

R.P. MCG'S
SLAMIDALF
THE HOOP MAGE

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For Melba June McGowan

I miss you, Grandma.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the wonderful and wonderfully talented Cam Kendell for providing the cover drawing! He does all sorts of great work for awesome projects and he was gracious enough to spend his time on mine.

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 is available at no cost with the exact same distribution rights as the physical book is.

If you can't afford the book for your child, just grab the epub 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.

R.P. MCG'S SLAMIDALE

THE HOOP MAGE



Chapter 1

THE G.O.A.T.

The score was 3 to 20, and we were getting our butts handed to us. Game of 21. One more point and it was game over. The big L. At the time, I was a young Hoop Mage, clueless about the game's nuances. But there was one thing I knew for certain. I wanted to be the best. I wanted to be the greatest Hoop Mage of all time. The G.O.A.T.

And yet... here I was. Losing to a goat.

Luckily, it was our ball. Dribbles, my Dwarven mentor and coach, passed the ball to me. I quickly grabbed it out of the air and took off like lightning toward the hoop, weaving it back and forth between my hands, bouncing it off of the ground. Then I launched, soaring up with every ounce of hope in my bones. My arms outstretched, a slam dunk just inches away.

SMACK!

Pain exploded across my face. The ball wasn't in my hands anymore. It was ricocheting off my nose, courtesy of one smug goat. I crashed to the ground with a bone-jarring **THUD**, staring dumbly at the sky.

I'd just been blocked. By livestock.

Before I could even move, the goat scooped up the ball like a seasoned pro and flicked it to his robed teammate. The robed figure charged the hoop and slammed in the game-winner as the goat trotted after him, bleating in victory.

"I'll never be the G.O.A.T.," I muttered, burying my burning face in my palms, "if I can't even beat a goat..."

The goat let out a triumphant bleat. I peeked through my fingers, catching its smug, square-eyed stare as it casually chewed its cud. I didn't speak goat, but I got the message.

"You suck, dude!"

Then, just to make sure I got the message, the goat strutted off, laughing like a maniac, and slapped hooves with the robed figure.

"We got'em good, eh boss?" The hooded figure snorted.

"I'll never become a real Hoop Mage if I can't even beat a goat," I muttered again, sinking deeper into my misery.

That's when my coach, mentor, and, well, let's be real, only friend, Dribbles, plodded over and stuck out a hand.

"Better luck next time, *Slamdalf*," he said with a grin so wide it had to be on purpose.

I froze. Slamdalf? *Slamdalf*?! That wasn't my name. I was Gerald the Great! Not Slamdalf the Failed Dunker. Not

Slamdalf the Slammed-Into-the-Ground-by-a-Goat. It was insulting. It was humiliating. It was... painfully accurate.

Dribbles' grip was like iron as he hauled me up, his squat frame steady as a stone wall. He looked every bit the battle-hardened dwarf. Bushy beard, scarred knuckles, a face that had clearly wrestled its way through more than one tavern brawl. But those sharp green eyes of his twinkled with something else. Mischief. Wisdom. Maybe both.

"I need to practice," I snapped, brushing dust off my robes. "I'm not letting myself lose to a goat. Not like that. Never again."

Dribbles just chuckled, waddling away with his beard bouncing like a second chin. "First you're gonna sleep, Slamdalf. Then you're gonna eat. You can't win games half-dead. Come on. Back to Dribbleton."

Dribbleton. His name for his "village." Which was really just his hut. One hut. One dwarf. And, I guess, me.

I followed Dribbles home. My shoulders sagged. My feet dragged. Everything just sagging and dragging. He was awfully cheerful for a coach who saw his star student lose like that. Well, I was his only student but still! His pride and joy! His future hall of famer! His... Slamdalf.

Each step felt heavier than the last as the game replayed on a cruel loop in my head. Could I have jumped higher? Moved faster? How did the goat steal from me like that? How did he teleport in front of me on that dunk attempt? Did he

teleport in front of me? Was he that fast? Am I too slow? That's it, I need to be faster! I need to get the ball more, and I...

POING

POING

POING

Dribbles was always dribbling. Always. Didn't matter if we were eating, sleeping, or running for our lives. He had that ball in hand, bouncing like it was part of his heartbeat. On the walk back it echoed off the dirt road pounding into my skull while I tried to replay the humiliation in my head.

His hut finally came into view. A squat, stone structure wedged between two knotted trees. The thatch roof sagged like it was tired of existing, and the crooked porch leaned hard to the left as if it had given up long ago. A battered basketball sat on the porch, rolling lazily with the breeze.

"Ayy, make yourself at home, lad, while I cook dinner." Dribbles barked cheerfully, ducking inside before I could even groan.

A cacophony of scents, smells, grunts, and groans came soaring out from the kitchen. Something hissed like it was either food or a small animal caught in the fire. Dribbles grunted, shouted, then laughed like a mad scientist I sat in his tiny dwarf chair, waiting patiently, thinking about the

game. I couldn't get comfortable. After all, I was trying to sit in a chair half my size. Or maybe I was thinking too hard.

The hut itself looked like the inside of Dribbles' brain had exploded into four walls. Shelves crammed with books stacked taller than me. Maps rolled and tossed everywhere. Artifacts, or possibly just broken junk, strewn about without rhyme or reason. I had already gone through his stuff a hundreds times before. Just a bunch of old dusty junk. No idea why he kept it around.

