

R.P. MCG'S
SLAMIDALF
AND THE HEART OF THE GAME

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Version: EUL-I.O **Author:** Ryan McGowan

Dedicated to my wonderful wife, Megan.

Love you.

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<https://camkendell.com/>

Parents and Teachers

If you aren't sure if this book is for your child or class, you can read all of it for free on my webpage. The epub and PDF is available at no cost.

If you can't afford the book for your child, just grab the digital version for them! You can pay me with a review or an email telling me what your child liked and didn't like about the book (that's the only way I can improve!).

Also, there are some jokes and references in here for you.

I hope you and your child get as much out of this book as I did writing it.

P.S. There are study materials available for free on my website!

R.P. MCG'S SLAMIDALF AND THE HEART OF THE GAME



Chapter 1

THE SOUND OF WATER

The sunlight dappled through the canopy like shards of broken glass, as the raft creaked beneath us. It reminded me of an old man's bones as he stretched at the start of a new day. Light danced on the water like a mischievous spirit, taunting Dribbles as he clung to the raft's edge. His face was wrought with misery, pale green and ghostly white, as he leaned over to offer the fish his secondhand lunch. The water swallowed it greedily in one gulp and the currents pulled it down to feed whatever fish might nibble.

"Hey, mind doing that somewhere else?" Passanova called out, his voice dripping with mock disgust as he watched the sea-sick mess from Dribbles' stomach float away down the river.

"Dwarves were not made for travelling on water," Dribbles gagged and groaned. His voice wobbled with the rhythm of the raft. He gagged once more and another chunk of tuna fish sandwich unmealed itself into the water with a sickening splat.

"Besides," he added, forcing a grin through his greenish pallor, "free food for the fishes!"

I never liked the water but the jungle made me like it even less. The trees loomed overhead like statues in a dark dungeon. The gnarled roots clawed at the riverbanks as if trying to escape the river's tide as it pulled us along. The canopy was thick like a wool blanket that let only slivers of sun pierce through. Beyond the few feet of light that danced on the water, the darkness swallowed everything, hiding whatever secrets lay a few feet away from shore.

Passanova hunched over a deck of cards, his fingers moving with the precision of a spider weaving its web. The game was a bunch of elvish nonsense. Symbols and sigils patterned across the faces of the cards in a random manner. I couldn't make heads or tails of it and my head hurt just looking at them.

Meanwhile, Bill stood at the front of the raft, his body eerily still for a creature that usually ran around with its mouth wide open. He stared into the distance as if he'd spotted something the rest of us couldn't see. Or, maybe he was just thinking about whatever blorts think about. You never could tell with Bill.

"Hey Bill, what's on your mind?" I asked, not really expecting to get a response but hoping that I would.

Bill turned slowly, its wide glassy eyes locking onto mine. For a moment, he just stared, mouth hanging open as if he could taste the air. He blinked once. Slowly. Deliberately. Then, as slowly as he turned to me, he turned back the other way.

I let out a long sigh. Why did I even bother? Talking to Bill was like trying to have a conversation with a rock. But, most rocks don't have a magic bracelet that lets them shoot their voice into your mind. I paused a moment to think about if the bracelet would work on a rock and what types of thoughts a rock might have. Did rocks complain about the temperature? Or, maybe they had a hard time getting comfortable. Rocks definitely didn't stink like a wet blort does.

Dribbles rolled onto his back, the pallid green color fading from his face in favor of his traditional dwarven tones. He was still paler than usual. His rosy cheeks didn't return to quite the same luster as before his unfortunate delunching incident.

"I don't know why you keep asking that thing questions, Slamdalf?" Dribbles asked between nauseous burps.

I wish he'd stop calling me that. It isn't like we've played any basketball since we left Pasadena. He gave me this stupid nickname after I got blocked by that stupid goat. He knows my ears get hot whenever he mentions it.

"I'm pretty sure it doesn't know up from down, let alone that it has a brain. Or, maybe it doesn't," Dribbles laughed as Bill kept staring into the distance.

I sighed. "I don't know... maybe you're right. But do you remember back in the cave? And what he did at the door?"

And with the orcs? He seemed pretty impressive back then. And, the king knew him by name.”

“Ayy, but have you heard it say anything since we got back to Ballendore? I haven’t. Maybe that magic bracelet only worked in Blortsylvania?” Dribbles shrugged. “Hey, Passanova, what do you know about that bracelet?”

Passanova ignored the question as if he didn’t hear it as he plopped another rune covered card down onto the deck. A little swirl of light lit up off the cards as he whispered an ecstatic “Yes!” to himself.

I had heard him ask me where Dribbles was once we got back but maybe Dribbles was right. Maybe the bracelet only worked in Blortsylvania and the residual magic had faded. Or, maybe we’d all imagined it. Maybe the cave was filled with hallucination causing spores. Still, as I watched Bill stare into the distance, deep down into the river, I got the feeling that he was waiting for the right moment to speak.

“So you really think that there’s a place out here that’ll train you guys, eh?” Passanova asked. His voice stunk with smarm as it leapt to my ears like a poorly sung note.

Before I could answer, Dribbles chimed in. “Ayy, I do. Legends always have a bit of truth to them, after all.”

“A legend! Well... that’s reassuring,” Passanova said, laughing for the first time in a week.

We all laughed. Even Bill, who spun around with a loud gurgle, his arms flailing like a windmill in a storm. He found it so funny that he started running laps around the raft.

For a moment, the raft was chaos. Dribbles clutched his stomach trying not to barf, Passanova wiping tears of laughter from his eyes, and Bill doing... whatever it was that Bill was doing.

Eventually, he skid to a stop in front of me. His wide eyes locked onto mine. Before I could ask what he was doing, he yanked on my robe with surprising force for a creature his size, and pointed ahead with a stubby, trembling finger.

I glanced to where he was pointing. Nothing unusual or out of the ordinary.

“Listen,” Bill’s voice rang in my head. It was a relief to hear my friend’s voice again.

“Hey guys, Bill can still talk,” I called out. “He just spoke to me. He told me to listen. Can you believe that?”

“Stop. Listen!” Bill’s voice rang out again.

Shocked at the concern in his voice, I closed my eyes and focused, letting the sounds of the jungle wash over me. Monkeys hooted and hollered in the distance. Birds chirped and cawed. But, it was the water that caught my attention. What had once been a gentle ripple had turned into a low, rumbling growl. It was as if the waters were stirring awake from a long, cold rest.

“Hey guys,” I called out to the group. “Is water supposed to sound like that?”

Chapter 2

INTO THE DEPTHS

Water was, in fact, not supposed to sound like that.

“Rapids!” Passanova yelled out, his voice cutting through the jungle noise like a blade. He flung his playing cards onto the raft and lunged for the paddle we cobbled together from a fallen tree and some rope from Dribbles’ pack.

I grabbed my walking stick, something I had stumbled upon earlier that week as we made our way into the jungle, now repurposed as the mast for our rather unconventional sail. Dribbles’ underwear, with festive hearts plastered across them, flapped in the breeze. In hindsight, maybe that wasn’t the best idea, considering the underwear’s questionable cleanliness and the fact that it was the most prominent feature of our raft.

“Everyone grab hold of something!” Dribbles shouted over the sudden tumult of the water. The raft bucked and heaved beneath us, as if it were trying to shake off the indignity of carrying such a motley crew. Or, perhaps it had finally realized that it had underwear placed upon it like a flag. Dribbles let out the last of his lunch as water started to splash into the raft.

The mast proved its worth as it served as a third leg for balance against the turbulence. Water clashed against jagged rocks, drenching us in river spittle and furious sound as we fought to keep our balance. The rope holding our log-raft together began to fray under the pounding of rocks against it.

I glanced around, doing a headcount through the chaos. Dribbles was practically welded to the raft's edge, his knuckles white from the force needed to stay aboard. Passanova paddled with both hands trying to steer our ramshackle vessel. His body pressed flat against the wood to avoid becoming airborne with each plunge into the rapids. I searched for Bill, and then...

SPLASH

"Blort overboard!" I yelled as our raft smashed into a rock, slinging us into the air like leaves in a storm.

I clung to my stick. I drew in a deep breath like it was my last. I was ready to dive into the murky depths and let fate make the best of me.

SLAM

I was airborne for only a second before I hit the water and darkness engulfed me. I sunk like a stone down towards the riverbed. I wiggled and waggled my fingers, trying to conjure some levitation magic to lift myself from the watery embrace, but to no avail. The spell wasn't working. What was I forgetting?

I flailed like a marionette with its strings being pulled in every direction. My clothes pulled me deeper into the abyss. Deeper... and deeper still. My arms squeezed around my walking stick in a desperate hug, as if it were my last connection to the world above. My body churned about as the ebbs and flows of the river dragged me across the bottom.

This was it. This was the end of my journey. I wasn't going to be the best basketball player of all time. I wasn't going to be the GOAT. Instead, I was destined to become fish food. No different than the tuna sandwich Dribbles ate.

A sudden realization hit me like a bolt of lightning. Or, maybe it was a fish that knocked it into me. I remembered why levitate didn't work! I wiggled and waggled my fingers, this time casting levitate on the walking stick. With an upward gesture, the stick propelled me skyward, rocketing towards the light. I could feel the resistance of the water against my clothes and hair, pulling me back down into the depths. Somewhere in the turbulence, the wide brimmed pointy hat I had found bid me farewell and swept away into the cool, murky deep of the river, never to be seen again.

Looking up, I opened my eyes to the most beautiful sight. A halo of light. Expanding, beckoning me back to the surface. As I broke through back to the air the green and blue hues of the jungle canopy and open sky greeted me. I gulped in a lung full of that precious life called air.

My grip tightened on my walking stick as it flew higher and higher into the sky. I looked down and the ground grew

smaller and smaller. I searched for my friends but could not find them. Were they all taken by the river? Poor Dribbles. Poor Passanova. Poor Bill. Poor... me. All alone in this jungle with none of my gear and nothing but this walking stick that's taking me higher and higher into the sky.

Unfortunately, a hoop mage's grip is more suited for basketballs than sticks. As I ascended, my fingers began to betray me. My grip weakened with each passing moment. The wet bark from the stick slipped through my hands. I reached desperately with my other hand, trying to claw my way up the stick as it soared above the treeline. I could feel the stickiness of the wood against my skin, but, it was a losing battle. I was sliding down, inching closer to an inevitable plunge back into the watery abyss below.

I tried reaching higher once more and... whoops.

My hands slipped.

I fell.

And I fell some more.

I wiggled and waggled my fingers again and cast feather fall on myself. My descent slowed to a crawl.

That was a relief. Unfortunately, you can't control where you fall, just how fast. So, I slowly fell like a graceful feather fluttering to and fro in the breeze right back into the water I had just escaped.

And, like everything else on this adventure, things weren't looking much better. Feather fall ends when you touch something. In this case, water was something. I looked around for something to cast levitate on. And then I was reminded once more why it didn't work before. It doesn't work on clothes or people. Don't ask me why, I don't make the rules.

I inhaled one final breath, surely to be my last, as I immediately sank like a stone when my foot gently tapped the water.

The current got stronger the deeper I sank, pulling me further down the river. I watched the light fade from above once again. The same halo of light that once gave me hope now was a harbinger of despair. I reached up towards it one final time and thought of my friend Dribbles.

"I'll miss you the most," I blurbled to myself as my body collided with something very hard.

THUD

Chapter 3

I'M ALIVE?

The afterlife was dark and loud and had this weirdly solid floor, and something wet kept tugging at my legs, which felt incredibly rude for a place that was supposed to be peaceful. This tugging felt suspiciously like water, which, I didn't guess was supposed to be a major feature of the great beyond.

“Oh...”, I groaned. “My head...”

It was then I realized that I wasn't dead.

I was stuck on the side of the river laying on something very hard and rather uncomfortable, like a rock. I opened my eyes. The light was painful and my vision was blurry, but I could make out a grey blob beneath me. As my eyes adjusted, sure enough, that was rock. I had never been so happy to be laying uncomfortably on a stone in my life. I turned my head some more, and a blur of green and brown hues appeared. I strained my eyes to focus for a moment. Sure enough, trees.

I let out a sigh. Followed by a cough and a lung full of water. How fortunate it was to be alive. Then my friends' faces slammed into my skull the same way my body had slammed into the bottom of the river seconds before the lights went out. I hoped they were alright. I sat up straight and scanned

the area. If I had made it, surely they had too. Right? Or, had one of them saved me and then ran off to help the others? I looked around for any evidence one of them may have left behind. Footprints in the mud, a discarded bag, maybe Dribbles' underwear?

Nothing.

I shouted for Dribbles. For Bill. For Passanova... but the echo of my voice was the only thing that replied. A few birds flew in response, chirping and caw-cawing, mocking my solitude as they flew about in pairs and flocks. The river here was more subdued than upstream. Or, at least I think I was further down. I couldn't hear the crashing of the rapids any longer and water tends to only flow in one direction. I tried shouting again but the density of the jungle swallowed it whole.

I was alone.

I started to dry myself off, wringing the water out of my robes and squeezing the water from my hair. I know wizards wear this attire, but I was seriously questioning its suitability for adventure. They're cumbersome, they weigh a ton, and you can't move around in them. And swimming? Forget about it.

As I squeezed my robes, water ran through my fingers and over my hands as it splashed the stone beneath my feet. Naturally, my shoes were drenched as well, squishing with each movement I made.

I started to look around the area to see if I could find any signs of our scattered belongings. Maybe a bit of the raft, or Dribbles' bag. Or maybe just Dribbles. I trudged up and down the riverbank in my squishy, damp, shoes. I searched and searched and kept my eyes peeled for anything that might be a sign of one of my friends.

I felt so alone that it started to feel like the afterlife after all. Tree after tree. Branch after branch. The jungle looked the same in every direction.

After my unsuccessful search, I decided to keep going down river in the hopes that maybe I could find them there. Maybe they set up camp to dry off and everybody was just fine.

The jungle held tightly onto its secrets. The riverbanks offered only a glimpse of clarity, letting me see across its banks and to the other side. There was very little walking space along the banks without bumping into the tangled green nightmare of trees and vines. Light barely penetrated the thick canopy of the jungle. The leaves and branches stretched up and out for every inch of sunlight that they could.

My stomach began to growl, a loud and painful reminder that I wasn't sure how long I'd been unconscious for. I trudged on. I walked and walked and kept on walking with my squishy shoes squishing every step of the way. Every couple hundred feet or so my stomach made out with a loud gurgle, as if to say "Feed me! Feed me!" I know stomach, I know.

As the river curved and carved towards the side I was on, a clearing appeared. The vines and leaves loosened, relinquishing their grasp of my sight and... finally. The sky revealed itself! Unfortunately, it was starting to get dark. The river split in two, encircling a small island. And on that island...

No...

It couldn't be.

Chapter 4

AS COLD AS ICE

A basketbough tree! Oh, what luck! What a treasure! What a miracle! What a blessing!

What was it doing out there in the middle of an island in a river?

The fruit from the basketbough tree are what we make basketballs from. The insides are carved out like pumpkins and get used for all sorts of things. The guts are rubbed against spider silk to make the nets and give them that *swoosh* sound. The seeds are roasted and smashed for potions and spices. The edible bits? Now, that was what I was after. The edible bits are always ripe, always ready to eat, and always delicious. Even the rind is used to make the grip and texture of basketball, well, at least the ones that aren't made of rubber. All we do is glue it to the outside of a bubble toad (rest in peace, little guy), and, *viola*, a perfect basketball.

Unfortunately, I had to devise a plan to get to that island. Sure, the river was calmer here, but there was no way I was going to get wet again, especially with the night breathing down my neck. I scanned the area looking for a way across.

“Well,” I thought aloud, “maybe I can float myself over there?”

But how? I needed something to hold on to first. A stick? No, that didn’t work very well the last time I tried it. I don’t think sticks are sticky enough. Maybe some vines? Too risky and flimsy. I looked around at everything I could see. Nothing seemed like it would work. “Well... what about turning the water to ice?”

I wiggled and waggled my fingers and ice began to sprout from my palms and drip down in front of me, turning each tiny droplet into a small pool of ice on the water. I continued to hold this pose, concentrating as I took one step at a time. The footing of my damp shoes on the freshly formed ice was incredibly slick, like oil sliding across a blade or fairy snot on a doorknob. Don’t ask me how I know about the last one.

Every shift of my weight felt like a gamble. I knew that one bad move, one bad slip, and I’d be taking another plunge straight into the water.

50 feet. Getting closer.

The ice continued to fall from the white mist forming in front of my outstretched palms. It made a staticky sizzley sound when the ice formed that reminded me of bacon frying, and boy was I hungry.

40 feet. Closer still.

I shivered at the thought of getting caught in an icy river. Although I knew that this wasn't such a case. The water was, in fact, a very pleasant temperature but my imagination took hold for a moment. I felt my skin grow cold and the thought slowed my pace. Still, I dragged on. I needed to keep focused on the task at hand. That is to say, the task of forming this ice from my hands.

30 feet. Halfway there.

My feet began to shake from the cold leaking up through my shoes that began to freeze on the bottom. My toes started to feel the sharp sting of subzero temperature around them.

20 feet.

I started to think about Dribbles and Bill and Passanova. My mind was wandering and I needed to stay focused. Was I going to have to deliver the bad news to Passanova's sister? "Stop. Focus," I said out loud to reaffirm what I had to do. I had to retain complete focus. Either I would slip or the spell would stop working. Neither were options.

10 feet. Almost there.

I could see several fruit from the basketbough tree almost within arms reach. I licked my lips in anticipation as my stomach growled louder than it had before. I thought of troll cheese tacos and mudberry pies. I thought about a warm plate of stewed gomberry apple fritters on a cold Saturday night next to a fire.

CRACK

I heard it from behind me. I looked back. The ice was beginning to break. I had to hurry. I inched my way across the ice, shuffling my frozen shoes as fast as I could. Still, the ice would only freeze about as fast as my spell would work.

Concentrate. Stay calm. Just keep focused.

5 feet. I could feel the current pulling away at the sheet of ice. I was starting to float away from the island. It was now or never. I had to jump or swim the rest of the way and I was determined that I was not going to get wet again.

I bent my knees and readied myself to jump. My frigid toes hurt, unbending as I moved my body weight forward. I jumped with all the force that I had left to give.

One foot.

Two foot.

Three foot.

Four foot.

I outstretched my legs as far as they could go to make that last foot. My feet dug into the dirt, mud, and sand of the side of the river as I began to fall backwards into the water. "No!" I shouted as my butt touched the surface of the water.

Despite my best efforts, I was soaking wet. *Again.*

I panicked, holding my breath and flailing my arms, trying to stay afloat. I struggled against the water as it splashed around me. I hit the bottom and... wait. I opened my eyes and looked around.

I stood up in the ankle deep water and went straight for the nearest basketbough fruit, soaking wet and glad nobody saw me flail about as I did. I cracked one of the fruits against a rock and I ate and ate and ate.

Chapter 5

THE MANY USES OF BASKETBOUGH FRUIT

A beam of light, fresh off its million-mile journey through the cosmos, which had enjoyed the trip up until this particular point, snuck through the basketbough leaves and weaved its way straight to my eyelids. I groaned, rolled over, and stretched my arms and legs out as far as they could go unaware of the long journey that that particular photon had taken. I hadn't slept that well in some time. Around me, the jungle was waking up too. Birds chirped away in the trees, the river gurgled and bubbled gently, and the grass swayed in a lazy dance, bouncing to and fro as a breeze brushed across them. I opened my eyes and realized I was still on the island in the middle of the river.

What a bummer.

Then, I remembered my missing friends.

An even bigger bummer.

I thought about how they might not have found a basketbough tree like I had. Maybe they didn't find anything to eat at all. Maybe they ended up as lunch for some big creature

with pointy sharp teeth, like a tiger or a big fat dinosaur. Thinking like that wasn't going to help me find my friends. I needed to stay sharp. To stay keen. To stay on point. So, first things first: breakfast.

For those that don't know, there are a million ways to prepare a basketbough fruit. You've got basketbough fruit salad, basketbough fruit stew, basketbough fruit gumbo, basketbough fruit and rice, basketbough fruit kabobs, basketbough fruit casserole, basketbough fruit soup (different than the stew), basketbough fruit sandwiches, basketbough fruit tacos, basketbough fruit skewers, basketbough fruit pasta, basketbough fruit wraps, basketbough fruit burgers, basketbough fruit stir-fry, basketbough fruit curry, basketbough fruit sushi, basketbough fruit pizza. My mind drifted as I ate a ripe basketbough fruit one nibble at a time.

The stringy bits of the fruit gushed in my mouth leaving a tangy, almost orange-like flavor in my mouth with the aftertaste of chicken.

After having my fill, I needed to figure a few things out. On the top of the list, I needed food for at least a few days. There was no telling how far this river would go or how long it would take me to find someplace safe to stay. Once I had a good amount of food, I had to figure out how to carry it all. Then, I had to figure out how to get off this island without getting too wet. Not the end of the world, but I didn't want to get swept away in the water and I was tired of getting

wet. Plus, I never learned to swim. Looking back, that was probably something I should have learned to do.

I spent some time gathering all the fruit I thought I could carry. It wasn't that difficult after all, I simply used my telekinesis spell to move a sharp rock near the fruits to cut them down.

Once I had done that I began to look for something to carry the fruit in. After spending a few minutes trying to figure that out, it hit me like a bag of bricks. What better way to carry basketbough fruit than inside of a hollowed out basketbough? So, I cracked one open by pulling on the stem until it popped open with a sucking splat. I scooped out all of the guts, with a squishy splat, and removed the seeds and stringy bits from the fruit with a springy splat. I began to tear up edible bits of fruit, placing them inside of the hollowed out basketbough fruit shell before plopping the lid back on with a final ker-splat.

I realized, though, that carrying a basketball sized fruit in my hands wasn't going to go well in the jungle. I decided that I needed to turn the container into a backpack, satchel, or some other kind of carrying apparatus. I looked into the tree and saw a few vines hiding themselves at the very top.

Score!

I telekinetically grabbed hold of the vines, gave them a good tug, and yanked with all of my might until they finally snapped free from the tree. The sound of the snapped vines

whipped in my ear and echoed off the water like a stone skipping across it. After floating them towards me, I was ready to turn my basketbough into a backpack. Or a basketboughpack, if you will.

I twisted the vines around the basketbough in a highly skilled fashion with the precision of a fine tailor and the prowess of a second, but different, fine tailor and... no luck. I tried it again with even more gusto. Nope, the basketbough slipped right on through. I attempted this over and over again, for about an hour, conjuring up different forms of inspiration, before I was finally able to figure out the right knots I needed to create this incredible and most highly fashionable backpack.

“Good enough for a few days,” I said to myself. I had noticed that I had been talking to myself more and more over the last day. I think I just missed Dribbles.

The backpack was a mess. The basketbough fit very loosely inside of the vines, barely holding it together. It was like a pile of post-played yarn and I was the kitten who had enjoyed himself.

Unfortunately, it was time for me to try to cross the river. I gazed at what had nearly caused my death yesterday. Maybe it had taken my friends. But, what I did know is that I had to conquer it. This was no different than the net goblins, the zombie potatoes, the spider queen, or Passanova’s orc army.

I thought about the best way to beat this enemy. I stared at it and it stared right back, bubbling gently this way and that

way as if to mock me. After considerable consideration, I had made up my mind.

I was going to wade through the river to see how far I could get.

I slung on my newly fashioned backpack, rolled my robe up to my waist, and peeled off my shoes so I could carry them to the other side. I didn't want to get them wet again.

I walked over to the spot I crossed yesterday and put my big toe in. *Brrrrr!* It was cold! But, nothing like it was last night.

Once my toe made its peace with the water, I eased the whole foot in. I waited. Then stepped the other foot in. Step. Step. Step. I repeated this wildly advanced technique until I realized I was halfway across... and the water was still only at my ankles.

Oh.

Well, this was awkward.

Hopefully nobody saw me last night.

I continued to cross the river, one heroic step through ankle deep water at a time. My battle scars included a pair of wet feet and a bruised ego.

On the bank, I dropped my robe back down and slipped into my shoes. I'd just finished tying the laces when leaves rustled ahead. Something was moving...

And it was definitely getting closer.

Chapter 6

WHAT'S FOR LUNCH?

I spun in a frantic circle, hoping for something, anything, to hide behind. A sturdy boulder, a thick tree trunk... maybe even a conveniently placed shrub. No such luck. This stretch of jungle specialized in twigs and pebbles. The décor screamed *wide open buffet...* and guess who was the entrée?

I braced myself for the inevitable. Certain danger. Imminent doom. The kind of ending critics call “predictable but satisfying.” Otherwise, an untimely demise.

Dribbles’s voice nagged at my memory. *“You really should learn at least one destructive spell.”* And, right now? A fireball would be nice.

I mentally rifled through my spellbook, which in my case was much shorter than most other spell casters my age. At 13, I should know twice as many.

Light.

Telekinesis.

Leaf Fall.

Spring Step.

Polyblort.

Ice Sheet.

Not exactly a “kill giant monster” lineup.

Spring Step could launch me into a tree... assuming the thing behind me wasn't tall enough to use me as a toothpick. Polyblort? Only worked on blorts and basketballs. Great for basketball games and saving blort lives, but otherwise useless. Telekinesis handled exactly one basketball's worth of mass, so unless this monster was politely spherical and regulation sized, I was toast. And Leaf Fall? Well, that just made me fall like a... leaf. Cute. Useless.

The rustling in the jungle grew louder and louder. Whatever it was, it wanted to be heard, and it was definitely coming right for me.

I braced myself for the imminent brawl. Shame I didn't have any weapons, other than my magic and a backpack made of fruit.

Before I could even pick a dramatic stance, a shape burst from the foliage at full speed, screaming at the very top of its lungs:

“OWAAAAOAOAOOOOOAOOAOWOOWAH!”

It was Bill!

“Whew!” I blurted out. “Great! Awesome! So glad you're...”

“*RUN YOU FOOL! AND DON’T FALL LIKE YOU DID LAST NIGHT IN THE SHALLOW PART OF THE RIVER!*“ Bill’s voice blasted into my skull as he zoomed right past me down the riverbank, arms flapping behind him like he’d lost control over them.

THUD

The earth rumbled beneath me. Something big was coming.

THUD

Correction: *Something REALLY BIG* was coming! Big enough to snap trees like breadsticks, big enough that the sound had weight.

I spun and sprinted after him, my legs pumping faster than they’d ever agreed to do before. My brain began to do the math. Large thing + fast thing + hungry-sounding thing = *me eaten, swallowed, and digested*. I ran faster and faster down the bank of the river as the thuds behind me got louder and louder.

ROAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR

Curiosity is a terrible disease, and I caught a full-blown case of it. I glanced back.

A layupodon.

Right.

On.

My.

Heels.

Layupodons are basically the size of trees and have decided that murder sounded fun. Huge. Thick scales that shimmer like rainbow armor. Legs built for jumping or running fast enough to outrun you. Teeth sharp enough to split magic.

Its hot, sour breath blasted the back of my neck. Chomp. Chomp. Sniff. Chomp. Big, pointy, nightmare teeth were biting for the back of my head.

“BILL!” I yelled, trying not to die and also trying to catch up with him. “What did you do? Why is this thing chasing you?”

Bill whipped around while running backward, at full speed, because apparently that’s a skill his species has.

“Do you think I know!?” he shouted directly into my mind. “You’re the local! I’m from a world where we stare at the sky with our mouths open! That’s our whole thing! AAAAAH!”

Bill turned back around in one slinky jello-like movement and hit the gas as he high-tailed it further down the river.

The layupodon closed in. Its breath hit my neck like a furnace full of expired milk, and the hairs there regretted existing. Any second now I was going to become a crunchy protein snack. First the river almost killed me, twice mind you, and now this? The universe had clearly filled out the

“How Would You Like to Die?” survey on my behalf. I was moments away from being eaten by a layupodon like it was eating a...

Wait a moment.

Eureka!

I wiggled and waggled my fingers, my expert spellcasting technique, and cast Spring Step on myself, loading my legs like magical pogo sticks.

SPROING!

I shot upward, soaring above the trees as the layupodon launched after me with a teeth-first leap of hungry malice. Its jaws snapped just beneath my boots, fraying a few stray strings a little more.

Mid-flight, I shrugged off my basketbough backpack, waggled my fingers again, and hit it with Telekinesis. Then I hurled it as far as I could. The bag arced through the air like a perfect free throw, spinning away toward freedom... or at least toward “not me.”

You see, I remembered that layupodons eat basketbough fruit. That’s why it chased Bill, who is, in case you’ve forgotten, a blort and therefore shaped like a delicious basketball snack for a dinosaur that eats basketbough fruit. And that’s why it chased me. Well, not *me me*, but the giant bag of fruit strapped to my back like a neon “FREE LUNCH” sign.

The backpack sailed overhead. The layupodon lunged again, jaws snapping inches from the flying fruit backpack. Its depth perception was clearly not winning any awards as it missed two quick bites.

With a frustrated snort, it skidded, spun, and skedaddled after the flying bag, bulldozing through trees. I watched the backpack shrink to a little orange speck in the distance as the monster crashed deeper and deeper into the jungle. I hoped that was the last we'd see of it... but the ominous narrator in my head strongly disagreed.

Gravity remembered I existed and I began my descent. I quickly cast Feather Fall, thank goodness I learned it before Spring Step. My speed slowed to “graceful dandelion fluff,” and I drifted down, blowing this way and that way like a leaf in the wind.

“Hey, Bill!” I called, lazily spiraling earthward. “It’s safe! The layupodon isn’t chasing us anymore!”

As I floated down gently, I noticed in the distance what appeared to be a steeple sticking out of the forest. A church? In the middle of a jungle? How curious. Dribbles had mentioned something about a church being out here before we left Pasadena.

I shouted down to Bill once more. “And it looks like I found us a safe place to go! There’s a church up ahead!”

Chapter 7

GIGGLING WITH THE GAGGLE

After about half a day of trudging through greenery that all looked exactly the same, Bill and I finally got within earshot of the church. There was loud cheering and a ruckus and... wait...

POING

POING

POING

A basketball! Dribbles! I was so relieved. I ran towards the church as fast as my aching tired legs could carry me. Branches from the trees smacked against my face and tugged against my shirt as I made my way towards the sound.

I burst into a clearing and I couldn't believe my eyes.

A gigantic stone church rose before me, towering stained-glass windows glinting in the sun... and, right beside it, a full basketball court where a mass of nuns cheered wildly while a smaller mass scrimmaged like their eternal salvation depended on it. It was like they were playing massketball.

I scanned through the crowd to see if I could find my friends anywhere but... I didn't. Instead, I saw some of the best defense I had ever seen!

Bill and I shuffled forward. We were filthy, exhausted, and in my case, seconds from chewing on bark for calories. There was no telling what was going on with Bill. He was just happy to be here.

"Hello!" I called out, waving weakly. A few habit-wearing heads turned. "We're travelers lost in this jungle and we're looking for our..."

"You're interrupting mass!" a nun snapped, just as another cheer exploded courtside. Then she caught sight of Bill and let out a shriek that could shatter a backboard.

"What is that thing?" She pointed at Bill with her pointer finger pointing pointedly at him as if she had seen a ghost.

Pretty soon we were surrounded by a full gaggle of nuns, which, for the record, is the scientifically correct term for "a swarm of whispering holy women."

"Is that a furry basketball?"

"Is it a demon?"

"Do you think he's single?"

Bill puffed up proudly at the last one.

“We... we’re looking for our friends,” I said, raising my voice over the murmuring. “We were in an accident on the river and it’s been at least a day since I’ve seen them.”

One nun stepped forward from the gaggle. Her head covering hid most of her hair, but long blonde strands escaped at the edges. Sharp hazel eyes, a short, pointy nose, and a gentle smile that could’ve been bottled and sold as anxiety medicine.

“Oh, you poor thing,” she said, placing a comforting hand on my shoulder. Her voice was soft, warm and the first pleasant sound I’d heard since the river tried to murder me. “Let’s get you cleaned up. And your... pet? He looks awfully cold. Come on. We’ll get you both inside.”

“Yes, but my friends,” I begged. “Have you seen them? Please. Please tell me you’ve seen them!”

“Yes, yes, your friends are here,” she said.

I swear to every god in the multiverse, there has never been sweeter poetry spoken aloud.

“They’re resting. Just as tired as you must be. Come. We’ll get you a warm bed too.” She gestured for us to follow and began weaving through the crowd back toward the church.

Relief washed over me so fast I nearly collapsed. My friends were alright! Dribbles and Passanova made it!

“I’m your *pet*, she says,” Bill grumbled inside my head.

“I guess they don’t get too many blorts around here,” I muttered back with a shrug.

“Who are you talking to?” the nun asked, her tone dipping into the are you okay, dear? register.

“Oh, nobody! Just thrilled my friends are alive.” I put on the happiest, least suspicious smile I could manage.

The nun leaned her shoulder against the heavy wooden church doors. They groaned open on ancient hinges, creaking like a choir of ghosts whose union contract did *not* include overtime.

