

What I Did Over the Break

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1 Introduction

In response to an assignment given me by my teacher, I turned in the following paper:

Over the Break

Over the break Em and I went into the outlands to visit a tribe of gubhorbles. Em wanted to warn them that there were some ogrelons coming, and they had better prepare for battle.

We spent a few days with them, training them how to fight ogrelons, and then the ogrelons came.

It was a very nasty battle, because there were too many ogrelons for us to fight and they came earlier than Em thought they would. Several hours into the battle Em did a rope trick and she and I hid until the fight was over. Then we snuck back through the outlands and came home in time for school.

After she read it she said to me,

“Cordilia, this is absolute nonsense!”

“Sorry, ma’am, I didn’t have space to explain it very well.”

“Explain it? Miss, this was supposed to be a truthful report, not a story.”

“It is true, ma’am.”

“Nonsense. Who’s Em?”

“She’s Emily Mulgrave, ma’am.”

“What, is she you cousin or something?”

“My mother.”

“Your mother? You call your mother, ‘Em’?”

“Yes, ma’am. She says there’s no use wasting three syllables on five letters, so I’m to just call her Em except in extreme need.”

“Try ‘Mom.’ It seems to work for everyone else, I suppose it could work for you too.”

“No, ma’am, nobody calls Em ‘Mom.’ It has never been done at all, far as I know. Most folk call her ‘missus Mulgrave’ or ‘ol’ hag’ depending.”

“Nobody calls your mother ‘old hag,’ unless you do. It would be just like your impertinence. Now look; I want you to turn in a complete and *true* report of what you

did over the break by the end of next week or I shall have to be very upset.”

It seemed to me she was pretty upset right then, but all I said was, “Do you mind if it’s not exactly a page long?”

“I’ve a good mind to require ten, with as impertinent as you’ve been.”

Ten. That seemed more reasonable. I might go a little over, but at least I’d be close, especially if she let me write at a normal size without skipping every other line. . . .

Here, then, is the paper I wrote.

2 Over the Break

Dear Mrs. Fenbinger,

Here is my detailed and completely truthful account of my break. I apologize for going a little over the page limit, but you said you wanted a complete report, and there were lots of details. Besides, you gave me almost two weeks, so I thought you probably wanted two weeks worth of writing.

2.1 Prelude

Until I started school, Em would spend several hours a day teaching me to write. At that time Tummy (my brother) lived with us still, and sometimes he would take me out into the inland and we’d hunt cockatrice, but otherwise I pretty much stayed at home and read. We had all kinds of books; rooms and rooms of them.

Then Tummy got married and moved away and I started school and things changed. Not right away; at first Em would still teach me when I got home, but when I told her that my teacher had taught us the alphabet she said it was time for me to start learning different lessons. She said in school I was to learn about people, and try to understand my classmates and teacher and not worry about what was taught. At home, it was time I learned the sorts of things that Em was actually good at.

She took me into the basement and gave me a thing like a lazer slug, except the lazer only came out on one side. She called it a lazer handle and said it braided four lazers

inside one another. She drew pictures of how it worked and made me take it apart and put it back together again. Over and over, day after day, I would come home, go into the basement, and there would be sitting a lazer handle and a box of tools. I would take it to bits and try to put it together again. Sometimes I would come down and there would just be a tray of parts, and I'd have to put it together without taking it apart. It took me a while, but eventually I was pretty good at it.

Then one day I came down and there was the lazer handle, but Em told me not to take it apart. She had one too, and as I picked mine up she lit hers, holding it out like a sword. I lit mine too and swung at her with a laugh, but she knocked my lazer aside and made a neat little jab and flashed me. I woke up in time for dinner.

Thus began Em's instruction on swordplay. Every day after school she and I would duel in the basement until she flashed me. She taught me lots of things; how to release a braid to shoot lazer across the room (not enough to flash, but nifty to watch), how to guard against wood and steel and stone (its all about releasing the outer braid at the right time), how to release all four braids at once to blast away heavy objects (called loose-blasting), but mostly how to duel. This continued for the whole school year.