At last, Dribbles emerged, triumphant, holding aloft his creation.

"Here you go, Slamdalf!" he boomed, setting down a plate like it was a royal feast.

On it sat a macaroni and troll cheese taco. The macaroni slumped out the sides like worms escaping a bucket. The troll cheese glistened with a greenish tint that suggested it might already be alive.

"I'm not hungry. And my name is Gerald," I muttered, pinching my nose.

"Eat up," Dribbles said, ignoring me completely. He jabbed a stubby finger from plate to mouth. "We've got a long journey ahead."

"What do you mean?" I asked, eyeing the taco like it might attack. Normally, this was my favorite. But this...

Dribbles slapped a map down beside the plate. His thick finger landed square on a point scrawled in dwarvish ink. “We’re headed for Pasadena tomorrow.”

I stared at the taco. I stared at the map. The taco oozed.

I did not enjoy my taco.

Chapter 2

NET GOBLINS

The morning sun slipped through the hut's one crooked window and landed square in my eyes like it had been waiting all night just to ambush me. I groaned, rolled over, and buried my face in the pillow. No use. The light pierced through my eyelids, dragging me out of whatever scraps of sleep I'd managed.

Dribbles, of course, was already up. He bustled about the room with a spring in his stubby step, cinching straps, stuffing gear, humming a tune that sounded more like random noises than anything cohesive.

"Ah, you're finally up!" he said, voice annoyingly chipper. He hoisted a bag onto the table with a grunt. "Ready to kick off this adventure?"

Adventure. That word was heavy in my ears. I liked it here. But, I did want to get better.

It was supposed to be a three-day march to Passadena across the Paint Plains, and Dribbles had every detail memorized. Roads, rocks, resting spots, probably the exact number of pebbles we'd trip over along the way. He spent most of the night studying it and I wondered if he got any sleep at all.

As he checked his supplies, he fished out a fat ring of keys, metal clinking like tiny bells. His thick fingers lingered on one in particular. He held a rusted, weather-worn thing that looked like it had opened doors a century ago. His eyes softened for a breath before a sigh slipped out.

“What’s that one for?” I asked, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

Dribbles blinked, then gave a laugh a little too quick. “Huh? This? Oh, nothing. Nothing at all.” He shoved it aside and rattled the rest like loose change. “Ah! Here we are.”

He slid the right key into the lock, gave it a twist, and the hut gave a final *click* behind us. With a firm nod, he tucked the whole ring deep into his bag like he didn’t want to think about it anymore.

“Alright then! Off we go,” he declared, pulling a basketball from nowhere and setting a steady *poing poing* rhythm as he walked.

He was kitted out in his usual getup. Baggy green basketball shorts, a red leather tunic stretched across his stout chest, and a backpack that somehow rode his shoulders like it had no weight to it. I tugged at my bag, groaning at the weight. It might as well have been filled with bricks. Maybe boulders.

And so our journey began with the sunrise at our backs, the Paint Plains ahead, and...

POING

POING

POING

Dribbles had started to dribble again.

“Why do you always do that?” I asked, falling in step behind him.

“Do what?” He glanced over his shoulder, innocence plastered across his bearded dwarven face.

“Dribble. Constantly.”

“Well, you can’t travel if you’re dribbling, and I hate traveling,” he said with a grin.

“But... we *are* traveling.”

He stopped mid-bounce, gave me a sidelong look, and winked. “No, only the person with the ball can travel. But I’m dribbling. So I can’t.”

I decided to let it go. I didn’t want to anger him. An angry dwarf is not something you want to mess with. Especially Dribbles. When Dribbles gets angry, his eyes narrow down to a point that barely passes over his bulbous nose.

The Paint Plains unfolded before us: rolling hills drenched in wildflowers, tall grasses bowing to the wind in waves of color. Above, morning light stretched in lazy pastels. Blues, pinks, a painter’s dream spilled across the sky.

POING

POING

POING

Dribbles was too short to see any of it. His eyes barely poked above the grass. Maybe that's why dwarves loved their little diggy-holes. I was about to ask when, suddenly, the dribbling stopped.

Dribbles froze, finger to his lips. "Shhh."

I blinked, scanning the meadow. Nothing.

"I don't hea..."

"SHHHHH," Dribbles hissed, glaring at me.

He dropped low. Lower than what you think. Somehow, shrinking closer to the dirt, which was already impressive given his height. I followed suit, crouching, afraid to be the one to get caught.

Dribbles duck walked toward me, every step exaggeratedly slow, then jabbed a stubby finger at the horizon. "There. You see that?"

I squinted. Honestly, at his height I wasn't sure how he saw anything past the grass. But then...

"I don't see a... oh."

Net Goblins.

Ugly little beasts, and worse than ugly, they were hungry and mad about it. Hangry. They smelled like old socks soaked in swamp water, and they had one favorite food. Basketballs. Not just any basketballs, though. No, they craved the ones a Hoop Mage had touched. The ones where the magic clings to the leather like gum stuck under a school desk, tacky and impossible to scrape off. They'd lick it clean if they could. And if they couldn't get the ball? They'd settle for a mage. Or two. Or a mage and a dwarf.

What I'm getting at is this was less than ideal.

"Okay, Coach," I whispered. "What's the plan?"

Dribbles stroked his beard, thinking. "What magic spells do you know?"

I counted them off on my fingers. "Telekinesis. Leaf Fall. Spring Step. And Light. You know. The basics."