Inside, a vast sea of polished pews stretched out in perfect rows, their dark wood gleaming under the flickering glow of countless candelabras. The air smelled faintly of wax and incense, a sacred aroma that seemed to whisper, *stay awhile and listen.*

A long red carpet ran straight down the center of the hall, trimmed with two proud golden stripes, like a runway for royalty or very confident sinners.

The walls soared upward; towering, ancient slabs that looked like they’d been holding up the sky since the dawn of time, etched with the memories of centuries long gone.

Above, the ceiling disappeared into shadow, broken only by the warm, golden light spilling out from several wrought iron chandeliers. Their curling metal arms twisted like vines,

cradling dozens of candles that cast dancing shadows across the walls.

The stained-glass windows soared up the stone walls like giant, shimmering storybooks. Sunlight bled through them in fractured beams, creased and bent into a riot of color that splashed across the pews, the floor, even my boots.

The windows told many stories. None that I recognized but all seemed to be about basketball.

One window showed a robed figure mid-air, legs stretched out in an impossible split. In one hand he held a flaming basketball; in the other, a glowing, heart-shaped orb that pulsed faintly, almost as if it were alive. I couldn't tell whether the "pulse" was simply the work of a very talented artist or a very magical one. Probably both.

The nun guided Bill and me through a side hallway to a small room tucked behind the sanctuary. Inside was a modest bed with a straw-stuffed mattress and pillow... and, at the foot of the bed, a smaller pile of straw clearly intended for someone round, orange, and easily startled.

"Here you are," the nun said. "Get some rest and please ask us for anything you need. The Father will want to speak with you in the morning."

"Thank you," I replied. "We really appreciate it. By the way, what's your name? And who is the Father?"

“Father Stopford is the leader of this church,” she replied. “He has tended this flock for nearly a generation. My name is Sister Wallace. Breakfast is in the morning. If you grow hungry before then, please help yourselves to the kitchen. Sleep well.”

With that, she slipped out, the old door giving one last dramatic *creeeek* as it shut.

I crossed the little room and dropped onto the bed. The straw-stuffed mattress crinkled under me as I pulled off my shoes and rubbed my aching feet. Blisters had bloomed along my soles and sides, fresh little souvenirs from our river adventure.

“Well, we made it,” I said to Bill.

I glanced over.

He was already asleep, curled up in his straw pile like an adorable, slightly fuzzy... erm... lil’ guy.

“Don’t blame ya, buddy,” I muttered.

I lay back and was gone instantly.

I dreamed of tacos. Troll cheese tacos. The smell, the texture, the flavor, the knock knock knocking.

...Wait.

Tacos don’t knock.

Chapter 8

MEETING STOPFORD

The tacos kept knocking. So persistent. So loud. So incredibly rude.

I'd finally had enough and was about to tell them exactly where they could shove their tortillas when I opened my eyes.

The door slammed open.

“AYY, LAD, YE MADE IT!”

Dribbles and Passanova filled the doorway, both grinning a mile wide. Dribbles's voice boomed with enough cheer to wake the dead, and, somewhere far, far away, a woman named Beatrice DuPlont, who had just finally beaten a years-long battle with insomnia.

She was awake again. She was very upset about it.

Dribbles stomped over and clapped a hand on my shoulder.

“When did the two of you get here?” I asked. “I'm glad you're alright!”

“Well, lad,” Dribbles laughed. “When the raft flung me over the edge, all river sick and puking up my lunch, Passanova decided to play the hero and tried to save me.” He shot the elf a wink. “Only problem was, the ambitious lad forgot one important detail.”

Dribbles leaned in, lowering his voice conspiratorially.

“He can’t swim.”

Passanova’s smile flickered, then collapsed entirely. He stared at the floor and his purple ears began to turn red.

“So after savin’ him from certain death,” Dribbles continued, puffing out his stomach with pride, “I did what any good dwarf would do.” He thumped his belly. “I slung him over this fine flotation device and rode out the worst of it.”

Passanova sighed the long, exhausted sigh of someone who had already relived this story too many times.

“I spent half the day floating on him,” he muttered. “It was... most unpleasant. His stomach was gurgling against my head.”

Dribbles roared with laughter. “Ayy, lad! Better uncomfortable than dead.” He smacked Passanova on the back, knocking him forward a step.

“Haha. Yes. Truly fortunate,” Passanova said, deadpan.

“So you just floated until you saw the church?” I asked.

“No, lad,” Dribbles said. “While we were still driftin’, a peculiar-lookin’ nun spotted us from the bank and started hollerin’. Said her name was Rose.” He squinted at me. “Don’t ‘spose you’ve seen her, have ya?”

“Can’t say that I have. They brought me to this room almost as soon as we arrived,” I yawned. I swung my legs out of bed and stretched until something in my back complained. “Still, this bed beats the last few places I’ve woken up.”

“So,” Passanova said, folding his arms, “when do we get back on the road? I can’t go home until Slamdalf becomes the Goodest of All the Ages. Or whatever it was.”

“Well, lad,” Dribbles said, nodding sagely, “I believe we’re exactly where we need to be.”

Passanova glanced around the room. “This old monastery?” His voice dripped with sarcasm. “You’re telling me you’re going to learn basketball here?”

A large man emerged in the doorway, effortlessly nudging Dribbles and Passanova aside. He was tall and lean with a straight and unyielding posture. A sharp, angular face sat beneath closely cropped hair and a silvery-gray beard that hid a jaw built for saying no. His eyes, most of all, were a piercing pale blue, like the first light of dawn breaking through a cold nights mist.

Needless to say, he was striking and imposing.

“Yes,” the man said, his deep voice filled the room. “This is an excellent place to learn the sport.”

He inclined his head slightly.

“My name is Father Stopford. This is my church, for lack of a better word. And I run the training here.”

Father Stopford studied me in silence, looking me over as if I were a book, turning page by page in his head. He didn’t blink. It felt like being examined, as if he were sifting through layers of me, searching for something buried deep and forgotten.

There was a strange sense of familiarity to it. The unsettling certainty that I’d met him before, even though I knew I hadn’t. Or maybe I had, just not in a way I could remember. His face gave nothing away, but there was a flicker there. Recognition, perhaps. Or curiosity.

Either way, I had the uncomfortable feeling that he knew more about me than I knew about myself.

“I assume you wish to learn the sport,” Father Stopford said at last, his pale eyes never leaving mine. “That is why you are here. Is that correct?”

“We... uh...” I gulped. “Yes. That’s why we’re here.”

“Good.” His voice lay calm. “Then we will see if you are worthy of our time and our patience.”

The silence that followed pressed down on me. I could still feel his eyes, weighing and measuring, as though he were waiting for an answer to a question he hadn't asked.

"Worthy?" I asked. "How do we prove that?"

"In time," Stopford said. "And effort."

Another quiet moment passed.

Then his gaze shifted.

He glanced toward the movement at my side towards what he had assumed was just a basketball and took a cautious half-step back, one eyebrow curling as he leaned away.

"What," he paused, "is *that*?"

"That's Bill," I said. "He's a Blort. He's... uh... not from around here."

"So it's like a pet?" Father Stopford asked, still eyeing Bill as though it might attack.

"No, not exactly." I shrugged. "More like a friend, I suppose. It's... complicated."

Bill chose that exact moment to let out a low, wet gurgle, followed by a satisfied blurb that echoed softly off the stone walls.

"Ah." He nodded once. "Very well."

Father Stopford paused for an uncomfortable amount of time.

“Nevertheless, lunch will be served shortly,” he said, turning toward the door. “Join us in the dining hall when you are awake. I have much to discuss with the three of you.”

With that, he stepped out and closed the door behind him.

I stared at the door.

Bill burped again.

Chapter 9

MEETING ROSE

A hundred nuns filled the vast dining hall, seated in rigid rows at long, unadorned tables. Above them, vaulted ceilings swallowed sound, returning it as a soft echo as the clatter of utensils and the low hum of voices folded neatly into one another. The nuns ate with a devout focus and their movements were precise and deliberate as they worked methodically through the morning's meal.

I spotted Passanova seated near the back with Father Stopford and another nun, their heads inclined in quiet conversation. I threaded my way through the rows of benches and chairs, careful not to disturb the solemn rhythm of the room.

"That is an interesting tale, my son," Father Stopford said, nodding as Passanova finished. "I am sorry for what you and your world endured. Still, I am glad to hear it is returning to balance." His voice was gentle, like a lyric sung softly.

"It weighs heavily on me, Father," Passanova replied. "But I am grateful for my new friends, and for what they've done for me... even if it all began with an accident on their way to becoming the best at this... sport." The word felt foreign in his mouth.

Stopford nodded his head. "Life has a habit of sending us where we do not plan to go. Yet though the road may twist and wander, our destination remains unchanged."

His gaze lifted and found me.

"Ah. Young Master Gerald," he said warmly. "I'm glad you could join us. Please, sit with your friend. Will Dribbles be joining us shortly?"

I nodded as I took the seat beside Passanova. "Any minute now." I glanced at him. "What burden were you talking about?"

Passanova let out a sigh. "I just... want to rebuild what I destroyed. If only I had had the strength to resist Gorzod then Blortsylvania would still be the beautiful place that it once was."

"Well, I'm glad to have you with me on my journey. With the help of Father Stopford maybe it won't take as long as you think!" I laughed.

Of course, I hadn't played a game of basketball in weeks. At this rate, I was never going to become the greatest of all time. A realization hit me like a sack of potatoes hitting the floor of an old church kitchen.

Something else followed close behind.

Gerald. He called me **Gerald**.

“Father,” I said, narrowing my eyes, “how did you know my name was Gerald?”

“Dribbles told me,” Stopford replied easily. “He’s very protective of you, you know.”

I wonder why Dribbles didn’t introduce me as Slamdalf? He had always introduced me with that goofy nickname before. Not that I’m complaining or anything. It was just... unexpected.

“Ah, yes. I nearly forgot.” Stopford gestured to the nun seated beside him. “This is Sister Rose. She is the one who found Dribbles and Passanova and brought them here. One of the more recent additions to our order but she has risen up the ranks with haste! She has many tricks up her sleeve.”

He laughed, the sound rolled through the dining hall and echoed off the stone.

Sister Rose bowed in silence.

Her hood draped low, hiding her face entirely. As she moved, her body shifted in strange, unsettling ways, bending where it shouldn’t, flowing where it ought to hinge. For a brief, uncomfortable moment, it looked as though she had three spines.

“She has taken a vow of silence as of late,” Stopford said mildly. “She may only speak when life is in danger. I’m sure you understand.”

He glanced up, smiling. “Ah. Master Dribbles. Please. Have a seat.”

“Ayy, thank ye kindly,” Dribbles said, plopping into the empty bench. “So what’s on the menu today?”

“Three-bean casserole,” Stopford replied warmly, gesturing to the bowl before him. “Made fresh from the grounds here. I’m sure you’ll enjoy it.”

He took a generous bite. His face brightened with honest satisfaction.

I leaned in and gave my own serving a cautious sniff.

It smelled... fine. Earthy. Wholesome. Respectable. The kind of meal that built character even among the toughest soldiers. But, it stood no chance against the eye-watering, nose-scorching glory of a troll cheese taco.

“So,” Stopford said between bites, glancing past me, “tell me about that creature.”

“The one that came with me?” I asked.

“Yes, that’s the one. What is it?” Stopford replied. “I’ve never seen anything quite like it.”

“Oh. Bill?” I said. “He’s a Blort.”

Stopford chewed with interest.

“There are many like him where Passanova comes from,” I continued, suddenly unsure this explanation was helping, “but this one helped us out in particular and...”

Passanova stood abruptly, his chair scraping softly against the stone floor.

“Excuse me,” he said. “Thank you for your kindness, Father. I would like to be alone for a while.” He hesitated, then added quietly, “It’s... nothing personal. I just need some space.”

He left in a hurry, his head hanging lower than normal.

“Was it something I said?” I asked, watching the space Passanova had left behind.

“No,” Father Stopford replied gently. “His heart is heavy. The choices he made weigh even more upon it.” He folded his hands atop the table. “Keep watch over him. Guide him true. There will be trials, but if you overcome them, he will prove a fine companion.”

His eyes shifted back to me.

“Now,” he said, “tell me more about this creature. A *Blort*, you called it?”

“Yes,” I said. “It’s... a long story.”

A faint smile tugged at the corner of Stopford’s mouth. “Then begin it. What is lunch without a good story?”

He speared another forkful of casserole and took a thoughtful bite, settling in.

I exhaled.

“Well... let’s see. It all began when a portal opened up in Pasadena and...”

Chapter 10

OFF THE GLASS

“That is quite the tale,” Father Stopford said when I finally finished. He nodded once, slowly. “Quite the tale, indeed.”

I nodded back. “We’ve been through a lot these past few weeks, haven’t we?” I said, glancing towards Dribbles.

“Ayy, lad,” Dribbles said. “The action. The chaos. The adventure!” His voice softened as he scooped up another spoonful of casserole. “It reminds me of home.”

The spoon clipped his beard instead of his mouth, smooshing beans into it.

“Oh, blast it all.”

“Use this,” Stopford said, offering a folded towel embroidered with a large S.

“Ayy, thank ye kindly,” Dribbles said, dabbing at his beard. “That’s what good folk do. We do what’s right, even when it’s scary... not that handin’ me a towel was all that frightenin’.” He handed it back with a grin.

Stopford accepted it with a nod. “We should always strive to uphold what is just and true,” he said. “Especially when our hearts resist it. Carry that lesson with you, young one.”

I stared at the two of them as they smiled between bites.

He’d handed the dwarf a napkin.

And now we were knee-deep in moral philosophy.

Stopford’s gaze flicked to me before he rose from the table. “Come,” he said. “There is something I would like to show you.”

He paused, then added without looking back, “Sister Rose, I will meet with you tonight.”

Sister Rose stood and bowed to Father Stopford. We followed him out of the dining hall, our footsteps echoing in the sudden emptiness left behind by our long conversation. The long tables stood bare now, lunch cleaned up as if it had never happened. Only a handful of nuns remained, scrubbing wood with soapy water, stacking bowls and spoons with quiet efficiency.

Stopford led us onward through a succession of arched doorways. Heavy wooden doors groaned as they opened, their hinges protesting the passage. At last, we entered the sanctuary.

The air was cooler here, tinged with incense and the deep, patient smell of old stone. We passed between rows of polished pews, their dark surfaces catching what little light

there was, until Stopford halted before the first stained glass window, the same one I'd studied before.

Morning light spilled through it, splintering into sapphire, gold, and crimson that spilled across the floor. The colors shifted and bled into one another, giving the impression that the window was breathing in the twinkling sunlight.

At its center hung a massive, glowing heart, encased in a radiant circle and held aloft by a robed figure. Behind it, a crowd knelt in submission, their postures mirroring the way Passanova had knelt before Gorzod's figure in the fire that had commanded him to deal with us.

My eyes locked onto the heart. Its light pulsed faintly, slowly, as if it were alive. I couldn't look away. As I stared, it pulled my gaze deeper and deeper into it until the heart consumed my vision as the world thinned and faded away. My eyes burned. My head throbbed. The glow intensified, gentle at first, then insistent.

A thumping filled my ears, slow and heavy like war drums echoing from very far away, inching forward step by step. The thumps grew louder and louder filling up my head with its raucous noise. It surrounded me and left me with no escape and nothing to do but fill it as I stared deep into the pulsing object.

All at once, the pulsing stopped.

The sanctuary snapped back into focus, and I realized that I hadn't been breathing. I sucked in air like I'd just surfaced from deep water and gulped it down in desperation.

Father Stopford's hand settled on my shoulder.

"Yes," he said quietly. "This window depicts a great reckoning."

His voice carried through the mostly empty church, echoing off stone walls and vaulted ceilings. "We do not worship a deity here. You may have noticed the absence of such symbols."

I looked around.

He was right. No gods. No angels. No looming divine figures watching from on high. Every stained glass window depicted mortals... people playing basketball. Victories. Failures. Leaps frozen midair.

All of them, except this one.

"What is that thing?" I asked, pointing at the object that had thumped in my head.

Stopford turned to face me. His eyes still searched my face.

Stopford turned to look at me. His eyes were still hunting for something. "That," he said with a heavy sigh, "is the Heart of the Game. It is both a blessing and a curse. Every hundred years a tournament is held at the Peak of the World for control over the artifact."

I swallowed. “What does it do?”

Stopford’s gaze sharpened. “The Heart of the Game allows its bearer to shape the world according to their will. Your encounter with Gorzod troubles me,” he continued. “That is the name of the one who subjugated this world nearly two centuries ago.”

Stopford closed his eyes and inhaled through his nose a long, deep breath before turning his gaze back to the stained glass window.

“And the tournament,” he said quietly, “is this year.”

“What did he do?” I asked.

“Gorzod turned the people of Ballendore against one another,” Stopford said. “He bent them to his will and forged weapons of terrible power for his own ends.” He gestured toward the kneeling figures in the glass. “A century passed as the hoop mage’s influence grew. He eventually drained the life from the people to preserve his own.”

I gulped. “Then what happened?” I asked.

Without a word, Father Stopford guided me to the next stained glass window.

“Another hoop mage defeated him.”

The window depicted a robed figure hanging midair, body arched in perfect balance as he soared toward the hoop. His arm stretched high, clutching a glowing basketball that

crackled with energy. His robes flared around him like living flame. Below, another figure, robed, hooded, and broken, reached upward in a futile attempt to block the shot, cursing twisted magic towards the triumphant hoop mage above.

It was the moment before impact.

The final moment that decided everything.

“So...” I said slowly, “it’s a basketball tournament?”

Father Stopford’s lips curved into something almost like a smile. “My boy,” he said, “what else would it be?”

Chapter 11

TROLL CHEESE TACOS!

I stared at the victorious hoop mage and I noticed that, in a weird, elderly way, he looked like me. If I were old. Really old. Older than the mountains and the sea. Older than time and creation. Older than that chunk of cheese I found under Dribbles table that had the fuzzy black spots and mushrooms growing out of it. The more I studied the figure, the more questions piled up. How was this ancient geezer even jumping like that?

And yet, it felt like looking into a mirror. Maybe that's what Stopford was looking for in me.

"Ayy, lad," Dribbles said, peering up at the glass. "Kinda looks like you... if you were an old geezer."

Father Stopford allowed himself a small, knowing smirk. "After this hoop mage defeated the evil that plagued our land, both vanished. Neither was ever seen again."

He spread his arms wide, presenting the church around us; the stone, the glass, the echoes of history clinging to every surface.

“These halls were raised as a reminder of the tribulations that nearly broke our world. And so we train only those capable of wielding such power responsibly.” His gaze locked onto mine. “That is why we are here.”

“So... where is it?” I asked. “The Heart of the Game, I mean.”

What else are you supposed to say to a story like that? This guy and his army of nuns are training basketball players so that they can win the strongest artifact in the world? An artifact so powerful that somebody that has it could control the planet?

Seemed a little far fetched to me.

A warm smile crossed Stopford’s face. “That, my son, I cannot tell you. Not yet, at least.” He straightened his robes. “Besides, I have matters to attend to. You should find Passanova. Spend time with him. Get to know him. He will prove a strong ally.”

He offered a half-bow, half-nod, then turned and strode toward the sanctuary doors.

I lingered, staring once more at the stained glass window.

“What do you make of all of this, Dribbles?” I asked.

Dribbles scratched at his beard thoughtfully. “Eh. Could be.” He shrugged. “Wouldn’t crack the top ten strangest things I’ve heard. I know of a dozen wizards named Gorzod. Either

way,” he continued, “Stopford’s right. You should go find the elf. I’ll see what else I can dig up.”

I found Passanova holed up in his room, hurling a ball against the door with sharp, frustrated throws.

Thud

Thud

I knocked twice and eased the door open. “Hey, Passanova. Can we talk?”

I leaned my head around the frame just in time for the ball to whistle past my face.

“Of course,” he said. “I *am* your servant, after all.” He delivered it with the kind of practiced sarcasm only years of aristocratic boredom could hone.

I pushed my way into the room. The door protested with a long creak. What little Passanova still owned was scattered across the floor in sad little piles. The river, apparently, had been thorough.

“River take your cards?” I asked.

“Yep. Along with everything else I had lined up to survive long, miserable days like this.” He waved a hand in front of his face, elbow resting on his knee. “So tell me, what do you humans do for fun?”

“Well, I play basketball. Other people do other things. Like bug collecting. Or painting.” I shrugged. “Some even follow

the prices of mud in distant kingdoms in order to pretend to own some of it for a loss of money. Fun stuff.”

“Bug collecting? Painting?” He snorted. “Booooring. But seriously, what’s so entertaining about throwing a ball through a hole?”

“It’s a lot more than that,” I said. “Come on. I’ll show you the ropes.” I jerked my head toward the door.

Passanova considered this, then shook his head. “Not tonight. I’ve got about two hundred more tosses before I hit a thousand.” He bounced the ball once for emphasis. “And I’m tired. Tomorrow?”

“Yeah, sure thing! Bright and early!”

I slipped back out and pulled the door closed. A split second later, *thunk*, the ball slammed into the wood.

“A hundred and ninety-nine left,” I called.

“Thanks,” Passanova shouted back, his voice muffled from the heavy door. “I almost lost count.”

I walked back to my room, my footsteps echoing off the cold stone floor and down the hall. The smell of a warm meal wafted through the air and it reminded me of something but I just couldn’t put my finger on it. I considered going to take a peek but I thought it best to savor the surprise.

My current mission was to take two things.

First: the shoes off of my feet.

Second: a nap.

The first was easy. The second was not.

I lay there, staring at the ceiling, my thoughts refusing to still. Images and words swam together. Hoop mages, stained glass, ancient tournaments, a heart that controlled the world. As I lay there for what felt like hours, an errant thought slipped through.

Was the dark wizard who conquered Dribbles' world the same hoop mage who once ruled this one?

No. Surely not. The cosmos is vast. Thousands of worlds tangled together like a knot of yarn linked in a mobius strip that spun throughout the wheel of worlds. There had to be plenty of evil, spell-casting weirdos out there trying to conquer things. Right?

Just as I was starting to drift, the door burst open.

Bill the Blort came bounding into the room, mouth wide, arms flung out, spinning in joyful circles as he went. This was typical Blort behavior.

"They love me, they do!" Bill telepathed, continuing his spin in the middle of the room.

I continued to watch Bill spin in place until a fly caught his attention. He then proceeded to attempt to catch the sky raisin using wide chomps from his gaping maw.

BONG.

A bell tolled through the halls.

“Dinner time!” someone called. “Tonight’s special: *Troll Cheese Tacos!*”

“Score!” I shouted, launching myself off the bed and sprinting straight for dinner.

Chapter 12

A NEW QUEST

The dining hall buzzed with life as trays of tacos were passed from hand to hand, table to table. Laughter bounced off the stone walls - a reward for a hard day's work.

The smell alone seemed to grab me by the nose and drag me across the room to my seat directly across from Father Stopford, with Dribbles and Passanova flanking me like mismatched bodyguards.

We made small talk as we ate. Compliments about the food. Comments on the spice. Little scraps of personal stories traded between bites. For a while, it almost felt normal.

Then the hall began to empty. Plates were cleared. Chairs scraped softly against the floor. Soon, only a handful of nuns remained, giggling together in a far corner.

“So...” Dribbles said, shoveling the last of his taco into his mouth. “I suppose it’s time we talk about the elephant in the room.”

Chunks of drippy cheese glooped and glopped across his beard like a bad painting in a museum or a bird that had an upset stomach.

“Elephant?” Stopford asked, scanning the hall. “I’ve not seen one here.”

“I mean the boy,” Dribbles chuckled, pointing at me with a greasy finger. “He’s on a path to greatness. The question is, will you train him?”

Stopford’s gaze slid to me. He studied me in silence, fingers pressed thoughtfully to his chin, lips pressed up towards his nose.

“Hmm...”, he sighed. “I’m sorry. I do not train people this young.”

Dribbles slammed his fist on the table, rattling the plates and the nuns left in the dinner hall. “And why not? This lad’s got more heart and talent than most grown hoop mages I’ve seen!”

Stopford’s eyebrows shot up, startled by the outburst. He raised his hands calmly. “It is nothing personal,” he said. “Gerald is simply too young for me to see his true nature clearly. To train him now would be... a risk.”

Me? A risk? To who, exactly?

“I can’t believe this!” Dribbles shouted. “You’re telling me that you won’t train him because of his *age*? And how old does one need to be?”

“Fourteen at the earliest. Preferably fifteen,” Stopford replied evenly. “A child’s heart is... unstable. You know this as well as I do. At that age, passions shift quickly. His interest

may fade, and my time, and effort, would be wasted.” He folded his hands. That said, I will train you, Dribbles. And Passanova as well, should he choose it.”

Passanova shook his head and rose from his seat. “You’re not wrong about children,” he said calmly. Then he placed a hand on my back. “But you are wrong about him.”

He looked Stopford square in the eyes. “This is a hero. Only someone with courage far beyond his years could have saved my kingdom. He allied with a giant and a manticore. He bested not only me but also an army of orcs!”

Dribbles nodded fiercely. “It’s all of us... or none of us.”

I swallowed hard and sat up straight as a board. “Please. Just give me a chance,” I said. “I promise you won’t regret it.”

Stopford exhaled slowly, the sound heavy with reluctance. His gaze dropped to the table.

“...Alright.”

Cheers burst from the three of us at once, echoing through the half-empty hall...

“BUT.”

His voice cut through the celebration with a sudden, unexpected gusto.

“Before I do, you will need to pass three tests.” His eyes gleamed. “Or, three quests if you prefer that term.”

“You bet!” I said, grinning ear to ear. “I can do anything.”

“Don’t be so hasty, young one,” Stopford chuckled, pushing himself up from the bench. “These are no simple tests.”

He stepped away from the table and tilted his head toward the vaulted ceiling.

“First, you must steal a fruit from the Blubblubs.”

“Blubblubs?” I asked, glancing at Dribbles.

He shrugged. Helpful as ever.

“They’re little fish people.” Stopford said, pinching his fingers together to show their size. “Itty bitty fishy people.”

Passanova blinked. “So... you want us to steal a fruit... from *itty-bitty fishy people?*”

Stopford nodded.

“That is correct. But not just any fruit. They keep a special decorative fruit. Round, mottled, like a ball of mud and moss.” He leaned closer, his eyes narrowing with a whiff of mischief. “It is not to be confused with their many decorative balls of mud and moss, which they festoon upon their huts.”

“Festoon...?” I whispered to Dribbles.

Stopford straightened. “After that, you must convince a Fleet-Footed Jungle Troll to part with its prized whistle.”

Dribbles looked at me with an eyebrow raised. “I, uh, suppose we could do that. What do you think, lad?”

I shrugged. “Guess we won’t know until we try.”

Stopford smiled faintly. “Good.”

“And your final task,” he said, turning back to face me fully, “will be to make me flinch.”

“Oh. That sounds easy,” I smirked.

“Quite,” Stopford replied.

A silence settled over the dining hall that sat somber among the stones. The giggles that had flitted and fluttered about had long gone as the gaggle of giggling nuns that remained had moved on to their duties.

We sat there, without so much as a peep for an uncomfortable amount of time that even the king of uncomfortable situations would have felt uneasy about.

Then...

With a sudden burst of courage that could have toppled a lesser fortress, I sprang across the table, arms wide, lungs full, screaming, “AHH!”

Stopford didn’t move.

He merely looked down his nose at me, unbothered, unimpressed, and most importantly... unflinching.

“Quite,” he said again.

He smoothed his robes as if nothing at all had happened. “Very well. You have one week to complete these tasks. I suggest you begin tomorrow at sunrise.”

With that, he turned and strode toward the exit, his robes whispering behind him as he vanished from the dining hall.

“Lad, you heard him. Tomorrow at sunrise. Best go get some sleep. I’ll be sure to wake you in the morning.” Dribbles clapped a heavy hand on my back as he stood up from his seat. “Good work.”

“Thanks, Dribbles,” I said, rubbing my shoulder. “Passanova, are you coming with us?”

Passanova snorted softly. “I don’t think I have much of a choice, do I?”

I grinned. “When you put it that way...”

I stood, stretching. “Alright. I’m going to bed. See you both in the morning.”

Chapter 13

THE BLUBBLUB HUBBUB

The sun boiled us beneath the canopy of the jungle as we pushed through the dense brush in search of the Blubblub village. Breakfast sat heavy and warm in my stomach, but I found myself nibbling anyway at the nuts and berries the nuns had packed for our trip.

Stopford had said the Blubblubs lived about half a day's walk back the way we'd come, near the rapids where we'd lost the raft.

We scraped along the edge of the jungle, in single file from shortest to tallest, trying our best to keep out of sight in case the fishy people weren't as friendly as their name suggested. Bill took his role as "scout" very seriously, slithering ahead on the ground with his noodly arms and legs, while Dribbles scanned the undergrowth, keeping a nostril open for sniffing out fish folk.

"What did Stopford say we're looking for again?" Passanova asked from the rear, his head poking above the leaves like a nervous giraffe.

"He said there'd be a dozen or so round wooden huts," I said, "domed roofs, all tucked into a cove along the river."

“Little fishy huts,” Dribbles added, perfectly mimicking Stopford’s solemn cadence, “with little fishy people holdin’ little fishy spears.”

Passanova snorted. “Sounds like he’s making it up just to get rid of us.”

I glanced back at him. “You don’t trust him?”

“Nope. Not one bit.” Passanova shrugged. “This all sounds like a tall tale to me. Think about it. He tells you he won’t train you, then caves the moment anyone pushes back and suddenly you’re off on a quest to steal fruit from fish folk.”

“You’ve got trouble trustin’ people, don’t ya?” Dribbles said, not unkindly.

“Yes,” Passanova replied after a pause. His voice softened. “You would too, after what I’ve been through.”

“Then tell us,” I said, glancing back at him. “We’re not strangers anymore. We’re friends.”

Passanova was quiet for a long moment. The jungle hummed around us, bugs buzzing, leaves leafing, critters crittering away. Finally, he nodded.

“Alright,” he said. “I’ll tell you.”

He drew in a slow breath.

“Gorzod came to my parents in a time of desperation. Our scouts had seen the manticores gathering along the edge of the Coral Coast, and we didn’t have the time, or the strength,

to prepare our defenses.” His eyes darkened, staring through me. “He appeared on the only day that year when the sun didn’t shine.”

Passanova’s voice changed as he spoke.

The air around us seemed to thicken, his words settling into it like dust in sunlight. Each sentence carried weight, rhythm, a careful cadence that tugged at something behind my eyes. I began to realize that I was being shown his memory.

The jungle blurred and the heat fell away. The sound of the bugs and critters faded off and then...

I was there.

A hooded figure tossed a scroll across the table at the center of the room, lifting his head just enough to watch it slide to a stop in front of the king and queen seated at the other end. Wisps of coarse gray and white hair escaped from beneath the hood, catching the firelight like ash.

“We have reviewed the accords,” the king said, his voice regal and unyielding. “We stand in full agreement with their terms. But speak plainly. Do you come to subjugate us? To bind our kingdom to your will?” The king’s hand closed around the scroll. “If that is your aim, leave now and never return. We will meet the manticores on our own terms, as a free and sovereign people.”

He hurled the scroll back across the table. It rolled once, then settled at the hooded figure’s fingertips.

For a long moment, nothing happened. The King and Queen stared at the hooded figure waiting for him to move.

Then the figure slowly lifted one hand from the table, palm up.

Fire blossomed to life from out of his skin.

The flames coiled and climbed with grace, casting warped shadows across the stone walls as heat pressed outward. As the flames flickered and flamed, something began to take shape. The blaze stretched higher, licking the ceiling, flooding the chamber in an ominous orange glow.

An image began to sharpen into focus, revealing a dark churning mass that blotted out the sun.

Manticores filled the blood red sky, stretching out across it like a funeral shroud. They swallowed the light, turning day into dusk. The air in the vision seemed to tremble beneath their collective weight, as though the world itself braced for doom.

The end of days, carried on beating wings.

The king and queen stood frozen, their faces etched with a realization neither had dared voice aloud. They exchanged a look that spoke more than words could.

Despair.

The queen looked down at the trembling fingers that lay in her lap. "What will the twins think?"

A single tear slipped free and traced a shining path down her cheek.

The king swallowed. “Do we have a choice?” He sighed as he shook his head. “We... agree to sign.”

The hooded figure’s fingers twitched.

A quill snapped into existence before the king’s face, shaking with anticipation.

“In blood,” the hooded figure bleated, malice dripping from his tongue like acid.

The king gripped the quill and pierced the sharp tip into his palm, soaking up the crimson blood that spurt forth.

He watched as his life soaked into the quill, staining it with the fate of his kingdom.

“Gorzod, you have our trust. Uphold your end of the bargain. Do not betray us.”

A tear slid down Passanova’s cheek as the world came back.

He turned away quickly, wiping it with the back of his hand. “We should... continue on,” he said.

Dribbles nodded. “I’m sorry you went through that lad. Truly. You know, we...”