2.2 Departure

The first day of the break I came down for breakfast and found Em all dressed in leather. I had never seen her wear leather before, so I asked her what was going on.

"After breakfast we are going on a little trip for the break. I've packed most of your stuff for you; you'll find it in a satchel in the sitting room, along with some leather clothing and your lazer handle. As soon as you're ready we'll depart."

"Are we going to see Tummy?" I asked, as he was the only person I knew outside the city.

"No, we're just going on a little trip into the outlands." With that she walked off, leaving me to eat my breakfast in a state of curious anticipation.

The leather was a bit uncomfortable, but it was exciting, and the satchel was surprisingly small and light. There was a nice little sheath for my lazer handle and a little toolkit attached to the belt, and the jerkin had a leather hood on it that I thought rather strange.

Once I was dressed, Em came up with a pipod and her own pack.

"I had hoped to train you to ride before this," she said, "but you haven't grown enough to reach the handles so you'll just have to cling to my back and try not to fall

off."

"Are we going far?" I asked.

"No, just to the edge of the inlands." She looked at me kind of funny and then said, "Cor, I'm going to tell you something you should never EVER forget."

I looked at her, half scared but very attentive.

"Never ride a pipod in the outlands. I don't care what the excuse is, how grave the need; never should anyone even think about riding a pipod if they ever intend to stop in the outlands."

"Why?" I asked. It seemed a silly rule; wouldn't a fast and silent mode of transportation be exactly what an outland explorer wants?

"The natives don't like it." That was all. "The natives don't like it," as if that completely answered my question. But before I could follow up she said "Hop up," and I spent the next little while just clinging to Em's back for dear life. She traveled to the edge of the slo at a ridiculous speed, zigging about from shrubbery to grove, staying out of sight of the city wall as much as possible.

Once we were in the inland and traveling more-or-less straight, I decided it was time to ask Em,

"Who are the natives?"

"Natives? Well, you are, since you were born in the same slo you live in now."

"No, I mean the natives of the outlands."

"Oh, they're people like turbo-pinks and trolls and wyverns and that sort."

"They don't like pipods?"

"Well, the glass howlers do, but they're about the only ones. I don't think the turbo-pinks really care one way or the other, and most of the humanoids really hate them."

"Why?"

"Ah, there you have me. I've never had the guts to ask them. They don't tend to be very docile, and bringing up things they don't like can be very foolish indeed."

"Oh," I said, and it was the last thing either of us said until we reached the edge of the inland.

If Em hadn't told me we were about to enter the outlands, I wouldn't have known. The land ahead looked just about like the land behind to me, but she seemed to think the boundary was pretty clear. Anyway, after hiding the pipod in a hollow tree, we set out on foot into the outlands. It was then about two hours before noon.

2.3 Into the Outlands

Its a good thing I like to walk; we walked for hours and hours. We walked until I thought I was going to collapse, until my feet felt like they must be bleeding all over the place (though when I looked, they weren't ever red. Em

says its because I've got good shoes). If it wasn't for the natives I don't know if I'd've made it.

The natives of the outlands are just like Em says, but apparently they don't like girls anymore than they like pipods. Em said if we were carrying pipods it'd a lot worse, but I don't know. We were attacked by a bronaut before lunch, a wyvern during lunch, three kobolds in the heat of the day, a panther around mid-afternoon, and then a pack of jackals over and over again all evening long. Em made me deal with one of the kolbolds by myself, to "prove" me she said, but otherwise we worked together.

The jackals were the worst. We were both armed only with lazer, and for the rest of what we fought that was plenty. Most things, after being flashed by a good length of the glowing don't feel inclined to go searching for more, and those things that do (like the bronaut, which Em said is the stupidest of the natives in the area) you can either over-laze and kill directly or you can finish them off with a knife while they're recovering.