He frowned. "No fireballs? No lightning bolts?"

I shook my head. "Nope. Just the basics for me." I gave him my brightest grin, proud as could be.

Dribbles pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. "Well, we could use polymorph, ice armor, thorn whip, meteor shower, dazzling colors, spitfire flame burst, or earthquake." He peered at me hopefully. "Any of those?"

I shrugged. "Can't say that I do."

Another sigh. Deeper this time. "We'll make do with what we have."

With a grunt, Dribbles shoved the ball into my chest. I nearly dropped it as he set his backpack down and plunged his arm deep inside.

The POING of the basketball echoed a little too loud across the plains. The Net Goblin heads snapped up. Their beady yellow eyes locked on us, drool dripping from their jagged mouths as they started lumbering closer, snorting and snickering like pigs at feeding time.

Meanwhile, Dribbles was still muttering to himself, elbow-deep in the bag. "Where is it, where is it... ah-ha!" He yanked out a massive horned helmet, followed by a shield so broad it could've doubled as a dinner table. Both were absurdly too large to have fit in the backpack.

I gawked. "How did you?"

"No time," he barked, strapping on the helmet and bracing the shield. Then he looked at me dead serious. "Toss me."

"What?"

"Toss. Me."

I snorted. "I can't even lift you."

"Not with your arms," He wiggled his stubby fingers mockingly. "With your *magic*."

I stared at him. "You want me to do what? Catapult you?"

“At. Them.” He gripped his shield like a battering ram and bent his knees, ready to launch.

I shrugged, raised my hands at him, and wiggled my fingers. This spell didn’t need me to say anything; I just had to think. The harder you think about the spell, the better it works. Or, at least that’s what the scroll said.

So I thought real hard.

Dribbles shot into the air like a cannonball.

“YAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

His battle cry curdled into panic.

*“WWWHHHHAAAAAAT DID YOU
DOOOOOOOOO?”*

He cleared the Net Goblins entirely, sailed a good few hundred feet, and slammed into the ground with a bone-jarring **THUD**. His shield clattered like a dropped gong. At least he was wearing his helmet.

The goblins blinked, looked at one another, then turned as one. Their long tongues licked their lips as they lumbered toward the dazed dwarf.

Whoops.

Chapter 3

THEY FEAST

The sun had dipped below the horizon, drowning the plains in shadow. Crickets chirped. Distant owls hooted. My nerves buzzed. I'd been searching for Dribbles and the Net Goblins for what felt like forever, ready to admit defeat, when a sharp, acrid scent stung my nose.

I froze. Sniffed the air. My eyes went wide.

"Burning basketball rubber!" I gasped. "I must hurry!"

Nose first, I crept through the dark. The smell grew stronger, and soon a flickering orange glow licked at the rocks ahead. Firelight danced up the jagged cliffs, throwing long, grotesque shadows across the stone.

I inched my way forward and my stomach churned as the scene came into view.

Three Net Goblins hunched around a campfire, their warty faces bathed in the sickly glow of burning rubber. They chattered with delight as they roasted basketballs skewered on sticks like marshmallows. One of the balls caught fire with a *FWOOSH*, belching black smoke. The goblins cheered,

clapping their clawed hands together, drool sizzling as it hit the flames.

The biggest goblin had a hunched back, his beady eyes glittering like oily marbles that gleamed with a cruel glint. The kind that might steal your last morsel of food from under your nose.

Beside him sat another goblin, a permanent grimace stretching his face so wide it looked painful. Rows upon rows of jagged teeth jutted out like rusty blades. He wasn't the biggest, but his grin made him the meanest-looking of the bunch.

The smallest goblin was... well, small. His patchy black hair looked like it had been painted on with a frayed paintbrush. His bulging eyes stuck out so far they looked ready to pop. Honestly, he looked like someone had smacked him in the back of the head and forgot to stop.

And there, at the edge of the firelight, I spotted something half-buried under a pile of nets. A familiar horned helmet...

Dribbles.

I knew I had one shot to get this right. I had to be sneaky. Super sneaky. The sneakiest guy you ever saw.

I inched forward, each step as light as a feather, until I was close enough to work my magic. I wiggled my fingers, focusing on Dribbles' beard. A little telekinetic tug should wake him up.

If you didn't know, dwarves don't take kindly to anyone messing with their beards.

"This'll wake him up," I thought, grinning. I gave his beard a yank, maybe a little harder than I meant to, and...

"YOWCH!"

Whoops.

I froze, my breath caught in my throat like I had just swallowed an apple whole. I held my breath there, glancing at the Net Goblins to see if Dribbles' yelp had drawn their attention, but they were kept in a spellbound gaze by the sight of the flaming basketball, their beady eyes glistening as they cackled and howled.

"Hey, who did that?" Dribbles growled, twisting his neck, glaring into the dark. His voice was gravelly with sleep and irritation.

Panic hammered in my chest. "If I draw attention to myself now, I'm toast!" I whispered to myself. But I couldn't just leave him tied up either. If I cut him loose, he'd hit the ground with a **THUD** that'd wake the dead, or worse, catch the attention of three hungry goblins.

Think, Gerald, think! There was a fire... there was rope... there was...

Eureka!

I wiggled and waggled my fingers, focusing every ounce of magic I had on the goblins' precious bonfire. With a quick sweep of my hands toward the sky, the burning logs and skewered basketballs shot straight upward like a rocket launch.

