

KNIGHT FROM THE MOG AND THEIR LITTLE BROG TOAD

Astra Tyler

DEEP WITHIN THE DARK

Frog-looking bog monster little lad sat on its hollow log common to the swampy land of the Mog. It burped a swirling purple spark that sat in the humid stench and hovered just long enough for an ankle to brush past it, setting off a rush of little stars and twirls up through the hairs of an uncautious fellow traipsing through the Mog. The frog-looking thing was swooped up into the arms of a gentle and caring knight, who placed it just so on their head for good luck. Not a moment was spared and the knight was off again, hopping from one giant lily-pad to the next.

Lurking below the lily-pads, a mudfish thing stared up and wondered *When oh when will they fall? Small fellow, I beckon below.* The knight could not hear the thoughts of the mudfish thing, having mastered the art of ignoring a pestilent beast of the Mogwild. The knight, they figure, speaks to whom they wish and listens to whom they wish, not a hungry fish nor a leadering outposter on the boundaries of was-home will tell them what to think and do or yell their thoughts like their spew is worth the effort. Should they, oft they, listen to the word of the wise, the world would be smaller and more terrifying. They saw what they saw in the lake's surface tension, what they saw they did not recognize as their own, and so off they were to see other lakes and other skies unriden with beastlings and fly-things in the treetop Mog.

ON TOWARDS OUTWARDS

"You there," hollered the outposter leadering for the hour. *"Head back now, squirt of the South Tower."* The knight listened instead to the thought of rampaging ahead, but slow and steady they skipped across and when the outposter hopped down from the treeloft, the knight stood still.

“I know you well, Anik of the South Tower, you’re looking for trouble.” The frog looking little lad caught the outposter’s attention, *“What’s that with you, Anik? Little brogs bring chaotic magiks.”*

Anik, a knight of their own, wandered their eyes and noticed the outposter was alone. *“Off I am,”* Anik said. Grunts, the outposter did make, shaking their head and rolling up a spliff of fine smokable mogleaf.

A snap and a spark and the spliff was lit, brand new. Gray clouds with little green accents tinted by the sky filtering through the canopy above, hovered in the stench before shuffling along. The outposter, newly calm and refreshed, blinked their pink eyes and bowed to the self-made knight. *“Be back soon,”* they said, and Anik went ahead.

CONSIDER AND PONDER

How many ahead? Wondered Anik the Knight, the night drawing the day, the Son’s bedtime at bay but nearing still. They could have been lucky, going the direction with fewest outposters to luck and chance past. None of them truly, well and truly, cared if a little fellow like Anik wandered off and went dead, but a couple would surely report a southling venturing off on their own. *But I’m not alone,* thought Anik of their little brog toad, whose toes were slimy but often misunderstood.

The brog kept company to the oft lonely Anik, a knight whose new job it was to scour beyond the Mog’s darkwood. A self-proclaimed title, that “knight,” but the brog didn’t mind: now subject and squire to the former squirt of South Tower.

Anik consulted the map. An old parchment, a gift, from a wandering old wizard centuries ago. Centuries ago, the Mog was an item, a precious curiosity of the empire at large. And when wizards entered the stench they never returned smelling quite as good: for a corpse smelled wicked! This old parchment, preserved, had written tongue none understood, but all could recognize the scrawled drawing of the darkwood. Positionally, Anik was in a corner of the world, betwixt two others, and all the world was staged as a six-sided form. Atop the map adorned spikey starry shapes that formed a lopsided cross. They looked like the stars a brog toad burps. Anik, confused, didn't know what to make of the lines between the starry shapes. A constant direction and shape of form, what could Anik find to orient this map? In the map's center there's a great big jutting shape of two sides with a point at the joint, likely representing the long believed great mountain of the beyond, according to the wise older ones. They'd say it's a mountain that could be seen from every corner of the world.

A family heirloom passed down: it landed in Anik's hands not too soon for their journey. It enabled a fascination, an itch, a reality-quaking shaking suspicion that there was so much more to the world than the Mog. More than the bog's murky waters. More than the growing night of the waning light browning the air.

More than the reflection Anik saw in the lake.

THE NIGHT BEGINS TO GROW

Anik scratched their chin and pondered to the brog toad, little lad monster thing that it was, *Will you scare away creatures of the night?* It croaked, and Anik nodded at it, assuaged, but not comfortable. The grounds of the Mog at night in the dark sky light Whisper filtering through the canopy was lit enough and dark enough for prowlers to stalk the little things left behind. Not

content with becoming a midnight meal, Anik looked for answers to their sleeping spot questions.

The trees went high up and a branch could be fashioned into a sort of bed, but the old wise ones said, *The canopy is where the winged bird beasts fed*. Anik resolved not to heed wise warnings, though they climbed the tree with reserve and attention. The brog toad, sensing uncertainty, clambered off Anik's head and into the pack on their back.

WHAT LIES BEYOND

The canopy was up high and Anik gulped and gave themselves an advice for their own: *Looking down would surely set one's fear abound*.

Little left of the heavy leaves of the Mogtop obscured the skies above from Anik. On a journey of their own, they reached for the top, to peek above the darkwood: a sight never seen by a Mog-living thing without wings.

