

The Last Brizzlehound: a Keepers story

The Museum of Dunt has always been a mysterious place, even for those who work there. It is no ordinary building: over the last five hundred years, its rooms came to hold all the wild things that the city around it did not want or was afraid of.

And although the city has changed now, and there are dogs and cats and vacant blocks, and children no longer have to wear guard chains to keep them safe, the wild things have not left the museum.

It is their refuge. It is their home.

But wild things will not be held in one spot, or tied down. And so, even on quiet days, the rooms of the museum shift and change places. When times are restless, they shift even more.

Two years have passed since the events that almost destroyed the city. The museum has been rebuilt, and the very worst of the dangers, which are locked away behind the Dirty Gate, have been quiet for months.

But the five Keepers are always on their guard. Herro Dan and Olga Ciavolga, who have been there since the beginning, sing to the rooms when they grow restless. Sinew plays his harp.

And Goldie and Toadspit, now fourteen years old, check the Dirty Gate once a week, to make sure it is locked and that none of the plagues, wars or famines locked away behind it can escape. They are almost always accompanied by Morg the slaughterbird and Broo the brizzlehound ...

This week's inspection had begun like all the others. As usual, the Dirty Gate was firmly closed, and when Goldie put her eye to the gap between its iron strips, she could see no sign of movement; no horses, no cannons being dragged into action, no troops mustering for an attack.

'It's nice and quiet,' she said. 'Maybe Sinew was imagining things. He thought the plague rooms were a bit restless, but if they were, the war rooms should be making trouble too.'

Toadspit frowned. 'Sinew doesn't usually get things wrong.' On his shoulder, the enormous black slaughterbird known as Morg croaked, 'Wro-o-o-ng.'

Goldie checked the Gate again. This time, she noticed that one of the stone blocks surrounding it was scratched, right down low, where it could be easily missed.

She pointed it out to Toadspit, whose frown grew worse. He took hold of one of the iron strips and tugged at the Gate.

Nothing happened, which was just as it should be. The Dirty Gate was kept locked at all times, and Sinew, Herro Dan and Olga Ciavolga held the only keys.

But Goldie was feeling uneasy now, so she put her hand next to Toadspit's and they both pulled. To their horror, the Gate creaked open. Not far. Only an inch or so. But that was an inch too much.



'Quick, close it!' cried Goldie, and both children threw themselves at the Gate and tried to push it shut.

It wouldn't move.

'Wro-o-o-ng,' croaked Morg again, and with a rattle of her wings and a bright, hungry look in her eye, she flew to the top of the Gate and settled on it.

Goldie looked around frantically. ‘Broo?’ she called. ‘Broo, where are you? Come and help!’

It was the nature of brizzlehounds to be sometimes small and cute, and sometimes big and deadly, depending on whether there was danger nearby. When Broo was big, he was the size of a bear and just as strong, and he had helped the children close the Gate once before.

He *should* be big now – if the Dirty Gate was open, the whole museum was in danger. But the Broo who came limping out from behind a broken display case was small and miserable.

Toadspit took one look at him and said, ‘There’s something wrong, and it’s not just the Gate. I’m going to find Olga Ciavolga. You stay here with Broo and make sure nothing comes through from the plague rooms.’

And without giving Goldie time to argue, he ran off.

Goldie picked up Broo and cuddled him. When he was small like this, he looked so harmless that it was hard to believe he was the last living brizzlehound. But she had seen him when he was as black as night, when his eyes glowed red and he spoke in a voice that made everyone who heard it tremble.

He wasn’t like that now. His little tail drooped, and all his bright, quick energy was gone. He snuffled into Goldie’s neck, and shivered.

‘Are you cold?’ asked Goldie. ‘Maybe I should light a fire.’ She glanced at the top of the Gate, where Morg was stepping from foot to foot in an agitated fashion. ‘Maybe I should light *several* fires, in case the rats try to come through from the plague rooms.’

She laid Broo gently on the stone floor, and set about gathering bits of wood from the display cases. There was ancient paper there too, lining the cases, and she tore it up and crumpled it into three different piles.

She put the biggest pile right next to the Gate, the second biggest next to Broo, and the smallest a short distance away. Then she made pyramids of kindling over the paper, and lit them with the tinderbox she always carried in her pocket.

Flames sprang up from the dry paper, and Broo whimpered. Goldie sat down next to him and stroked his head, while she waited for Toadspit and Olga Ciavolga.