The Net Goblins let out startled screeches as they watched their precious fire shoot off into the night sky.

"MY BALLS!" one screeched. Its voice scratched through the air like rust on a tin can.

I didn't have much time to act. I wiggled and waggled my fingers again, focusing on the fiery logs hovering above. They began to float there. *Feather Fall* was a success!

With the Net Goblins gawking slack jawed at the floating fire, I slipped around the backside of their camp, silently working on the knots binding Dribbles. My fingers flew like quicksilver, fumbling, tugging, twisting I was being sneaky—really sneaky. Like a *really* sneaky guy.

The rope gave way with a snap.

"What'd you do that for?!" Dribbles hissed, his beard bristling with righteous indignation. "I had 'em *right where I wanted 'em!*"

He was mad.

Mad about Net Goblins.

Now, you might not know this, but Net Goblins aren't exactly geniuses. They'd left Dribbles' backpack right beside him. And I can't stress this enough. You never, and I mean *never*, want to hand an angry dwarf his backpack.

Dribbles reached into his backpack and pulled out a gigantic axe, twice the size of the pack itself. He hoisted it with ease. His eyes blazed with dragon fury.

With a roar that rattled my ribs, Dribbles charged.

"I'LL GUT EVERY LAST ONE OF YA FOR WHAT YOU DID TO MY FAVORITE BASKETBALL!"

The Net Goblins froze for half a heartbeat. Then their eyes bulged, their knees knocked, and they bolted like startled squirrels, tripping and tumbling over each other in a panicked stampede.

Dribbles thundered after them, axe swinging in wild arcs, moving with the fastest, angriest, wobbliest waddle I'd ever seen.

Chapter 4

HOW MEMORIES ARE MADE

I spent the rest of the night searching for Dribbles, keeping the floating fire logs in sight so I wouldn't get lost. The dark had never been kind to me.

When I was just a little wizard apprentice, I'd been tasked with collecting spider silk from the Net Weavers. Nasty job. They're specially bred spiders, trained to spin the silk for basketball nets all across Ballendore.

One time, I slipped. Fell straight into their webs. And let me tell you. I'm a wizard, not an acrobat.

The silk clung to me instantly, thick and sticky, stronger than any iron chains could possibly be. I thrashed and fought, but every movement only wrapped me tighter. The Weavers began to creep closer, their long legs gliding silently across the cavern floor.

Before long, they had spun me tight, layer upon layer, until I was trapped inside their cocoon. It was pitch black in that cave, and soon, I could barely see anything, their webs even covering my eyes.

The Net Weavers themselves were monstrous with bodies big as boulders, legs spindly as javelins. They used the hairs along their legs to help them weave the strands into the silks we'd harvest for basketball nets. Their bodies were large and round, and they had tiny heads. But their eyes... those two human-looking eyes gleamed from their tiny heads, watching me. They almost looked sad. Or maybe that's just how they always look. Sad, and hungry.

I still shudder whenever I think about it.

To their credit, the Net Weavers had kept me alive by feeding me little scraps of whatever bugs wandered into their webs. It turns out they weren't trying to kill me. Instead, they were just making sure I didn't fall deeper into the cave. Noble, perhaps. Horrifying? Absolutely. Ever since then, seeing anything with more than four legs makes my own skin feel like it's crawling.

The night stretched on, quiet except for the hiss and crackle of the dying log beacon. It had been a few hours since I had last seen Dribbles rage into the darkness and the light from the floating log beacon was beginning to die out. Just as I was about to give up, a silhouette cut against the twinkling night sky.

There he was. Dribbles stood atop a hill like a dwarf-shaped war god, pumping his axe in the air.

"That'll teach ya nasty snots to mess with a Dwarf!" he roared into the heavens.

Relief washed over me. “Dribbles! You old fart! I thought I lost you!” I shouted, scrambling up the slope.

He grinned, beard shaking as he bounded down toward me. “No wonder ya lost to that goat, Slamdalf! Throwin’ me like a sack o’ bricks!”

That jab stung more than I wanted to admit. I hadn’t meant to toss him like that. Fear had done the throwing for me. But, maybe I did need a little practice.

But then Dribbles clapped me on the shoulder, his laughter booming. “Still, ya saved my hide. And for that, wizard, you’re my hero.”

He slid his axe onto his backpack and reached in shortly after, pulling out a basketball and tossing to me.

The instant my fingers closed around the ball, a blinding aura burst forth, wrapping me in a cocoon of radiant energy. My body locked up, every muscle twitching as a surge of raw power ripped through me. My hands shook uncontrollably, my heart pounded like a war drum, and the air itself seemed to crackle and hum with my pulse. My knees buckled under the weight of it all, yet somehow... I felt stronger, every cell buzzing with a power I had never known.

“What... what is this?!” I gasped, my voice cracking under the shockwave of power storming through me.

Dribbles just crossed his arms, grinning like a proud coach. “Ayy, you’ve leveled up!” He flashed me a thumbs up,

a wink, and a nod that jiggled his beard. "You're getting stronger!"

"Stronger?" The light ebbed, fading into the night, but the charge still thrummed in my veins, alive and restless. "But... why?"

"Because you assisted me, lad!" Dribbles' eyes twinkled as if the universe itself had just confirmed one of his theories. "Like in basketball! Help yer teammate score, and you get stronger too. That's how the game's played!"

I blinked, half in awe, half in disbelief. "You're telling me magic depends on... basketball rules?"