“Yes. Yes,” Passanova cut in, sharper than intended. He exhaled. “Now let’s go find the fish people.”

“Found them,” Bill’s voice sounded out in my head.

“They’re right here.”

Chapter 14

ITTY BITTY FISHY PEOPLE

Ten little fishy people, holding ten little fishy spears, poked their spears into Bill's side. Under normal circumstances, this would have been an impossible task. Bill was many things: round, bouncy, and deeply ungovernable. But, restrainable was not one of them.

However, under these circumstances, specifically, the kind involving multiple sharp objects pressed into him, Bill found cooperation to be the wiser path.

The Blubblubs stood barely a foot tall. Their bodies were fish, but only technically. Short, fin-like legs jutted out where tails should have been, holding them upright as though they were eternally swimming straight up into the sky. Their mouths sat at the very top of their heads, which was anatomically correct for their bodies.

They looked less like living creatures and more like a child's drawing that had somehow escaped the page: flat, almost two-dimensional, with arms stuck awkwardly to their sides and spears that seemed to possess no depth whatsoever. Even the light had trouble deciding how to land on them,

with their shadows pushing this way or that way depending upon... well, it was hard to say.

The Blubblubs blurbled and blobbled at us, sucking air through their gills and forcing it out through their top-mounted mouths in a way that resembled a drowning fish attempting a lecture.

I leaned closer to Bill and mouthed, carefully, “Do you understand them?”

Bill emitted a gurgling sound, his countenance betraying the utmost agitation and distress.

I took that as a **no**.

Dribbles raised his hands, motioning for us to do the same. “Easy lads, don’t make any sudden moves or...”

THWACK

A dagger buried itself in the side of one of the fishy people. The creature let out a wet, glassy *keee-errk*, dropped its spear, and collapsed in a twitching heap, blurbling helplessly until its last breath finally escaped.

The Blubblubs shrieked in unison, which sounded like air being blown through a waterlogged set of bagpipes. Tiny feet slapped against the dirt and grass as they fled into the dense jungle foliage, leaving their spears behind.

“Hurry!” Passanova lunged forward, already moving. “We can follow them back to their little fishy huts!”

He took off with a spring in his step, grinning from ear to ear.

Bill stood frozen in fear, his eyes still wide and bulging out in surprise, head swiveling left and right as he searched for any hidden fish. Dribbles and I ran past him, crashing through vines and undergrowth after Passanova. I could hear Bill behind us, waddling along as quickly as he could through the brush, his feet slapping against the now wet-from-fish grass. He gurgled frantically between panicked breaths.

Dribbles pumped his stubby little legs as fast as they could take him, but, I was faster, passing him along the way.

The thick jungle air filled my lungs as I ran. Leaves crunched and twigs snapped with every step I took. It wasn't long before we found Passanova crouched behind a bush at the edge of the jungle facing the river. I knelt down beside him, peeking through the leaves.

"See there?" He whispered.

I shook my head. "I don't."

"Look close," Passanova said, pointing. "See those rocks at the edge of the water?"

I squinted my eyes, focusing in on the rocks. After a careful inspection, they looked like normal rocks. I wonder what his elf eyes saw.

Wait... Was that movement? I paused, holding my breath in order to focus better.

There it was again. Movement.

I see it now. The Blubblubs cowered in their huts with their doors closed, nervously peeking out of little windows. They had five wooden huts that were disguised like rocks.

One curious Blubblub was blowing their cover, cracking the door to one of the huts just enough that a glint of light reflected off its scales.

“I see it. Great job. But... why’d you do that back there?” I asked.

“Do what?” He asked in response.

“Kill that Blubblub. Couldn’t you have used your weird singing on them? Maybe shouted really loudly at them?”

“Instinct,” he said quickly. “Reminded me of The Hunt. Besides, sound has a tendency to be... inaccurate. Messy. A knife is more precise. Goes exactly where I want it.”

“The hunt?” I asked.

“Yes, every other year a member of the royal family goes on a month long hunt as a show of skill and honor,” Passanova explained as Dribbles caught up to us. “I was the last to embark on The Hunt and I had to find a Glowing Brydicoo.”

“What’s that lad?” Dribbles huffed and puffed, catching his breath as he settled in beside us. “A Glowing Hood-iehoo? Here?”

Passanova shook his head, smirking, a quiet giggle escaping before he could stop it. “The Glowing Brydicoo are a rare breed of Brydicoo that devour children in their sleep. Usually Brydicoo only eat shorter adults, much like yourself, but the glowing ones slip into towns at night and take the young.”

“I... uh...” Dribbles stammered, his face contorted with concern. “I wish somebody would have told us about that before we jumped into that portal!”

“I’m just kidding,” Passanova’s face turned red as he held in a hardy laugh. “They’re just rare. They look like your rabbits do but twice as big and with really big sharp, pointy teeth.”

He raised his hands and snapped them together in front of his mouth, pantomiming a vicious bite at the air.

“Very funny,” Dribbles said, chuckling and rolling his eyes. “They’re over there are they?”

I nodded. “They’re in these little rock looking houses. Go take a look.”

Dribbles shoved his way through the brush, his beard snagging on leaves and twigs. “Looks like they’ve got guards,” he muttered. “A lot of them. By my count... about eighty.”

Chapter 15

FRUIT THIEF

The Blubblubs had poured out of their huts, bristling and ready to defend themselves. Their bright scales caught the sunlight, scattering it across the river in sharp, flashing reflections as they paced in a wide ring around their homes.

“We didn’t come here to kill them,” Dribbles said after finally catching his breath. “We came for that muddy fruit. Passanova, what do your elf eyes see?”

Passanova and I leaned through the bushes, scanning the huts for the fruit. “I don’t,” I whispered. “Do you?”

Passanova shook his head. “No. What did Stopford say it looked like?”

“A ball of mud and moss,” I said. “I don’t see anything like that here... do you?”

We kept searching until Dribbles spoke up. “Is that it? On top of the hut to the left?”

He stretched his eyelids open with his fingers, then squinted hard, leaning forward for another look.

“That tiny thing up there?” I asked, scrunching my face as I strained to see it. “How can you even tell what it is?”

“He’s right,” Passanova said, easing back from the bush. “I can see it now. Plain as day.” He glanced at me. “Can you use your magic to pull it this way?”

I shook my head. “Too far. I’ll need to get closer. And, I’ll need a distraction. Maybe Bill could wander out there and... Anyone seen Bill?”

We looked up and down, left and right and couldn’t find him. But then, Dribbles said quite a large number of dwarven expletives not meant to be repeated, let alone written down.

“Found him!”

He jabbed a finger downriver. Bill was there, inching forward on his belly, crawling toward the Blubblubs with the subtlety of the sun as Bill was also large, round, and orange.

The Blubblubs noticed him immediately.

Spears snapped in his direction. They thrust and chattered, and every so often one of them hurled a spear that skipped past Bill and clattered uselessly into the mud.

Passanova sprang from the bushes and charged toward Bill, whooping and hollering as he went, waving his arms like a man possessed. It half worked. The Blubblubs split their attention. Half their spears swung toward Passanova, the rest stayed trained on Bill.

“Alright, lad,” Dribbles said, “I guess we’re going to distract them. You sneak in and wiggle your fingers or whatever you do and grab that mud fruit.”

With that, Dribbles burst from the brush, arms thrown wide, bellowing like a mad dwarf. He made the same unholy noises he’d used back on the Paint Plains when I’d tossed him over the net goblins; sounds designed to confuse, alarm, and deeply offend.

Dribbles and Passanova hooted and hollered, kicking up noise, dust, and chaos, while Bill continued his slow advance. He meandered. He lollygagged. He crawled forward with no apparent concern for spears, danger, or the general concept of urgency, inching ever closer to the huts.

The fish people were most concerned with Bill. He was, after all, the closest, the roundest, and the most orange. While the three of them kept the guards busy, I slipped the long way around.

Every step I took was measured, every breath I made I counted. I moved slowly through the brush, careful where I placed my feet. Leaves whispered instead of crunching. I was sneaking like a really sneaky guy.

When I emerged into the open, heat rushed to my hands and flushed my face. One wrong move and every spear in the cove would swing my way. This was a different kind of pressure than what I was used to. All eyes weren’t on me. Everyone

had their own problems to deal with. But, if I didn't do mine, we might all be fish food.

Foot by foot, inch by inch, I crept closer until I could get a good view of the fruit.

The fruit sat atop the hut exactly as Stopford had described it. A lumpy ball of mud and moss, unremarkable in every way. I wiggled and waggled my fingers, coaxing at first. The fruit shuddered, then shifted, just barely breaking free from its perch atop the largest of the huts.

It lifted and drifted toward me, inch by agonizing inch, my fingers trembling as I guided it along. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Bill edging dangerously close to the Blubblubs. Most of their spears were still trained on him now, as they should be, because he was the roundest and most orange of the four of us.

I needed to hurry. And someone, anyone, needed to pull Bill back.

But I was trapped in place. If I shouted, I'd give myself away. If I stopped, the fruit would drop. Every second I hesitated, Bill crept closer to being deflated... or whatever it is blorts do when they're punctured.

I didn't dare hurry it. One sudden lurch and every fishy eye would snap to it like a hook in water.

Twenty feet to go.

My fingers ached from holding the spell so carefully. Sweat began to bead on my brow and some dripped down my nose. I swallowed, forcing my thoughts to stay where they belonged.

Fifteen feet.

I was in control. I've got this. Only a few more feet to go. I can do this. I'm doing this. I'm...

What is that noise?

SQUAWK.

SQUAWK SQUAWK SQUAWK.

Chapter 16

LUCKY ME

The sound tore through the jungle like a rip in your underwear when you bend over too quickly. I looked up just in time to see a massive bird fly overhead, its shadow sweeping across the village like a passing storm cloud.

It squawked again. And again. And again.

All at once, the Blubblubs froze, lowered their spears, and tilted their bodies skyward for they had no necks and had to bend at the knees. Whatever courage they'd had moments before drained out of them as the bird folded its wings and began a sharp, screaming dive toward the huts.

If that bird got the fruit, it'd be gone and our quest would be over.

I had to think fast and I didn't have time to think.

I lost my concentration.

This was a fortunate turn of events, as you will eventually see.

The spell unraveled in an instant and the fruit dropped to the ground.

The bird flew past, missing it by inches, as the sudden fall threw off its perfect dive. The fruit struck the mud with a wet **thud**, bouncing once before coming to rest no more than ten feet from me.

Lucky. Stupidly lucky.

The Blubblubs, being none too pleased with the situation, shrieked in a most unpleasant way. They raised their spears and started to run at me with great anger and fishy determination.

So, I did what anyone in my situation would do.

I ran straight at them. As did Dribbles and Passanova.

Dribbles hurled himself forward, flying several feet through the air before crashing into the center of the pack like a runaway boulder. Fish scattered in every direction. He swung his bag in a wide, furious arc, spinning it at the top speed of an unladen dwarf, flattening Blubblubs and sending the braver ones pinwheeling into the dirt.

Passanova leapt in beside him, light on his feet, slipping between jabbing spears with practiced ease. His strikes were sharp and precise, sending out punches and sweeping kicks that sent fish flying left and right. Their flat little bodies skid across the ground like a skipping stone right before it plunges into the water.

A few of the fishy people were already within spear's reach of the fruit.

I jumped for it. They did too.

We were only feet apart as I sailed through the air, twisting my body between the spears they hurled. What I learned in my short time with the Blubblubs is that they weren't particularly skilled with throwing spears. I'm not entirely sure how they survived as a species. Frankly, they were terrible at it.

Lucky for me once again.

I stretched my arms out. I stretched my fingers out. I wiggled my fingers.

ZIP

The fruit flew into my hand. I hit the ground, rolled, and spun back to my feet as spears stabbed and swiped at the space my head had just been. I dug my heels into the wet ground to pivot back around, slipped, and slung mud into the Blubblub's eyes. My legs slid past them as they flailed about like fish out of water until my feet ran out of mud to slide through.

The fish unleashed a flurry of flashy stabs, this way and that way. My feet clawed at the grass and gave me just enough grip to jump through the barrage of spears. I twisted and contorted through them as if I had done it a thousand times before.

I hadn't.

I was winging it and absolutely terrified.

Lucky for me, they were blind.

I glanced back over my shoulder and saw Passanova and Dribbles fighting to hold the line as more fish poured in, the circle around them tightening by the second.

“I’ve got the fruit! Run for it!” I shouted, scrambling to my feet and kicking loose rocks and grass behind me.

Tiny fish feet slapped the ground in frantic pursuit - *plip plop plip plop* - a sound so awful it can only be described as wet chalk dragged across stone while a three-hundred-pound mosquito screamed directly into your ear.

A spear jabbed past my right side, missing me by inches.

I reached behind me with my palm open and fingers twitching and wagging away as cold spilled from them. Ice dripped, pooled, and spread across the ground beneath my feet. A second later came a chorus of *slip-slop-plip-plop*, followed by a satisfying sequence of fleshy **thuds** as fish bodies met frozen earth.

I sprinted for the trees and risked a glance over my shoulder.

Dribbles and Passanova had managed to peel away from the fish people and were running along the riverbank, putting distance between themselves and the school. Bill, meanwhile, had wandered straight into the center of the abandoned fishy village and was calmly looking around like he’d just arrived at a museum.

What was I going to do with him?

“Hold on, Bill!” I yelled. Then, without slowing, I twisted and shouted, “Dribbles! Catch!”

I cranked my arm and tossed the fruit as hard as I could.

The fish stopped chasing me so they could watch the fruit fly over their heads and straight into Dribbles’ hands.

Instantly, the Blubblubs erupted into furious screeching and tore off after him.

All but four.

Four fishy warriors remained between Bill and me, spears raised, shrieking, and very clearly not interested in letting us leave.

I bolted for Bill, who still stood in a wide-eyed stupor in the middle of the fishy town square.

The first Blubblub lunged at me. His spear whizzed past my ear as I sidestepped, sprinting by him and straight toward a pair standing shoulder to shoulder. They attacked at the same time, one high, one low.

I ducked beneath the high spear and veered left. The fish on the right overcorrected, spinning toward me. I used his momentum against him, cutting back the other way and leaping clean over the low spear. The two fish collided in a clumsy tangle of fins and frustration, knocking themselves flat into the dirt.

The last fish, seeing what had happened with the others, screeched and chucked his spear at me.

I dropped to my knees and leaned back, the spear sizzling through the air an inch above my nose.

Close one. Was it *luck*?

I snapped forward, used the slide to launch myself up, and kicked off the ground, vaulting clean over the short Blubblub. He tried to follow, tripped over his own feet, and toppled backward, landing with a soft *plop*, staring up at me with one eye and his fish lips popping in disbelief.

I had broken through the fish and now all I had left was to grab Bill.

Chapter 17

STUCK IN AN AQUARIUM

Bill had managed to pry open one of the hut doors and was reaching into the room inside, one eye squeezed shut, tongue sticking out as if that might help.

“Bill!” I yelled, skidding into the fishy town. “What are you doing? We need to get out of here!”

The river ran shallow through the settlement, barely ankle-deep, though it splashed up against the underside of Bill’s round body leaving it sopping wet. The Blubblubs had stacked stones to choke the current into a narrow channel, leaving thin trickles of water threading through the gaps. The air reeked like a forgotten aquarium left out in the sun.

“Bill, let’s go!” I yelled as I stepped soggily into the town.

Their acrid stench had seeped into the dirt and mud causing each of my steps to release a plume of fetid fishy funk. My lungs burned by the time I reached him, the shrieks of the Blubblubs growing louder behind me.

“Oh! Hi there!” Bill telepathed, his voice bright and breezy. “Isn’t this place *wonderful*? The moisture! The sounds! The smell!”

He inhaled deeply through his open mouth and sighed.

I didn't know blorts could smell like that.

"Isn't it to die for?"

"Yes. You're going to die," I panted, grabbing at his arm, "if you don't pull your hand out of there and run."

Bill gently shook his head.

"No can do."

"Come on, Bill," I snapped, losing my patience. "They're right there."

"I can't," Bill telepathed. Then, helpfully, "Also, you've got one behind you. You'd better duck."

I dropped and spun, fingers wiggling on instinct. A spear sliced through the air where my head had been a heartbeat earlier. I locked eyes with the fish as it overextended, grabbed hold of it with my mind, and skipped it across the river like a flat stone. *Plip, plip, plip* it skipped until it disappeared in a splash and a very offended blurble.

I turned back around to Bill, my face flush and nose scrunched up to a point. I had enough of the silliness Bill was pulling.

"Bill, I've had enough of the silliness," I growled. "It's time to go!"

“I already told you I can’t,” Bill’s voice rang out with regret. “My arm’s stuck.”

“...It’s *stuck*?” I shot a glance over my shoulder. The remaining Blubblubs were regrouping and closing fast. “Why did you even put your hand in there?”

Bill lifted his free shoulder in a small, helpless shrug.

“I don’t know. It felt like the right thing to do at the time.”

I dragged a hand down my face, palm catching my lip and pulling it into a tired grimace.

“Okay,” I said, forcing calm where none existed. “We’ll figure something out. Any ideas?”

Bill shook his head. “I do not.”

The fish were closing in. I had seconds at best.

“Think, Gerald. Think,” I whispered.

One of the Blubblubs sprinting toward us tripped over its own stubby fins, pinwheeled through the air, and bounced face-first off a rock with a wet **thwap**.

Eureka!

“Bill,” I said quickly, “close your eyes.”

Bill didn’t ask questions. He shut them tight.

I wiggled and waggled my fingers and...

POOF

Violet smoke burst outward with a sharp flash of light, and Bill vanished. Where he'd been stood a basketball.

Polyblort. Easily one of the most useful spells I knew. I wonder how many problems I could solve by simply turning Bill back and forth into a basketball.

The newly minted Bill-ball splashed into the shallow water beside the hut, bounced once, clipped a stone, and rolled free with a hollow **thunk**.

I snatched the once blort, now basketball, out of the water and started to run back towards the church. Spears clattered uselessly behind me as I tore downriver, heart hammering in my chest. The jungle swallowed me whole, leaves whipping at my arms, mud sucking at my shoes. I didn't slow until the Blubblubs' shrieks faded into frustrated blurling.

I ducked into the brush and crouched as low as I could, clutching Bill to my chest.

I stayed motionless, watching them plod past, swaying side to side like penguins trudging through mud, their webbed feet making soft **plop, plop** sounds with every step. Most still clutched their spears. Others had traded up to rocks, gripped in their finned little hands like grim, soggy trophies. Their scales caught the light as they passed, flashing silver and green like the river behind them.

I held my breath as a few wandered uncomfortably close, not out of fear of being heard, but because they smelled like exactly what they were.

Fish.

Once there was enough distance between us, I eased out of the brush and started back toward the church. Without thinking, my hands fell into rhythm.

POING.

The sound cracked through the jungle like a dinner plate dropped in a cathedral.

...Whoops.

Far off, a single voice piped up.

“Meep.”

Then another.

Then a dozen.

Within seconds, the jungle erupted into a chorus of shrill meeps and shrieks as the Blubblubs came charging back toward me. Their flappy feet battered the ground, kicking up dirt and leaves as they ran in a wobbling, furious wave.

Not good.

I knew I couldn't keep the pace I had earlier while carrying Bill like this, and dribbling him was obviously not helping, so I wiggled and wagged my fingers and...

POOF.

Bill reappeared in a burst of violet smoke, arms flailing as he popped back into existence.

"Bill," I said, grabbing his shoulders and spinning him around, "listen to me. We need to run. Along the river. Away from the fish."

I pointed.

"That way."

Bill nodded solemnly, then immediately sprinted forward screaming at the top of his lungs, his noodley arms flapping wildly behind him like panicked streamers.

It was good to have him back to his normal self.

Chapter 18

FIRST QUEST FINISHED?

The fish stayed hot on our heels as we tore back toward the church. Grass and mud flew beneath our feet while the *slip-slap* of flailing fins grew louder behind us with every frantic step they took. In my peripheral vision, a spear stabbed into the earth and quivered close enough to feel the vibrations.

We needed a plan.

“Bill,” I panted between breaths, “what do we do?”

Another spear skipped along the dirt beside us, clattering uselessly to a stop.

Bill stared at me with his large eyes open wide. “We fight when the moment is right,” he telepathed.

I nodded. He was right. We shouldn’t give up. We need to fight. The problem was that “we” consisted of a kid with a handful of questionable spells and a blort whose primary assets were enthusiasm and a very large mouth.

“Deeper into the jungle,” I gasped, veering sharply toward the thickest stretch of trees. Bill followed without hesitation.

The world closed in around us as branches clawed at our arms and leaves slapped against our faces. Spears **thunked** uselessly into tree trunks, their momentum dead the moment they hit wood.

The fish had speed for weird little fishy guys with squat legs, but the jungle didn't care.

Here, among roots and vines and choking undergrowth, their clumsy bodies betrayed them. They stumbled. They slipped. They tangled themselves where we could duck, weave, and vanish between trunks.

My heart tried to crawl into my throat as we pushed ourselves harder. My lungs burned, my legs screamed, and so did the fishies behind us.

“Look, to our right!” Bill shouted.

I risked a glance through the trees and nearly cried with relief. A clearing. Stone walls. The church.

I sucked in what little air I had left and screamed for help.

A spear whistled through the space where my skull had been a heartbeat earlier.

“GET DOWN!” someone bellowed.

Being one who had spears tossed a hairs length away from their head by little fishy people, I obliged the request by shifting my weight towards the ground into a slide. A spear

ripped overhead, close enough that I felt the wind of it pass my ear.

The fish collectively screeched as a gaggle of nuns burst from the clearing and thundered past us, habits snapping, staves already swinging. I skidded to a stop and stared as they waded straight into the horde.

The nuns' wide, brutal arcs of their staves sent clusters of fish sailing through the air, bodies bouncing off trees or vanishing into the brush. Spears flew back in panicked retaliation, but the nuns dodged, bobbed, and **smacked** them out of the air, batting them harmlessly into the dirt.

One nun ducked a spear, spun, and swept a fish's legs out from under it. Another scooped a blubblub clean off the ground with her staff and *launched* it into the canopy like a screaming, scaly comet.

As fish lay scattered across the jungle floor, one nun threw her head back and unleashed a shrill "YIIIIIP!". The remaining fish stopped in their tracks, popping their mouths erratically. Then, another nun joined in. And another. Soon, the jungle rang with yips, overlapping and echoing in a sharp piercing chorus.

The fish exchanged confused *meeps*, glancing at one another, unsure whether to fight, flee, or flop dramatically in place. Then, a fish near the back made a decision.

It jumped, let out a long, panicked *meeeeep*, spun on its heel, and bolted the way it had come.

That was all it took. The rest joined in, dropping their spears and stones, *meeping* and screeching as they fled into the jungle, slipping over the roots and each other until they faded away into the jungle.

“Ayy, lad. Didn’t think you’d run into trouble.”

I turned to see Dribbles standing there, one hand extended toward me, the other casually holding the fruit we’d risked our lives for.

Relief hit me so hard my knees nearly gave out. I took his hand, and with barely any effort, he hauled me to my feet in one smooth motion. I never could get used to the ridiculous strength dwarves packed into such compact frames.

He tossed me the fruit and winked. “Good work out there.”

I brushed grass and dirt from my clothes and turned to the nuns. “What was that noise you made?”

“The yips?” one nun said brightly. “That’s the sound a river fox makes when it spots its prey.”

She tilted her head. “Did Stopford not tell you?”

Dribbles pursed his lips. “No... can’t say he did. Does he usually tell the others who have to do this?”

The nuns exchanged confused glances. “Do what?” one of them asked.

“Fetch this here fruit,” Dribbles said, holding it out. The jamberry glistened weakly in the sun, mostly from the mud

but also from the bits of old juice that began to ooze out of it.

The nuns looked at one another again. A few snickered. One let out a full, unrestrained belly laugh.

“That’s a jamberry,” she said. “We grow them here. They’re all over the jungle.”

She pointed just a few feet away. “See?”

I glanced back at the fruit we’d stolen from the fish. It now looked... tired. Damp. Deflated. Expired. Oozey.

“You mean to say,” I said slowly, “there’s nothing special about this fruit?”

“Oh sweetie,” one of the nuns said in a cherub-like consoling tone. “No, there’s nothing special about them at all.”

I turned to Dribbles. Heat rushed to my face.

“Well, lad,” he said, a thin edge of irritation slipping into his voice, “let’s go turn this in.”

He looked toward the church.

“And then,” he added, “we’re having a talk with Stopford.”

Stopford wasn’t far. We found him seated on a bench behind the church, hunched over a notebook, scratching away with a pen and quietly laughing to himself.

“Ahh, yes. I’ve been expecting you,” he said, never looking up.

Dribbles gently tossed the fruit at him. Without glancing, Stopford caught it one-handed, set it beside him on the bench, and kept writing.

“We got it for you,” I hissed, “and we almost lost our lives.”

Stopford nodded. He finished his writing, closed the book, set it neatly beside him, and finally looked up.

“But you didn’t die,” he said pleasantly, inspecting me. “And you got the fruit. In fact, you look surprisingly devoid of holes.” His eyes traced my outline. “No blood or punctures. Excellent work.”

He smiled, opened the notebook again, tore out a page, and handed it to me.

On it was a badly drawn star with the words GOOD JOB written at the top.

“A well-deserved completion merit,” he said. “Now, your next task.”

“Now hold on just a minute,” Dribbles cut in. “We risked life and limb,” Dribbles said, jabbing a thick finger toward the fruit, “for something you grow right here. What exactly was so special about this fruit?”

“About this fruit right here?” Stopford said.

He lifted it slightly. “This specific fruit. The one currently in my hand?”

I nodded again.

“Well,” he said, examining it, “nothing at all other than the fact that I asked you to get it, and you did.” He sniffed it. “In fact, it’s quite rancid. Well past the point of being edible.”

He flicked his wrist and tossed the fruit into the jungle.

We watched it vanish into the greenery. Needless to say, we were unpleased.

“Now,” Stopford continued, dusting his hands together, “with that quest out of the way, go clean up, get some rest, and we’ll meet for dinner tonight to discuss your next assignment in more detail.”

I stared straight into his smiling eyes, pinching my own shut as heat rushed to my face. I held it there, breathing, counting, then lunged forward, stopping inches from his nose.

Stopford sat there, unflinched.

“Quite.”

Chapter 19

FIRST QUEST FINISHED!

Dinner was a punch in the gut.

Fish and jamberry stew with mint, plus a thick chunk of bread slathered in jamberry jam. I'd come early to sit with Stopford and Rose, partly because I had questions, but mostly because my stomach was growling.

I decided to open up with some gentle conversation.

"Why did you try to kill us?" I asked between slurps.

The stew was... surprisingly good. Not nearly as fishy as I'd braced myself for.

"Seeing as I did nothing of the sort," Stopford said mildly, spooning soup into his mouth, "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Those fish were not what you said they'd be," I replied, lifting the bowl and sipping the broth. I was starting to understand it now. The soup, I mean.

Stopford nodded. "All I said was that they were little fish people," he said between spoonfuls. "You never asked me anything more."

“But I... You...” I stammered, trying to find the right words to say but they never came.

“If you had asked,” Stopford continued with a thin smile, “I would have told you exactly where they were.” He swallowed the soup. “This was a simple task, and you did quite well, if not in the most efficient manner.”

“What was the right way to do it?” I asked, my voice rising in volume. Despite that, I had more soup.

“That’s neither here nor there. You succeeded. Look, your companions are joining us.” Stopford inclined his head toward them in that polite, stately way of his. “Dribbles. Passanova.”

They took their seats, nodded in return, and ate in silence, broken only by the occasional clink of spoon against bowl.

“Good soup,” Passanova said at last.

“It is,” Stopford replied. “My own recipe.”

“My dwarven tongue does not agree,” Dribbles said, sliding his bowl away. “No offense.”

“None taken.” Stopford drained the last of his bowl. “It’s a delicate flavor profile. I’ve yet to meet a dwarf with the patience for it.” He set the bowl aside, dabbed his mouth with a napkin, then folded the cloth over itself again and again. “Now. I imagine you’d like to hear about your next quest.”

I nodded “Yes, no surprises this time. I want to know everything that I can.”

Stopford smiled. “Very good. You passed the first test.”

Rose stood.

She hadn’t touched her food. The chair scraped softly as she rose and reached into her robe, producing a small badge and holding it out to me. She moved strangely, her body stiff, uncertain, as though she were learning how to use it for the first time. Her hands were heavily wrapped, layer upon layer, as if she were trying to hide burns.

Her hood never shifted. I still couldn’t see her face.

For a moment, I wondered if that was wrapped too.

“What’s this?” I asked, turning the badge over in my hands. On its face was a golden basketball stamped with a green checkmark, the words *TEST I PASSED* embossed beneath it.

“That,” Stopford said, smiling far too proudly, “is for passing the first test. Congratulations.”

“Then what was that thing you gave him back at the bench?” Dribbles asked, eyeing the badge.

“Oh, the doodle?” Stopford waved a hand. “Early concept work. I try to maintain the highest standard of awards in Ballendore. Morale is important.” He paused, tapping a

finger against his chin. “Ah. You thought the test was about the fruit.”

He laughed softly and shook his head. His eyes and cheeks buried a belly laugh.

“I can see why.”

“Then what was the test?” I asked, my brow scrunching.

“I needed to know whether you’d learn the correct lesson,” Stopford said. “It’s not always about winning. Or even completing the quest. The test was about whether you were humble enough to recognize your mistakes and adjust.”

“Because I wanted to know about the next quest?” I asked.

Stopford nodded. “Yes. But the important part is why you asked.”

“So we don’t die,” I snapped.

“How might that relate to basketball?” Stopford asked.

There it was again, that light in his eyes. The unmistakable glow of someone doing exactly what they were put on this world to do.

I sat with his question for a moment.

“Well,” I said slowly, “if I know my opponent, I can increase my odds of winning.”

Stopford tilted his head, squinting one eye and pursing his lips. “In a roundabout way, yes. But not simply to win. It’s so you know how to exploit their weaknesses.” He raised a finger. “For instance, if you knew the opposing team had a troll, how would that change the way you practiced?”

“He’s right,” Passanova said. “It’s why armies use scouts. You learn the enemy’s numbers, their position, their equipment. Information is worth more than a finely made blade or the thickest armor on the battlefield.”

Dribbles nodded. “Ayy, he’s right. That’s why the element of surprise is so effective.”

“So, what you’re saying is that if I know who my opponents are and what they might do I can figure out ways to exploit their weaknesses?” I asked.

Stopford nodded. “Exactly. And that is why you passed the test.” Stopford beamed a smile at me.

“Now, let me tell you about this troll.”

Chapter 20

GLAMPING

Sweat dripped down my face as the humidity clung to my skin like a wet rag. We set off deeper into the jungle the next morning. The air felt thick enough to chew. We'd packed plenty of food. Stopford had promised it would be a full day's walk through dense forest before we reached Fleet-Footed Jungle Troll territory. He'd also said we'd know **without question** when we arrived.

"Oh, you'll know," were his exact words, followed by a belly laugh that shook the table and grated every nerve I had.

This time, at least, he'd reassured us there would be no threat to our lives. The trolls were peaceful creatures, he said.

Still, we came prepared.

Dribbles had his trusty axe out. Passanova kept a dagger loose in his hand, flipping it every few steps. I kept my fingers limber and ready to wiggle. And Bill... well. Bill was just Bill.

"Jungle isn't a place for a dwarf," Dribbles grumbled, hacking his way through dense foliage and trying to lift his short little legs over roots thicker than his arm. "Next time, how

about a nice dungeon? A cave? Somewhere with stone. A place to spelunk.”

“Gerald,” Passanova said, stepping lightly over a fallen log, “what are you going to do when you become the pig?”

“The pig?” I responded. “Do you mean the GOAT?”

“Whatever farm animal you’re trying to be,” he said. “What happens after that?”

“I... I haven’t thought about that... Hey Dribbles, what have others done after they’ve become the greatest of all time?”

Dribbles snorted. “Well, lad, if someone had already taken the title of greatest of all time, you wouldn’t be able to take it now, would ya?”

“Dribbles, I’m not sure that’s how that works,” I said.

“So you aren’t trying to become a farm animal, then?” Passanova asked. His tone was earnest, almost concerned.

I shook my head. “No. I just want to be the greatest that’s ever been so far. That’s really what it means. But maybe I can get so good that no one else can ever match me.”

“That’s the spirit, lad,” Dribbles said, pumping a fist. Then he glanced at Passanova. “What do your people do with their great achievers?”

Passanova stopped dead in his tracks, turned slowly, and looked Dribbles square in the eye.

“We eat them.”

Then he stepped over a mossy log and kept walking, whistling as he went.

“Oh don’t tease me like a bugbear,” Dribbles chuckled, hurrying after him. “Surely a proud people like yours would make tapestries or statues of your finest.”

“You don’t understand,” Passanova said, shaking his head. “We eat them so we may take a piece of their greatness into ourselves. It is the highest honor our people can bestow. To be devoured, distributed, and remembered in every body is a dream.”