But they were not the only ones who came hurrying through the long corridors of the museum. Herro Dan came too, his old face wrinkled with worry. And Sinew,

looking taller and thinner than ever, with his harp in one hand and Broo's basket in the other.

'Poor little man,' said Herro Dan. His knees clicked as he squatted down next to Broo. 'What's wrong with you?'

Olga Ciavolga pushed her grey hair out of her eyes and said, 'His nose is dry. That is not good. Here, Sinew, lift him into his basket – carefully now.' Then she knelt beside the little dog, saying, 'What is the matter with you, my dear? You were all right earlier.'

Broo whimpered again. 'He is very hot,' the old woman said. 'I think he has a fever.'

By then, Sinew was kneeling next to her. Toadspit called to Morg, and the slaughterbird dropped from the top of the Dirty Gate onto the boy's shoulder.

'Fe-e-e-e-ever,' she croaked.



The knot of worry in Goldie's chest grew bigger.

Olga Ciavolga ran her hands over the little dog's ribs, and across his belly. 'Does it seem to you, Dan, that his skin is very tight?'

Herro Dan's face grew pale. 'You don't think—'

'I do not know what to think. It is many years since I have seen the symptoms.'

'What are you talking about?' Goldie looked from one to the other. 'The symptoms of what?'

Olga Ciavolga pressed her lips together. Herro Dan sighed and said, 'How long since you've seen him big?'

'Broo?' Goldie blinked. 'Why, he was big just—' She broke off uncertainly.

'It's been two days at least,' said Toadspit. 'Mo-o-o-ore,' croaked the slaughterbird.

‘Why is that important?’ Goldie leaned forward. ‘*Why?*’

‘There was a disease,’ said Herro Dan, and Goldie had never heard him sound so old and weary. ‘It came long ago, with the invaders from Merne and their dogs. When it hit the brizzlehounds—’

‘It begins with them not being able to change size,’ said Olga Ciavolga. ‘They grow feverish, and their skin becomes tight. When the fever breaks, a few days later, they start to blister. And then—’

She stopped. Goldie could hardly breathe. ‘What’s the cure?’

Herro Dan shook his head. ‘We never found a cure. It’s one of the reasons why Broo is the last brizzlehound.’

‘But where did it come from now?’ demanded Toadspit.

‘Where do you think?’ said Herro Dan. ‘From behind the Dirty Gate.’

The five keepers took it in turns tending the fires that Goldie had lit. The rest of the time they sat by the basket, whispering words of comfort in Broo’s ear.



‘There has to be something we can do,’ muttered Toadspit, throwing the leg of an old cabinet onto one of the fires. ‘I don’t *believe* that there’s no cure!’

‘Do you think we would have sat back and watched so many brizzlehounds die, if we could have saved them?’ said Olga Ciavolga. ‘We tried everything we knew. We scoured the peninsula for herbs. We invented potions that could almost wake a soldier from the dead. But we found no cure.’

The fire closest to the Dirty Gate collapsed in a shower of sparks, and Toadspit poked at it viciously until it flared to life again. ‘Then we have to find one now. We can’t lose Broo! Herro Dan, what can we *do*?’

The old man was stroking the air above the little dog’s head. ‘There there, my dear,’ he murmured, ignoring Toadspit. ‘There there. It’s gonna be all right.’

Broo shivered and growled. His whole body was slick with sweat now, and the skin on his belly was so tight that he yelped with pain whenever someone touched him.

Goldie could hardly bear to watch him, so she watched the Dirty Gate instead. Which meant she was the first to see the whiskered nose quivering in the gap.

She leaped to her feet, grabbed a flaming chair leg out of the fire and threw it at the rat.

Everyone except Broo jumped up too. Toadspit, Olga Ciavolga and Herro Dan grabbed their own bits of wood. Sinew played a quick, dangerous sounding tune on his harp, a tune that seemed to say, ‘Go back! There is nothing here for you except pain and death. Go back!’

But the rat had already gone.

Olga Ciavolga sank back to her knees. ‘We must build up the fires. Sinew, will you bring more wood? And something to eat?’

‘Get some of those broken chairs from Stony Heart,’ said Herro Dan. ‘They’ll burn well.’

Sinew nodded, but he didn’t leave. Instead, he crouched beside his friends, watching the hectic rise and fall of Broo’s chest.

The little dog trembled, and his paws twitched helplessly. Goldie felt as if her heart was being squeezed by an iron fist. ‘Isn’t there *anything* we can do?’