"Aye!" Dribbles said, puffing his chest. "Now stop askin' daft questions and focus that new power of yers. Maybe this time, try somethin' with a bit more, how should I say... ***boom.***"

The thought of untapped power simmered in my mind, sparking possibilities I'd never dared imagine.

Now, on to Passadena.

Chapter 5

MEET PASSANDRA

The rolling hills of the Paint Plains came to an abrupt halt, as if the earth itself had grown weary of stretching and decided it was time to take a long, deserved rest. Rising from this sudden stillness was Pasadena. At first glance, the town didn't look like it had been built so much as coaxed out of the land. Its low stone walls and squat, square-shaped buildings blended seamlessly with the golden-brown rock that underpinned the plains. It was as if the hills had been carved down into neat blocks and stacked with purpose.

The streets, wide enough for two ogres to pass with ease, were alive with motion. Merchants shouted from stalls piled high with desert melons and prickly fruit. Children darted between carts, bouncing ragged basketballs off the stone-paved ground, their laughter mingling with the braying of pack animals. Clay pots overflowing with desert succulents clung to windowsills, their blooms exploding in flashes of red, yellow, and violet that broke up the monotone sandstone. Every doorway seemed to boast an old, sun-bleached hoop nailed above it. Some cracked, some bent, others still proudly intact.

I paused for a moment at the edge of town, letting the air sink in. There was a smell to Passadena, warm and spicy, like clay baked in the sun mixed with the faint sweetness of flowering cacti.

It was then that I noticed her. A slender elf in traditional elven basketball gear strode toward us, waving with casual elegance. Her long blonde hair flowed like spun silk, shimmering with each step as though the very air bent to highlight her presence. Emerald-green eyes fixed on us with a gleam that suggested mischief, or perhaps just the confidence of someone who knew exactly how striking they were. Even her uniform, neatly pressed and spotless, seemed to carry its own glow, whether from a meticulous hand-wash or perhaps a quiet pulse of elven magic. As she approached, I noticed that her skin had a dark violet hue to it, something that I had not seen elves have before.

She stopped a few paces away and puffed out her chest with the exaggerated pride of an actor taking center stage. “Welcome to Passadena! I’m Passandra, mayor of this great town!”

“Ayy, nice to meet ya! I’m Dribbles, and this here’s my pal, Slamdalf!” Dribbles jabbed a thumb in my direction, nearly poking me in the ribs.

“Uhh... hi! I’m Gerald the Great!” I blurted before my brain could stop my mouth.

Dribbles' eyes narrowed, and I felt his glare burn hotter than fire. My shoulders slumped. "I mean... I'm... Slamdalf?" I corrected, my voice wobbling on the final syllable.

His face softened, and he gave me the tiniest nod, followed by his trademark thumbs up.

"Whoa, another hoop mage! Cool!" Passandra exclaimed, her emerald eyes brightening as though she'd just discovered a new star in the sky.

Another hoop mage? That was rare. Most of us had taken portals to other worlds, looking for something more than just basketball. No dragons to slay here, no grand quests, no sinister plots or lich kings to conquer. Just hoops.

"Who was it?" I asked, curiosity prickling my mind.

Thoughts of who this mysterious mage could be flitted through my head. Was it the Bounce Weaver? The Hoop Whisperer? Could it have been the Shot Master himself?

"He called himself 'The Trickshot Kid,'" Passandra replied with a nod.

"The Trickshot Kid?" I thought. The name didn't spark even the faintest flicker of familiarity. Never heard of him.

Dribbles just shrugged, as if mysterious hoop mages popped up every Tuesday. "Well, none of that matters much right now. I'm lookin' to teach my friend here how to pass the ball. You, uh... know anybody?"

Passandra arched a perfect eyebrow, the kind only elves can manage. “Do I? Why, I’m the best passer this side of Ballendore! But why does a hoop mage need to learn to pass?”

“Well...” I muttered, my cheeks heating up from embarrassment. I lifted a finger and pointed to the big, ugly bruise blooming across Dribbles’ forehead; a souvenir from his less than graceful crash landing with the Net Goblins the night before.

Passandra’s eyes widened slightly, then softened. “I see... Well, don’t you worry. I’ve got just the thing to get you up to speed in no time!” She pursed her lips and let out a sharp whistle that echoed down the streets.

Almost at once, people began to appear. Humans, elves, even a few pixies no taller than my ankle, all bustling about like ants after rain. They collected our gear with careful hands. One elf politely accepted Dribbles’ deflated and partially melted basketball, the one the Net Goblins had skewered.

“Ayy, if you know anybody that can repair this, please do,” Dribbles said, handing it over with the reverence of a priest offering a relic.

“We’ll get that taken care of for you,” Passandra promised. Then her grin widened, mischievous and dazzling. “But first, you need some rest and food. Come! Passadena has the finest Macaroni and Troll Cheese Tacos in all the plains!”

This time, the tacos were incredible, and I stuffed my face well into the night.

Chapter 6

THE BLORT

“Please bring me the Blort!” Passandra declared, her voice echoing through the courtyard like a trumpet.

“The... what? The Blort?” I glanced over at Dribbles, who wore a puzzled look.

“What’s a Blort?” I asked outright, hoping for clarity.

A sly smile tugged at the corners of Passandra’s lips. “This... is a Blort.”