The jackals though! They came in a huge pack, and they just sort of swarmed us. We must have flashed at least twenty before they started to back away, but they didn't just scatter, leaving us to take care of the ones we had flashed; no, they kind of moved all to one side and focused their attacks. We found ourselves pushed back, and though we flashed a few more, eventually we found ourselves a good distance away from the prone ones and clear of jackals.

That was all well and good and we resumed walking, but after enough time had passed for the flashed jackals to recover they came swarming all over us again! It was the same story as last time; a desperate fight until we had flashed some twenty, then they pulled off to one side and worked us away from the fallen. This time, right before they left us alone, Em and I both put as much lazer into one of them as we could and got a double-flash, but after two prolonged fights we had only managed to kill that one jackal.

The third fight was the worst. It was pretty dark by then, but Em said she wanted to press on as long as we could because the dogs had slowed us up and she wanted to make sure we got there before sunset the next day. She still hadn't told me where "there" was, but she assured me it would be enjoyable and worth the trip and I'd see when we arrived.

This time the jackals didn't seem inclined to back away. With the glow of the lazars and the growing darkness, we made pretty easy targets, and we weren't doing too well. Whenever we got the chance we'd shoot lazer braids into the crowd to light things up a bit, but the odds were against us.

Finally, Em said to me, "Cor! If I gave you both handles, how long could you keep them back by loose-blasting?"

"Not long. The kickback makes my arms sting after a while."

"Can you do thirty seconds?"

"I'll try."

She handed me her handle and dropped to her knees behind me. Three jackals ran up; I loose-blasted my right handle and they went flying back, knocking over a few more on the way. Two more came from behind; I wheeled and loosed on them too. Back and forth I spun, blasting with one and then the other, always keeping one lit and ready in case I needed it. After each blast my hands and arms hurt more and more, until on one blast I lost my grip and Em's handle shot back out of my hand. I took a little lazer myself, and was standing there, glowing, smoking, and hoping to fend off the beasts with my remaining blade when Em grabbed it from my hand.

"There's a hardsmord behind you; grab it and hang on no matter what!" she yelled as she leapt in front of me, blasting freely.

If that little statement means anything to you, it didn't to me. A hardsmord? Grab onto it? I was fogged, but I knew Em better than to think she was cooky, so I turned about and...

There was a hardsmord, a single long strand of it, hanging in the air. Confused, I grabbed it and it immediately bunched up under my hands and pushed my up into the air. Desperately I clung to it as I rose higher and higher, until the world suddenly disappeared.

For a minute I wondered where I was, then I realized that I must be nowhere. There never was a more nowhere sort of place. All I could see in every direction was a sort of a silvery grey. There was absolutely no sound, no sign of anything at all. Except the four feet of hardsmord hanging there in nothingness, of course. Also myself, and what I was wearing and carrying; but that was all. I was standing, but I couldn't see or feel what I was standing on; I was breathing, but I couldn't even feel my own breath. I had always wondered what nowhere was like...

Then Em appeared, carrying both handles and her pack. "Injured?" she asked.

"Nope." I said. "Is this nowhere?"

"Not exactly. It's what is known as a giant's pocket."

"I didn't see a gaint," I said (I wasn't going to admit I said this, but then I remembered that I promised to write a complete and truthful account, so I though I ought to).

"That's just what it's called. Its a simple spell that pits the strange topological consistency of hardsmord against the topological malleability of slodoop to create a nearly

inaccessible pocket.”

“You can cast spells?” I asked. I had never even suspected this. It was like waking up one day and suddenly finding that what you always thought was grass was actually lime candies or something.

“Yes,” she answered, “and I’ll teach you too eventually, but you have a lot of other things to learn first.” She slung off her pack, dropping it onto nothing, and sat down beside it, during which time I capered about the pocket whooping for glee. “But right now, Miss Cordilia Mulgrave,” and by her use of my full name I knew she was happy for me—seven whole syllables devoted to me!—“we need to eat and get some sleep. We’ve a full day ahead of us tomorrow.”