Olga Ciavolga shook her head. ‘We must wait till the fever breaks. If the blisters do not come, they sometimes get better.’

‘And if the blisters *do* come?’ asked Goldie.

There was a sudden burst of smoke from one of the fires. Olga Ciavolga turned away, coughing and rubbing her eyes.

Goldie swallowed. 'When will the fever break?'

'Soon.' The old woman's voice cracked. 'It will break soon.'

'Big,' whispered Goldie. 'Make yourself big, Broo.'

The little dog's eyes flickered, but he didn't wake up, although the fever had broken an hour ago.

Goldie leaned closer. 'If you were big, I don't think this disease would be so bad. It's only because you're small that it's making you so sick.'

Her voice took on a pleading note. 'Remember the soldiers behind the Dirty Gate, the ones who were going to shoot me and Toadspit? Remember how you leaped out of the long grass and saved our lives? As black as night, you were, and as big as a lion! Do that now, Broo. Make yourself big. Save your *own* life.'

'He cannot.' Olga Ciavolga was breaking picture frames over her knee and feeding them to the fires. The flames burned higher and higher, but still she fed them, her old hands tearing at the wood, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

'The change from little to big,' she said, 'or from big to little, is not something he chooses. It comes, or it does not come. And the disease stops it altogether.'

'It comes when there's danger,' said Goldie. 'And there's danger now.' Her knuckles whitened on the basket. 'Listen to me, Broo, there's *danger!*'

Herro Dan touched her shoulder gently. 'There's nothin' you can do, lass. Why don't you go and get a bit of sleep?'

'No,' said Goldie, without looking up. 'I'm all right.'

The old man nodded, and did not take offense. None of them would leave Broo. Not while he still lived.

The last picture frame disappeared into the fires, and Olga Ciavolga joined the others, keeping vigil. 'Is he quieter? Good.'



None of them spoke for a while. Then the old woman said, softly, ‘The first time I saw him he was a pup, locked inside a cage that was far too big for such a tiny white scrap of a thing. A man was beating him through the bars.’

Goldie had heard this story before, but still she winced.

‘I could not witness such cruelty and do nothing,’ continued Olga Ciavolga. ‘But before I could act, this little white pup ... changed. Right in front of my eyes. I had never imagined that such a thing was possible.’

She stared at her hands, remembering. ‘He was still a pup, of course. But even then he stood almost as high as a man, and his coat was so black that it hurt my eyes to look at him. And when he spoke—’

She swallowed. ‘He raised his head and said, “Why are you hitting me?” The man laughed. “To teach you a lesson. I own you, and you must do as I tell you.” And the pup replied, in a puzzled voice, “But how can you own me? I am a brizzlehound.”’

Broo whimpered, and wriggled onto his side. Olga Ciavolga wiped a tear away. ‘That man was a fool, and cruel with it. He deserved what happened to him.’

She stopped, staring down at the little dog, and the look on her face was so dreadful that Goldie felt as if her bones might crumble.

‘What is it?’ she said.

Whatever it was, Herro Dan saw it almost at the same moment. The old man’s mouth trembled.

‘*What?*’ shouted Goldie.

Olga Ciavolga opened her mouth, but no words came out. She raised her hand and pointed to Broo’s belly—

Where blisters were beginning to form.

The blisters rampaged across Broo’s belly like an invading army. The keepers did their best to soothe him, but without success. He was growing weaker by the minute.

So Sinew played for him. He played tunes of chasing and leaping, of nose-to-the-wind and tail-held-high, and the joy of being alive.

But it made no difference.

Goldie put her head in her hands. ‘No hope. Is that what you said, Olga Ciavolga? Once the blisters come there’s no hope?’

‘That is right,’ whispered Olga Ciavolga, who was using her kerchief to shield Broo from the heat of the fires.

‘Well then.’ Goldie chewed her lip. ‘Whatever we do can’t make things any worse. Is *that* right?’

Herro Dan sighed and put his arm around her shoulders. ‘Can’t make things worse. Can’t make things better. Just let it be, eh? Death comes to us all in the end.’

‘Let it *be*?’ said Goldie. ‘No, I won’t. Would you let it be if it was Olga Ciavolga lying there? Or me? Or Toadspit?’

‘You forget,’ said Olga Ciavolga, ‘that Dan and I have seen this disease before. We know how it runs. We have tried to beat it so many times – and failed.’

‘*I* haven’t tried!’ And Goldie picked up Broo’s basket and jumped to her feet.