She gestured toward the strangest sight my eyes had ever been cursed, and blessed, to behold. At first glance, it was a basketball. Round, orange, familiar. But then my brain registered the extras. Arms. Legs. Feet. Big blinking eyes. A mouth. *Teeth*. Hair sprouting like weeds after rain. And that mouth... did I mention it had a mouth? Yeah, it had a mouth. And it stunk. It stunk *real* bad. Like socks left inside a cheese grotto after a long hike. Not good. Not good at all.

“Do they normally stink like that?” I asked, pinching my nose.

The belch rattled windows, sent a flock of birds screaming into the air, and left the faint aftertaste of old cabbage hanging in the breeze.

"Now that the Blort has been fed, go ahead and pick it up and pass him to me," Passandra said breezily, as if giant sentient basketballs belching root vegetables was just another Tuesday in Pasadena. "But, remember, *never* bounce a blort!"

I crouched down, eyeing the peculiar little gremlin-ball. "Hey, uh... Blort? Can I pick you up?"

The Blort nodded rapidly, its toothy grin somehow both encouraging and deeply unsettling. Was it about to burp in my face? Bite my nose off? Hug me? I wasn't sure which option terrified me most. On second thought, it stunk so bad I had wished it had bitten my nose off. That was the clear choice.

I reached out, sliding my arms under its bouncy, squishy frame, and hefted it up. The Blort was surprisingly light. It weighed the same as a basketball did despite having more to it than dried basketbough fruit skin and air. And, then it hit me.

"Eureka!" I exclaimed, holding the blort while eyeing it over. I knew what my new spell was going to be.

"What's that?" Dribbles asked, his eyebrow climbing higher than a startled squirrel up a tree.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” I said quickly, brushing him off. No way I could explain my thought just yet.

I turned back to the Blort, bringing it closer to my face. “So, you don’t like being bounced?”

The Blort’s eyes went wide. It shook its head so fast its hair flew about in little greasy streaks.

“Why?” I asked, narrowing my eyes, curiosity sparking hot in my chest.

The Blort stuffed an entire hand in its mouth, cheeks puffing out, then yanked it free with a grand, dramatic flourish.

“Oh... so you puke?” I guessed.

The Blort nodded eagerly, relieved I’d cracked the code.

“Good to know,” I said, then lobbed him toward Passandra. “Think fast!”

The Blort pinwheeled through the air, arms and legs flailing, gurgling with glee. Passandra darted forward like a whisper on the wind catching him with the grace of a falcon dipping its claws into a lake to catch a fish. Then, in one seamless motion, hurled him back to me. She was a master at work. Light as a feather, precise as an arrow, and as deadly as something particularly deadly.

“Alright, pass it back,” Passandra said, snapping me out of my awe.

I obliged.

“Now, Slamdalf,” she called, settling into a runner’s crouch. “I’ll cut to the basket. You hit me in stride.”

“Got it.”

She took off in a blur. I flung the Blort and immediately knew. Disaster. The throw was awful. Terrible. The worst thing that’s happened to this town since somebody bathed the blort. I’d passed to where she *was*, not where she was *going*. Rookie mistake. And if the Blort hit the ground he’d be furious. I had no potatoes on hand to calm him down, either.

And that’s when it hit me. I knew what to do. My new spell!

Time slowed. I flailed my fingers, desperate for anything, and I mean anything, to happen.

POOF!

A puff of smoke engulfed the Blort.

POING!

He bounced off the ground with a cartoonish **thud**, like a rubber ball hitting the ground.

Passanova skidded to a halt, eyes wide with horror. “Did you... did you just kill the Blort?!”

“N-no!” I stammered. “At least... I don’t think so.” I scurried over. “Hang on, let me just uh...”

I scooped up the now Blortless basketball, wiggled my fingers, and...

POOF!

The Blort popped back into existence, wearing the most pleased, potato-drunk grin imaginable just before spattering his half-digested potato across my face, jersey, and hair.

“Well,” I said, dripping with starch. “At least he’s happy.”

Dribbles gawked. “How did you do that?!”

“That’s my new spell,” I declared, chest puffed. “I call it... *Polyblort!*”

Dribbles buried his face in his palms. “Not exactly the kind of explosive magic we talked about...”

Note to self: Polyblorted Blorts are still Blorts even when they’re in basketball form.

Chapter 7

GAME DAY

I had slept well that night and awoke perfectly rested. For once, I let myself relax, soaking in the rarest treasure of all. Peace and quiet.

SLAM!

The door nearly flew off its hinges, hitting the wall to its side, splintering the wood.

“GOOOOOOOOD MORNING! MATCH TIME, BABY!” Dribbles bellowed, charging in with the grace of a runaway rhinoceros.

I jolted upright. “Our... match?” I croaked, mid-yawn.

“Yep!” Dribbles grinned so wide it looked like his face might split in twain. “You and me versus Passandra and her pal, Dribblynn!”

I groaned, rolling out of bed and tugging on my jersey and shorts. It was news to me. Apparently, I had a game to play.

By the time we shuffled onto the court, a roaring crowd had already packed the stands. Humans cheered. Elves waved banners. Gnomes sold snacks out of popcorn helmets.

Faeries buzzed overhead like fireflies. The arena was alive and I could feel its energy course through me.

Dribbles and I ran through our usual warm-ups, him dribbling like a maniac while I tried to remember how my knees worked this early in the morning.

“Are ya ready?” he asked, eyes blazing, bouncing on his toes with excitement.