2.4 To the Gubhorbles

After breakfast the next morning Em and I slid down the hardsmord, which she then tapped smartly to return it to its normal liquid state.

I will not trouble you with the details of the day. Walk for a while, fight some beast; walk for a while, fight some beast. None of them were too difficult to beat, though the dune freak did mangle Em’s left boot pretty well and when she flashed it, she flashed herself too. I pulled them apart, over-lazed the dune freak, and waited while Em recovered. Her foot was okay inside the boot, so we continued on without trouble.

It was nearing sunset when I noticed something that troubled me.

“Um, Em? I think there’s a huge army of trolls or something up ahead.”

“Really? I don’t. . . oh, yes, I see now.” And she kept walking, as if nothing had happened.

“Shouldn’t we, I don’t know, go around them, or something?”

“Probably not. If they are gubhorbles, which I think they are, then they are the folk we’ve come to visit.”

“We’re here to visit *gubhorbles*?”

“It’s a rather involved story, but I’ve been acquainted with this particular tribe of them for, oh, thirty-some-odd years. Not a bad lot, really; rather civil, compared to most gubhorbles, and all gubhorbles are civil compared to, say, ogrelons.”

I thought about this for a while as we walked closer. Then I asked, “How should I act around gubhorbles? I don’t remember learning much about them.”

“Well, you did learn about them; you remember the ‘Primer on Goblinkin Kith’?” I didn’t and I guess she could tell by my face that I didn’t, so she gave me the

executive summary of the book: “be polite and respectful but never self-deprecating.”

After a few more minutes the gubhorbles noticed us and sent a detachment to investigate. As soon as they were within bowshot, Em halted and waited for them to arrive; I followed her example. Soon we were surrounded by some fifty armed gubhorbles. One of them stepped from the ring and addressed us in a series of unintelligible grunts.

“Narin Ot,” replied Em, for whom the grunting apparently held no mystery, “it is gratifying to see so able a commander as yourself at the head of this impressive welcoming force! It has been many years since I saw you last; I am glad to see your prowess has not gone unnoticed.”

There was more grunting.

“Your memory is as noteworthy as your list of accomplishments is long. She is my hagling, still very young but earnest, bright, and not unaccomplished.”

As, once again, grunts followed Em’s remarks, I nearly decided to object. Hagling? How dare she call me a “hagling!” I had no clear conception what a hag *was*, but it did seem rather offensive. However, the grunts were brief and before I figured out just what I should say, Em spoke again.

“Would that I could share your confidence; my affairs are not as pleasantly situated as your own. It is on business which seems to me quite urgent, and not merely on pleasure, that I have sought the audience of your lords tonight.”

There was no response to this; we merely all began walking.

2.5 A Student, a Teacher

I tried to ask Em a few questions as we walked, but she hushed me up. “Not now,” was all she’d say, so not now it was.

So, we went to the gubhorble city and Em talked merrily to loads of gubhorbles and they grunted cheerfully back and all sorts of things were accomplished and I had no clue what was going on. Finally, after dinner when Em and I were alone, I asked her what had happened.

“Weren’t you listening?” she asked.

“Um, yeah, I listened to a lot of grunting.”

“Oh bother. What do they teach in school these days? Look, when they go [here she made a peculiar wheezing sound] what they mean is ‘oo’ or ‘uh’. When they go [here she growled] you should think ‘th’. Its all just a spoken cipher, since they don’t have lips to make our sounds with. ‘Hhh’ becomes [a clack], ‘eh’ becomes [a groan]—”

Here she stopped. It must have been clear from my face that I wasn't remembering all this. "Wait a minute; I'll be right back," she said, and left me.

A short time later she came back, a scrawny young gubhorble walking beside her.