Dribbles, Bill, and I stopped in our tracks.

Passanova walked a few more steps, then paused and turned back. “What?”

“How many people have you eaten?” I asked nervously.

My palms were slick with sweat. Dribbles had both hands on his axe now. Purple people eaters were not somebody we could trust, no matter how many eyes they had.

Passanova blinked at us a couple of times. Then he burst into laughter, the sound echoing up into the canopy.

“I’m kidding,” he said between breaths. “We don’t believe in that level of sacrifice. We celebrate the arts, Nova Poetics, music, and activities like The Hunt.”

He grinned at us. “Honestly, you should see your faces.”

Without missing a beat, he turned back around, marching through the jungle, whistling the same tune he was earlier.

“Nova Poetics?” I asked.

Passanova nodded. “Yes. It’s... well...” He hesitated, then gave a small shrug. “You wouldn’t have heard of it.”

“Well now you have to tell us,” I said. “What’s Nova Poetics?”

Passanova slowed his pace. “Across our world are magical devices called Plummox Points. They’re usually built atop mountains or in places where the sky is clear and wide.” He tilted his head back, as though the canopy might part if he stared hard enough. “From there, Nova Poets aim astral cannons at the stars and paint poems across the heavens.”

Dribbles let out a long whistle.

“To lie in the grass and read the sky as it’s being written,” Passanova continued, his voice softening, “is an indescribable thing. Beauty so vast it makes you forget you exist. You just float along with the stars.”

He sighed. “But the Plummox Points were destroyed. The ancinite used to shape their crystal lenses was repurposed into pain crystals. Gorzod used them to imprison my parents. And many others.”

“Nova Poetics,” I repeated, quietly, staring up at the leaves overhead. “What happens to the stars?”

Passanova paused a second, reflecting on the question. “What do you mean?”

“You said you paint with them,” I said. “What happens to the stars?”

He rubbed his chin, thinking. “We draw out a fraction of their luminescence. Just a trace. Their light stretches across space for a time, then returns to them.”

I nodded slowly.

“I think I would like that very much,” I said.

Passanova glanced at me, a grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. “Maybe I’ll show you someday after you become the horse, Gerald.”

“Very funny,” I said. “But what if there are mistakes? A misfire, or something.”

“Oh,” Passanova said casually, “then the star is destroyed. Fairly common occurrence, actually.”

Dribbles and I traded glances.

“So the stars are... destroyed?” I asked, just to be sure I’d heard him correctly.

Passanova nodded. “Yes. Blown apart. Extinguished. Sprinkled like dust across the aether. However you’d like to phrase it.”

“Stars like...” I swallowed. “Like our sun?”

The gears began to turn in his head while the humor drained from his face, replaced by something quieter, thoughtful, introspective. Then, slowly, his expression curdled into horror.

“Well,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck, “now that you mention it... that doesn’t seem... great.”

He looked up through the canopy, suddenly less interested in the sky. “On second thought, maybe I won’t show you someday.”

“Probably for the best, lad,” Dribbles said. He glanced around as the light thinned between the trees. “But first, we’ve got a troll to catch, and it’s getting dark. Shall we set up camp here?”

“As good a place as any,” I said. “What do you have for camping in that bag of yours?”

Dribbles dropped the bag in the center of the clearing. It landed with a heavy **thump**. He rummaged around inside for a moment, brow furrowed. “I could use a hand, lad.”

I fumbled around inside the bag until my hand hit whatever it was he had stuffed in there. “Ahh, there it is,” I said as I gripped the handle.

“Pull on the count of three. One... two... three!”

Dribbles and I pulled up on the bag and, with a tug, the air shifted around us in odd rhythms and rhymes as a box, made out of a strange material, popped out of it.

“Tungite,” Dribbles said, already anticipating my question.

It was a box, solid, heavy, brown, but not quite. It shimmered faintly, like it couldn’t quite agree with the light around it. Frankly, I didn’t quite agree with its shimmer.

Painted across the front in bold white letters were the words:

DRIBBLES GLAMPING GEAR

“Alright, lad,” he said, waving me back. “Step away. No reason to get yourself hurt while we’re out here.”

I took several careful steps back just as Dribbles flipped the latch.

Three tents snapped open mid-air and landed fully assembled in a neat arc around the clearing. Logs tumbled out, stacking themselves into a perfect fire pit. A spit swung into place. A cauldron thudded down at the center, already boiling something rich and mouthwatering. Seating logs rolled to a stop, evenly spaced as if wiggled by magic.

The fire ignited on its own with a polite *whoof*.

Dribbles dusted off his hands.

“Lads,” he said proudly, “it’s time to glamp.”

Chapter 21

FLYING WURYMS

Dribbles had apportioned the rest of the camp with practiced ease, each tent, log, and pot placed exactly where it belonged. It all had the unmistakable feel of muscle memory.

A man who's done this before, I thought.

"Ayy, I've done this before," Dribbles said with a proud huff, as if he'd plucked the thought straight out of my head. "When you've been on as many adventures as I have, you learn to appreciate a proper night every now and again."

"Dribbles," Passanova said, fishing a warm chunk of brownish-red meat from the already-boiling soup, "may I ask you a question?"

"Ayy."

"Why didn't you pull this out sooner?"

Dribbles sat and pondered the question between sips of the mystery soup that smelled vaguely of chicken and mushrooms. The soup did not have chicken, nor did it have mushrooms, but I decided to not let that distract me as I ate.

“I suppose,” Dribbles said at last, shrugging, “maybe I forgot about it.”

Passanova’s eyebrow crept upward as he took another sip. “You mean to tell me that we’ve been rained on, slept in the mud, gone without warm meals, in some cases for days at a time, and you’ve simply forgotten about such luxuries?”

Dribbles nodded. “Ayy.”

Passanova considered this. “It is good soup, you know.”

“Ayy,” Dribbles agreed.

He glanced over at me. “Say, Gerald. Why so quiet?”

I looked down at my bowl, then over at Bill. “What does Bill eat?” I asked. “Are you even hungry, Bill?”

Bill turned to stare at me unblinking and intensely present, as was blortish protocol.

Passanova leaned in and lowered his voice. “They don’t eat,” he said. “They’re full of themselves. They don’t go hungry.”

I nodded along, pretending Passanova had said something that made sense. Half the time, I couldn’t tell whether he was drawing from some deep well of arcane knowledge or just saying things to amuse himself. Eventually, curiosity won.

“Passanova,” I said, “and don’t take this the wrong way... do your people make things up often?”

“What do you mean?” He asked, tilting his head to the side like a puppy hearing a new sound.

“Well, earlier you made the joke about eating people and now you’re telling me that blorts don’t eat because they’re full of themselves. Maybe this is some advanced elvish eating humor that I’m not accustomed to?”

“Dark elvish,” he corrected. “And yes to the first one and no about the blorts.” He flicked a crumb from his fingers. “They can eat. They just don’t need to. Anything they eat is for the joy of it.”

He tore off a chunk of bread and lobbed it toward Bill. “Bill. Would you demonstrate?”

Bill turned to face me and nodded formally, like this was a matter of etiquette. Then his mouth opened so wide that half of his round body had shrunken in on itself and had gone missing. What remained was a perfect half-sphere, the flat edge lined with thick, uneven teeth. Bill snatched the bread from the ground, flipped it into the air, and snapped his jaws shut with a crack like a bear trap.

The tiniest morsel of bread had been separated from the rest and Bill began to nibble away at the larger remaining chunk as he balanced it on his teeth like a mouse enjoying a particularly potent piece of Parmesan cheese.

“Ahh, yes. I see,” I said, watching Bill nibble away at the bread, his lips, if you could call the ends of his mouth that as they puckered away and committed odd and terrible

maneuvers. “I apologize for causing this to happen. Is there any way we can get him to stop?”

Passanova shook his head. “I’m afraid not. In blort society, it’s considered rude not to finish a meal.” He watched Bill fondly. “They’re very proper. The burps, belches, yawns, and screams you hear are all matters of strict etiquette.”

Dribbles laughed. “Sounds like the under-dwarves.”

“What are they?” I asked hurriedly, trying to change the subject away from blort society and their faux eating habits.

Dribbles’ grin widened. “Oh, just a story. Gather round and I’ll tell you one.”

He patted the ground and motioned us closer. We obliged. The fire popped as we shifted in, its light crawling up his beard and throwing long, twitching shadows into the trees. Bill continued nibbling behind us, delicate as a mouse, oblivious to the mood change.

“Now,” Dribbles said, rubbing his hands together, “which story shall it be?” He paused, then nodded to himself. “Ahh. I’ll tell you about the Wuyrm.”

“The worm? Can’t be too scary,” I said. “And, what does this have to do with under-dwarves?”

“Under-dwarves?” Dribbles questioned. “Never heard of them.”

I looked at Passanova who shook his head and shrugged his shoulders.

“But the Wurym isn’t the kind that you’d find in the belly of a fruit or wiggling in the mud.” Dribbles gestured to the sky. “No, these soar the skies as silent as the wind on nights just like these...”

His voice trailed off as he looked up to the canopy. The fire light flickered, lighting up his face and beard in an almost purposeful dramaticism that gave more weight to his words than it probably should. “It is said that The Wurym circles overhead unsuspecting campers, as quiet as a whisper...”

“You said that already,” Passanova quipped.

“As shushed as a shushabee,” Dribbles went on anyway, flicking his eyes at Passanova, who only grinned. “And the only thing you’ll feel is the faintest breeze, just barely enough to notice, right before it eats you.”

“Is that it?” I said. “That’s not very scary. Seems like you’d be safe under trees. Like we are.”

“Ayy, well, suit yourself then,” Dribbles lamented with a theatrical sigh. “The greatest horror with big teeth that ever did fly the skies. Just you wait until it snatches you up, then you’ll be sorry. You’ll be saying, *Oh I didn’t believe my ol’ pal Dribbles no sir and now I’m in the belly of the Wurym being digested by its stomach juices, just you watch.*”

Passanova and I laughed. I poked the fire with a stick. Smolders moved and let out a puff of smoke.

“Wait,” Dribbles said softly. “Did you feel that?”

“No, no, you can’t fool us ya old dwarf,” I said jokingly. “That story was lame, you’ll have to try better.”

Passanova didn’t laugh.

He straightened, head tilting to the side, eyes lifted to the dark above the firelight. “I felt it too.”

“Haha, very funny guys. That’s real funny. Look at you two old men trying to scare a little kid like myse...”

The air snapped past me as if an arrow had flown within feet of me.

“Wh... what was that?” I whispered.

The firelight clawed at the leaves overhead, shadows writhing as if the trees were uneasy. Somewhere beyond the clearing, a deep *whoosh* tore through the forest and vanished, sending dead leaves skittering in a long, violent line.

“The W-W-Wurym?” I gulped.

Chapter 22

HUNTING A WURYM

“Dribbles,” I said, my voice catching as my stomach folded in on itself, “do you have anything I can use against a Wuyrm?”

“Lad, there’s no such thing,” Dribbles said quickly. “I made it up.”

Despite his assurance, this didn’t do anything to help ease the terror I felt in my gut.

“J-just in c-case,” he added, already digging into his bag. “L-let me see what I’ve got.” His hand disappeared inside. “Ah. Here we are.”

He pressed a dagger into my palm.

The leather-wrapped hilt was cool, almost cold, against my overheated skin. A red gemstone glowed faintly in the pommel, carved into the shape of a skull, its eyes catching the firelight. Flecks of gold winked as I turned it over in my hand. The hilt curved in a gentle S, a delicate web pattern hammered into the metal.

The blade itself didn’t gleam like steel. It was matte. Dull. The color and texture of a tooth.

As I moved the dagger, a pale blue afterimage lingered in the air for a heartbeat, imprinting itself into the aether before disappearing.

I readied the dagger at my side, ready to stab at whatever beast might be coming for us from the sky, wurym or not. I ducked low, squatting with my legs spread as if I were a crab, dagger at the ready. This was my power stance, I determined, and nothing could get me.

The whoosh came again.

I stabbed upward, slashing at empty air, the dagger hissing through nothing. Despite my best efforts this accomplished nothing except for a sore shoulder.

“What did Stopford tell us about the trolls?” Passanova asked, slicing his own daggers towards the sky every time a whoosh crossed his ears.

“Didn’t he say that we’d know when the trolls are near because of the whooshing sound?” I said, relieving myself from my crab-like stance.

“Ayy,” Dribbles said, loosening his grip on the axe. “That does sound familiar.” He glanced between us. “So... is it time for the plan?”

I looked to Passanova. He nodded.

I nodded back.

I looked to Dribbles.

Dribbles nodded too.

The three of us nodded at one another, back and forth, from me to Dribbles from Dribbles to Passanova, from Passanova to me, and so on. Then, we all took a look at Bill who had just finished nibbling up his chunk of bread.

“Why are you guys looking at me like that?” Bill telepathed into my head.

“It’s time for the plan. Do you remember it?” I asked.

Bill looked up into the sky with his mouth agape and his tongue positioned in the usual way that meant that he was using both of the neurons he had available to process the request. Eventually his tongue slid back into his mouth, his mouth closed, he nodded, and said “Yep, I remember” in his telepathic way.

I was reminded how useful that bracelet we found had been.

I dropped into a squat so Bill could climb onto my shoulders.

He ran over to me in the usual stupid sort of way that he did, arms and tongue flailing behind him, before he leapt onto my shoulders.

“Careful,” I muttered, wobbling. “You’re top heavy.”

Dribbles then reached into his bag to produce a camouflaged blanket that we had prepared the night before. It had all manner of sticks, twigs, leaves, dirt, and fur from various

animals that the church was willing to part with, stuck to it with elgrit glue.

For those unfamiliar: elgrits are large, hairless, yak-like creatures that secrete a powerful adhesive across their skin. To the untrained eye, this secretion looks like fur, which is why people often mistake elgrits for yaks. I learned the truth as a wee lad, quite by accident, and have carried a small vial of the stuff in an ornament at my waist ever since.

You never know when you'll need glue.

Dribbles draped the blanket over me. It stuck instantly.

With the blanket overtop me, and with Bills extra height, we were ready for the plan. I could only assume I looked nothing like a Fleet Footed Jungle Troll, however, we were assured that they were not particularly bright creatures and that they were often known to think small trees and termite mounds were their parents.

With Bill's added height and the blanket sagging around us like a malformed shrub, we were, technically, ready.

Passanova chuckled to himself. I knew he thought there was no way this plan would work. I had to prove him wrong.

So I stood very still, sweating in the blanket made of sticks. And also, Bill being on my shoulders didn't help. Blorts are rather stinky creatures.

The first whoosh passed.

Then another.

Then another.

Soon, the whooshing sound became a physical sensation that I could feel beneath the blanket. The sounds increased in tempo. My heart raced. I couldn't see anything but... I could hear and feel it.

Whoosh

Whoosh

Whoosh

SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEECH

Chapter 23

THE TROUBLE WITH TROLLS

The deafening screech ended, unleashing a swirl of dust and leaves through the camp. I peeked out through the eye holes that we had cut when we made the blanket like a little kid hiding from a monster.

A massive figure stood before us, ten feet tall or about three Dribbles in height. Its belly bulged so far forward that its spine curved into a deep S just to keep it upright. Long, greasy strands of hair whipped around its head like oily strands of string.

“Hullo innit an sumsutch,” the figure said.

He dragged a finger out of his nose and held it up. A sinewy strand of snot stretched from nostril to fingertip, wobbling in the air. A long, yellowed nail had excavated a truly impressive booger.

“Name’s Sam. An’ how ’bout you?”

“Oh! Hullo an whant not,” I said, doing my best to match his speech. “We... I mean I am... Sam too!”

I cringed at my response. We had not discussed the finer details of forest troll naming conventions.

The strand snapped. The booger collapsed into a single, glistening glob, which he popped straight into his mouth.

“Sucsulent. My troll cheese, innit.”

Troll cheese.

Did he just say *troll cheese*?

You mean, my favorite food is troll boogers?

My stomach started to spin and the taste in my mouth turned slightly metallic. My mouth started to fill with thick saliva. Uhoh. I know this feeling. The last time I felt this way I...

BLECH

Threw up.

The soup we’d had for dinner now dripped down the front of the blanket draped over Bill and me.

“Are you alright?” Bill telepathed.

I shook my head in an exaggerated way so he could feel it. From the outside, with the retching sounds and the jerky movement, I was certain the troll would grow suspicious.

Instead, he just kept munching on his booger, smiling from ear to ear.

Anyone who's ever thrown up knows the moment that comes after; the brief, crystalline clarity. Like a lighthouse cutting through a violent sea. Like blocking the shot of the guy who's just made three in a row.

I peered out through the holes in the blanket and noticed the shiny metal object around his neck. I leaned in to take a better look, still tasting the gut juice that departed the wrong way. The troll moved his arm just so and I could see it more clearly.

It was a whistle! Yes! This was the right troll.

"Sos," the troll said, swallowing loudly. "Whant brings yous out here?"

He had finished his boogery cheese and put his full attention towards me, looking me over in the same way that Stopford had.

I collected myself the best I could. The smell of my barf gagged me as I tried. The post puke perception was beginning to fade. I had to stay focused. I had to get that whistle. What's a little vomit between me and greatness? I had to. I needed to.

Still, pretty gross.

"Trade?" I choked out the only word I could.

"Whots is trade?" Sam asked.

“Is... yous gives me whistle,” I said, squinting through watering eyes, “an’ I gives yous... thing.”

The stink burned worse now. I decided I didn’t need to keep my eyes open the whole time.

“Ahhs a recipoririocal esxcshange of da commodoties fors mutuals econoromoric benefit,” Sam said, beaming proudly.

“...Sumthin’ like dat,” I replied, mangling my way through the accent. “Wot yous say?”

Sam lifted his booger picking hand up to his chin, closed one eye, and pursed his lips.

I waited.

And waited some more.

Somewhere deep inside his skull, gears turned. Eventually, a conclusion was reached.

“Sounds gewd,” he said. “Whots yous gots?”

I searched on my person for the trinket we were intending to give him but... oh no.

I flicked my eyes toward the tents. Passanova was trying desperately to get my attention.

He had it in the tent with him!

But, if Sam noticed Passanova in the tent, Sam would bolt out of here as quick as lightning. Stopford had been clear:

Fleet-Footed Jungle Trolls spook easy. One wrong movement and Sam would be gone in a blur.

Think.

What did I have?

What would a troll want?

My fingers brushed something solid at my side.

Oh.

The dagger.

I slid my arm through one of the blanket slits and lifted it into the firelight.

“Dis rights here,” I said quickly. “Big magic. Shiny. Blues glow.”

Sam squinted at it then shook his head. “Nah, gots plenty o’ dose. Whats it do?”

I wiggled and waggled my fingers ever so slightly, as to not cause undue fear, and coaxed the dagger into the air.

I lifted it out of my hand and held it there for a second, then let it drift toward Sam, spinning slowly so the firelight caught along the dull, toothlike edge. The blue shimmer trailed behind it like a ghost in the night.

“Does dat,” I said. “But it’s diffimult.”

Sam’s eyes widened a fraction.

“I teach,” I added quickly, “an’ yous give whistle?”

Sam lifted his booger picking hand up to his chin once again for another ponder. I could hear the gears whirring along in his head.

This time they clicked fast.

“Deals.”

I handed the dagger over. Sam’s long, grimy, troll fingers creaked and cracked like wood as they wrapped around the hilt.

“Sos,” he said, “hows does it works?”

He held that dagger uncomfortably close to his face. I didn’t want to cut my new friend, lest his troll rage spark a battle that we would probably lose. I also didn’t want to spook him because he still had the whistle around his neck. The dagger was just too close to his face for me to use my magic to move it around. I had to think fast.

“Gots ta extend yous arms,” I said, leaning hard into the accent and putting on my best troll salesman act, “an’ close yous eyeballs ta learn.”

“Hmm...” Sam said, “No tricksey?”

I shook my head and tapped on Bills foot so he’d shake his head along with what I was going to say. “No tricksey.”

I nodded, slowly and confidently. “Onsly way tah do it.”

“Alrights,” he said after a moment of consideration. “I closes my eyes.”

Sam complied, excitedly pushing his arm out straight with such a great force that it snapped his spine straight with a series of wet pops. It turns out, he was several feet taller with proper posture, which I did not enjoy discovering this late in the interaction.

“Goods,” I continued. “Nows, thinks real goods thinking thoughts. Thinks ’bouts how its looks an’ feels in hand.”

“Hmm... I trys now.”

Sam squeezed the blade tight enough that a human would’ve lost a few fingers. Thankfully, trolls seemed to come with factory installed calluses that were tougher than stone.

“Nows, lets go!” I commanded as I wiggled and waggled my fingers.

Sam let go of the blade.

“Nows, opens eyes!”

Sam’s beady black eyes snapped open. A massive, toothy grin split his face as the dagger floated obediently in front of him.

“OH!” he barked. “Nows this! This GREAT trick!”

He laughed, delighted, bouncing on his heels as the dagger drifted in the air between us, trailing blue light.

“Thanks you!” he said. “I show friends at ree-you-nuns. Fiftumith comings up!”

As the dagger floated there, Sam took off the whistle and dropped it into my hand.

Chapter 24

TROUBLE SLEEPING

The whistle was made of an oddly cold metal, much colder than the night air. It shimmered in the campfire light, reflecting the world around it like a warped mirror. I flipped it over in my hand, turning it slowly.

On the underside, a set of initials had been embossed.

F.B.S.S.

Father Stopford's initials, maybe.

The cord tied to it was smooth but sturdy, woven tight enough that I trusted it wouldn't snap no matter how hard it was pulled. Not that I planned on testing that.

"Dis ones magicals too," Sam said, nodding with the solemn authority of a wizard delivering ancient truth. It was unsettling, coming from a troll. "Simply toots five times an' I come runnings. Cans hear it miles an' miles. Gots good ears."

He demonstrated by jamming a finger into one ear and pulling out a sticky glob of wax that stretched like melted cheese.

Oh no.

My stomach started to spin again. I gulped the feeling down, able to restrain myself. I vowed to never eat troll cheese ever again.

“Thanks bigs friend, Sam.” I said, holding back another barf. “Good trades!”

Sam nodded enthusiastically, then smeared the string of ear wax across his lips like lipstick. It glistened gold in the firelight.

“Good trades! Sees, you, I haves date!” He said as his ear greased lips glistened gold and his spine bent back into an S.

One moment, Sam was there. And, as quickly as he came, he left, leaving behind a plume of dust in his wake that flickered the fire as it settled. As the dust settled, I tore the sopping blanket off my shoulders and flung it into the woods without a second thought.

Bill hopped down from my shoulders, wobbling as he landed. Dribbles and Passanova unzipped their “glamping tents,” as Dribbles insisted on calling them, and stepped out to inspect our prize.

“You did good, lad,” Dribbles commended as he compared the whistle to his own, eyeing it like he did the bracelet that Bill now wore. “This is mighty fine. Rare metal!”

He passed it to Passanova, who squinted at it and whistled softly. “Looks to be muthril. Sweet, dark elvish steel.”

“Muthril?” I asked. “Is this another one of your jokes?”

Passanova shook his head, laughing a little. “No, not at all. See here?” Passanova held it up to my face, rotating it slowly. I noticed a slightly green tint that reflected when the light from the fire flickered the lowest. “That green glint when the light is weakest? That’s muthril alright. Very rare, indeed! Good eye, Dribbles.”

He handed it back to me. I rolled it between my fingers, feeling its unnatural coolness. “Rare, huh? Any idea what these initials mean?” I turned the whistle over so he could see the engraving.

“F.B.S.S.? Hmm...” Passanova frowned thoughtfully. “Hmm. Not sure. Sometimes muthril is stamped with its intended world when it’s forged.” He tilted his head. “This is Ballendore, so... maybe *For Ballendore?*”

“That would make sense,” I yawned. “Maybe Stopford will know for sure. Either way, I’m exhausted, I smell like vomit, and I’m going to bed.”

“Ayy, sleep easy, lad,” Dribbles said, settling onto a log. “We’ll keep watch for a while.”

“Sleep easy,” Passanova added, lifting a hand in a lazy wave.

The glamping tent Dribbles had marked as mine was absurdly comfortable with thick furs layered across the floor, pillows piled like a nest, and more soft, cushioned things than I had ever seen in one place. Bill stayed outside with the others, standing still near the fire. I watched him for a

moment through the tent flap. His eyes were wide, reflecting the flames as if the fire itself had caught him in a spell.

Beyond the canvas, I could hear Dribbles and Passanova trading playful insults, their voices rising and falling with laughter. Whatever tension had once lived between them seemed to have burned off in the firelight.

I smiled to myself. I was glad to have my friends. And I was glad they were finally getting along.

Unfortunately, sleep did not come gently.

That night, I tossed and turned as flashes of a laughing goat stalked my dreams. The goat that had beaten Dribbles and me on the court near Dribbles' home. The goat that laughed at me as he walked away.

His face haunted me, laughing, calling. "I'm coming for you," the voice bleated, "And I will beat you again."

In the distance behind him, something stirred in the darkness. A brilliant ball of light appeared, trailing behind it with an orange glow. It arched closer... and closer. My eyes moved from the goatish head to the bright glowing ball as it moved closer. The goat continued to laugh.

My eyes flicked from the goat's grinning face to the bright sphere hurtling toward me.

As I gazed on, staring at the ball, I realized it was on fire.

I tried to turn. Tried to run. My legs locked beneath me, useless. I slipped, my footing vanishing all at once, and then I fell... and down I went tumbling into the darkness below as the goats laughter could be heard, echoing off into the gloom.

I woke up in a deep sweat, gathered the damp blanket, and slipped out to what remained of the fire, hoping the coals might warm me and dry out my blanket. Bill was already there, sitting quietly, poking at the glowing logs with a stick. The embers flared softly with each touch.

He turned his head toward me.

“Nightmare, too?” he telepathed.

I nodded and sat beside him, the warmth sinking into my bones. “This stupid goat,” I muttered. “He just kept laughing at me. And then there was this ball of fire... and I fell. Just straight into the dark.” I shook my head. “I don’t know what to make of it.”

“That was Gorzod,” he telepathed.

He let out a sigh, something I had never heard from him before. “I was once the defender of the Wiggle Realm,” he said adjusting himself in his seat. “I was to defend the Mogrificator of Woe, a powerful device that wields unseen power and...” Bill paused for a moment, lifting his head up as if he had remembered something he had long forgotten. “Well, why don’t I show you?”

Bill stood and placed his hands on either side of my face, his palms gently covering my eyes.

“Now breathe as I tell you. One... two...”

A sudden rush of air swept all around, if just for a moment, and then, silence. My vision frosted white and the warmth of the fire faded. I felt my body move through time and space and, unfortunately, this a sensation most specific that it can only be conveyed through “Yep” and “Mmhmm’s” among those who have traversed the chronoverse via a blort.

Slowly, a world came into view, folding into itself until everything was as it was supposed to be. My feet sank into something soft and yielding, squeaking under my weight, and the frost faded away.

I could see again.

Chapter 25

THE WIGGLE REALM

“Where are we?” I asked, taking it all in.

Yellow orbs perched atop thin stalks dotted the horizon, as if someone had tossed them skyward and let them fall where they pleased. The ground rolled away in soft, spongy mounds the color of salmon. Above it all, the sky burned a bright lemon yellow. Strangely, I felt at peace.

Bubbles drifted through the air, popping in and out of existence as though an unseen hand willed them into being.

As my eyes adjusted, I spotted Bill frolicking through the squishy field; leaping, rolling, delighting in it. He finally turned toward me.

“The Wiggle Realm!” He said.

“The Wiggle Realm?” I echoed. Then, the more important question hit me. “And you can *talk*?”

“Yes. The Wiggle Realm,” Bill said. His voice had taken a sudden and uncharacteristically serious tone. “It is part of the Nine Jiggly Plains. I am the guardian of the Unseen Gloop.”

He tilted his head. Well, it was more of a full body rotation. “Have you forgotten?”

I blinked. “I... I guess I have but... you are speaking? Out of your mouth?”

“Ahh, well, let me remind you of my status,” Bill continued, drawing himself up with sudden gravity.

“My name is *Blortulum GlarxithandrivoX Y’kalburvok* The Unflappable, Grand High Overseer of the Wobbling Void, Lord Chancellor of the Glurp’nar Caverns, Wielder of the Sacred Splat, Keeper of the Eternal Bouncing Sphere, Master of the Nine Jiggly Planes, Guardian of the Unseen Gloop, Exalted Protector of the Wiggle Realm, Grand Duke of the Quivering Peaks, First Among the Goo’d, Champion of the Infinite Slosh, Herald of the Jellied Depths, and Supreme Master of the Order of Billiards, Wielder of the Mogrificator of...”

I cut him off. “Yes, yes, I remember now. But, you can *talk*?”

“I always could,” Bill said flatly. “I told you back in the spider cave. You just weren’t listening.”

His tongue lolled as he scampered toward me, but there was no humor in his eyes now.

“Watch closely,” he said. “This is the nightmare I live every night.”

As if summoned by the words, the air in front of us tore open.

A vast crimson portal bloomed into existence, spiraling with dark energy. Violet flames lashed outward from its center, twisting and multiplying until the rift reached its apex.

From within stepped a hooded figure. Their voice rolled across the realm, echoing with menace and malice.

“Ahh... the Wiggle Realm,” it said. “Now let us see if it is still here.”

Before I could respond, one of the drifting bubbles nearby popped and from its shattered light emerged a blort clad in gleaming silver armor.

With a sharp, ringing battle cry, the blort charged.

Sword raised, feet bouncing across the spongy ground, it hurled itself straight toward the hooded figure.

“Oh, Y’kalburvok,” the hooded figure sneered. “You fool.”

The figure raised his hands and lightning screamed from his fingertips. Jagged, living arcs of purple lightning slammed into Y’kalburvok’s silver armor. The blort convulsed once before collapsing, flinging his sword forward as he fell face-first into the squish.

The blade skidded, then stopped right at the robed figure’s feet.

The figure laughed softly. “Ahh... the Mogrificator of Woe,” he murmured. “This will do. Yes. This will do very nicely.”

With a lazy flick of his wrist, the sword lifted into the air. Its gleaming surface blackened as if swallowed by night, veins of venomous violet energy crawling along the blade. Thick, crude ichor dripped from its edge, hissing as it burned into the spongy ground below.

Satisfied, the figure turned his back on the fallen blort and stepped into the crimson portal.

With an electric hiss, the portal closed as if it had never been there at all.

As I watched Y'kalburvok lay there motionless, my vision was once again engulfed by a brilliant bright light. A great whooshing of wind surrounded me as I once again traveled through space and time, this time, returning with a sense of sorrow.

When the world settled, I was back at the fire.

“What was that?” I asked.

“My nightmare,” Bill telepathed, quietly, in my mind.

“...Was that you?”

Bill nodded.

“That was me,” he telepathed. “Before I was disgraced and reduced to the lowly life of a mortal blort. I swore an oath to protect the Mogrificator of Woe... and I failed.”

He tilted his head toward the sky.

“I broke my code.” Bill telepathed a sigh as he lay his head in his hands. “That’s all I do now. Fail.”

“That’s not true,” I said. “You saved our butts when the spiders caught us. And again with the door.”

“Child’s play. Good luck. Circumstance.” he telepathed, his round body deflating a little. “I nearly got you all killed by the fish people. I am undisciplined. Unfocused. Easily distracted.”

I sat with that for a moment, watching the fire chew through what little wood remained.

“I’ve failed plenty too,” I said. “Before we met, I accidentally hurled Dribbles halfway across the forest with my magic. Net goblins were attacking and he wanted the jump on them. I almost lost him.”

Bill was quiet.

“Yes,” he finally replied, a weary mental sigh following the thought. “But you improve. I do not.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think that’s true. You know, Dribbles told me something once. It’s not about success. It’s about how you deal with your failures.”

That was a lie. Dribbles had never said that. But it felt like something he would.

I yawned and stretched, the adrenaline finally draining out of me. “I’m going to try to sleep. You gonna be alright?”

Bill let out a gurgle in response. I decided that was good enough an answer as any.

I grabbed my blanket and went back to sleep. My dreams continued that night. I stood in a massive arena with thousands upon thousands of voices crashing together as one. The crowd roared my name in unison.

“Ger-ald! Ger-ald! Ger-ald!”

Arms outstretched. Body gliding forward. The hoop looming closer and closer as the crowd swelled to a roar. This was it, the perfect dunk.

CLANG CLANG CLANG CLANG CLANG

Chapter 26

THE THIRD QUEST

“Time to get up!” Dribbles shouted, banging a wooden spoon against a pot lid with enough force to wake the dead.

I groaned, rubbed my eyes, stepped out of the tent, and shuffled over to the fire. Steam bubbled up from a dented pot and a familiar smell wafted into my nostrils. I dropped onto a log beside it. “What’s for breakfast?”

“Troll cheese soup,” Dribbles announced proudly, plunging the spoon into the pot and lifting it high. A long, glistening strand stretched from spoon to soup.

“No thanks,” I said immediately.