With a few *fwips* and a *fwoosh*, Anik poked their head from the underneath and saw the brilliant dazzling gems of the overworld that danced and flickered with a — a great, big, otherworldly might, the light, of all the world, even the Mog. Anik found a footing to stand in awe of the great light of the night they only knew as Whisper, the sleepy lightly mutterings in the night when the Son has fallen asleep for the day. But this was no gentle muttering whisper, this was a gargantuan mystical entity that commanded the gems of a sky-spanning bejeweled black blanket. The way the great thing had perched above the — the mountain, the great mountain of the beyond the wise ones spoke of in mythical storytelling times! There it was. Was it holding up the great night booming thing of the sky, or was the great night sky thing meeting with the great mountain of the beyond? The *beyond*; Anik was staring at the beyond...

For so long had they been staring they did not catch the horizon, where, a night-stalking winged beast was staring, too, with intentions dissimilar. While Anik basked in an unknown sublime sight, the winged beast thing found their dinner for the night. *Dinner, dinner*, thought the beast, *Little bug climbed their way to my plate tonight*.

From perch to flight, it took half a second for it to reach a speed that shook the leaves beyond all their might. Like green confetti, leaves spun into the air, and Anik was lifted by their shoulders into the beyond, while they grasped at the beast's hair.

Anik did not know whether to take in the moment of ascending beyond the darkwood or flail and defend their life and knighthood. But suspecting this moment to be their last, they took one long look at their shrinking past, disregarding their only advice not to look down. The canopy was dark compared to the emerald green beyond the boundary of was-home. The shape of the land was not so much six-sided, but Anik could see lights at the nearest 'corners' of the world. And to each of these centers of light, there were streams of bright water, all fed by the great mountain, the source. No wonder there was so such significance to it. Of course, above the mountain the great disc sat and watched them. Now surely the great sky thing which commanded the gems was its own heroic being, not mere shadow of the Son.

So, Anik prayed for the first time in their life: to the night sky giant, to grant them access to an afterlife in which they were released from their present being. They wanted to see something else in their reflection if they had lakes wherever their soul was headed.

IN SKIES HIGH ABOVE

While Anik prayed, the brog toad pondered what best to do in order to go onward. It peeked from the pack and saw the ground shrinking and it yelped, feeling its guts wrench. The

pack's stitching was barely bearing the weight of a heavy toad like him, and risking it all, the brog toad leaped onto Anik's head, grasping terribly at their hair lest they fall through the air.

Feeling that gut feeling coming, it burped up a large purple cloud of sparks and swirls that touched the ankles of the beastly thing flying them. As it touched it rushed with stars and twirls and froze the bird in static shock, unused to the brog toad's sparkling croak. Anik, meanwhile, felt briefly pleasant from the exchange, but the birdthing's talons shocked open and if Anik did not quickly grasp at a foot of this thing they would be hurtling towards the ground in a less graceful fashion.

A diving bird is most threatening, its mid-flap flight gave its shadow a large intimidating stature. Its intensely sharp talons were flinched apart and locked, for lack of control more than anything else. Its wings were still outstretched, midflight, stuck outwards. While the ground approached, its wings still stood to give them gliding flight.

Those bright blue streams, that, Anik realized just now, reflected the light of the cosmic bright giant, were also guiding lights for Anik's flight. The closest and most probable for their gravitational pull was leftways from the direction the birdbeast was headed, which had been toward the big mountain.

Anik struggled and pulled as hard as they could. With concentration, they believed this to be the hardest tree they should ever climb – and Anik's life was on the line if they could not climb the thing and steer this bird into those shining blue waters.

The forced intense pressure of the situation, and the altitude surely, had Anik struggling deep quick breaths. Fight or die.

As the wind howled in their descent, Anik howled back. Eyes closed and rigor in their bones, they pushed themselves to grip tightly upwards and onwards up the winged beast's leg.

Tufts of hair became dark feathers, and Anik knew they were going the right way. Anik screamed when they opened their eyes; there was not a moment to lose. With a *hup* and a *haa!* Anik was straddling the beast, and they poured their weight onto the left wing, gripping for life, and when the feathers flew away they quickly gripped the flesh freshly bare.

IN CLEAR WATERS

The bird flew most gracefully, guided by its pilot, into the river.

Anik held their breath as water swallowed them most forcibly and they painfully flailed to resurface quickly to avoid anything that might lurk within.

Gripping to the emerald grass like it were the hair of the beast, they threw themselves out of the river and breathed heavy.

After a few moments, Anik sat upward, still breathing hard. Something was missing. “*Little brog! Where are you?*” Anik whipped their head around and around and began to fear the worst.

Had it drowned with the beast?

With anxious and ungraceful kicks, Anik crawled to the riverside bed. They looked down into the clear waters and saw it on their head. It croaked, its purple swirling sparklings sent shivers of delight which brought their reflection’s smile upright.

They sat back onto the grassy green and stared upward at the sublime dance of the stars. The stars, like the stars of the brog toad’s burp, and the stars, spiky shapes, spike shapes which reminded them of those they saw on — of course, the map!

They pulled it out, starting with excitement and then with careful attention: it, and everything else in their bag, was drenched in wet. Though, whatever the map was written in did

not smudge or wipe away. The parchment was translucent now, and when they held it up to the sky, they matched the brightest stars ahead to the lopsided cross at the top of the map's head.

Toad in tow, map in stow, Anik, knight from the Mog, knew where they were going, following the river flowing towards a city of lights in sight, towards what is more, and, perhaps, self-sought delight.