"Cor, this is Goopo. Goopo, Cor. Goopo has kindly agreed to follow you around night and day and repeat everything you say. You should be able to figure out the cypher pretty easily if you listen to her. We're especially lucky she agreed; she has excellent diction, and was my first pick."

Goopo grunted.

"Very pleased, I'm sure," I said. Goopo "repeated" it by grunting at me.

"Okay, now listen up, both of you; we don't have any time to waste. The lords have asked that you and I, Cor, help to prepare the people of this nation for a forthcoming ogrelon attack. You remember the tricks I taught you about fighting ogrelon?"

Indeed I did. With almost every move she taught, Em would qualify it by saying, "now, if your foe was a larger beast, like an ogrelon, for example, that wouldn't work quite the same way. Against an ogrelon you'd want to..." I always thought it was just a random example, but apparently Em knew in advance I would be training gubhorbles to fight ogrelons; Em always knows what she's doing.

The next day after breakfast Em told me to follow Goopo, who would take me to the large practice field where I would begin training gubhorbles. She said to train them any way I wanted, but remember they only had metal swords, they all already knew how to fight in general, and they would only get half a day of training. I was tempted to "loose" Goopo, since her grunting echo was getting annoying, but better sense prevailed and I spent the day drilling the troops.

Early in the exercises I made a foolish mistake; I asked a gubhorble a question. He grunted at me. I turned to Goopo for help. She made the exact same grunts (I guess she thought her "excellent diction" would help). For a moment I stood there, confused, and then I said, "um, never mind." I guess this offended the gubhorble, who had a bit of a temper. He yelled grunts at me. When I didn't react at all, he got really mad and nearly lopped off my head with his sword. Em's training came to my aid just in time; I intercepted his swing with a loose-blast which completely disarmed him, then flashed him where he stood.

Then, fortunately, my senses returned to me and, turning to face the bulk of the trainees I yelled, "This is war! This is about life and death! I don't care if you feel tired

or mad, confused or happy, upset or insulted; if you make a bad move in battle, you die! Ogrelons aren't like trolls; they aren't forgiving or slow. They're more like griffons with clubs, and trying to block one of their attacks with your sword will only cost you your sword, and likely your life as well!

"This good gubhorble did nothing wrong, you might be thinking. I asked him a question, he answered; I ignored him, he got mad. Perfectly justified? Absolutely! But, justified or not, he did something very wrong. What did I just tell you? Stay back until *after* they swing; stay out of reach! Then, when they do swing, dart in as fast as you can, make a jab, and then GET OUT!

"This good fellow stood close enough to me I could spit on him! He swung while my own weapon was fully ready! As a result, he lost his weapon, and if I were an ogrelon he would have lost his life. Fight like you mean it, because the next time you fight, your opponent won't be as forgiving as my lazer handle.

"This is not about your manhood. This is not about fame, glory, or nobility. This is about killing or being killed, and when fighting ogrelons the difference is not based on strength, bravery, or skill; the difference is how well you stay out of their reach."

I suppose that is enough description of the next two days. I trained two groups a day for two days, going through the entire horde in that time. Goopo grunted along with whatever I said, and I did start to sort of understand things, sometimes.

In the evenings I would ask Em what she had done, but all she would say was "I'm helping them tactically," and not a word more. Em can be laconic sometimes.

2.6 Battle and Home

My third morning with the gubhorbles was not like the previous two. For starters, there was no breakfast. Also, it started before dawn, and I didn't get to train anyone. Instead, we were attacked by ogrelons.

I don't remember a lot of details of that morning. Em told me they had come earlier than expected, and we would probably lose the battle, though maybe, if I'd done my job right, the gubhorbles might yet win the war.

After that, it was chaos and fighting for, oh, a long time. Ogrelons are worse in person than I had imagined, and all I managed to do was stay alive; not a single ogrelon felt the sting of an over-laze by my hands, and I'm not certain if I even flashed any.

