubbing its furry face and body all over the ball, as though soccer balls were made for tickling not kicking. The soccer ball didn't seem to mind this upgrade in treatment, but the siblings certainly did.

"Cat!" yelled Baley.

"Shoo!" shouted Yacob

The orange and black tabby stopped to stare at the two children. He gave them a look that reflected annoyance more than fear, as though Yacob and Baley were interrupting his fun, not the other way around. Then, after taking a brief moment to ponder his next move, the cat pranced off with his tail and nose in the air. He was clearly in search of another yard with another ball for rubbing that didn't have such yelly children in it.

Still standing between the recycling bin and a large garden pot that were the makeshift goal posts, Baley called out to Yacob, "Wash it off!" She paused and then added a "please."

Yacob's sister had a severe allergy to cats. One touch and she would sneeze through an entire box of tissues and her body would be covered in hives. She had once visited a friend's house and sat on a pillow that was actually a cat bed. By the time his sister arrived home she looked like a human candy cane, with tiny polka dots instead of stripes.

Moving the ball so that it was directly under the garden tap, Yacob turned on the faucet without thinking. But what happened next made him leap back in surprise.

"What's wrong?" called out Baley, but Yacob didn't bother to answer. The bubbles pouring out of the spout offered all the reply that was necessary.

Baley ran over to stand next to her brother as a seemingly endless supply of bubbles filled the yard around them.

And then they heard a yell. A yell that was both big and small. Or rather a yell that belonged to someone both grown up and not grown up at all. In other words, a very tiny grandpa. In a red hat. With a red face.

“Turn off the river maker!” yelled the knee-high creature with more authority than you would expect someone the size of a coffee maker to possess. “You are going to be running down the magic!”

Yacob, who was not used to taking orders from people shorter than him, decided it was still best to obey. The little man’s face was now redder than his hat, and it didn’t look healthy.

Once Yacob had turned off the tap, the man clapped his hands together twice, and instantly all the bubbles in the backyard vanished.

Then Yacob, Baley and the extra peculiar and unexplainable creature in a red hat stood in a triangle and stared at each other. Yacob was relieved to see the wrinkly face slowly fade to a lighter shade of ketchup.

Baley stepped forward to get a closer look at this garden invader, making Yacob unexpectedly grateful that he wasn’t an only child. He thought he was probably extra lucky that his sibling was a girl too. His friend Grandon had an older brother who once put his underwear in the freezer. When Grandon finally discovered his underwear stuffed between packs of frozen blueberries, they were icy and hard and smelled a little bit like fish.

“Are you a garden gnome?” Baley had always taken the fastest route between a question and an answer even if it wasn’t the most polite.

“A garden gnome? A garden gnome?!!!!” shrieked the small being in response.

Yacob was distressed to see the colour of the creature's face once again change to match his red hat.

“Please do not be using this name. It is a most insult. I come from a long line of the ancient and the wise. We are known to be called Snufflewort!”

Before he could catch himself, Yacob let out a snort of laughter. He wasn't sure how wise these creatures were if they thought the name 'Snufflewort' was an improvement on 'garden gnome.' Snufflewort sounded like a lumpy growth on your toe that occasionally caught a cold.

“But you are the ... the things that, you know, sit in gardens. Like decorations,” continued Baley, unfazed by the outraged Snufflewort.

Shaking his head, the Snufflewort took off his red pointed hat, scratched his white hair, and then put his hat back on. He was much calmer when he finally responded to Baley.

“This was our way of being among Rumpa. We are liking the garden spaces. Rumpa are liking us in their garden spaces. It was an arrangement most pleasing to everyone,” the Snufflewort explained.

“What's a Rumpa?” Yacob finally found the courage to put his first question to the creature.

“That's obviously us,” Baley informed him, “they are the sniffle-thingys and we are the rumps.”

Baley turned back to the Snufflewort and asked, “And then something changed? With the garden situation?” Yacob's sister had a nose for smelling trouble. The way that Yacob's ears could hear a bag of potato chips being opened two rooms away.

But before the Snufflewort could respond, their mother's voice rang out from the kitchen window.