I turned the whistle over in my hands instead, letting the morning light skate across its surface. “So,” I said to Passanova, “your people made this, yeah?”

Passanova nodded. “We are fine metalsmiths. Our work surpasses even dwarven steel in elegance and strength. How, or why, this found its way here, I cannot say.”

Dribbles snorted. “Better than dwarven steel?” He barked out a laugh. “Not a mite better than a good human forge... no offense, Gerald.”

I shrugged. “None taken.” Humans were skilled, sure, but even I knew we were outclassed when it came to this level of craftsmanship.

Passanova let out a sly smile. “Easy for you to say, spelunker. Your smiths can’t weave steel. You still just clang on it like nincompoops.”

“Nincompoops?” Dribbles roared in response, his face getting redder with every word. “I’ll have you know that we...”

I listened to the two argue well into the morning as we packed up our belongings and started our way back to the church. The trip back was uneventful, yet, I was proud of the job that we had done. I twisted the whistle in my hand, taking a look at the good work the planning and preparation did.

When we returned to the church, the grounds lay unnaturally still. No chatter. No footsteps. No bells. The usual hustle and bustle that clung to the place like background noise had gone missing.

Stopford stood alone at the center of the yard, waving both arms above his head. His robe snapped and flapped in the wind like a poorly hung banner.

“A quick return!” Stopford yelled. “I assume you completed your task successfully and without incident?”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the whistle, holding it up for him to see. “Sure did.”

Stopford wiggled in place with excitement. “I assume Sam didn’t give you much trouble, did he? Happy fellow, but, not the brightest. Still, he was the only one willing to go halves with me on this whistle. We use it for... very different purposes.”

As we approached he raised his arms. “Go on, then. Toss it here!”

I obliged and tossed the whistle to him.

Stopford snatched it out of the air with a quick move and placed it around his neck. For the first time in the week that I’d known him, a smile slipped across his face. He squirmed with delight as he could hardly contain himself.

“I know,” he said, “I’ll just give it a quick little toot.”

And with that, Stopford let out a quick little toot of the whistle, standing there, grinning from ear to ear. Within moments, the nuns streamed out of the church and began to congregate with Rose standing next to Stopford.

“Ladies, I have gathered you here today to give praise to the young boy who has returned this whistle to me,” Stopford announced. A cheer rose from the crowd. “As such, it has been determined by me to make their final task a bit... easier.”

A murmur rippled through the gaggle, falling over them all at once, as if someone had flipped a switch.

“As you may or may not know,” Stopford continued, “I am unflinchable. It is a rare genetic condition passed down from Stopford to Stopford for generations. If you did not know, this is also how I collect so many fouls while playing defense. I do not flinch and, therefore, I am charged.”

“Hey, Dribbles,” I whispered.

“Yes, lad?”

“Did he give us a task that couldn’t be completed?” I asked.

“Yes, lad.”

“I thought so,” I whispered back, crossing my arms and giving Stopford the stink eye.

“So,” Stopford went on, “it has been decided that I should change the young hoop mage’s task.”

An audible gasp swept through the gaggle of nuns.

But Father, “one nun called out, “you’ve never done this before.”

Another murmur crept through the crowd like a fog sitting down in the morning for a nap.

“You are correct,” Stopford said, raising a hand. The gaggle fell silent at once. “However, I believe it appropriate to make

an exception in Gerald's case. Fear not! His task is not an easy one. Please, form a circle around our new friends and me."

The nuns shuffled their feet and gathered around us, forming a loose ring. Rose remained at Stopford's side. Curious.

"Today, young hoop mage, you will prove whether you are worthy of the training we can provide," Stopford continued. "You will prove whether you are worthy of the legacy of those who have come before you. Rose, please stand before us."

He swept his arm wide.

Rose sauntered into the center of the circle, her body wiggling and undulating like a weasel or a stack of kobolds underneath a trench coat. From beneath his robes, Stopford produced a basketball and tossed it to Rose. She snapped it out of the air with ease.

"Please demonstrate your prowess," Stopford said, a smile spreading across his cheeks.

Rose bounced the ball twice before launching herself into a crossover, slamming the ball from her right hand to her left with a sharp flick. She raised her left knee high, torso twisting and shifting her weight in the opposite direction, only to whip back to the left in an instant. The ball danced under her control, spinning around her waist, threading between her legs, and moving around with a simplicity that respected the years of practice she had spent controlling the ball.

As she spun, I swore I saw a small tail flash out from beneath her robe.

Or maybe my eyes were playing tricks on me.

When she finished her performance, she flicked the ball toward me. I plucked it out of the air and turned it in my hands. A large letter **S** was embossed into the orange, rough surface, pressed deep into the leather.

“Your task,” Stopford paused for a moment. “Is to keep this ball away from Rose.”

I glanced at Rose. Her hood still shadowed her face. If she wasn’t even going to look up, this seemed like a piece of cake.

“Easy enough,” I said. “For how long do I...”

I no longer held the ball.

Rose stood directly in front of me, spinning it on her bandage-wrapped fingers.

“For five minutes,” Stopford said, smiling. “You have one hour to complete this task.”

He raised the whistle to his mouth.

TWEEEEEEEEEEEEEEET

Chapter 27

KEEP AWAY

Rose snapped the ball to me with such force that, when I snatched it from the air, it pushed me back several feet. Before I could collect myself, she was on me like glue, tapping the ball with her hands every chance she got.

I tried to dribble.

Before the ball even touched the ground, she had slapped it away with a sharp crack and the familiar sound of the ball bouncing rang out across the open field.

POING

POING

POING

I dove after it and she was already on me like flies on the back end of a mule. The gaggle roared, cheering her on as she dismantled me piece by piece.

I had to think fast.

Stopford never said I had to do this alone.

I scanned for my friends. Dribbles was the easiest target. Simple bounce pass, I told myself.

I didn't realize how wrong I could be.

I tossed the ball towards Dribbles and, before it could touch the ground, it was swatted back by Rose and back into my hands.

"Try harder," she demanded.

It was in that frustrated moment that I took the ball and ran off towards the jungle, holding the ball in the pocket of my arm. I ran as fast as my legs could go, dodging this way and that way around trees and branches, using every ounce of my strength to push myself faster and faster. As I sidestepped a rather large tree, I ran straight into Rose who promptly tapped the ball out of my hands.

"AAHHHHHH," I yelled, grabbing the ball with an angry tug as I started back to the church.

Rose followed close behind, bobbing to the left and right of me, tapping the ball over my shoulders, or under my arms, or over my head. She was in complete control and there was nothing I could do about it.

When I made it back to the church, I walked straight into the center of the circle the gaggle had formed and sat down, legs crossed. The ball rested on the ground between my legs. Rose walked over, sat next to me, and tapped the ball every few seconds.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

I needed to think.

And think I did.

Five minutes passed. And then another. Then another still. My mind churned through hundreds of ideas, each as bad as the last.

Levitate the ball out of her reach? No... I don't think I could use my magic for that long.

Run again and freeze the ground beneath my feet as I go? She'd just step around it or outrun me.

Launch the ball as far as I can with telekinesis? No... that doesn't seem to be in the spirit of the challenge and Stopford probably wouldn't approve. Besides, I bet she'd find it.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Think, Gerald! What do all of these tasks have in common?

"Hey! Dribbles, Passanova, come here for a second," I called out over the crowd. "Let's have a little chat."

The two walked over. Well, Dribbles waddled. I gestured for them to sit with me in the circle.

“I’ve got a question to ask you guys,” I said.

Passanova nodded. “Ask away.”

“What do all three of these tasks have in common?” I asked.

Dribbles scratched at his beard. “What do you mean, lad?”

“Well, I figure there’s a lesson in each task,” I said as Rose tapped the ball for what had to be the five-thousandth time.

Tap.

5,001.

Tap.

5,002.

“The first one was obvious,” I continued. “We had to learn everything we could about our opponent.”

Dribbles and Passanova nodded.

“And then, the next one, we tricked a troll, yeah?” I asked.

Dribbles and Passanova nodded again.

“So now we have to keep the ball away from Rose.” I gestured between us. “What does that have to do with either of those things?”

Dribbles rested a hand on his chin and ran his fingers through his beard. “That’s a good question, lad. I s’pose you don’t have any ideas, Passie?”

Passanova narrowed his eyes at him. “*Passie?*”

Dribbles laughed. “What? Don’t like it?”

“No,” Passanova said flatly. “I do not.”

“Well, you need a nickname,” Dribbles said. “Why don’t you tell us something about you that we don’t know yet? Maybe that will help us come up with...”

“Guys,” I interrupted. “I really need you to focus here. What do these tasks... wait a second.” I turned to Dribbles. “What were you about to say?”

Dribbles rubbed his beard again. “Well, lad, I was going to say that maybe that will help us come up with a nickname for him.”

“Yes, yes, but how would we do that? About anyone.” I asked.

Dribbles tilted his head up, running his fingers through his beard. “I... suppose we’d have to know a bit about the person.”

“And if we’d known more about the fishie people, we wouldn’t have had nearly as much trouble, yeah?” I asked, the words tumbling out in a hurry.

Dribbles nodded.

“And you had to think like a troll to get the whistle,” Passanova added, his eyes lighting up like fireflies at night. “Just like we have to think like an animal when we’re on the hunt.”

“Exactly!” I exclaimed. “So... lean in.”

I whispered an idea to the guys. It was just a seed but sometimes that’s all you need.

I rolled the ball a few feet away so Rose couldn’t listen in. She went over and touched the ball every now and again, inching closer to try to hear what we were saying.

“Hey, Bill!” I called out. “Come here!”

“You have fifteen minutes!” Stopford shouted.

Chapter 28

TRICKING A ROSE

“Come on, Bill, hurry!” I yelled, waving my arms in big, frantic circles.

Bill sauntered over at the brisk pace of someone with absolutely nowhere to be. He stopped to muse at the sky, then crouched to stare at the ground where a little bug walked across the grass in the way little bugs do when they walk across grass. He was utterly unbothered by the urgency and made no effort to relieve it.

After what felt like minutes had passed, he wandered close enough for me to yank him in. I could smell him in all of his blort glory.

Pungent. Musky. Above all else, unpleasant.

I tried to ignore it and leaned in to whisper my plan to the group. As I explained, the three of us plugged our noses. Unfortunately, I could still smell him through my mouth.

“Does that make sense to you?” I asked Bill, pushing him back when I was done with my whispers.

Bill nodded. “Yep. Makes sense to me,” he telepathed.

“Good. Now that that’s settled...”

I wiggled and waggled my fingers and...

POOF

I cast polyblort on the basketball.

Bill waddled over to the freshly made blort, who stood there blinking in wide-eyed wonder. It was its first moment in the world. It looked up at the tall stone wall behind the church, then at the vast sky above, and then, longer than anything else, at the little bug tiptoeing across the grass toward whatever tiny place it called home.

Rose motioned to Stopford as if to ask “That’s not in the rules!” To which Stopford shrugged his shoulder and looked at her with a big grin on his face.

Bill tapped the blort on the shoulder and began to communicate with it using a series of gurgles, gargles, and burps. The other blort stared at him, his eyes still wide open, nodding every now and again at the occasional burp or gurgle and turning his head like a puppy at every new sound. After a moment, the non-Bill blort began to gurgle back.

Bill nodded and burped in response, to which both gurgled together for a moment before Bill turned to me and telepathed “We’re ready.”

And with that, the plan was on.

Bill pushed the other blort. Years later, I learned this new blort was named Carlimus Maximillian Elbonziburg the Omniscient.

We'll call him Carl.

Carl responded to the shove with a belch and pushed Bill right back. After some tussling, Bill and Carl began to fight one another in a most enjoyable chaos, turning on top of one another, wrestling back and forth, spinning one another around, and all around being as confusing as possible.

I watched Rose closely. She held one finger out, trying to track which blort was which. Her brow furrowed. She scratched her head, pressed a hand to her chin, and stared as the two blorts continued their writhing, gurgling dance.

I noticed something in her eyes. She had lost track. She had no idea which was which.

That is when I decided to act.

I wiggled both sets of my fingers, with my toes crossed, and cast polyblort on both Bill and Carl. This was the first time I had cast it on more than one object.

POOF

POOF

Rose lunged for one of the balls, her black-and-white habit flapping behind her. I darted for the other, snatching it

mid-leap and rolling across the ground, already setting up a pass.

“Bit harder to keep up with two, huh?” I called, whipping my ball toward Dribbles.

Rose charged after him, clutching her ball like she was smuggling treasure out of a dragon’s hoard. She reached for Dribbles’ ball, but, before she could get her fingers on it, Dribbles spun around her, passing the ball to Passanova with one hand while knocking the other ball out of her hands with the other.

“Hey, not fair!” Rose rasped.

Did... did she just break her vow of silence?

Her runaway ball bounced toward me with that now-familiar rhythm I had grown accustomed to.

POING

POING

POING

I scooped it up and launched it skyward with every ounce of muscle I had, wiggling my fingers to cast Feather Fall. The ball rocked lazily in the air, swaying back and forth in the breeze as it began its long, gentle descent.

“By my estimation,” I said, crossing my arms triumphantly, as if the matter were already settled, “it’ll touch the ground again in ten minutes.”

Rose froze. Her head twitched side to side, eyes darting around while she tried to figure out what to do. I could see her try to calculate this out, trying to figure out how to overcome this. She sprinted to Passanova, tapped his ball, then raced back beneath the spot where the floating ball would eventually fall. She looked to the roof and shook her head. It was too far of a jump from the roof of the church or the trees in the jungle.

She ran back to Passanova and tapped the ball again, then returned to her original spot, standing perfectly still, eyes locked on the ball drifting lazily overhead.

I caught Passanova's eye and gave him a subtle nod.

He grinned, winked, and then, without making a sound, slipped away into the jungle with the ball he held.

By the time Rose noticed, he was long gone.

She whipped her head to the left. Nothing. Right. Still nothing. Then, she ran to where he was, getting low to the ground and sniffing a few times. She arched her back in an odd snake-like way as she stood back up. She sniffed again, deeper this time.

Then Rose took off like a bolt of lightning, disappearing into the jungle.

"How much time is left?" I asked Stopford.

"Five minutes," he said. "You've got two minutes of consecutive possession left."

I grinned. “More than enough.”

I wiggled my fingers, coaxing the ball out of the sky like I was reeling in a flying blubblub on a long, invisible line. It floated down, spinning lazily and bobbing gently with the wind until it dropped into my hands.

I tossed it to Dribbles who opened up his bag and, with a thunk, the ball slipped through into the deep darkness inside.

“It’ll be safe here,” he said, his eyes narrowing into a vicious dwarven glare. “And none of ya are gonna say anything about this or else you’ll be dealin’ with me.”

Every nun in the circle gasped and raised a hand to her chest. A few shuffled backward, habits swishing like curtains caught in a draft. They all nodded in agreement.

Soon after, Rose burst back into the clearing with the basketball clutched to her chest, with Passanova trotting behind her with his usual smug grin. She glanced skyward, searching for the ball that was no longer there.

Her gaze slid to me. Then to Dribbles. Then to Stopford. Finally, her eyes landed on the nuns, who, as one, became suddenly and intensely fascinated with the ground.

Her breathing quickened. She darted from nun to nun, pawing at sleeves and skirts, hunting for the missing ball.

TWEEEEEEET!

Stopford's whistle split the air.

"Congratulations," he said cheerfully. "You've done it."

The gaggle erupted into joyous cheers, crowding in and hoisting the three of us into the air, bouncing us up and down in celebration. Stopford stood off to the side with his arms crossed, smiling like a proud teacher watching his favorite students graduate. In a sense, we had, though our training hadn't even begun.

Rose, still clutching her ball, waved her arms in that strange, wiggly way of hers, clearly giving him a piece of her mind.

When the nuns finally set us down, I spotted the ball still in Rose's hands. I wiggled and wagged my fingers and...

POOF

Bill popped back into existence in a puff of smoke.

Rose huffed, puffed, and pouted about our victory. She spun on her heels before stomping off into the jungle. Her feet pounded the earth, leaves rustling and twigs snapping with every furious step until she vanished into the green.

"Do you suppose she's upset?" I asked Stopford, leaning toward him.

He chuckled. "She'll be fine, she's just not used to losing. Now, go get some rest. Training starts tomorrow. Bright and early at the crack of dawn."

Chapter 29

TRAINING MONTAGE

For the next several weeks, my mornings began in the dark, when the world is still asleep and the air carries that cold, just-before-dawn chill. I'd drag myself out of bed, rubbing the sleepy grit from my eyes, and head straight to the court. Every day Stopford beat me there. He stood waiting with his arms crossed, a ball tucked under one arm, as if he'd never left.

We started shooting as the first streaks of sunlight spilled over the treetops, turning the jungle mist golden. He instructed us to shoot into the direction of the rising sun. As we warmed up, the sun became a defender, hurling its rays from a billion miles away to block our vision and punish sloppy form.

Hours later, sweaty and starving, I'd head to breakfast, which was usually a couple slices of buttered toast and a fried egg or two. Once, we had oatmeal with berries... except the "oatmeal" was lumpy paste that reminded me of blort feet for reasons I can't fully explain, and the "berries" tasted like someone had described a berry to a statistician who turned around to describe it to a cook. It was a faint whiffing of a berry. The memory of a once consumed berry generations

ago, the word of which was passed on from grandfather to father, from father to daughter, and finally to my plate.

After breakfast, Stopford had us practice stealing the ball from each other. He called it *possession training*. I realized that this was really like playing keep away if you had the ball and like a robbery if you didn't.

On the days I went up against Dribbles, I discovered I could hang onto the ball longer if I dribbled between my legs. He hesitated every time, like he couldn't quite decide how to attack it. But I also learned his weakness. Every fifth dribble, he let the ball float in the air just a fraction too long. That tiny pause was all I needed to swipe it clean.

Passanova was a tougher nut to crack. At first, I couldn't read him at all. His footwork was smooth. His eyes never gave away where he was going. His dribbles were as unpredictable as my journey had been so far. Then, one day, I spotted a pattern. Every other time he spun the ball around his back, he glanced in the opposite direction he planned to move. Once I caught that, I could time my steals perfectly.

Keeping the ball from him, though? That was another story. He was lightning fast, and no matter what trick I tried, he'd figured it out by the next round.

After that, we had to "work for our lunch," as Stopford called it. This was really just a fancy way of saying we had to steal the food we ate. Either we swiped it from the nuns

after they'd already gotten their portions, or from the cooks when they weren't looking.

Passanova, naturally, turned it into a performance. He discovered one of the cooks had a soft spot for a good song, so every day he'd lean against the counter, crooning some overly dramatic ballad. While she swooned, he'd sneak a handful of whatever was on the menu: Bread rolls, deep fried bananas, and once even an entire ladle full of soup that he somehow pilfered without spilling a single drop.

Dribbles, being Dribbles, simply didn't bother. Skipping lunch was practically a dwarven pastime. He claimed he fought and played better on an empty stomach.

As for me, I tried to acclimate to the stealing mindset. I really did. But stealing food felt wrong, so I decided I would just go hungry.

After lunch, we spent the rest of the day doing drills. The schedule looked like this:

Mondays - Ball handling drills.

Tuesdays - Shooting drills.

Wednesdays - Footwork drills.

Thursdays - Rebounding drills.

Fridays - Defensive drills (with Stopford acting as the offense).

Saturdays - Team drills.

Sundays - Rest.

While we trained, Bill mostly stayed with the nuns, who had taken a great fondness to him. We often spotted him toddling alongside them, one stubby leg working double-time to keep up. Other times he simply waddled with his mouth open, attending to his usual blort duties. The nuns adored him the way someone might adore a puppy given to them on their fifth birthday. They cooed and fussed at him as he went about his very important blort business.

Curiously, Rose hadn't come back after her loss. Stopford shrugged it off, but I caught the tightness in his jaw. It bothered him. He mentioned it was unlike her to leave the grounds for this long without returning.

One night, I lay in bed stuffed to the gills and drifting toward sleep. The cool sheets draped over me, a small comfort I'd grown accustomed to, and my eyelids sank lower with each slow breath.

Beside me, Bill snored in a steady rhythm, a HONK-SHOO HONK-SHOO sort of thing. I found myself counting his snores like sheep, letting the sound pull me under.

Just as I was drifting, my ears caught the most peculiar sounds. The skittering of tiny feet. The scritch and scratching of claws on stone. Hushed whispers and slippery syllables that weaved through the silence and into my ears.

I slid out from under the cool sheets, got up from my bed and snuck over to the door to see if I could hear what it might

be. My feet pressed coldly against the stone floor. I pressed my ear against the cool wood, holding my breath and closing my eyes hoping to help my ears in their task.

Three voices. Definitely three. All sharp and pointed, murmuring quiet and fast. Maybe they were speaking in another language, or, maybe speaking in code.

Then, all at once, the whispering stopped.

I paused a moment and listened with all of my focus. Nothing. Silence. I could hear my heart beating in my chest and in my ears.

Suddenly, just as fast as the voices stopped, I could hear the pitter patter of tiny feet, fading down the corridor.

It was too weird to ignore and I decided to get a closer look.

I wrapped my fingers around the cold bronze handle and twisted it slowly until it didn't twist anymore. I opened the door at a snail's pace, inch by inch.

CRREEEEAAAAAK

The sound ripped through the silence like a cat wailing after an ogre stepped on its tail.

Of course. These things tended to happen to me.

I poked my head through the gap, peering into the hallway. Nothing. Just the usual darkness, no different from the early mornings before training. I nudged the door open a little more, even more slowly this time. The door creaked and

groaned louder, of course, as we've learned, these things tended to happen to me.

I decided to just open the door normally, to which, it opened without as much of a peep.

Naturally.

The hallway stretched out in both directions, empty and still and perfectly dark. My eyes darted left, right, back to left again, but there was no hint of the tiny feet or their owners.

Maybe Dribbles and Passanova had gone on a late night snack run? I didn't think the whispers belonged to them, but then again, I couldn't hear the voices well enough.

But the third voice that I heard... that was the problem.

Maybe Sister Rose had come back and they were going to play a prank on me?

Either way, my curiosity got the better of me as I inched my way down the hallway.

I wanted to be sneaky. Properly sneaky. You know, like a really sneaky guy. So casting Light was out of the question. If I did, whoever, or whatever, it was would see me coming long before I could see them.

The polished stone floor was cool against my bare feet as I crept out of my door and down the hall. I moved slowly and quietly, like a whisper before it hits your lips. Eventually I had made it to the arch that lead to the sanctuary.

I peeked around the corner and, scrounging around the pulpit, I saw three short figures with long twitching tails. They were shorter than Dribbles and much, much thinner. Too thin to be dwarves. Kobolds? Goblins who have grown tails? Fake tails? Rat people?

I didn't know.

I kept staring, my head barely poking past the edge of the archway, eyes locked on the three figures. They moved in quick, jittery bursts around the pulpit, claws scritch and scratching against the wood in a sound that made my teeth itch. The church's shadows swallowed most of their details, leaving only silhouettes and motion, which was enough to be unsettling, but not enough to be helpful.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, a glow spilled through one of the stained glass windows.

That's not right.

Surely it wasn't morning yet. I hadn't even gotten any sleep! And this wasn't the soft, forgiving gold of dawn. This light was red. Deep. Angry. The color of something burning with rage. The color of fires burning up through the depths of the ground to bring eternal doom to this world. The color of a tomato.

It swelled. Thickened. Grew hotter and brighter by the heartbeat.

Too fast for sunrise.

The creatures froze mid-scratch. They hissed and then let loose a piercing screech that scraped straight down my spine. A moment later they vanished, skittering into the shadows like spilled ink pulled back into the page.

The red light surged, flooding the sanctuary, climbing the walls, bleeding through the glass until...

CRASH

Chapter 30

FIND YOUR DESTINY

The wall erupted inward, vomiting stone and flame into the church.

The blast was deafening, leaving my ears ringing. Stained glass **exploded**, sending shards screaming through the air, burying themselves in pews and shattering against the stone. I dove behind the wall just in time, feeling the sting of glass splinters rake across my arm.

A harsh chorus of brassy horns blared throughout the church and echoing in the rafters.

Behind me, doors slammed open along the corridor. Footsteps multiplied into a stampede as nuns flooded the sanctuary, habits whipping and boots pounding stone.

“We’re under attack!” Father Stopford’s voice thundered from somewhere around me. “Prepare yourself, young hoop mage! It’s now or never!”

From farther down the hall came Dribbles and Passanova shouting over each other, half panicked, half barking demands, trying to make sense of the chaos.

“Clear the doors and windows!” a nun yelled, before yanking a heavy chain.

With a mechanical groan, thick metal slabs dropped from the ceiling, slamming into the stone floor with a deep, final *CLUNK*. One by one, the stained-glass windows and doorways vanished behind steel.

The sanctuary plunged into darkness.

Then, on the far side of the church, a torch flared to life.

Fire raced along thin strands strung through the rafters, weaving a blazing web overhead. The flames spread fast, flickering and snapping, spilling just enough light across the pews to reveal the battlefield forming around us.

“It’s so pretty,” Bill telepathed. I noticed him standing next to me with his mouth open staring at the strings of flame above.

Dribbles darted ahead, axe already in hand, his pack bouncing against his shoulders as if it, too, was eager for battle. Passanova fell in beside me, gripping a staff, freshly pressed into his hands by a nun who looked far too calm for the action around her.

“Slamdalf. Dribbles. Passanova,” Father Stopford said, his voice cutting through the chaos. “With me.”

At the pulpit, Father Stopford leaned in, his eyes aflame with fear and the anticipation of battle.

“The three of you,” he whispered, “and your pet, are all that stands between peace and subjugation. Go now. Find your destiny. Find the heart.”

He reached around the pulpit. A loud *click* echoed through the church. The floor trembled. Stone scraped against stone as the pulpit slid forward, revealing a staircase descending into darkness.

“Go. Now!” Stopford barked, shoving us toward it.

The stairs spiraled down deeper than I imagined. Ten feet... Twenty... Thirty. With each step, the air cooled, heavy with the damp staleness of earth long undisturbed.

Behind us came the grinding shriek of stone on stone.

I turned just in time to see the entrance seal shut.

Darkness swallowed us whole once more.

Dribbles muttered something dwarven and dug torches from his pack, jamming them into our hands. I murmured a few words of my own, fingers tracing a careful pattern through the air. A soft orb of light bloomed from my palms.

It drifted ahead of us, floating down the curve of the stairwell, its glow licking over the rough stone walls as we descended into whatever waited below.

Above, muffled booms rattled the stone, shedding grit and tiny pebbles loose from the ancient ceiling. The battle over-

head faded step by step, swallowed by the oppressive hush that pooled in the depths ahead.

Our footsteps rang against the rough floor as the spiral finally leveled out, opening into a long, shadow-cloaked hallway.

Beset on either side of the hall stood rows of dead torches, rusted lamps, and dust choked lanterns, relics of a time when this place had been meant to be used. The flames from our own lanterns flickered nervously, casting eerie, shifting shadows against the cobwebs and detritus that littered the floor, making them dance like specters in the gloom.

In the distance, I caught the faint pitter-patter of what might have been tiny feet scurrying away. Or maybe it was just a slow drip of water, shaken loose from the stone by the explosions, playing tricks on my ears.

Beside me, Passanova shuddered. His voice was barely a whisper in the dark.

“This place gives me the creeps.”

His words lingered in the cold, mingling with the musty smell of this forgotten place.

“Me too,” I whispered back as the four of us pressed on.

The hallway widened ahead, revealing an endless procession of bronze statues. They stood in perfect rows along both sides, each mounted atop a stone plinth etched with strange, angular writing I didn't recognize.

The statues flanked both sides of the corridor, leading toward a massive, ancient wooden door at the far end. They loomed like silent guardians, protecting a final mystery from discovery. Each figure was frozen in motion, mid-leap or mid-spin.

“These are basketball players,” Dribbles whispered.

Halfway down, I stopped. One statue caught my eye as it stood apart from the rest. Not in reverence, but in menace. Its pose reached toward me, hooved hands stretching out, as though it meant to rip the breath from my lungs. Its head was gone, severed cleanly at the neck. The nameplate beneath it had been violently pried away, leaving gouges in the stone like claw marks.

The plinth it stood on was the last one completed. Beyond it, the corridor continued, but the bases were bare, row after row of unfinished stone, waiting for names that had never been carved. Or, names yet to come.

“What do you make of this?” I asked, unable to tear my eyes away.

Passanova snorted quietly. “Whoever that was,” he said, gesturing to the decapitated statue, “they weren’t well liked.”

It was massive and ancient, its surface worn glass-smooth by centuries of hands pressing against it. Hands that had hoped, prayed, or begged. The dark wood drank in the torchlight, hoarding every secret it kept sealed away.

Beneath my feet, faint and eroded by time, an inscription clung to the stone floor.

NAISMITH'S REST

“Know the name, Dribbles?” Passanova’s voice came out quietly, the gloom of the unlit tunnel draining the bravery from it.

Dribbles gave a slow shrug. “Nope. Guess we go in.”

The door creaked and cracked as I pushed it open. It groaned in protest under the weight of a long rest now interrupted. But, just for a moment, the sound of a light pitter patter brushed by my ears.

“Did you hear that?” I asked.

Bill telepathed into my head. “Hear what?”

Dribbles shrugged again. “Just the fighting above. We should move before that commotion decides to follow us down here.”

We stepped inside. The vast chamber swallowed us.

It was a shrine to goalposts.

Hoops of every imaginable shape, size, and material. Some rose tall and regal, glass backboards with pristine white lines and blazing orange rims that caught the dim light and throwing it straight into my eyes. Others sat humbler with plastic frames painted white, rims edged in red, their surfaces

scraped and scarred from hundreds of games played. Each one told a story.

One hoop in particular commanded the room, standing dead center like the chamber had been built around it.

This was a masterpiece.

It was encrusted with diamonds and jewels that glittered like stars in the low lantern light. It was fit for a king.

Besides this majestic hoop was a table. Plain. Simple, yet significant. Resting atop it sat a wooden basket and a single sheet of parchment. The basket itself looked simple enough. Three steel hoops stacked from widest to narrowest, with vertical wooden slats forming a V-shape. I couldn't see the base, but I'd bet my last copper it was wood too.

We took a step closer...

... and a blur exploded from the shadows.

A robed figure, swift as a hawk, launched into the air and drove a flying kick square into my chest. The air was knocked out of my lungs as I fell to the ground. Around me, the **whap** of fists meeting faces rang out, and my friends dropped like dominoes.

I squinted up through the haze of pain, struggling to draw breath.

"Sister... Rose?" I croaked.

"Ha!" She yipped. "Still falling for that?"

With one smooth, practiced flourish, Sister Rose seized the folds of her robe and snapped them skyward.

Chapter 31

A R.O.S.E. TRICKS US

Before me stood *three* kobolds, stacked atop one another, balanced precariously on top of one another.

For those unfamiliar with kobolds, imagine a tiny, reptilian dog-like creature that stands on two legs. They have very little hair. Just a few scraggly tufts sprouting here and there, as if someone had tossed a handful of fur at a glue-covered wall and called it a day.

These three were frozen in dramatic karate stances.

Before I could fully grasp this new and deeply confusing reality, they sprang apart, flipping and twirling through the air, landing with the smug precision of cats who knew they stuck the landing.

“We’re **R.O.S.E.!**” shouted one kobold.

I assumed he was the leader. Mostly because he yelled first.

The three of us sat there, baffled.

Was this a joke? Were they serious? They were tiny little guys, barely bigger than a blubblub. Without the element of surprise, we could mop the floor with them. Dribbles barked

out a hearty laugh. Passanova shot me a sideways look that clearly said, *Is this real life?*

Unfazed, the lead kobold stepped forward and swept an arm wide with a theatrical flourish.

“We are Relentless and Opportunistic Stealing Experts.” He paused, then grinned, showing every one of his sharp teeth, and a few of the chipped ones, too. “R.O.S.E.”

The kobolds stood with their chests puffed out, heads held high, and hands on hips in a I just saved the world sort of way.

They looked absurd. They were also very proud of their display and it was clear to me that they had spent quite some time preparing for this exact moment.

And then, in the blink of an eye, their preparation paid off.

With a single, swift, perfectly coordinated movement, they drew several daggers. Before we could even think to react, rope snapped through the air, looping, twisting, and clenching tightly around us, binding us together in mere moments.

They had, indeed, spent quite some time preparing for this exact moment.

“Hey, uh, Dartfoot,” one of them said, jerking a thumb toward Bill, who was calmly staring into the basket on the table like it might stare back. “What do we do with... that one?”

Dartfoot squinted at Bill, wrinkling his nose. “Bill? What even is it?” He leaned closer, then recoiled. “I don’t think it even knows what’s going on.”

Bill blinked.

Dartfoot waved a claw dismissively. “Eh. Leave it.”

The other two kobolds yanked the rope tight, drawing us closer together. I leaned toward Dribbles and whispered, “What just happened?”

Dribbles gave a slow, thoughtful shrug. “Best to go along with it, lad. Who knows where this leads.”