About mid-morning I bumped into Em. She said our work was done, and I needed to go up the rope beside our tent. She said rope-tricks weren't as good as hardsmord-

bridged giant pockets, but it would have to do. So I ran to the tent and climbed up a rope hanging in mid air and found myself inside a sort of gauzy tent when I got to the top. Em came a little while later and pulled up the rope after her, and we waited.

It didn't take long for the noise of battle to fade into the distance. Em said the gubhorbles were falling back to a more defensible location, and after an hour or so we would head back to the slo.

"Shouldn't we stay and help them out?" I asked. It didn't seem like Em run away from any challenge, no matter how hopeless.

"Yes, we should," she answered, "but they'll do quite well without us and we only have two more days before school starts up again."

"Oh." I hadn't thought about school. Somehow, war seemed more important. I guess it wasn't, though; Em is always right.

The return journey was so like the outgoing one it was almost eerie. Three kolbolds, a wyvern and a bronaut, a pack of jackals (though we called it a night before their second attack), an ogre, two trolls, a panther, and a dune freak. One night in a giants pocket, two full days of hiking, and a pipod ride at the end. Somehow, though, it didn't seem very exciting this time, and I wasn't nearly as scared.

When we got home late the sixth night, I asked Em,

"Em, why did we go out there?"

"To warn the gubhorbles that the ogrelons were coming."

"But how did you know they were coming?"

"They've been slowly encroaching for several years."

"Yes, but how did you time it so perfectly? How did you know they would attack while we were there?"

"Well, I knew they'd find our trail and follow us to the gubhorbles."

"You mean, we caused the battle?" This was a shock. Somehow I got the idea that we were there to help the gubhorbles, not to lead a pack of ogrelons to their very doorstep.

"It would have happened sooner or later anyway," Em explained. "It was only a matter of time. Long before summer they would have fought, and probably in the ogrelons' own time and place, instead of the ogrelons being surprised by an army waiting at the end of the trail of two lone women."

"So, we went out as bait?"

"Basically, yes."

"Oh." Since there didn't seem to be much else to say, I got into my pajamas and went to bed. I had a full day of school ahead of me.

3 Extrodution

Mrs. Fenbinger didn't take my report very well. She practically screamed when she read it, and marched me right home, holding my left ear in a vice-like grip the whole way.

"Mrs. Mulgrave," she said as she stormed into my house, unannounced, "your daughter has turned in the most preposterous piece of nonsense I have ever read!"

"You've led a sheltered life, Fenbinger," Em replied, "but is that really reason to interrupt my housework?"

"But you don't understand! She says she spent the break fighting ogre lawns and cavorting with goblins and bandishing lazer and—Oh! Nasty stuff!"

"'She claims,' not 'she says,' 'ogrelons' not 'ogre lawns,' and they were gubhorbles, not goblins. Yes, I know."

"Aren't you going to punish her for writing lies?"

"The surest way to breed a liar is to treat an honest person like one."

"Still, I understand your complaint; you wish my daughter to tell you her life is as boring as your own. That your life is entirely uninteresting is of no interest to me whatever. If you would rather my child turn in the lies you wish were true, you will be sadly disappointed. Good day."

"But..."

"I *said* good day!" said Em, a bit testily, and Mrs. Fenbinger left.

"Cor?" Em said once Mrs. Fenbinger was gone.

"Yes, Em?" I answered.

"Mrs. Fenbinger doesn't believe in goblinkin. Because of that, she must be given certain allowances. Perhaps next time it would be as wise, in discussing our little excursions, to merely say something like 'I decided not to change clothing for six days, and spent my time playing in the woods within walking distance of my home.' There's no need to force her to see what she chooses to ignore."

"Yes, ma'am," was what I said, but what I was thinking was... "She said 'next time'! She said 'our little excursions'—excursions, in the plural! We get to go out again! Whoopee!"