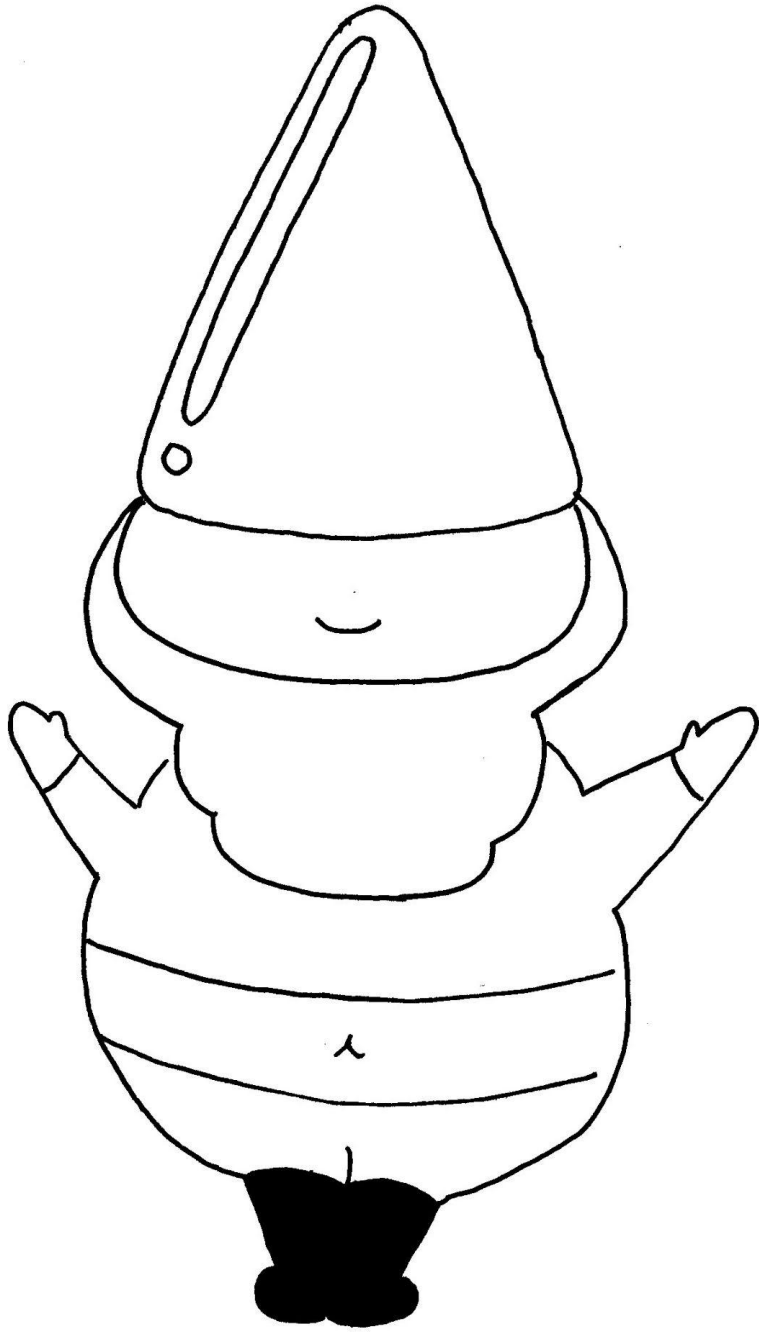
“Yacob! Baley! Time for lunch!”

The Snufflewort looked around with fear, and then quickly continued. “You do not need to be knowing the whole of the happy then sad story of Snufflewort. You only need to be leaving the magic alone!”

“What magic?” inquired Yacob.

“The magic in the water,” replied the Snufflewort.

“You mean the bubbles?” Yacob asked with growing excitement.



“Rumpa are using the name bubbles. But bubbles are games for the children. Like rubbery toys that make the burping sound when you are squeezing the belly. For us they are having the name circle wafers.”

“Circle waffles, bubbles, whatever,” Baley continued in a matter of fact tone. “We’ll lay off the taps, but you are going to make us a deal.”

Yacob almost wanted to warn the Snufflewort that making deals with his sister didn’t always turn out the way you might expect. But his first loyalty was to Baley, not to a miniature grandpa with a long beard and red pointy hat.

“We want you to meet us, at dusk, at this spot. And we are going to need more information,” Baley finished with a warning.

“Or else?” demanded the Snufflewort. Clearly his ancient and wise ways didn’t prepare them for negotiating with Yacob’s sister.

“Or else we tell our Rumpa mother,” Baley stated while pointing at the kitchen window. “We tell her everything.”

“Oh no, we are not allowed to have talking with the giant Rumpa! It’s very written in the book of *Things Snufflewort Can and Can Not Do*. If there is danger that is growing larger, we can make the talking with small Rumpa. But never the giant ones, who are wearing shoes the size of our heads.”

The Snufflewort took a gulp of air, like he was trying to swallow a growing panic.

“It is agreed. At dusk, we will be returning to this place in the grass. But you must promise to share our talking with no one. Especially no one who is a giant Rumpa.”

And having made that reluctant deal with Yacob's sister, the Snufflewort touched his nose and let out a sneeze. The sneeze was so loud that both Yacob and Baley blinked with surprise.

By the time they had unblinked their eyes back open, the red hat and its owner were gone.