Passanova scoffed. “Of course you’d say that. We should be resisting.” He sighed, shoulders slumping. “But fine. Whatever. You’ve got it handled.”

Dartfoot paced the chamber, scanning the room while the other two kept their daggers trained on us.

One of the them had sharp, pointy teeth and narrow eyes that glistened with malice. He looked like the embodiment of threat and cunning, the sort of creature that enjoyed knowing you were afraid.

The other had his tongue lolling out the side of his mouth and a wild, unkempt mop of hair, like he’d lost a fight with a lightning bolt. He bounced lightly on his feet, humming to himself.

Honestly, he reminded me a lot of Bill.

Dartfoot's gaze snapped to the parchment on the table. He snatched it up and thrust it toward me.

“Read it. **Now.**”

The cold kiss of his dagger pressed against my throat. I swallowed, the blade's chill seeped into my skin.

This was not how I'd pictured my day going.

I looked down at the parchment, being careful not to let my neck inch closer to the blade, and started to read it aloud.

“To the seeker of wealth, the path is clear,

The grandest prize lies ever near.

Adorned in riches, fit for a throne,

Its splendor unmatched, it stands alone.”

Before I could finish, Dartfoot ripped the parchment from my hands.

“Oh, this is easy! Ben! Scuttlefoot! R.O.S.E. mode!”

The kobold with the wild, haystack hair, apparently Ben, scrambled to the base of the jeweled basketball goal. The sneering, sharp-toothed kobold, who could only be Scuttlefoot, sprang onto Ben's shoulders like a predator mounting its prey.

With the grace of a street acrobat and the ambition of a jewel thief, Dartfoot vaulted onto Scuttlefoot's shoulders.

In seconds, they formed a wobbling totem of kobolds, now standing nearly six feet tall and absolutely convinced they were unstoppable.

“We’re gonna be filthy rich!” Dartfoot crowed. “Once we get this back to the city, we’ll live like kings!”

He grabbed the most jewel-encrusted basketball goal and gave it a mighty yank.

No sooner had the goal been wrenched free than the room began to shudder violently. A deep, angry quake shook the room as if the very foundation of the earth was trembling below.

Bound together, Dribbles, Passanova, and I exchanged glances. The fear in their eyes mirrored my own. With my hands tied, I couldn’t cast so much as a spark. I had known I should’ve memorized one emergency incantation. Just one.

“Stand. And move!” Passanova barked.

We scrambled. Passanova lurched upright. I grabbed Dribbles under the arms and dragged him along, his stubby legs flailing like two panicked sausages on a string. We staggered toward the hallway and...

BOOM

The doorway slammed shut just as we reached it. Stone screamed against stone, and a slab the size of a dining table dropped from the ceiling, planting itself in front of the door like it had been lying in wait all along.

WHUMP

A huge net dropped from above, tangling the kobolds in a mess of rope. They squirmed, spat, and unleashed a torrent of high pitched curses that sounded like a kazoo being strangled.

All of us were trapped.

I looked down at the only creature in the room who hadn't panicked, hadn't moved, hadn't even blinked. The only one who could save us.

Bill the Blort.

Chapter 32

THE FIRST RULE OF VILLAINRY

The three kobolds squirmed and thrashed beneath the net, their tiny claws tangling in the mesh as they hissed and snapped at one another. For the moment, panic had them right where we needed them. If they figured out this was just a net and not some ancient, soul-devouring curse bestowed upon them by an evil lich, we'd be toast.

"Bill!" I yelled. "Find something sharp. Anything!"

I was counting on him to pull us out of this mess, just like he had back in the spider queen's lair. But, when I turned to him he was frozen in place, his mouth hanging open in the usual way that he did as if he wasn't aware of the world outside of his blort brain.

"Psst. Hey." Passanova's voice brushed my ear. "Take this."

Something cold and narrow slid against my fingertips and I closed my fingers around it. A dagger!

"Where did you get this?" I whispered.

"Never mind that, just hold still," Passanova replied.

I pinched the dagger between two fingers, trying very hard not to think about arteries, tendons, or my lifelong enjoyment of having functional hands. Passanova shifted behind me, rolling his shoulders, wriggling his arms into position until I felt his hands finally reach the ropes.

“Now,” he murmured, calm as ever, “drop it.”

I let the dagger fall.

I couldn't see his work, but I could feel it. His body shifted against mine, twisting left, right, up, down, and through at least four other directions that I'm fairly certain don't exist in normal geometry. The faint *scritch-scritch-scritch* of rope fibers kissing blade grew louder as tension eased, strand by strand, knot by stubborn knot.

Across the room, the kobolds were far too busy wrestling, bickering, and bonking one another on the head to notice anything beyond their own petty chaos.

Passanova worked the blade with the kind of delicate precision elves were famous for. Fast. Deliberate. Deadly. The rope fibers parted with soft, obedient snaps.

Dribbles, sensing the give in the ropes, flexed his stocky arms, pushing against them until the fibers grew taut, straining them to their limit. Then...

POP!

The rope went slack, surrendering, slithering uselessly to the floor.

We were free.

The kobolds, meanwhile, remained locked in a furious knot of claws and curses, hissing and snapping at one another like a bag of very angry snakes. We stood up, brushed ourselves off, and exchanged a look. Collectively, we were unbothered by the ongoing implosion of fists happening a few feet away.

I felt a gentle tug at my robe and looked down. Bill was holding out a plump, shimmering gemstone, cupped in his hands as though offering a holy relic.

“This should do the trick,” his voice echoed in my head.

“I... don’t think that’s quite the cutting tool we needed,” I said. “Why don’t you keep it?”

“Sounds good to me!” Bill replied cheerfully.

Before I could blink, he popped the gemstone into his mouth and swallowed it whole.

Somehow, I wasn’t even surprised. I just gave him a slow nod with my lips pursed in acceptance.

Good job, buddy, I thought. You earned that one.

Passanova scoffed, brushing the last of the rope fibers from his coat. “Saved you that time. Now we’re even.”

“Ayy, you did good, lad. Real good thinking,” Dribbles said, clapping Passanova on the back hard enough to make him stumble forward a step. He was already digging through his

pack, pulling out his trusty axe and a thick coil of rope. “Now let’s tie these three buggers up proper-like.”

With a flourish, he tossed the rope to me. Well, more of a lob, really.

Then, Dribbles bellowed at the squabbling kobolds. The sound boomed through the chamber loud enough to rattle dust from the ceiling and, quite possibly, their tiny teeth.

They froze instantly, as if a stern teacher had just entered their chaotic classroom and they were caught throwing chairs at one another.

“What the...” Dartfoot gasped. “How did you three get out? We’ve got ten years of tutelage underneath the master thief himself, Gimgin!”

Passanova offered them a coy, infuriatingly confident grin.

“You forgot the first rule of villainry,” he said lightly. “When tying someone up, always check for hidden blades.”

He chuckled and, with theatrical flair, produced a dagger from his sleeve, spinning it once around his fingers before catching it by the hilt.

“Ohhh, yeah,” Dribbles laughed, throwing his head back. “The lad knows a thing or two about villainry!”

His laughter thundered around the chamber, deep and rolling, like a drumbeat heralding imminent doom.

Passanova's smug grin vanished instantly, snuffed out like a candle in a cold draft. He shot Dribbles a glare sharp enough to shave the beard off his face.

"Alright, that's enough of that, you two," I said, stepping between them before things escalated further. "We need to tie these three up."

I nodded toward the kobolds.

"Passanova, can you check them for any hidden daggers, blades, and other tools before we tie them up while Dribbles looks intimidating with his axe?"

Dribbles answered with a single nod and a broad, toothy grin before hoisting his axe onto his shoulder. Passanova, to his credit, got to work without further bickering, patting down each kobold with the brisk, professional efficiency of someone who'd been on both sides of a shakedown before.

While they handled that, I returned to the parchment.

It still lay where Dartfoot had dropped it, edges beginning to curl beneath the lantern's heat. We'd been lucky. R.O.S .E., or, whatever they called themselves, had been too busy congratulating themselves to notice the rest of the writing.

I smoothed the page under my fingers, cleared my throat, and began to read aloud once more...

"To the seeker of wealth, the path is clear,

The grandest prize lies ever near.

Adorned in riches, fit for a throne,
Its splendor unmatched, it stands alone.
Yet Naismith's gift, the game's true start,
Was born of simplicity, not of art.
The first to hold the ball's descent,
A humble vessel, its purpose bent.
Choose wisely, for greed's sharp sting,
Will seal your fate, and end your fling.”

I traced the final line with my finger, my thoughts tangling
in knots almost as tight as the ones Dribbles was tying.
What did it all mean?

Chapter 33

SOLVING THE RIDDLE

“It’s a riddle,” Dribbles said, rubbing his chin in slow, thoughtful circles. “Say it again. One line at a time.”

I cleared my throat and began to recite it slowly.

“To the seeker of wealth, the path is clear. The grandest prize lies ever near.”

I paused. “That part’s straightforward enough. The prize is in this room.”

Passanova gave a short nod, already scanning the chamber, his eyes flicking from hoop to hoop. Behind him, the bound kobolds hissed like a nest of angry teakettles.

“Go on,” he said.

I continued.

“Adorned in riches, fit for a throne. Its splendor unmatched, it stands alone.” I frowned. “Did they just pick the wrong goal?”

Our gazes followed the same path, landing on the bejeweled monstrosity R.O.S.E. had tried to snatch. Gold filigree

curled along its frame. Gems glittered from every surface. The backboard shone like a crown jewel under a spotlight.

It was stunning. Excessive. Impossible to miss. And wrong.

Then it hit me. “It didn’t stand alone.”

They both turned to me.

“Look at it,” I said, pointing. “It’s grouped with the others. The riddle says stands alone. We should be looking for a goal that’s actually by itself.”

The three of us swept our eyes across the chamber, measuring the distances between each hoop. Was it the one furthest from the others? The highest? The most hidden?

I thought about it for a moment and that’s when I noticed Bill.

He stood perfectly still beneath the statue of the man with outstretched arms while bathed in the glow of the torchlight. For the first time since I’d met him, there was no twitching, no absentminded bobbing, no glassy-eyed stare into the middle distance.

Just a wide, tranquil smile.

He looked serene. Reverent, even. As though he alone understood what he was looking at.

Our search dragged on. Each hopeful glance ended the same way: disappointment. Every goal appeared evenly spaced, none more isolated than the rest. Frustration began to creep

into the air, thickened by the kobolds' jeers as they twisted against their bindings.

"Too dumb to figure it out!" one cackled.

"Shoulda let us steal it!" another hissed.

"Why don't you keep reading?" Dribbles said, pointedly ignoring them.

I nodded and continued reading the next lines aloud.

"Yet Naismith's gift, the game's true start, was born of simplicity, not of art."

I frowned. "Who is Naismith? This is his tomb, right?"

Dribbles' eyes lit up. "You sure you said that right, lad?" he asked eagerly. "Maybe it's a smith. A *dwarven* smith! Think of it! Fine, legendary dwarven steel forged in the fires of Gul-Drank-La'Tor!"

Passanova stepped forward and plucked the parchment from my hands, scanning it with a furrowed brow.

"No," he said flatly. "He read it right. Naismith."

He glanced at me sidelong. "Who is Naismith, Gerald? Some sort of god of yours?"

The skepticism in his voice made it clear he didn't expect an answer worth hearing.

“I’ve never heard of him,” I admitted. “Maybe Stopford was lying when they said they didn’t worship anyone. Maybe this is who they worship.”

“I know who it is.”

Bill’s voice bloomed in my head like a sudden bell chime, clear as day. I turned to find him pointing a stubby finger toward the looming statue above.

“It’s him.”

I stepped closer, my bare feet cold against the stone floor, and studied the figure in the torchlight. Once bronze, it was now half-swallowed by pale green verdigris. Dust packed the folds of its coat. Webs stretched from its outstretched arms to the wall beside it.

Forgotten and neglected yet still standing proud.

Did Bill have some secret knowledge of this world he’d never mentioned? Had his past travels brought him here before? A thousand thoughts chased one another through my head as I tried to make sense of it all.

“How do you know?” I asked.

“It says so right here.”

He gestured toward a tarnished plaque at the statue’s base. I crouched, brushed away what looked like a century’s worth of grime, and slowly revealed the engraved letters beneath:

JAMES NAISMITH — CREATOR OF BASKETBALL

“Well, I’ll be...” Dribbles murmured, bowing his head just slightly, as though paying respect to a legendary warrior.

“So,” I said, straightening up. “His gift. Basketball. Is there... an actual basketball in this room?”

My eyes swept the chamber. Hoops, goals, gilded monstrosities, yes. A ball? No. Not one.

Then I caught Bill out of the corner of my eye.

“Wait, what if I turn Bill into a basketball?”

“Sure,” Passanova replied, folding his arms. “And then what?”

He had a point. Turning your best blort into sports equipment is only a plan if you know the next step.

“Keep reading,” Passanova said at last.

I cleared my throat and pressed on.

“The first to hold the ball’s descent, a humble vessel, its purpose bent. Choose wisely, for greed’s sharp sting, will seal your fate, and end your fling.”

The moment the final line left my mouth, the kobolds erupted into shrill, overlapping squabbles. The noise was so piercing I half-expected it to wake the dead. I couldn’t help but chuckle.

If only they’d been a little more patient.

“The first to hold the ball’s descent...” I said slowly. “Nai-smith? Do we put a basketball in his hands?”

My gaze flicked from Bill to the empty space between the statue’s outstretched palms.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “That’s not right. A basketball’s too small. His arms are too spread apart.”

“What vessel is it talking about?” Passanova muttered, pacing like Dribbles at halftime. His brows were drawn tight, as though he were trying to wring a thought out of his own skull. “What purpose?”

We stood there, grinding our brain-muscles until smoke just about rose from our ears. The kobolds’ squabbling turned into an incoherent chorus, until suddenly, out of the arguing, a single stammering word broke free.

“B-b-basket!”

“Quiet, you nincompoop!” Dartfoot snapped, cracking Ben across the forehead with a sharp headbutt.

My eyes snapped between the basket and the statue.

Basket.

Statue.

Basket.

Statue.

“Is... is that it?” I murmured. “It looks about the right size.”

I leaned closer, eyeing the basket, then the statue’s waiting hands.

“Maybe,” I said softly, “it fits.”

“Worth a try,” Passanova said, already edging backward, “but maybe we should be on the other side of the room when you do.”

“Ayy, smart,” Dribbles agreed, retreating as well. “Very smart.”

We split to the far corners, leaving the trussed-up kobolds squirming in the middle like offerings no one wanted to claim. Having magic, the task fell to me. I raised my hand, letting the familiar thrum of telekinesis coil through my fingers.

That’s when the *déjà vu* hit as if this moment had already happened once before, lived and forgotten in some other life.

I wiggled my fingers, focusing my will. The basket lifted from the floor and drifted toward the statue.

As it neared Naismith’s outstretched hands, it suddenly snapped into place with a precision that I knew I hadn’t commanded.

“I didn’t do that!” I shouted, the words echoing off the stone as I braced for impact, explosion, divine retribution, or an otherwise untimely demise.

The basket flared to life.

Pale white light spilled outward, washing over the walls and floor like liquid moonlight. A low hum rose beneath it, vibrating through my bones until even the air itself seemed to throb.

As the glow intensified, the wall behind the statue shuddered.

Dust sifted down in lazy spirals. Stone groaned. Then the slab rumbled aside, revealing a narrow passage hidden beyond.

When the wall finished moving, the light faded. The hum died. The basket went dark.

The chamber returned to its original, dusky stillness as if nothing had happened at all.

We stared at one another, wide-eyed, the silence thick enough to choke on.

“Well... that just happened,” I said, profoundly relieved that I hadn’t been blasted to smithereens by a laser beam or incinerated by some mystical death ray summoned from the many screaming mouths of Labobu, the foul demon said to roam the world beneath the ground. Woe be upon those who trespass in his territory, for those scorched by his curses rarely live long enough to complain about it.

Anyway.

I'm very glad it wasn't that.

“Ayy, lad, I'll drink to that,” Dribbles said, exhaling as his shoulders finally let go of the stress of the situation. His gaze drifted toward the center of the room. “So... what d'ya reckon we do with these three?”

The kobolds had stopped their bickering. Their yellow eyes bulged and throats warbled in fearful unison. They looked like fish plucked from water, twitchy and gasping, waiting to see what cruel fate had reeled them in and left them to dry.

Chapter 34

A DIGGY HOLE

“Hey! Put me down this instant!” Dartfoot squawked, thrashing his stubby legs. “I’ll have you know I graduated top of my class at the Kobold Academy of Sneakery and Mischief! I’ve masterminded countless secret raids, foiled heroes twice your size, and...”

He went on like that for awhile, ranting away. Threats. Boasts. Promises of vengeance. Declarations that this “wasn’t the last we’d see of R.O.S.E.!”

His voice grew shriller with every word, though it was hard to take any of it seriously while he spun slowly in the air, kicking and flailing like an enraged, scaly windmill.

Unfortunately for them, we’d left all three kobolds dangling from the very goalpost they’d tried to steal.

We turned our backs on the spectacle and shuffled toward the newly revealed passage.

Inside, there was nothingness. The only break the darkness was a molten orange glow hovering somewhere deep within, pulsing faintly like a distant heartbeat.

“Think that’s it?” I whispered, pointing toward the light.

“Ayy,” Dribbles murmured, axe held ready. “Looks like it. Or maybe it’s a trap. Best stay sharp, lads.” His voice echoed into the shadowed void ahead.

The darkness pressed in, gnawing at the edges of my vision. I wiggled my fingers and released a spell. A soft globe of light bloomed in my palm and drifted forward like a cautious lantern. Its glow carved narrow tunnels through the dark, revealing only dust and stone, and whatever else was in the other side of the room.

“I’m going in,” Passanova whispered, taking a careful step forward into the room.

“STOP.”

The word cracked through the chamber like thunder, rattling the air itself. We froze where we stood.

“WHAT DO YOU SEEK?”

My throat tightened, but I forced myself to speak anyway, my voice barely more than a breath.

“There’s... there’s a battle above,” I stammered. “We were hurried into this passage... told to seize our destiny. Told to seek the Heart... by Father Stopford.”

The room did not respond and sat silent except for the pulsing from the mysterious object floating above.

After a few moments passed, Dribbles broke the silence.

“So...” he said carefully, “who are we talking to?”

No answer came.

Dribbles cleared his throat. “I said, who are we talking to?”

Still, there was no reply.

“The old silent treatment, eh?” Dribbles huffed, planting his hands on his hips. “Well, I’ll show you!”

Before anyone could stop him, he marched forward. His silhouette stretched long across the floor as the object pulsed brighter with each step. He reached out to grab the object when, suddenly, a blinding white light emitted from the object. A light so bright that I had to avert my eyes. A sudden gust of wind blew all around and I felt the ground beneath me change and shift.

Had it just exploded?

When the light subsided and I dared to open my eyes, I found myself in a small, stone room. Its walls were rough-hewn and damp, glistening faintly in the dim lantern light. Crude wooden shelves and squat stone stools lined the edges, but all attention drew to the center where a vast red-and-gold carpet sprawled across the floor, bold as a banner.

“My diggy hole!” Dribbles gasped, voice cracking with pure, unguarded joy. “It’s been years! But... why are we...”

His words faltered as a child burst around the corner.

A boy, small and sturdy, clad in armor three sizes too large. It clanked and sagged under its own weight, but he wore it proudly, grinning ear to ear. In his hands, he clutched Dribbles' old shield like it was the greatest treasure in the world.

"Grundar..." Dribbles whispered, the name trembling out of him. "My boy..."

He staggered forward with his arms outstretched, calloused fingers aching to close around his son. But when he reached him, the air rippled. Shimmered. And his hand slipped clean through.

The boy was an echo. A memory.

A ghost.

Dribbles crumpled to his knees. One tear traced a familiar path down his scarred cheek before the dam broke. His head fell to the ground, burying his face in his hands, his tears pattered against the stone beneath him.

A younger Dribbles, full of vigor, barreled around the corner and scooped the child into his arms.

"Ayy, lad, I need that shield for my journey!" he laughed, swinging Grundar into the air.

The boy squealed with delight, their laughter ringing together, filling the chamber with warmth no magic could conjure.

From deeper in the hole, a sweet, gentle voice called out from another room.

“Shortsy! Grundar! Come get some dinner!”

“My wife... Pebble,” Dribbles murmured. His voice caught in his throat as he rose unsteadily and drifted toward the adjoining room.

I trailed behind him into a spacious dining room where an array of food adorned the table. The walls were the same rough-hewn stone as the rest of the home, softened by age and use. A massive wooden table dominated the center, scarred from years of use but polished to a warm glow under the flickering light of several lanterns that hung from the ceiling.

In the corners, various mining tools and artifacts were displayed as proud symbols of Dribbles’ life and hard work. Shelves lined with pottery and small personal items added to the lived in ambiance.

“Our final meal...” Dribbles whispered.

He reached for Pebble.

His hand passed through her as if through mist.

She didn’t notice. She smiled as she set food on the table.

The three dwarves, his younger self, Pebble, and Grundar, took their seats. Their voices rose together in laughter and easy conversation, the kind of simple joy that fills a home

and makes it whole. Food passed from hand to hand, laughs mingled together, and Dribbles sat on his knees watching the memory in silence.

“Daddy! I’ve got something for you!” Grundar exclaimed.

He dug into his pocket with both hands, cheeks puffed in excitement, and pulled free a folded scrap of paper. With both hands he offered it to the younger Dribbles.

“What’s this?” asked Shortsy, unfolding the paper to reveal a quickly drawn picture of two wizards engaged in a magical duel over an orange object.

“Just something I made for you!” Grundar said, grinning from ear to ear.

Shortsy’s eyes softened. “It’s wonderful. What gave you the idea?”

“I was thinking about you,” Grundar said, puffing out his chest. “And the great journey you’re going on. Keep it safe!”

“Of course, lad. Of course.” Shortsy bent down and pressed a kiss to his son’s head.

The moment fractured.

Pieces of the world shattered like glass as the familiar white light flooded my vision. The blinding white light consumed everything, tearing away the warmth of the hearth. I shielded my eyes, blinking against the brilliance until it burned itself out.

When my sight returned, the world had changed.

Before us lay a battlefield that stretched into forever. The ground was torn and scarred, littered with broken weapons and bodies swallowed by shadow. Small fires licked at the wreckage, their glow painting the night in the colors of devastation. Arrows jutted from the earth like a forest of blackened thorns, each one a marker of death.

The air stank of smoke, ash, and blood.

Atop a distant hill, a wizard stood holding open a blue-hued portal with an outstretched arm. The gateway churned with electric magic, spitting sizzling sparks into the air before being sucked back into its swirling depths.

“Come, Shortsy!” the wizard shouted over the chaos. “This world is lost. Save yourself while you still can! I can’t hold it open much longer!”

“But I can’t leave them!” Shortsy’s voice trembled, ragged with desperation. “What if they survived? I have to find them!”

The wizard’s hands flashed through a series of desperate sigils and gestures. With a surge of power, Shortsy was wrenched off his feet, his body rising into the air.

“No! No!” he screamed, thrashing as invisible forces hauled him upwards. His fists struck at the empty air and boots kicked uselessly at nothing. “I must find them! I **must!**”

It didn’t matter.

Inch by inch, he was dragged toward the portal's hungry blue glow. With one final, broken cry, his form slipped into the vortex and vanished.

The wizard staggered, his face carved hollow with sorrow. Then, summoning the last of his strength, he dove in after him. The portal convulsed, and, with a thunderclap, it vanished.

Silence followed.

The battlefield lay still once more, broken only by the hiss of dying fires and the whisper of wind creeping over the dead that carried secrets no living soul was meant to hear.

Dribbles let out a howl that split the smoke choked night. He fell to his knees and hammered the arid ground with his fists.

Again.

And again.

And then, as his grief shook the world, my vision drowned once more in that merciless white light as the world fractured and fell away.

Chapter 35

WHAT'S IN THE BAG?

Above all else, tempting fate is never wise for an adventurer.

The instant Dribbles touched the object, time seemed to slow.

Unbeknownst to us, while still caught in the aftershocks of his memory, a violent *zap* of energy erupted from within the orb. Dribbles was hurled across the chamber like a discarded doll, his body slamming into the stone wall with a sickening **thud** before crumpling to the floor.

“YOU ARE NOT WORTHY.”

The voice thundered through the chamber, reverberating through stone and bone alike.

“ONLY THOSE DEEMED WORTHY MAY POSSESS MY POWERS.”

“Dribbles!”

My voice cracked as I sprinted toward him, boots skidding on stone. I dropped to my knees at his side, heart hammering so hard it felt like it might tear free of my chest.

A thousand memories swam across me at once. Lessons barked over campfires, laughter echoing through dark halls, battles survived shoulder to shoulder...

Not now... Not him.

“No... no... no...”

I grabbed his shoulder, desperate to shake him awake. A shock jolted through my arm, throwing my hand back like I'd touched living lightning. Sparks crackled faintly across his body.

“Dribbles! Please!” I pleaded. “Say something!”

The room answered with silence. Only the faint, angry crackle of lingering energy danced across his body.

I held my breath between shallow gasps as I held back the tears that welled up in my throat. I watched his chest, praying for it to move.

Move.

Please... move.

I waited.

And waited.

And waited...

A tear dripped from my face, wetting the stone below. And then another. And another.

“Dribbles...” a whimper escaped my lips. “Please...”

I buried my head in my hands like he had moments before, back in the dream. Back in his diggy hole as he watched the family he once had fade away.

Now, I was alone. Just like he was.

My tears turned to sobs as I grabbed ahold of him the best that I could, wrapping my arms around his lifeless body. I sat there crying, wondering what to do next.

A hand patted my back.

“Ayy, lad...” Dribbles wheezed, coughing through the words. “I... I think I’m alright.”

I shot up to see Dribbles alive and well. His chest hitched as air tore into his lungs. His eyes fluttered, glassy and unfocused, before finally locking onto me.

“I’m gonna be all... AHH!”

His face twisted in agony mid-sentence, his hand shooting down to his leg.

“Blast it all!” he snarled. “It’s broken.”

He prodded the limb with trembling fingers, each touch drawing a hiss between his teeth until at last he pulled away with a sharp intake of breath. Sweat slicked his brow.

“Whatever you do,” he growled through clenched teeth, “don’t touch that cursed thing, lad.”

I wasn't planning on it.

Not after what I'd just seen.

But we'd come all this way for this? For Dribbles to be laid out on cold stone with a shattered leg? For us to be trapped deep underground with no clear way out? Why had Father Stopford sent us here? Why urge us to seek "the heart," if all it offered was a broken leg?

All I wanted to do was play basketball.

Why me?

I'm not some chosen hero destined for greatness. I'm not brave. I'm not ready for any of this. I'm just a kid who wants to play ball. Maybe I'll be great someday, maybe the best, but...

All I want to do is go home back to Dribbleton.

None of this is my burden to carry.

"Well, what do we do now?" I asked. "Can you stand up?"

"I can try, lad, but I'll be dead weight. Little use to you with this leg," Dribbles' voice was soaked in defeat. "But... here, let me check my bag. Maybe I've got..."

His hands patted the stone around him in a frenzy.

"Wait. Where's my bag?" His voice sharpened with panic as his eyes darted about.

His gaze snapped onto something near the object in the center of the room.

“What are you doing?” Dribbles roared, his voice thundering with more strength than his shattered body should’ve had. “No, Passanova!”

I spun around, my heart slamming into my ribs.

Passanova stood there, Dribbles’ bag clutched open in his hands, his eyes burning with fevered resolve. Without hesitation, he bolted straight for the orb.

“Passanova, stop!” I shouted.

But it was too late.

With a fluid, almost practiced motion, he swept the bag around the glowing object and yanked it shut. The orb vanished inside, swallowed whole by the darkness within.

The chamber convulsed.

Dust rained from the ceiling as the ground bucked beneath us. A shaft of brilliant light tore down from above, spearing through the gloom like divine judgment and pinning itself squarely on Passanova.

As if by an ancient command, the carved stone shuddered and began to twist and turn, spiraling upwards into the sky. Stone stacked upon stone, slab stacked upon by slab, reshaping itself into a staircase.

An exit.

Passanova's hand tightened on Dribbles' backpack.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I can't wait any longer. With this artifact, I'll have the power to destroy Gorzod. I know I can." He swallowed. "Please... forgive me."

He tore up the staircase, boots pounding against stone, clutching the pack like it was the only thing keeping him alive.

What was I to do? I couldn't leave Dribbles alone broken on the floor. But... what was Passanova going to do with it? What if it was The Heart of the Game?

Or, worse, what if it was a weapon?

Bill's voice cut through my panic. "Go. I will stay with Dribbles".

"I can't leave him!" I shouted, my voice splintering as it echoed off the chamber walls.

"Ayy lad, go," Dribbles said. Pain had roughened his voice. "I'll drag myself up when I can. Remember what Father Stopford said. Go after Passanova. This is your road now. Your destiny."

He clasped my hand and gave it a reassuring pat. A small smile broke through the pain on his face... warm, steady, almost fatherly.

For a moment, I believed him.

I shut my eyes, exhaled, and nodded.

He was right. This was my destiny...

...and that destiny had just been stolen by a double-crossing elf.

Chapter 36

THAT DOUBLE CROSSING ELF

I raced up the spiraling stairs as a thousand blood-boiling thoughts crashed around in my head. How could he just leave us like that? How could he not care about Dribbles after everything that we'd been through? After Dribbles had saved his life?

Had he been using us the entire time? Smiling. Joking. Playing the fool while steering us straight toward his own ends?

My fists clenched so tight my nails dug into my palms as I thought about the backpack he had stolen from Dribbles. But, it wasn't just a bag to Dribbles... it held all of his memories of his home, his family, and his life.

No.

I wasn't going to let Passanova take that away from him.

Not now.

Not ever.

As I neared the top of the stairs, the distant clang of steel and shouts of battle echoed through the air. The church was still

under siege. When I finally cleared the last step, I witnessed the chaos unfolding.

War.

Fires licked at the rubble, belching smoke that carried the acrid tang of ash and charred timber. Dawn was just beginning to break, pale light filtering weakly through the canopy, painting the battlefield in washed-out grays and sickly gold.

There was no doubt where Passanova was headed. Back through the trees. Back through the jungle. Back towards Pasadena. Back to his sister to share what he had stolen. Back to his parents to show them that his quest was over so they could strike a bargain with Gorzod once more.

Or, maybe this was a ruse.

Maybe Passanova was working for Gorzod all along. Maybe he didn't care about his parents.

It didn't matter.

I didn't care about the artifact or the power it would give me. He could keep it.

I wanted the bag.

That was my destiny.

Dribbles was the only person who had ever treated me like a son. The only one who had chosen me. Who had bled for me. Fought for me. Sacrificed for me.

So, I did the only thing I knew how to do.

I ran.

My feet tore across the forest floor, pounding in time with the distant war drums echoing behind me. I kept to the shadows, hugging the treeline as I went. Every branch struck out like a spear waiting to stab me.

The river's roar swelled ahead, but I steered wide of the banks, slipping through the cover of the trees.

The basketbough island rose ahead, its twisted branches clawing upward like fingers reaching up in defiance of the earth below. I'd slept there days ago, when the world had felt simpler and safer.

What once gave comfort looked different in the morning light. The memory was smothered by the viper tight coil of fear and anger in my chest.

As I moved through the trees, I heard shouting up ahead. I scanned through the leaves and branches to see if I could make out what it was. Across the river, I spotted a pair of torches bobbing along, their flicker carving jagged paths through the pale dawn.

I pressed myself tight against the trunk of a tree, bark biting into my back. I watched as more shapes emerged from the gloom.

Orcs.

“Keep movin’, ya filthy elf!” an orc barked.

A meaty thud followed; the unmistakable sound of a body hitting the dirt.

Elf? That must be Passanova. I strained my eyes and leaned forward a bit through the branches.

A piercing shriek ripped through the morning followed by a violent wave of crimson energy that slammed into the orcs like a tidal wave. Bodies went flying in a tangle of curses and steel.

The prisoner broke free, running into the underbrush with a bag clutched tight against his chest.

For just a moment, he was gone. But then, the flash of a chain snapped out, coiling around his neck and yanking him to a brutal and immediate halt.

“That’s definitely Passanova,” I whispered to myself.

“Yep. Sure is,” Bill’s voice echoed in my head.

I flinched and spun.

There was Bill, crouched low for a blort, with a gleeful wide smile plastered across his face.

“What about Dribbles?” I hissed, barely keeping my voice down. “You said you’d help him!”

Bill’s grin didn’t falter.

He tilted his head slowly like a dog hearing a strange noise. His eyes remained glassy and expressionless. For a second, I couldn't tell if he hadn't heard me or if he just didn't care.

“He made a deal with the kobolds,” Bill announced brightly, thumbing his own chest, stretching out a grin wide enough to hurt. “He promised them every ounce of treasure they could carry if they escorted him straight to the king. I even got The Grand Duke Ben Bennington to sign this contract.”

Before I even registered what he just said, Bill began reaching into his mouth.