I nodded, clutching the ball. Ready. More ready than I’d been the day that goat dunked on me. Barely. I was a Hoop Mage. I had all the power in the world at my fingertips. I could do this. I can do this. I will do this.

Then I looked across the court.

Passandra stretched gracefully, golden hair flickering in the sunlight as she moved about.. Next to her loomed her “buddy.” Dribblynn. Not an Elf. Not even close. A Troll. A mountain stuffed into a basketball jersey that looked one sneeze away from exploding. His shoulders alone could’ve flattened me like a pancake.

TWEEEEEEET!

A faerie referee zipped to midcourt and blew her whistle, the shrill blast rattling my eardrums. My stomach instantly fell into that pit that shows up at times like these. My knees wobbled like jelly. The nerves came too and they were some of the worst I’ve ever had.

“Ayy.” Dribbles put a steadying hand on my shoulder. His usual booming grin softened into something surprisingly kind. “One basket at a time, Slamdalf. One basket at a time.”

The faerie referee squeaked out the rules, wings buzzing furiously to stay at ear height. “Half court only! First to twenty-one wins! All buckets worth one!”

“Know what that means?” Dribbles asked, elbowing me with enough force to nearly knock me over.

I nodded, fighting to keep my composure. I knew the rules. Half court, offense and defense on the same side. First to twenty-one wins. No long range threes, no and 1's, nadda. Pretty simple. Pretty terrifying.

“Are both teams ready?” the faerie referee chirped through her whistle.

“Yep!” Passandra answered, flashing a confident smile.

“Ayy!” Dribbles shouted, already squaring up against Driblynn, the Troll wall. He was a speck against the troll. Poor matchup.

Was I ready? No. Not even close. But the game wasn't going to wait for me to find my courage. It was time.

“BLORT! BLORT! BLORT!” The crowd's chant rumbled through the arena like thunder. Elves stomped their boots. Trolls pounded their chests. Gnomes shook blort shaped balloons. Or maybe they were basketballs.

And then he appeared. My little Blort friend waddled onto the court, arms swinging with each step, and his goofy grin plastered in place as if he'd been waiting for this moment his whole life.

He stepped up to the center, looking each of us over. The Blort put a hand to where a chin might be if he had one, contemplating with an exaggerated expression of deep thought. The crowd hushed, hanging on his every wobble. What could he be planning?

Then, with the gravity of a king deciding who lived and who perished, the Blort toddled over to me. He stared up at me with those wide, shiny eyes... and unleashed a burp so violent my long hair flapped in the breeze.

BUUUUUUUUUURP!

The faerie ref clapped her tiny hands. "Ball goes to Slamdalf!"

The arena exploded in cheers. Dribbles whooped. Passandra groaned. Dribblynn cracked his knuckles like boulders grinding together.

Me? Well, it was now or never. This was it. The match had begun.

Chapter 8

OUTSMARTING A TROLL

Game start.

I passed the ball to Dribbles, who shot forward like a firework blasting towards the hoop, his stubby little legs pumping furiously as he dribbled with shocking speed for somebody his size. The ball thumped against the court in a rapid rhythm as he weaved between Passandra's outstretched arms, bouncing it between his legs in a ridiculous little jig.

Passandra's eyes narrowed, but Dribbles gave her a sly wink as he juked left. She lunged to stop him and ate dust as he hip checked her straight into the crowd. A cluster of pixies went tumbling like bowling pins as she crashed through them.

At the net, Dribblynn loomed. The Troll was a mountain in sneakers. He hadn't even bothered to move, just stared blankly ahead, a long string of drool dangling from his lips. It dropped onto his stomach with a wet splat and started sliding down like a slug. My stomach churned.

"Ball!" I shouted, sprinting into the lane.

Dribbles saw the opening and hurled it my way. The ball smacked into my hands, and adrenaline surged. I leapt, feel-

ing the rush of air, lining up my shot. For a brief, glorious moment, I saw it: the ball sailing true, the crowd roaring, Slamdalf the Great rising to the occasion...

... until a shadow blotted out everything.

Dribblynn had finally moved, lumbering toward me like a landslide in slow motion. His massive hands rose higher, higher, and higher still until he completely erased the basket from existence. I couldn't see a thing. My brain screamed, *Guess and pray!*

I flung the ball.

Silence.

Not even a peep from the crowd.

I watched the ball fly up and over the mountain, vanishing behind his huge form.

And then...

The crowd let me have it.

"Aiiir baaaaaall!" they chanted, drawing out every syllable with cruel delight. The ball arced wide and smacked harmlessly against the ground before bouncing out of bounds.

Dribbles and I shared a look. We both shrugged at the same time, as if to say, *Yep. That was terrible. New plan needed.*

Passandra had already popped back up, brushing dust off her uniform as if nothing had happened. It was their possession.

She snatched the ball, skipped to the sideline, and hurled it high over my fingertips as she passed the ball in. Dribblynn raised one lazy arm, caught it like an apple falling from a tree, and simply dropped it into the hoop with a dull *thunk*.

“Point for the Pasadena Passers!” the referee exclaimed as his wings buzzed with excitement.

The stands erupted. Pixies cheered. Trolls stomped their feet, rattling the bleachers. Someone tossed a half eaten taco into the air that landed on a poor bald gnome child's head. They didn't seem to notice.

Dribbles rubbed his chin, analyzing the situation. “Alright, Slamdalf, you take the Troll. I'd do it meself, but he's got, oh, about ten of me stacked end-to-end on a good day.”