The little dog yelped with pain at the sudden movement. ‘What are you doing?’ cried Olga Ciavolga, scrambling after Goldie. ‘Can he not die in peace? What is the *matter* with you?’

Goldie took a step backwards. ‘I’m going to try something. It probably won’t work. It’s just— *I have* to try.’

Broo whimpered again. Olga Ciavolga drew herself up. ‘Put him down. I order it!’

‘No, I won’t. You’re the museum’s keeper, not mine.’

‘Whoa, whoa! Hold your horses, both of you,’ said Herro Dan, patting at the air as if it might bolt away from him. ‘Goldie, what are you talkin’ about? Try what?’



Goldie’s face felt raw. ‘To make him go big. To put him in so much danger that he *has* to go big.’

‘You’ll kill him,’ said Sinew.

‘The disease’ll kill him,’ said Goldie. ‘All I’m doing is giving him a chance.’

And before anyone could stop her, she turned and ran out of the room.

Down through the long, dark passages of the museum she went. Through Forgotten Dreams. Along Knife Edge. Through Lost Children.

She could hear Toadspit running after her, but she took no notice. Everything around her seemed to echo her fear and grief. The rooms groaned as she ran into them, and sobbed as she ran out.

In Broken Bones, the skeleton of a slommerkin, which had never spoken when it was alive, whispered, ‘The last brizzlehound.’ In Vermin, the stuffed rats wept real tears.

By the time Goldie came to the twisting stairs of Harry Mount, she was crying too. She held the basket as tenderly as she could, but still Broo whimpered.

The sound tore at Goldie's heart. 'I'm sorry, Broo,' she whispered. But she didn't stop.

As she ran down the long staircase, the light around her grew dimmer. The walls drew in so close that the hair on the back of her neck stood up. In the basket, Broo struggled for breath.

The stairs ended so abruptly that Goldie almost fell off them. She caught herself just in time, clutching the basket and teetering on the edge of danger.

She was standing on a narrow ledge, looking out over the waters of an enormous black lake, with pillars rising out of it, and a low, arched ceiling. Watergas lamps spluttered and hissed at the top of each arch. The air was freezing.

Goldie shuddered. Something lived beneath the waters of Old Scratch, but none of the keepers knew what it was, not even Herro Dan. They avoided the place when they could. And if the museum brought them here, they hurried through, quickly and quietly, and breathed a sigh of relief when they reached the other side.

What if she was wrong? What if she was condemning Broo to an even uglier death—

She heard a step behind her, and swung around. Toadspit stood there, his face white, his chest heaving.

Goldie eyed him warily. 'You can't stop me. I'm going to do this.'

Toadspit said nothing. Somewhere in the distance, something splashed. A ripple spread across the lake towards them. The air grew even colder. A finger of black water reached up and stroked Goldie's shoe.

She jumped backwards. Swallowed. Clutched the basket so tightly that Broo whined and opened his eyes. *I can't do it*, she thought.

Toadspit stepped down beside her, his eyes as dark as riverstones. 'You were right,' he said. 'We have to try.' His voice broke. 'Do it. Do it quickly!'

Goldie stared blindly at the lake. 'Forgive me, Broo,' she whispered. Then, with all her strength, she threw the basket into the waters of Old Scratch.

The little dog sank beneath the surface with barely a splash. Goldie tried to breathe, and failed. She felt as if she had torn out her own heart and thrown it away.

Beside her, Toadspit was mumbling to himself, though Goldie couldn't tell what he said.

A bubble rose from the spot where Broo had disappeared. Far back between the distant pillars, the lake swelled and rolled. *Something* had scented the little dog, and was moving towards him.

‘You should go,’ Goldie said to Toadspit. ‘That thing, it’ll come after us—’

Toadspit shook his head. The water rippled. A black wave broke against one of the pillars.

Goldie wanted to scream. She wanted to dive into the water and drag Broo out again. But she did nothing.

Another bubble. A flurry of them. The little dog must be running out of air.

Goldie took a step forward. Toadspit gripped her arm. They stared at the water, at the horrible sheen of it, at the hungry waves that seethed across its surface. Closing in on Broo.

‘Maybe he’ll drown first,’ whispered Toadspit. His voice shook uncontrollably. ‘That’d probably be best.’

Goldie wrapped her arms around herself. ‘No, he’ll change. He’ll fight off the disease, and he’ll fight off that *thing*, whatever it is, and come back to us.’