Deeper and deeper his arm went, way past the point that anatomy, physics, and good sense allowed, past the point where his arm should have poked out his backside. With a sudden pop, Bill yanked his arm free. In his hand was a sopping wet scroll. Thick strings of saliva clung to it as he gave a triumphant flick of his wrist.

With a flourish he unfurled it and presented it to me, revealing these hastily scrawled words:

I, Grand Duke Ben Bennington, heir to the Kobold Kingdom, son of Dan Dannington, do solemnly swear - under penalty of a fate worse than death - to deliver his excellency, Dribbles the Dwarf, to the King of Ballendore safely and timely.

— *Signed, Ben Bennington.*

I blinked at the scroll.

Then at Bill.

My eyebrows climbed so high they were about ready to leave my face.

“And you trusted them?”

Bill nodded enthusiastically.

“Why, yes! Ben’s my nephew.”

Chapter 37

BACK AT THE CHURCH...

“What do you mean he’s your nephew?” I asked, keeping my voice as quiet as possible. “You’re a blort. Ben’s a kobold. You’re not even from this world. How would you even know him? And how would that work?”

Bill puffed out his chest. “Well,” he intoned grandly, his voice echoing inside my head as if it came from a high throne, “The story goes a little something like this. My uncle, “Albanor Questilioxiful Pentameter, Bringer of the...”

I slashed the air, cutting him off. “No. Absolutely not. We do not have time for this. Bill. Listen. Passanova has what I’m pretty sure is the Heart of the Game. The thing Father Stopford told us to find. The thing people died buying us time for. And now he’s got Dribbles’ bag too. Everything Dribbles has left. His home, his family, all of it is in that pack.”

I leaned closer. “So this is the part where we stop messing around. We put on our game face. And we figure this out.”

Bill’s grin twitched.

Just for a heartbeat, it faltered, like a mask slipping. He gave a stiff nod, his body snapping upright like a soldier.

“Game face,” he said quietly. Then, with a crisp nod, “Got it.”

I took a deep breath as my mind raced.

A wizard to outsmart.

An artifact to recover.

A kingdom to keep from destruction.

And I was stuck with Bill as my co-pilot while all I know how to do is play basketball... and not even that well.

“We’re going to follow them and see where they go,” I said, pointing in the orcs direction. “But with the sun coming up, we’re going to have to be careful. Really careful. Especially because of that dinosaur you ran into last time. Remember?”

I held up my hands in front of my mouth, opening and closing them like chomping jaws, mimicking the Layupadon with its big, pointy teeth.

Bill’s pupils widened to the size of his eyeballs, then, nodded vigorously as the memories of the razor-sharp toothed Layupadon entered his head, or at least I think. He squatted down low. Real low for a blort. “Alright. Follow me,” he telepathed.

I sighed and crouched low as well. The sun was climbing fast now, its light stretching long fingers through the forest,

dragging the shadows thinner by the minute. Bill and I moved carefully through the shadows following the orcs from a distance as they trudged back to the church.

We stuck to the treeline, slipping from trunk to trunk, freezing whenever patrols prowled along our side of the river. The water wound lazily through the land like a basking serpent offering us no cover if things went wrong.

When we reached the church, my heart sunk. The once orderly monastery grounds had been twisted into a chaotic encampment. Ramshackle tents of leather and bone sprawled in crooked rows like a patchwork of scars across the land. The air was thick with acrid smoke, rising in greasy columns from holes ripped through the monastery's stone walls, as though something unseen had clawed the fire upward.

The grand doors lay in splinters, reduced to a jagged wound that gaped into the cloister's heart. Inside, the bones of the monastery still stood, but rubble and ash choked the floor. Small fires crept along the walls, their flickering flames crawling across the walls in long shifting shadows. The air was thick with smoke and rot. The monastery looked hollow. Desecrated. Its soul torn out and replaced with a rotten worm.

"This is not good," I muttered, pulling my shirt up over my nose. My throat burned with every breath. "Not good at all."

Bill nodded.

His grin was gone. No glassy eyed cheer or idle bobbing. His jaw was clenched tight, and his eyes moved with a sharp, calculating focus I'd never seen before, sweeping the wreckage like a veteran soldier reading a battlefield.

"There," Bill said suddenly, his voice barely above a whisper in my head.

He pointed toward the center of the encampment.

A massive stone circle loomed above the orcs' camp, its slabs lashed together with ropes as thick as a man's arm. Strange symbols had been carved deep into the stone. Writhing, twisting runes that seemed to crawl when you looked at them too long. They pulsed faintly through the smoke, like something breathing just beneath the surface.

"Watch closely," Bill added.

My stomach tightened as a terrifying understanding settled in. Whatever the orcs were planning, it wasn't good.

The air around the stone circle thrummed like a drum. I had the sickening certainty that we were about to witness something we wouldn't be able to forget and might not survive seeing.

The orcs tore the ropes free, and the stone circle shuddered, then stood on its own. A massive orc in heavy armor stepped forward, his bulk blotting out the morning light. His shadow stretched long over the gathered crowd, swallowing it whole.

Passanova was shoved roughly to the front, forced to stand beside the armored giant. His face was carefully blank, but his shoulders were locked tight, every line of his body braced for something he couldn't escape.

More orcs surged in. That's when I saw the cages.

The nuns were alive. Bruised, filthy, shaken, but alive, huddled together locked together in prisons. Relief flooded over me and then drained just as fast. My eyes scoured the camp, searching desperately for another familiar shape.

But there was nothing. No trace of Dribbles or the Kobolds to be found. Whether that was lucky or not, I couldn't decide. Either way, it meant Bill and I were on our own. I hope they made it out, if they did. Maybe they're still down there.

Then, a horn sounded.

A deep, bone-shaking blast rolled through the camp like thunder, rattling my teeth and vibrating in my chest. Every orc dropped to one knee and bowed their heads. The silence afterward was suffocating, charged with an electric tension that left everybody waiting.

"What's happening?" I whispered, my throat so dry from the smoke the words barely escaped.

"He's here," Bill replied, his tone uncharacteristically grave.

"Who is?" I asked quickly. "Dribbles?"

Bill didn't look at me. His eyes stayed fixed on the far edge of the camp, where the shadows deepened and the air itself seemed to bend. His grin was completely gone, stripped away and replaced with something I'd never seen in his eyes before.

Fear.

Chapter 38

HE'S HERE

I could barely make out Passanova's voice cutting through the raucous noise, pleading in the distance. "Please, Rentok! You don't have to do this!"

His backhand came fast and brutal, the crack of it snapping through the air. Passanova was sent skidding across the dirt, collapsing in a heap.

"Silence, traitor!" Rentok's snarl rolled through the camp like thunder.

He plunged a gauntleted hand into the pouch at his waist and withdrew a fistful of red sand. The grains glimmered like crushed rubies as he cast them into the stone circle.

The earth shuddered as sparks hissed up in a violent spray. Blue and red lightning ripped through the air, laced with flames that clawed toward the sky, twisting and snapping with untamed fury. Heat washed over me even from the treeline, an unseen pressure pushing against my skin as the fire climbed higher and higher.

The camp fell still as the fire roared, alive and writhing, until the circle became a blazing wound in the earth.

A horn bellowed deep and long, shaking the morning light.

Then a figure stepped through.

I knew that silhouette instantly. It was the same wizard who had crushed Bill in the memory he showed me and whose face had flickered in the flames of Blortsylvania. Even at this distance, something inside me recoiled, as though some buried part of me already remembered his presence.

It was Gorzod.

To survive this, we'd need more than courage. We'd need to be smart. We'd need to be cunning.

We'd need luck.

"You have failed me, Passanova."

Gorzod bleated mockingly, almost jubilant, as tendrils of lightning erupted from his fingertips. They struck Passanova again and again, each impact snapping his body into violent convulsions. His screams ripped through the night as the crackling energy burned through cloth and skin alike.

"But your failure," the wizard sneered, laughter threading through the fire and thunder, "has brought me great fortune. **Great** fortune indeed."

Gorzod clapped his hooves sharply.

From the portal staggered Passandra, dragged forward in chains, shackled and gagged. She stumbled, barely able to stay upright. Behind her, a cage scraped across the stone,

crammed with blorts pressed tight together, their wide eyes reflecting the firelight in terrified silence.

“You seem to have forgotten something, young one,” the wizard crooned. “Your family signed in blood. You are bound by it.”

He tilted his head, studying Passanova with cruel interest.

“As is your sister. Isn’t that right?”

Passandra collapsed beside her brother, knees striking the dirt. Tears streamed down her face. Her gaze locked on Passanova. Words she couldn’t speak trembled behind her eyes.

I’m sorry. I tried. I couldn’t stop him.

“And you, insolent worm,” the wizard sneered, his tone sharpening like a blade, “will learn what true pain is. Just as your mother and father did.”

Gorzod clapped again and out from the blazing portal drifted a massive crystal; faceted, violet, and throbbing with a malignant heartbeat. Its surface crawled with shadows, its glow bleeding corruption into the air.

The wizard raised his hand. Passanova’s body yanked as if being pulled by invisible hooks. His limbs stretched and twisted grotesquely, bones cracking under the strain. His scream tore through the night, echoing through the trees and through the very bones of the world.

The monks wailed in their cages as the crystal flared hungrily, dragging at Passanova's very essence. Inch by inch, his body was pulled toward it, until he was suspended within. His face twisted and writhed, contorting in silent torment as the crystal's inner tide washed over him again and again like a drowning man dragged out into an endless black sea.

The robed figure threw back his head and loosed a bleating laugh that split the camp like a cracked bell. My heart seized. That laugh. It scraped at the edges of memory.

It was the same laugh back in Ballendore. The same goat that I lost against.

It was him... but why would this wizard want to play basketball? Why did he challenge Dribbles and I? Why didn't Dribbles warn me? What in the world was going on?

All I want is to play basketball.

My stomach knotted tight into a sour pit that dragged me down. The acrid bite of scorched stone and burnt magic filled my nose, coating my tongue and throat.

I turned to Bill, feeling crushed beneath the weight of it all, like a boulder trapping me against the cold earth. My voice came out flat and hopeless as I whispered to Bill a question.

"We can't do this... can we?"

Bill met my gaze. His usual wide-eyed dopey grin was gone, replaced with a squint that almost... almost looked heroic. His jaw tightened as he pursed his lips.

“We’re going to do it or die trying. So, what’s the game plan?”

Chapter 39

A PLAN?

We crept around the outskirts of the church moving silently and staying hidden as we pieced together the situation. Guards stood every twenty feet, like grim fence posts, while a few patrols prowled further out.

On one side, the nuns and Father Stopford were crammed into ramshackle cages, hastily made from downed trees. On the other, the blorts were imprisoned, their usual boisterous and bouncy nature crushed in fear. And at the center of it all, Passandra was bound near her brother, whose body hung suspended in the torment of the crystal locked inside of its nightmarish stasis.

Closer to the church lay the true knot of danger.

A cluster of massive orcs crowded around an equally massive stone wheel. Above them the wizard bleated orders, stabbing a clawed finger at a very ordinary map spread across a very unstable table.

It was, without question, the most fortified point in the camp and was positioned uncomfortably close to both the crystal and the blort cages. In contrast, the nuns were penned

up under the watch of much smaller orcs, who seemed more interested in picking at their own butts than picking a fight.

I exchanged a glance with Bill while my mind raced. How were we going to do this? If we were going to make a move, we'd have to be smart about it. The wizard and his orc entourage were a force to be reckoned with. Whatever we tried next would have to happen before they noticed we were here.

As we crept and crawled around the camp, doing our best to evade the watchful eyes and sharp ears of the occasional patrol, disaster struck in the most unfortunately stinky way possible.

Bill, in his usual clumsy fashion, rolled straight through something... foul.

It was green. Sticky. It bubbled softly with a stench like a swamp on a hot day. It made my eyes water.

Bill sniffed and gagged so hard his tongue flopped sideways and his eyes rolled into the back of his head.

"Ewwwww, get it off of me," Bill telepathed, one eye twitching independently of the other.

I looked upon the once orange blort, now turned a certain shade of green most befitting of an orc.

Wait a minute.

“Eureka!” I exclaimed, perhaps a little too triumphantly for someone crouched in a reeking pile of... you know.

I had grown accustomed to the pungent odor as we lay in wait near the stinky pile until nightfall. The stench was now part of our strategy, an unpleasant but necessary camouflage. An odorous disguise. Our ticket in.

The plan was as follows:

1. Camouflage: Rub the stinky stuff all over my skin to convincingly pass the look, and smell test, of an orc.
2. The Bait: Pretend to have captured an escaping blort. This would be my cover to get close to the camp.
3. Infiltration: Begin the approach to the camp, bringing the blort with me as if returning from a patrol.
4. Get the key: Once inside, locate and secure the keys to the cages where the prisoners are held.
5. Liberation: Free the nuns, creating a distraction with their escape to cause a commotion.
6. Rescue: Use the chaos to slip away, circle back, and free the remaining captives.
7. Escape: Run like the wind.

“Alright. Let’s get this over with,” I muttered, mostly to convince my stomach not to revolt.

With deep, spiritual reluctance, I plunged my fingers into the green mess, scooping up some of the glump, feeling it squish between my fingers, and generally finding it to be very unpleasant.

It made a wet schlup sound as I pulled my fingers apart. The muck clung together in strings, not dissimilar to troll cheese but, much stinkier and with a denser grit. Though I had grown somewhat used to the smell, having it so close to my face was an entirely different assault on my senses.

Bracing myself, I smeared a streak across my cheek. The sensation of it against my skin, coupled with the invasive stench filling my nostrils, was too much. I recoiled, unable to continue.

Meanwhile Bill, sweet little ol' deranged Bill, didn't hesitate.

With a grunt, he just flopped sideways into the muck like it was a warm bubble bath. He rolled back and forth, coating himself head to toe until he resembled... well, I'm not sure. A green smelly ball.

"What?" He telepathed at me. "You get used to it."

I looked Bill up and down and a thought started to trickle into my head.

"What if we ran the same play that we did with the troll?"

I hoped that Bill was on board with this new strategy. I did not want to put more of this butt stuff on my face.

Bill stared at me with one eye scrunched as if something was in his eye. His gaze lifted towards the canopy of the trees and he tilted his head to one side like a dog trying to figure out what a new sound was.

After a long pause he telepathed “Let’s try it out.”

I knelt down, allowing Bill to get a running start so he could jump and sit on my shoulders. The moment his arm made contact with my back a familiar surge of energy coursed through me.

Lightning burst from my skin in jagged arcs, snapping through the air with a sound like tearing metal. My vision flashed white. The ground beneath us trembled as energy surged through bone and blood and marrow.

Another level up!

This time, I knew exactly what spell I was taking.

Chapter 40

A PERFECT DISGUISE

Night crept in, settling like a funeral shroud, broken only by the scattered fires that glowed in patches like mold on an otherwise fine cheese. We needed every advantage we could get and that's when we made our move.

Bill perched awkwardly on my shoulders, his weight driving my boots deeper into the dirt and making my knees wobble. He felt heavier than before. That might have been the sleeplessness. Or the grime. Or the indignity of what we were attempting. Or the hunger.

I tugged my robe up and bunched it over his head, leaving only his eyes peeking out like a blortish periscope. The fabric kept scratching against my neck, and with Bill's weight weighing me down, every step I took felt like the last I was going to take.

Together, we probably didn't look like an orc. But in the murky firelight and chaos of the camp, maybe, just maybe, we could pass. At least if no one looked too closely at Bill's wide eyes.

We had our target.

This particular orc was deeply engrossed in mining his nose for golden treasures. He was smaller than most orcs, too, which was peculiar as they tended to come in the large and larger varieties.

He was clad in the same attire as the other orcs; a large, brown leather tunic paired with makeshift pants, crudely sewn together from scraps of fabric and other assorted materials. He leaned on a spear with one arm while the other was busy his treasure hunt, digging away at the deepest recesses of his nasal cavity.

Most notably, a set of keys dangled from his belt, keys we believed would unlock the cages our friends were in.

Bill's voice pressed into my mind, steering me between the light and through the shadows. Without him, I was blind.

My robes muffled the world into little more than shifting shapes and patches of torchlight. I had to put my full trust in my unusual friend who was prone to forgetting what he had forgotten about.

"Ok. Forward," Bill's voice echoed in my mind, directing our movements.

My chest thudded with nervous energy as I stalked deeper into the orc camp, into the smell of smoke and sweat and orcy armpits.

I forced my steps into the exaggerated swagger of a soldier dragging himself home from patrol. The ground beneath my

feet felt uneven and rough, littered with stones and remnants of meals, each step sending small pebbles skittering away.

I had hoped they wouldn't notice I was barefoot.

Next time, I reminded myself, put your shoes on when you go and investigate sounds in the middle of the night. You never know what might happen.

I lurched forward, mimicking the lumbering movements of an orc. Every step was heavy and deliberate as if I had just trudged through miles of rough terrain.

"Now turn right but keep walking", Bill nudged in my head again, tugging me along a path I could not see.

I pivoted slightly, hoping I was going in the right direction.

"A little more. You're walking off course. Let me kick you when you're good," Bill telepathically advised.

As I corrected my path, he delivered a swift kick to my shoulder.

"Perfect!"

The air was thickened with the stink of charred wood burnt down to bitter embers, mixed with an unusual sour musk that lingered in spurts throughout the camp.

I kept walking, following Bill's silent guidance until he instructed me to halt.

“We’re in front of the cage. Stopford is looking at me with a confused look on his face,” Bill’s voice resonated in my mind.

“Father,” I whispered, keeping my voice low and attempting what I imagined was a casual orkish accent. “It’s Gerald. We have a plan.”

Stopford’s silhouette shifted behind the crude wooden bars.

“We’re going to get you and the nuns out,” I continued. “But we’ll need a distraction once the door’s open.”

“That sounds promising,” Father Stopford murmured. “How, precisely, do you intend to open the door?”

“We haven’t gotten that far yet,” I admitted. “But, this disguise seems to be working pretty well.”

And then there was silence. A long silence. I waited for a reply until I couldn’t any longer.

“Father?” I whispered. “Is everything alright?”

A slow inhale drifted through the bars.

“Gerald,” he said carefully, “I must tell you something about your disguise.”

“Yes, Father?” I asked. “Impressed?”

“No,” Father Stopford said shortly. “It is bad.”

I blinked.

“You appear to be,” he continued gently, “a blort sitting on a wizard who is attempting to impersonate an orc.” He paused a moment before continuing. “It is reminiscent of those silly kobolds. And also, you are covered in poop.”

My cheeks burned red as a rush of fear and embarrassment flooded over me.

“Wait,” I whispered. “You knew they were kobolds?”

A soft, almost amused exhale came from behind the bars.

“Oh yes. Quite obvious,” Father Stopford replied. “From the moment they arrived. That is why I kept them close. I assumed you were observing them as well.”

“Uhh... Oh, yeah, of course. Totally,” I whispered back, trying to sound convincing. “Anyway, I think it’s time that we try to get you out now. I’ll be back soon.”

Just then, a heavy hand landed on my shoulder, stopping me in my tracks.

“Hey! Wait a minute!”

Chapter 41

LILAC WHISPER

Ice shot down my spine as I froze in place stiff with fear.

Father Stopford gasped. Bill's voice cracked through my head.

“Oh no. Oh no no no. We've been caught.”

My heart hammered in my chest as I began to wiggle and waggle my fingers. The familiar tingle of magic built up in my finger tips, ready to cast a spell at a moment's notice.

“Hey. You.” a guttural roar hit my ears as he yanked me around.

The nose picking orc stood before me, sniffing me with big, long inhales from his freshly mined nostril.

“You don't smell right!” he barked, jabbing a green sausage like finger at me.

Panic clawed at my throat until the orc produced a small, pink-tinted bottle.

“Here. This is the scent we're wearing today!” he declared. His beady eyes glared down at me like I'd offended his

mother. “Put it on before Rentok catches you reeking like... *that*.”

The orc plugged his nose and shook his head in disgust.

“He’s big on fragrance,” the orc added, punctuating the statement with a wet, victorious snort.

I scrambled beneath my robe and grabbed the bottle with exaggerated nonchalance.

“Oh... yes, thank you,” I grunted, channeling my inner orc by dropping my voice half an octave. “We... er, I mean, I’ve been out on patrol all day, and I reckon I missed the, uh, scent briefing.”

The orc’s face split into a tusky grin.

“Ahh! The daily memo!” he bellowed, slapping a crumpled parchment against my chest hard enough to rattle my spine. “Not a problem. Here you go!”

I caught it before it fluttered away and stuffed it into my pocket.

“Read it before morning,” he added. “Don’t want you unprepared for departure.”

“Thanks, friend,” I said, trying my best to sound like an orc who’d just discovered friendship. “I’ll get back to patrol once I’ve freshened up and studied the memo.”

He nodded approvingly and began trudging back to his post.

The bottle was pink and shaped like a heart with a cork at the top. I pulled on the cork to open the it.

POP!

“Oh yeah,” the orc called over his shoulder. “That’s *Lilac Whisper*.”

He puffed his chest out proudly.

“As sweet as a meadow of daisies. Twice as pretty, too,” he said, spitting a glob of snot into the mud.

With that, the orc stomped back to his post and began his nose digging again as though nothing had happened.

Without giving it much consideration, I doused Bill and my robes with its contents. It was most certainly a delightful blend, but I couldn’t detect the lilac. Perhaps that is why it was called lilac whisper? The scent was a pleasant mix of pixie poofs that danced with griffon fluff, finished with a zesty splash of lemon.

Yet, all it managed to do was sharpen my awareness of the rancid stench of blort feet and the sour green butt gunk we’d slathered on earlier. The result was less “orc warrior musk” and more “perfumed corpse in a barnyard.”

“Here. Read this,” I whispered, slipping the crumpled memo through the bars while keeping one eye on the nasal prospector across the camp.

“Certainly,” Father Stopford murmured.

He cleared his throat with a tiny, nervous ahem and began in a hushed, dramatic tone:

“Due to unforeseen circumstances, namely Grunk Da Stompa accidentally stomping through the stage, the concert with Axe to Grind and Grunk Da Stompa is postponed.”

Stopford looked up from his paper and sighed. “I was quite looking forward to that.”

He continued on.

“Because of this, the imminent march toward Courtlandia will commence earlier than scheduled. All personnel must report to their Duty Stump by sunrise or face disciplinary reflection in the pain crystals.”

He squinted at the paper, frowning. “**Please note:** The crystals are *extra* painful this time of year.”

I raised an eyebrow. “That’s... an awful lot of detail for a memo.”

“Yes,” Stopford agreed softly. “They appear proud of the crystals.”

“Well, thanks Father. Be back soon,” I whispered back. “Bill, we need to get the keys. Where was that orc with the keys?”

“That was that orc. I got the keys right here,” Bill telepathed smugly, dangling them from his toes like a cat showing off a dead mouse. “Picked his pocket while he was sniffing you.”

“Does... that creature speak” Stopford blurted, peering at Bill like he’d just spotted a unicorn tap dancing.

“Sort of. It’s complicated.” I rubbed the back of my neck. “He beams thoughts into my brain and uh...”

Stopford looked at me with his head tilted.

“Anyway! Looks like we’ve already got the keys.”

Bill vaulted off my shoulders in a single athletic move, landing with a wet splorch in the mud in front of the door of the cage. One by one, he inspected each key, tilting his head and frowning, then flinging the rejects behind him with a clatter.

“Nope. Nope. Definitely nope.”

By the fourth try, Stopford was wringing his hands impatiently. By the fifth, I was convinced Bill was just enjoying himself. Finally, he paused, narrowed his eyes, and gave a solemn little nod.

“This one.”

He slid it into the lock and gave a sharp twist.

Click.

Clack.

The cage door swung open. Father Stopford stepped out, blinking like a mole seeing daylight for the first time. I wasn’t sure why he did this as this was night time and his cage was just a bunch of logs that let in plenty of light, but I digress.

“Here,” he whispered, snatching the keys with surprising speed. “I’ll handle the remaining cages. I’ll brief the sisters as I go.”

Sounds like a plan,“ I said as Bill handed the keys to the Father. We started edging our way back around the camp. “We’ll let you know when we’re ready.”

Stopford nodded, took three steps, then pivoted back around.

“Wait! How exactly are you going to let us know?”

I gave him my widest grin.

“Oh, you’ll know.”

Chapter 42

SAVING PASSANDRA

We slipped out of the camp the same way we came in.

I continued on doing my best orc strut, swinging my arms like they were heavy and lumbering along like I knew what I was doing. Bill stuck to my shoulders, his telepathic voice pinging in my head like an invisible map.

“Left. Root. Don’t trip. Straight.”

When we reached the tree line, I peeled Bill off of me freeing myself from the oppressive reek of the green guck and his foot odor. After he was off I shrugged my robe back into place.

We circled wide along the camp’s outer edge just beyond the tree line, crawling all the way down to the far side of the camp like a pair of escaped prisoners. The cool grass tickled my palms as I crawled, reminding me of Dribbleton.

Orcs sprawled about and snoozed around the flickering fires, wrapping themselves in patchy hides and ratty furs to fend off the night chill. A few guards loitered about sleepy eyed with fatigue from the battle earlier that day. I could relate.

I felt like I could sleep like a giant underneath a blanket of grass.

But this was no time for napping.

“Remember the plan,” I whispered to Bill.

He gave me a quick blortish nod in return. I wiggled and waggled my fingers and recalled what I had done to the net goblins so long ago. I felt the familiar warm buzz of magic racing through my fingers, like sparks itching to leap free. I fired off my telekinesis spell to snatch the blazing logs from the campfires; its invisible force coiled outward, wrapped around the blazing logs. I pulled.

One by one, burning logs tore free from their fire pits, wrenching upward like flaming comets answering an unseen gravity. With a flick of my fingers I hurled chunks of flaming wood left and right, this way and that way, to and fro.

The camp was ablaze with fires sprouting from the flung logs. Acrid smoke curled through the night, stinging my nose and eyes as it spread.

Then the horn sounded.

A deep, grumpy **BWOOOOAAAAA W** that rattled the trees and shook the flames higher and higher. I crossed my fingers, hoping Father Stopford knew that this was the cue.

Bill and I crouched while watching the pandemonium unfold.

The orcs flailed at the flames with their ratty blankets, smacking at the fires like they were overgrown flies. After a few frantic moments, some of them wised up and started smothering the blazes. My heart sank. “Come on, Father,” I whispered, teeth clenched. “That was the signal!”

As if on divine cue, the night split with a thunderous cry.

“HYAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

Out of the dark came the nuns, flying feet-first into the fray.

Sandaled heels sliced through the air, smacking orc skulls with the precision of a hawk swooping down on their prey. Every orc that caught a high flying kick to the noggin fell like a sack of potatoes. One by one, they dropped in heaps, unconscious before their tusks even hit the dirt.

The element of surprise was ours, and holy smokes did it pack a wallop.

The remaining orcs bellowed and stumbled toward the charging sisters, roaring like a pack of drunken boars.

Perfect.

While their attention shifted toward airborne sandals and righteous fury, Bill and I slipped the other direction back into the heart of the camp. We ran over broken pots, scattered crates, and embers that hissed beneath our boots.

I kept an eye out for the wizard, but he was nowhere to be seen. Lucky us... or maybe very unlucky us.

We pressed on, weaving through the chaos until we reached Passandra. She stood chained to a thick wooden post with her arms held high, gawking at the commotion in the distance.

“Psst, hey Passandra!” I whispered.

She gasped, whipping her head around the pole so fast her hair cracked like a whip against the wood.

“Gerald?! By Clarinatia! You’re alive!”

Her eyes went wide, brimming with relief.

“Sorry to find you like this,” I muttered, grimacing at the chains that cut into her wrists.

My gaze slid to the glowing crystal cage beside her.

“We’ll get you untied,” I said quietly. “And Passanova out of that thing. But... how?”

Passandra jerked her chin toward the crystal.

“Easy,” she said. “Tip it over. It’ll shatter. He’ll be fine. Maybe dazed for a minute, but when isn’t he?” Passandra laughed. It sounded like it was the first time she had laughed in a year.

“No kidding,” I said with a crooked grin. “Alright, first things first. Keys. Any idea?”

“Yep, just over there on that table.” Passandra pointed with a quick flick of her head, zeroing in on a rickety table a few feet from us.

“Perfect.” I snapped my fingers at Bill. “You grab the keys and free her up. I’ll handle the crystal.”

I turned towards it. The crystal let out a slow, deliberate thrum that seemed to vibrate in my teeth. Faint veins of darker purple swirled beneath its surface, as if something inside it were breathing... or feeding.

Passanova hung suspended within, frozen mid-torment.

“How hard can it be?”

Chapter 43

A NEW SPELL

Passanova hung frozen in the purple crystal, arms arched overhead, body wracked with pain, face twisted in silent agony. Strange liquid slithered across his skin, fizzing and sparking before sinking back, only to surge again. It rose and fell in a cruel tide of torment.

The crystal itself was wedged in a jagged stone crevasse, balanced on a rickety wooden platform the orcs had slapped together to cradle it. I threw everything I had at it, but the stubborn thing wouldn't budge.

First, I shoved it with my hands but my palms kept slipping off of its slick purple surface. Then, I snatched a large stick, as thick as an ogre's club, and wedged it under the crystal. I pressed my weight into the stick and... Nope, still nothing.

I flicked my hands, wiggling and wagging my fingers to try to use telekinesis to lift it out of its cradle, but it was no use. It was not affected by my magic and much too large.

The crystal was impossibly heavy, and whatever dark magic held him captive was far beyond my strength to break. I stepped back panting as I stared at him floating there.

“What’s the matter?” Passandra called, rubbing her raw wrists where the chains had held her. “Why haven’t you gotten him out?”

“I can’t tip it over,” I said.

Her eyes narrowed. “What have you tried?”

“I’ve tried using my hands, a stick, my magic... nothing,” I said, mimicking my failures with my hands as I went.

“You’re just pushing it the wrong way,” Passandra said, walking around to the other side of the crystal.

She looked it up and down, examining it carefully, then pressed her pointer finger against the crystal. With the gentlest nudge, the crystal tipped over, exploding into a thousand glittering shards that scattered across the ground like spilled starlight.

The pieces wriggled and zipped across the ground, snapping into place with sharp, crystalline clicks as Passanova’s body began to knit itself together. First his feet, then his legs. His waist twisted into being, ribs latticing together. Arms locked into his shoulders.

Finally, his head clicked into place with the last shard locking into the top of his skull like a jewel in a crown.

Air poured into his chest as he convulsed as if he’d forgotten how to breathe. He fell over, fingers clawing at the dirt while he dragged in air. For a moment, he just trembled there, sweat dripping off his face, before his eyes finally focused.

“Passanova!” Passandra dropped beside him and wrapped him in a fierce embrace.

“I’m sorry,” Passanova rasped, his voice broken but earnest. “I shouldn’t have done that. Is Dribbles... is he okay?”

“I don’t know,” I replied, glancing nervously at the battle around us. “But, we don’t have time for that now. We need to free the blorts and get out of here before Rentok and his orcs realize what’s happening.”

Passanova nodded as he pushed himself to his feet still shaky from being reformed.

“Then we move,” he said. “We’ve wasted enough time.”

Just as I had begun to wonder what kind of mischief Bill had gotten himself into, he came bouncing into view with a gaggle of blorts in tow behind him.

“Oh,” I said, blinking in surprise. “Well, I guess freeing them was easier than I thought it was going to be. How did you do it?”

“I opened the cage,” Bill replied.

“Yes, right. Of course. Why didn’t I think of that? Well, let’s get out of... Wait!” I realized we had forgotten something. “What about Dribbles’ bag?”

Bill skid to a stop, sending the blorts tumbling into a heap behind him in a big wobbly pile.

“I know where that is,” Passanova said. “Follow me!”

He took off into the crowd weaving effortlessly through the slog of punches, kicks, and sword swipes that flew through the air, dodging this way and dipping that way as he went.

An orc's axe whooshed past his ear, and he leaned just far enough for it to miss.

Another swung a club, and he dipped beneath it without breaking stride.

"Man, he's good," I muttered, half in awe, half in frustration as I stumbled after him, struggling to keep up. In comparison I was like a tavern regular who had had one too many!

The battlefield was the purest pandemonium.

Steel clashing against steel, flames belching smoke into the night sky, nuns unleashing war cries. Every step felt like it could be my last... but Passanova moved like the battlefield itself had been choreographed for him.

A sword swung toward me, glinting in the firelight, as I tried to keep up with Passanova. I hit the dirt, barely ducking under the arc of the strike and wiggled my fingers in response. I hit the ground. A surge of ice crackled from my hands, spreading across the ground at the orc's feet. His feet slipped sending him skidding like a drunken penguin before he face-planted with a glorious **thud**.

"Gerald!" a voice cracked like a whip.

Father Stopford stood a few yards away, his robes torn, his hair wild, and his expression lit with a love of battle long lost but found once again.

“Make your way to me!” he shouted.

I dodged another wild orc swing, ducking under a clumsy axe strike, and scrambled toward him, weaving through the mayhem like a mouse in a maze trying to find a delicious bite of cheese.

Sweat dripped into my eyes and I couldn't see. I crashed into something. Luckily, it was Stopford who grabbed my arm with an iron grip.

“When do we run?” he shouted, dodging an errant foot. “We can't hold out much longer.”

“As soon as we have Dribbles' bag, we can go,” I said. “Passanova is on the way to retrieve it.”

“Already have it!” Passanova called out, appearing out of the whirling mess of orc and nun combat. He tossed the bag my way with a quick, precise throw. “Let's head out!”

I caught the bag and nodded, but before I could move, the nearest orc spun with a roar, its jagged axe whistling down toward Stopford. Steel met wood with a crack as Stopford caught the blow with his staff. He twisted his staff ever so slightly, sending the weapon flying to the ground..

The orc blinked in shock, just in time for Stopford to whirl his staff around and bring it crashing into its skull. The brute dropped like a felled tree.

“Whatever you’ve got planned, do it now!” Stopford commanded.

I wiggled and waggled my fingers, pulling power into my palms.

Green smoke billowed forth in heavy coils, curling and spreading across the battlefield like a living fog. With a final shout, my voice rose above the chaos.

“Hold your breath and run to the river!”

Chapter 44

RUNNING WITH THE GAGGLE

We tore through the camp and down toward the river as the green mist boiled up behind us, rolling like swamp fog come alive.

Orcs staggered, fumbling around in rank despair as the fumes coiled into their nostrils.

“Oi! That’s a right stinky one, innit?” one bellowed before slugging the nearest body in blind accusation.

“That’s foul, mate!” another gagged, shoving his companion flat as he doubled over.

They dropped their weapons. Helmets clanged against stone. One particularly large brute tried to roar through it and instead produced a tragic wheeze before collapsing to his knees.

My new spell, *Foul*, was working perfectly. Dribbles had been right all along. I needed more devastating magic in my arsenal.

Behind us, the battlefield turned into a symphony of retching and a theater of betrayal. The once terrifying army lay

scattered, clutching their guts and noses and pleading with a sky that offered no mercy.

The nuns ran alongside us, their robes flowing behind them as we sprinted down the riverbank as fast as our legs could carry us.

My heart raced as I glanced over my shoulder. The spell had worked, at least for now. But out in the open, with the wind carrying the stench away, I knew it wouldn't last long. We had to put as much distance between us and the orcs as possible before they recovered... or got used to the smell. Or, maybe they had enough *Lilac Whisper* to mask the smell.

The river stretched ahead, its waters glinting in the moonlight, and I pushed myself to run faster, hoping it would lead us to safety.

A dog's howl cried in the night, echoing all around us. Then came the thunderous barking of something far larger. I risked a glance back. A pack of orcs thundered toward us, mounted on wolves the size of horses. Each pounding stride they took erased more of the distance between us.

"Anybody know how to deal with wolves?" I shouted, my voice cracking in panic as I scanned the group for answers.

The riverbank stretched ahead, but the wolves were gaining fast. Their snarls grew louder with every second. We needed a plan, and we needed it now.

“No, but keep running!” Father Stopford shouted in reply. “We’ll figure something out.”

With every step we took, the wolves ran three. If we didn’t think of something fast, they’d pick us off one by one. Our bones were quickly becoming destined to become chew toys.

What would Dribbles have that a wolf feared?

Fire.

Wolves fear fire.

I reached into Dribbles’ Bottomless Bag, hoping I could figure out how it worked. My fingers scraped against the emptiness. Nothing. I jammed my arm in deeper, wiggling around, desperate for anything solid. Anything. Still. nothing.

On my third try, I closed my eyes and focused, thinking hard about all the things that might have fire. When I squeezed my fist, I felt something sticky.

Like a stick.

My fingers wrapped around it and I yanked it out with a quick tug.

A torch!

It wasn’t much, but it would have to do.

As the orcs drew closer, the sound of the wolves rapid breathing and the quick pattering of their paws grew louder

and louder. One poor blort lagged behind, his legs working so fast and hard they looked like a blur, but it wasn't enough. He was falling further and further back, and it was only a matter of seconds before he became a feast fit for a wolf.

Not today.

Not on my watch.

Gripping the torch tightly, I turned and sprinted toward the blort, the torch flames flickering and spitting out behind me in the wind. The wolves were closing in fast, their eyes burning with hunger, but I wasn't about to let them win.

Not today.

That's when the earth began to tremble.

A deep, bone rattling rumble rolled beneath us, shaking dirt loose from the riverbank. The trees around us swayed unnaturally, their branches creaking and groaning as if something massive was moving through them. Birds erupted from the canopy in a flurry of caws and chirps, scattering into the distance.

The wolves didn't falter. If anything, the rumble only spurred them on. I could feel the ragged breath of one right behind me, hot and sour. Its jaws clacked together so close to me that I could practically feel my jersey tugging into its teeth.

My pulse hammered in my skull.

I was about to be torn to ribbons.

Then, with a gut wrenching crack, a tree the size of a tower began to topple in front of us. The trunk groaned and split as though something immense had shoved it aside. The specter of verdant death loomed across the dirt, stretching wider as it fell.

I pumped my legs until they screamed, the blort squeaking in panic beside me. Wolf fangs nipped at my back.

The tree was falling fast.

On second thought, it didn't look like I was going to be dog food after all.

It looked like the blort and I were about to become a pancake.

Chapter 45

NOT AGAIN...

The tree plummeted with the speed of a titan's club, as if being swung by the gods themselves.

I wiggled my fingers and a cold mist formed in my palms. With a quick motion, I iced the ground in front of me and dove arms first. I slid across the slick surface just as the tree slammed down behind me with a deafening **THUD**.

My ears rang as I twisted mid-slide to look back just in time to see the wolf behind me hit the ice. Its paws pinwheeled and spun it like a top before it skidded snout-first into the tree with a *crunch* that made my teeth ache.

The orc on its back launched like a ragdoll out of a catapult through the air before face planting in the dirt.

He didn't get back up.

Meanwhile, the blort who had been lagging behind slid across the ice with the skill and precision of a hippopotamus doing ballet. His short arms and legs flailed about like overcooked noodles as he spun the same way the wolf did until he finally hit the dirt at the edge of the ice.

His momentum carried him forward as he rolled several times before coming to a stop, dazed and delirious.

I scrambled to my feet as a deep and guttural roar hit me so loud it vibrated in my bones.

From the jagged gap where the tree had fallen, something began to push through. Branches snapped like twigs as a colossal jaw emerged. Jaws lined with rows upon rows of dagger teeth.

A Layupodon.

Not again.

Maybe it was the same Layupodon.

Its nostrils flared as its enormous eyes swept the riverbank. And then... oh joy.

It looked right at us. Specifically, on the waddling, squeaking buffet of blorts scampering for their lives.

The Layupodon's pupils narrowed. Its lips curled back.

Dinner had just been served.

I slid to a stop near the dazed blort. He was wobbling back and forth, looking dazed but cheerful. His eyes spun like tops, but he still managed a goofy, gap-toothed grin.

"Come on, buddy," I said, scooping him up like a sack of potatoes.

I gave him a gentle toss forward, and he landed with a squeak before scampering on his stubby little legs as fast as they could wobble.

As with all things unexpected, it tends to be that there lay something even more unexpected waiting just moments away.

From the corner of my eye, something huge and ugly came hurtling through the air. I turned just in time to see an orc, arms spread wide like a vulture swooping in for the kill.

Rentok.

The same Rentok who had Bill and I moments from death when we fought against Passanova in his castle. And now, here he was flying through the air aimed squarely towards the layupodon.

Rentok's eyes burned with wild determination. His voice cut through the chaos like a war drum.

“This beast belongs to **ME!**”

He hit the Layupodon's back with a bone-jarring **THUMP**, arms already working furiously. He held a thick coil of rope, which he whipped loose in one smooth motion.

The Layupodon roared, thrashing like an earthquake made flesh, its massive body bucking and heaving to dislodge the intruder.

Rentok clung tight, legs locked like steel bands around its scaly hide. His tusked grin gleamed with feral triumph as he hauled the rope over one arm and began to spin a loop overhead. The lasso whirled wider and wider, humming as it cut through the air.

The beast screamed, snapping its jaws and thrashing against the orc straddling it.

The orc let loose the open end of the lasso, and it sailed through the air with perfect precision, looping over the head of the Layupodon. But, just as the rope settled into place, the beast snapped its massive jaws forward, catching the rope in its big, sharp, pointy teeth.

With a savage whip of its head, the beast tore the rope free and flung it aside, thrashing so hard it sent Rentok sailing through the air like a rag doll.

He hit the river in a big **SPLASH**, vanishing beneath the churning water. The Layupodon bellowed and wheeled its monstrous head back toward us. Its gaze locked with mine, those massive eyes narrowing in primal hunger. The riverbank shook under its pounding footsteps, each one rattling through my bones. Dirt crumbled and rocks tumbled into the water as the beast thundered after us.

And then came the wolves. Orcs and snarling fangs poured over the fallen tree like a tide of muscle and steel, their bloodlust ignited by the chaos. They chased the Layupodon,

falling in behind it as if the monster itself were leading their charge.

A prehistoric juggernaut and an orc army chasing us.

What luck.

My lungs burned as we ran down the endless river that stretched before us.

That's when I heard it.

At first, I thought it was just more pounding footsteps. But no, the sound was different. It was deeper. Rounder. A constant roll, like thunder that never faded, only swelled louder and louder the further we ran.

"Gerald," Stopford shouted. "Tell me the river isn't supposed to sound like that!"

Chapter 46

HAVING A BALL

It was, in fact, the case that water was not supposed to sound like that.

At least not without a normal amount of gravity applied over a sufficient amount of vertical distance.

Ahead of us, the river and jungle ended. It was as if some colossal blade had sheared the land clean through, or perhaps a giant had stomped here too many times and finally caved the world in. As we tore forward, the view yawned open wider. The trees and soil just... stopped, dropping away into a jagged edge where the ground plunged away.

We were charging headlong towards a waterfall with a Layupodon and an orc army chasing after us. My mind raced with the memories of my adventure so far. The game against the goat, the net goblins, Pasadena, the blorts and Blortsylvania, Larry and King, the zombie potatoes, the spider queen... None of those situations felt as dire as this. The nuns, the blorts, the twins, Bill... all of us were barreling straight for the edge of a cliff with no way out.

We were doomed.

In my final moments, my thoughts drifted towards Dribbles. The only soul in all of Ballendore who saw something worth saving when no one else would. I thought about how he missed his family, how he talked about them like they were just a dribble away. I thought about the way he gave everything, always, just to keep me alive. And I thought about how he dribbled a ball everywhere he...

Wait.

Eureka!

Dribbles' basketball! Of course! The Layupodon craved basketbough fruit and Dribbles' ball was the closest thing we had. My heart hammered as I clawed for Dribbles' bag, fumbling with the straps like it was the last locked door between me and salvation. I didn't really understand how the blasted thing worked, but instinct screamed louder than reason. I fixed the image of Dribbles' ball in my mind, the orange rubber, the stippled bumps, the smell of rubber and sweat that always seemed to cling to it.

I plunged my arm deep into the void, elbow deep, then shoulder deep, reaching further into nothingness until... yes! My fingertips brushed rubber. I seized it with a desperate grip and yanked it free.

The Layupodon was closing in, its thunderous strides slamming through the ground. Its razor-sharp teeth, glinting like jagged spears, zeroed in on the blorts, snapping inches from their hides. I had to act fast.

“HEY, DINOSAUR!” I bellowed, my voice cracking just loud enough to echo off of canopy.

I hoisted the ball high.

“LOOK WHAT I’VE GOT!”

The Layupodon whipped its massive head toward me, its pupils shrinking to pinpricks as it focused on the orange ball, nostrils flaring and lips peeling back revealing even more of its teeth.

It charged right at me. Its pounding feet churned the earth, kicking up clods of dirt and grass as it ran. The stench of its breath hit me first. Hot. Sour. Like rotten meat.

“I’m sorry, Dribbles,” I whispered, fingers wiggling and wagging as sparks of magic flared to life. Then, with a desperate fling of my hand, I hurled the ball.

I waved my hand outward, sending the ball sailing through the air with a burst of telekinesis. The Layupodon launched skyward, twisting midair as its jaws snapped at the basketball.

It crashed back down, skidding through the dirt. I dove aside, narrowly dodging its massive clawed feet as they gouged the earth, flinging gritty mud and clumps of soil into my face while it scrambled to grip the ground.

Once it had gained enough traction, the Layupodon exploded forward, lunging after the basketball and straight into the orc army. Orcs and wolves were sent flying through the air and into the river as the rampaging beast barreled

through them. The remaining orcs wheeled around in a frantic scramble, bolting back the way they'd come up the river and back towards the church.

The Layupodon closed in on them fast as its massive skull swung like a battering ram, flinging orcs and wolves aside like ragdolls into the trunks of trees with bone-rattling **THUDS** and into the water with a **SPLOOSH**.

We took this opportunity to peer over the waterfall's jagged lip. The roar of the plummeting water vibrated in our chests as we weighed our options. And yet...

It was the only way forward.

Chapter 47

A LONG WAY DOWN

“It’s a bit far down,” Passanova said, leaning over the cliff’s lip, his long hair whipping in the mist.

I edged up beside him and felt my breath catch. The river thundered forward, then hurled itself into the abyss. Water plummeted hundreds of feet before detonating in white spray on the rocks below, feeding a snaking silver stream that wound toward a vast, shimmering lake that stretched beyond the horizon. Beside it, golden plains sprawled like a sun scorched quilt, framed by jagged peaks that clawed at the sky.

Passanova wasn’t kidding. The drop made my stomach lurch. One misstep and we’d have a long merciless fall to the rocks below.

“Anybody have any rope?” Father Stopford shouted, cupping his hands to cut through the roaring water.

Being the *prepared for anything* sort, I knew Dribbles would have some rope in his bag. I thrust my hand in. I thought about rope. I pictured rope. I imagined what rope might feel like in my hands. I clenched my fist and pulled my arm out and a long rope began to spill out. I kept pulling, more and

more of it spewing after me like I'd snagged the tail of some endless snake.

"The orcs won't be far behind," I warned, glancing back toward the church spire jutting above the jungle canopy. My stomach twisted. "Bill, can the Blorts even climb a rope?"

Bill blinked at me for a moment. "We Blorts are vertically challenged," Bill telepathed to me.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Right.. So... how do they feel about going into the bag?"

"Let me ask," Bill replied in my mind.

Bill waddled over to the gaggle of Blorts and unleashed a booming gurgle that echoed like a horn. They all swiveled toward him, eyes bulging and mouths gaping as if they had been put into a trance by an enchanter. Bill gurgled and gaggled in a rapid fire barrage, his throaty sounds rolling out in waves. One Blort sputtered a gurgle back. Then another joined in. Soon, the whole pack erupted in a chorus of gurgling retorts, a sloshy symphony that bounced off the cliffside.

"They'll go in the bag under one condition," Bill said.

"What's that?" I asked, tilting my head.

"That they aren't let out until they're somewhere safe," Bill said, his gaze fixed on the other Blorts.

“It’s a deal.” I strode over to the gaggle and started scooping them in, one after another. Each Blort gave a damp squelch as I wedged them through the mouth of the bag, their bodies wiggling like pudding.

“What about you, Bill?”

“I’d rather stay out here with you, if you don’t mind,” Bill telepathed.

I nodded. “Thanks, friend.”

Bill didn’t reply back. He just stood there with his mouth open while staring at me. I think that was his way of agreeing.

While I wrangled Blorts, Stopford had organized the nuns. They were already filing onto the rope with disciplined calm.

“Careful, ladies,” he said, braced against a staff.

The nuns hands clenched the coarse hemp, bare feet skimming down the cliffside.

The twins stood guard at the cliff’s edge. Their eyes were fixed on the rope lashed tight around a gnarled tree trunk, watching for any sign it might fray or snap under the strain. I leaned out over the edge again, watching as the nuns scaled the sheer cliffside. Their martial arts finesse really shined through. When the nuns found the right rock jutting out, they’d add some slack into the rope and loop it around the stone to help secure it in place.

Once the first wave of nuns touched solid ground, the twins nodded at one another and began the descent themselves.

“Careful on the way down,” I said as I tracked their every move. Passandra and Passanova moved down the cliff with smooth, fluid elegance. Their hands gripped the taut line, feet finding each crag with unshakable poise. Elves were really a sight to behold.

Father Stopford sat hunched on a flat rock near the cliff’s edge, his chest heaving, still trying to catch his breath after the battle. His staff rested across his knees, and for the first time since we met, he looked every bit his age.

I eased down beside him, the spray from the falls cooling the sweat on my face.

“Were you able to get it?” he asked with a flicker of hope. He glanced at me with old, weary eyes. “The heart, I mean.”

I slid Dribbles’ bag onto my lap, its worn leather smooth in my hands. I nodded. “I think so. Passanova stuffed it in here before he ran out of the underground. I never saw anyone tamper with it after that. But...” I gulped. “I’m almost afraid to check. Not after what it did to Dribbles.”

Father Stopford dipped his head in a silent nod, his gaze drifting back out across the horizon, lost in the sprawling vista from the waterfall’s crest where the river’s wild plunge carved a shimmering path to the endless golden plains below, framed by jagged peaks clawing at the sky.

Stopford let a sigh escape his lips. “The heart only lets those who are worthy touch it,” Father Stopford said, pivoting toward me with a slow, deliberate turn. “As noble as your friend may be, the heart doesn’t plumb the depths of one’s soul to gauge true worth.”

He looked back up the river.

“No, the blasted thing only cares if you’re good at basketball.”

Stopford rose with a grunt, brushing dust from his robes. He straightened stiff, staff in hand, and strode to the cliff’s edge where the rope dangled down into the mist.

I sat on the rock for a moment, staring off into the distance, thinking of Dribbles.

Chapter 48

CALL ME SLAMDALF

Bill and I scaled the cliff together. I knotted a scrap of rope around my waist, letting him hang off me like a jittery blort pendulum as I clambered down the sheer face. Every foothold I found sent him swaying side to side, his stubby limbs twitching wildly as though he were trying to swim through the air. My fingers scraped against the jagged stone, knuckles stinging as I lowered us inch by inch.

“Larry sure would be nice to see right about now.” Bill telepathed to me.

By the time I reached the ground the nuns were already organizing the supplies. Stopford barked orders in his stern, papal way, while the twins double checked weapons and regrouped the stragglers.

The nuns had already decided on a bit of sabotage. They wanted to burn the ropes so the orcs wouldn't have an easy descent. Practical but not very nun-like, I thought.

I dipped back into Dribbles' bag and, sure enough, came up with another lit torch. I handed it off to a nun, who pressed it against the coarse strands. Fire chewed up the rope, its fibers curling black as they fell away into the mist. I couldn't help

but wonder just how many torches Dribbles had squirreled away in that endless sack.

“We do not have much food. Do you know if there might be any in that magic bag of yours?” Stopford asked.

I shrugged, already thrusting my arm deep into the bag. The leather edges rasped against my skin as it slid into the void. I zeroed in with fierce focus as my mind flipped through a menu of options. I thought of troll cheese tacos and had no success there, although my stomach began to regret that the moment I thought it. I simplified it a bit and thought about bread, cheese, and water.

Nothing.

Growing desperate, I gave up on specifics and just focused hard on the idea of food. Any morsel at all. My gut rumbled with a sharp pang twisting inside. It’d been a solid day since I’d shoveled anything down and hunger was starting to chew at me.

Something nudged my knuckles, a faint jostle deep in the bag. I latched onto it and hauled out a hefty box, its faded surface scribbled with a sketch of a dinner table piled high with food. Across the top, bold blocky letters read: “*Rations For An Army.*”

“Ahh, just what we needed!” Stopford crowed, waving the nuns over to add it to their growing hoard.

Only then did my feet find the time to start screaming. I glanced down. A sorry sight! Battered, bloodied, and one nail already gone.

“Hey,” I called out. “Anybody have any shoes?”

From the gaggle, a pair sailed my way. “Here you go, Gerald!” a voice trilled, followed by a chorus of giggles.

“Thanks!” I slipped them on. A little tight in the toes, but better than bleeding all over the place.

“Alright, everyone,” Stopford announced, squaring his shoulders. “I’ve made this trek only once before. The city waits between those peaks. That’s our path forward.”

He strode out front, robe snapping in the wind like a battle-scarred banner. The golden plains stretched wide before us, an ill breeze crawling off the twin peaks ahead.

The nuns clustered around Bill, hopelessly enchanted by him. Wide eyed, they giggled, hiding their faces whenever his voice chimed into their heads. “Do it again, do it again!” they laughed, their voices bubbling up like a rare burst of sunlight.

I fell back with the twins. Passandra walked close, steadying her brother with quiet words. Then she glanced my way. “You did good back there, Gerald.”

“Thanks, you too,” I said. “But... you can call me Slamdalf.”

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My facebook is also a great place to keep in touch. Just search for "Ryan Paul McGowan – Author".

About The Author

Ryan McGowan (R.P. McG) lives in a small town in Texas with his wife and daughter. When he's not doing his day job, he can be found writing books, playing in his band Chasing the Coyote, or playing video games.

Enough of that third person stuff.

When I was a kid, I loved to read. I remember reading Goosebumps and Redwall for fun, but, reading in school was a drag. Do you know how many times I had to read Holes? I missed reading for fun. All of that academic stuff just wasn't for me so I moved on to music. They knew how to party! Rock and roll, you know? Even then, I still lingered around books. I ended up getting an accidental English minor while getting my business degree. I took a bunch of poetry classes to help me learn to write music.

But, what I discovered is that I really just like to create. I'm a builder. I make things. So, one day I decided I was going to write a book. And so, I did. And then wrote another. And another. And the rest is history.

When doing market research for my books, I noticed that the kids section seemed pretty lacking. Sure, there's a bunch of

great book series out there, but they were all long... lengthy. I don't remember books being 400 pages when I was 10!

It was then that I decided to write fun, easy to read, books for kids. I also decided that my kids books should be free for those that can't afford them. After all, if kids are supposed to read, they should have easy access to fun books!

And Now!

The Beginning Of The End Of Slamdalf!

Chapter 1

A chill frost wind swept down from the jagged peaks above as if the mountains were casting us away with its cold breath. The wind bit sharply at my cheeks and ears, carrying the clean scent of distant snow. It had been a week since we made it out of the jungle and into the plains and it would be another few days before we got to the base of the mountains. Father Stopford tried to keep spirits high as we went, but the fear of a frosty fate lay heavy in our minds.

I had looked through Dribbles' magical bag for some warm clothes but didn't find any. The best thing I could find for warmth were torches, which, it appeared to have an endless supply. Stopford signaled for the nuns to begin gathering up bits of tall grass so we could stuff it into our clothes. It itched my skin and didn't provide much insulation but it was better than none at all. Plus, I smelled like a field. At least I wasn't alone in that.

Bill had become the mascot of our motley crew mostly because he didn't seem to notice the cold. He bounced between the nuns anyway, sticking his tongue out and generally being his usual blorty self, which, honestly, helped. At one point I asked him to ask the blorts if they still wanted to stay in the

bag. We popped one out, he gurgled a few times, the blort let out a wet sneeze, nodded, and hopped back in the bag.

“Yes, they want to stay in the bag where it is warm,” Bill telepathed.

I figured as much. At least we wouldn’t have to worry about wrangling them.

I had kept close to the twins. Passandra had done a good job of keeping her brothers spirits up, but I could tell the journey was weighing on her as well.

“You two ok?” I asked, knowing that they were just as tired and hungry as I was.

Passandra nodded. “Yeah, I think so. There’s just so much on our mind. I don’t think any of this would be happening if our parents didn’t make that deal.”

“No way,” I said, shaking my head. “Gorzod destroyed Dribbles’ world long before he got to yours and was doing the same to this one. I just...”

I trailed off, staring at the peaks ahead of us. The cold air rolled through the line sending shivers through the gaggle. “I don’t know how we’re going to do it. Besides, who put the capital of our world in the mountains? Basketball isn’t a winter sport!”

They didn’t chuckle at my joke. We all know we got lucky. Gorzod didn’t make an appearance during our escape. Instead, we got a layupodon to help us out. Luck. Me leveling

up when I did? Luck. The spell working first try? Luck, luck, luck.

There's only so many rolls of the dice before that luck runs out and we've been rolling them like gambling goblins.

"I know it isn't our fault," Passandra said quietly, more to herself than to me. "I just wish I could stop feeling like it is."

"Alright, I think this is where we'll be stopping for the night," Stopford called out. We were nearing the end of the lake that the river from the jungle had fed into. "Gather as much water as you can as this is the last clean supply until we get to the capital. Gerald, can you search in that bag of yours for some canteens or waterskins?"

"Talk later," Passandra said, nudging Passanova in the ribs.

I nodded, popped open the bag, and thought about things that could hold water. I felt something rough bump my hand and pulled out a big animal skin fashioned into a bag. "This what you're looking for?" I asked.

"Ahh, perfect!" Stopford said. "Can you see if you have about a dozen more?"

"Let me see."

By the time the nuns finished making camp, I had finished pulling out everything the bag would give me that would hold water. Old bottles, jugs, vases that looked like they were worth a fortune, and a broken ceramic cup that had "For Tress" written at the bottom. I ran it through my hands and

felt its smooth surface before putting it back. Maybe that one was special.

Bill grabbed one of the vases and slid inside of it, making a hollow THUNK sound, followed by the silly flopping sound of his noodley arms slapping the sides. I could see his eyes peeking out through the hole and his noodley arms flailed out of the top like a kitten in a shoe playing with the laces. Thanks Bill. Big help.

“Hey Passandra, could you let Stopford know that I’ve taken everything out of the bag that I could find that would help?”

“Sure thing! You need to get some dinner. The nuns made a delicious soup. Just, don’t ask what it’s made out of.” Passandra laughed as she went to find Stopford.

As I made my way to the dinner line, I could hear whispers floating on the cold night air.

“Stopford trusts that boy with our lives?” One would say.

“We’re following a boy with a bag of tricks and a talking ball. God help us,” from another.

A heavy sigh escaped me, my breath visible in the cold air like a small white cloud of worry. I wish Dribbles was here to help. He always knew what to do and how to do it. I hope he’s ok, wherever he is. If those kobolds lay one finger on him I...

“Ahh, there you are, Gerald,” Stopford called to me. “Come, let us grab some food and have a quick talk.”

We sat by the fire with our bowls of mystery soup. Stopford took a spoonful and smiled. "Not bad, is it?"

I poked at mine. "Father... everyone seems to think that I'm meant to save them... They're all looking at me like I'm going to get us killed. I'm just a kid who wants to play basketball. I'm not meant to be a leader."

Stopford chuckled softly, the firelight flickering on his face. "Gerald, look how far you've already come. In a short time you've gathered an army of friends that would die for you. You saved us all from certain doom using a stinky disguise and a fart spell. You staved off worgs, orcs, and a layupodon all by yourself using just one spell."

"That's all luck," I said, spinning a piece of something with my spoon. "I'm just a kid."

He leaned in a bit. "Well, I suppose you are," he smiled, looking me up and down. "Just a kid, that is. But, there's something special about you. You'll learn in due time. Besides, you don't need to be perfect to inspire them. You've always risen to the challenge even when things look the most dire. They know that. After all, you saved them yourself. Show them you believe we can do this, one step at a time. They'll lift you up in time."

I stared into the soup. "You really think so?"

"I know so," Stopford said, clapping me on the shoulder. "You've surprised them all. Keep surprising them. Now,"

he said, lowering his voice, “there’s something I should have told you sooner.”

Chapter 2

Stopford leaned in closer, letting the light from the flames throw trembling shadows from underneath his face. I waited for him to tell me the secret with bated breath.

“Well?” he asked.

“W-well what?” I replied.

“Aren’t you going to ask?” he asked.

“I thought you were just going to tell me,” I said.

Stopford closed his eyes and leaned in even closer, practically on top of the flames. He inhaled through his nose causing the smoke from the fire to fill his lungs. He let out a raucous fit of coughs that echoed through the night. I waited, watching the fire drift its smoke towards him once more.

Smoke never bothered me. It usually strayed towards somebody else whenever I was near. I always found it odd that smoke from a camp fire usually found the person it would stalk for the rest of the night. Tonight, it found Stopford

After finishing his coughing fit, he leaned in again, the same shadows dancing across his face.

“You’re...”

“WOLVES!” A voice rang out.

“TO ARMS!” Stopford yelled, tossing aside his soup and grabbing his walking staff. “You should ready yourself. Quick, search in that bag for a weapon!”

I nodded and stuck my hand inside, thinking of all sorts of menacing weapons. My first thought was a dagger, but, with the luck I’ve had with them, maybe not. Maybe I needed to protect myself. I thought about how effective Dribbles’ shield had been, how it glowed in the night and how he was able to crouch behind it when we met Larry.

But, I didn’t want to take his shield. It meant so much to him that he was willing to go back in to become a meal for the Spider Queen. So I thought about any other kind of shield and popped my hand inside. My fingers raked across cold, brushed metal. I gripped it and pulled, and out with a THUNK popped a shield in the shape of a diamond with a peculiar purple hue across it. It had two new leather straps across the back of it and, spinning it around to the front, a laughing clown face stared right at me, shaped out of metal. It stared straight through me. I leapt back, dropping the shield.

Clowns. I can’t stand them.

“Come! Prepare yourself for battle once more,” Stopford called out, jumping towards the commotion. “Grab that shield and hurry!”

I hesitated but now wasn't the time for that. My friends needed me. I scooped up the wretched thing, strapped it to my arm, and charged in.

As I got closer to the conflict, I could hear the snapping and growling of the beasts growing louder. My heart hammered in my chest and the only thing I could smell was the smoke from campfires. The nuns yelled and screamed at the wolves, trying to get them back but it was no use. I saw them leap from the darkness and into the light of the fires. But yet, just past the fires, I could see figures moving and the reflections of glinting steel and...

Orcs! Gorzod's army was here already.

A bark came with a flash of white at the corner of my eye. I ducked, swinging my arms out to the side and turning my head upward to see a wolf leaping over me.

"Run if you want to live! Hehe!" A muffled voice sounded from my side.

I turned my head towards the voice and saw nothing but silhouettes and shadows in the dark.

"If you're going to live you better book it!" The voice called again. It sounded like it came from my arm.

"What is going on? Who is that?" I yelled.

"Don't worry about that now, I'm just trying to help! Take two steps to the left."

Confused, I obliged and took two steps to the left just in time to see a flash of steel slam down to the ground out of the corner of my eye. I spun around and saw the second largest orc I've ever seen, clad in massive heaps of rusted iron and leather, which frankly, seemed unnecessary. He lifted his sword with an effortless grunt and prepared to swing it again.

"Now, listen closely," the voice said. "Grab the bag and run deeper into the camp. Pronto!"

Not wanting to duel an orc twice my size wielding a sword as large as me, I did what the voice told me. I figured, at this point, mystery voices had a 50/50 chance of being a good thing, so I might as well roll the dice once more.

I grabbed the bag and ran deeper into the camp. The cold night air felt like icicles in my throat as I ran as fast as I could, the cold grass crunching beneath my feet.

"Duck."

I ducked. A wolf leapt over me from behind, tumbling into a fire sending sparks and smoke into the dry grass. In moments, the grassland was ablaze and the darkness around us quickly turned to day.

"Gather your friends and run to the mountains."

"Passanova! Passandra! Bill! Stopford! Where are you?" I yelled into the fighting, the icy wind carrying the hot flames ever closer.

I spied Bill's arms flailing in the distance and took off after him. "Bill! Bill! To me!"

Without hesitation, Bill pivoted ninety degrees towards me, causing the orc that was chasing him to fall over as he tried to adjust direction. Bill's face set into that now-familiar determined look he'd been wearing ever since we rescued the nuns.

"Where are the others?" I asked.

"I don't know. It looks like we're surrounded. What do we do?" Bill telepathed.

I looked around at the fighting. The wolves. The orcs. The fire. The nuns desperately trying to stay alive. Neither Stopford nor the twins were anywhere to be seen.

"Go into the mountains, you'll be safest there! Hehe!" The voice called out.

"What was that?" Bill asked, looking around to see where the voice came from.

"I don't know but whoever it is has helped me out so far. Do we listen?"

"Duck."

Bill and I ducked; him much lower than I, mainly due to him being about a foot and a half tall. A large lit log flew overhead and into a wolf, knocking it over in angry whimpers and snarls.

“Right. Mountains it is. Let’s go!” Bill telepathed.

I shook my head. “Not without our friends. Voice, whoever or whatever you are, help us meet our friends and lead the nuns to safety. If the mountains are safe for the two of us, it’ll be safe for all of us.”

I waited for a reply.

“Voice?”

And there was silence. Well, other than the wolves, orcs, nuns, fighting, and fire.

“Right then. Bill, are you ready to try something?”

Bill gulped, his body bathed in the red and orange hues of the fire that surrounded us.

“Yep. What’s the plan?”