The words sounded absurd to her. How stupid she’d been, to think that this might help. She should have listened to Herro Dan and Olga Ciavolga. She should have let Broo die in peace.

‘You should go,’ she said again.

‘I’ll stay until the end,’ whispered Toadspit.

There had been no more bubbles. ‘Perhaps,’ whispered Goldie, ‘the end has already come.’

‘No. We’d feel it. The museum would feel it— look!’

His fingers dug into Goldie’s arm. Several pillars away, something rose up, something oily and unimaginable, then plunged down again.

The air between the pillars clapped like thunder. The waters heaved. Goldie was panting, as if she had run from one end of the museum to the other.

What was happening? Was Broo dead yet? Had he tried to fight? Had his great heart gathered itself for one final battle, only to realise that it was trapped in a small, sick body, and a thousand times outmatched?

Did he know that it was Goldie who had delivered him to such a death?

The waters boiled. ‘Look!’ cried Toadspit again.

And again the creature rose up—

But no. It *wasn't* the creature. Goldie could hardly believe her eyes. It was—
'Broo!' she screamed. 'Here!'

The huge black head turned towards her. The enormous chest took in a lungful of air. Broo started to paddle towards the ledge.



He was halfway there when he flinched and began to sink, as if something had taken hold of him and was dragging him under. He roared with pain and rage, then disappeared beneath the water.

'He's still sick!' cried Toadspit. 'He doesn't have the strength for this!'

Goldie didn't hesitate. She threw off her shoes. She whipped her knife out of her pocket, leapt into the water and struck out strongly, swimming towards the spot where Broo had vanished. When she reached it, she took a deep breath and dived.

The brizzlehound was just below the surface, fighting furiously against something that gripped him from below. Goldie couldn't see what was happening, but she could

feel Broo twisting and turning, his paws scrabbling at the water, his teeth slashing at the *thing* that held him.

She ran her hand down his leg and felt – something. A hand? A tentacle? She couldn't tell. She thrust her knife into it, as hard and deep as she could.

The water erupted around her and her own leg was seized. Something slashed at her cheek. She thrust again and again with her knife, and the grip on her leg loosened.

Her lungs were bursting. She kicked frantically for the surface, took two great gulps of air, and dived down again.

She had no idea how deep the water in Old Scratch was. She felt as if she was swimming downwards forever. But there at last was Broo, still struggling, but more feebly now.

Goldie dived past the great paws, jabbing with her knife at the *thing* below. The water howled at her. A slimy arm flung itself around her neck and began to tighten. Broo kicked free, but now *she* was being pulled down.

She stabbed and hacked at the arm around her neck. Her chest spasmed with the desire to breathe. But still she fought.

Suddenly, something brushed against her. A human hand briefly gripped hers, then dived past her. Below her, the water boiled. Goldie drove her knife one last time into the slimy flesh that held her – and it let go.

She shot upwards, breaking the surface just in time. She took a great gulp of air, and another, and another.

Something splashed nearby. Goldie twisted around and saw Broo paddling anxiously towards her. Another splash, and Toadspit surfaced, knife in hand, hair streaming across his face.

‘We have to get out of here!’ he gasped.

They swam for the brick ledge as quickly as they could. Broo was weak from sickness and loss of blood, and they had to drag him up onto the ledge, and half carry him along it, looking for the door that would take them to safety. Goldie kept an eye on the water, but although it shuddered and rippled, there was no sign of the creature that had attacked them.

They found the door and hurried through it, slamming behind them. Then all three of them collapsed with relief, unable to go a step further.

There was a celebration that night. Olga Ciavolga, Herro Dan and Sinew made a fuss of Broo and made sure he had his favourite things to eat. They stroked his head and scratched his back, and murmured in his ear until he grumbled, ‘I do not know why you have to keep telling me you love me. I would much rather have another bone to chew on.’

They made a fuss over Goldie and Toadspit, too. ‘You were right to do what you did,’ said Herro Dan. ‘It took courage—’

‘It took desperation,’ said Goldie. ‘I didn’t know if it would work.’

‘Even if it had not, you would still have been right to try,’ said Olga Ciavolga.

‘But I’m very very glad,’ said Sinew, with a crooked smile, ‘that it *did* work.’

Broo’s nose, as cold and wet as a brizzlehound’s nose should be, nudged Goldie’s foot. ‘So am I,’ he said, in his deep, growly voice. ‘Thank you.’

And he went back to chewing contentedly on his new bone.