Now, you might be wondering why I didn't just use my telekinesis on the ball to get it into the hoop. And that's a fair question. A very fair question.

See, Hoop Mages can only cast a certain number of spells per day, and I'd chosen to focus on *Polyblort*. What I hadn't told you is that I spent the time between waking up and playing the game casting Polyblort over and over again on my little friend. What can I say? I liked the Blort and he was enjoying it.

Anyway. Back to the game.

It was our ball, so I inbounded to Dribbles, who immediately passed it back to me. I started in towards the hoop. But then,

Passandra darted in like a bolt of lightning, cutting me off. I tried to dribble between my legs but one quick swipe from Passandra loosed the ball from my control.

The two of us went back and forth trying to gain possession of it. If only I hadn't spent my day casting Polyblort this wouldn't be a problem! I felt like she was playing with me. Toying with me. She was a cat and I was a mouse. She was the eagle soaring overhead and I was the little fish minding his own business enjoying his swim in the lake.

After a frantic struggle, I managed to take control of the ball, but Passandra closed in, blocking every path with her arms out wide. She was covering me like jam on toast.

But then, an idea. I dribbled the ball a little carelessly. A little too loose. Too predictable. The perfect bait... and she took it. Passandra stole the ball and with one flick of the wrist, she tossed the ball high toward Dribblynn.

But this was part of my plan. A genius plan. The smartest plan that I've ever had. A terrible, brilliant, wonderfully stupid idea that was bound to work.

As the ball soared through the air, I wiggled and waggled my fingers, focusing every ounce of my magical will on that ball. Dribblynn raised a hand the size of a wagon wheel, snatched it from the air, and grinned.

POOF!

The ball exploded into a puff of smoke, replaced by a very startled Blort, blinking wide eyed in Dribblynn's massive hand.

The Troll froze. Then sniffed. Then grinned wider. A little bit of drool dripped down his tapestry of a jersey.

"Oh no," I whispered.

GULP.

Down went the Blort. Whole. Like a meatball.

The crowd gasped. Somewhere in the stands, a pixie fainted.

The referee zipped over, wings buzzing furiously. "FOUL!" she squeaked, blowing his whistle so hard he flipped upside-down. "No eating Blorts on my court!"

Dribblynn blinked, confused, and burped a tiny puff of glitter.

Passandra groaned, pressing a palm to her face. "Dribblynn... we talked about this."

The referee escorted Dribblynn to the sidelines to sit on the bench. This was too egregious a foul to continue to play. Dribblynn shrunk up on the bench, face in his hands, with tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Ronaldo, you're up!" Passandra called, letting out a whistle.

The game was just getting started.

Chapter 9

NOW OR NEVER

The score was tied 19 to 19. Next team to score twice would win the game.

With Dribblynn out, Passandra had no choice but to rely on her apprentice, Ronaldo the Vacant. (And trust me, the nickname was earned.)

Unfortunately, they had possession. Passandra inbounded to Ronaldo, who immediately tossed it back. She sprinted toward the hoop. Her eyes locked in on victory, just two more points away. She leapt high, lining up for a clean shot. I was a second too slow and I scrambled to close the distance. She was wide open.

Swish.

Dribbles unleashed a torrent of dwarvish curses that could sear the bark off a tree. My gut clenched. One more basket and it was over. Another loss. Another failure.

But Dribbles' voice cut through that defeatist mind trap like a knife. "Snap out of it, Slamdalf. Let's win this."

Something in me came back.

I took the ball, feeling the rough, familiar bumps under my fingertips. I took a deep breath, letting the air fill my lungs. Exhale. Time to go.

I passed the ball to Dribbles who got to the top of the key where Ronaldo met him. He waited for me to get into position before passing the ball my way.

"Let's go," I muttered, half to him, half to myself before smacking the ball between my hands.

I charged down the court, pounding the ball like a war drum. Passandra closed in, but I spun once. Twice. My hair whipped around me as I went. For a heartbeat, I was free. The basket was mine.

Then, just as fast as it came.

Gone.

The ball vanished from my hands. Ronaldo had slipped in like a thief in the night, snatching it from me. He moved away from the basket, turned, and rose for the shot.

Dribbles and I froze, watching as the ball arced high. It looked good. Perfect, even. This was it. The end of the game. Another loss. I slumped my shoulders and dipped my head in shame.

"Aiiiiiir baaaaall," the crowd rang out.

I looked up just in time to see the ball sailing my way. I guess I had a bad mental image of what a perfect shot looked like.

"Grab it and shoot, lad!"

Just as the ball touched my hands I began my shot. The air was electric. I was wide open. I could see Passandra scrambling my way, her mouth moving in slow motion mouthing "Noooo" as the ball left my fingers.

Silence. Not even the popcorn gnomes made a sound. I could feel the thrumming of my heart in my chest. Sweat ran down my face and stung my eyes but I kept on watching the ball as it sailed closer to the net.

Swish.

The crowd erupted in cheers, but only for a moment. The score was 20 to 20. All eyes were on the game. Every man, woman, child, gnome, troll, fairy, dwarf, and otherwise living creature in the area waited with bated breath. Who was going to win?

Passandra took the ball and bounced it back to me. Half court rules. Somebody has to help inbound the ball.

I passed it right back, and she immediately lobbed it to Ronaldo, who took off down the lane. Passandra lingered at the back, watching, assessing. She had a plan.

I drifted toward the hoop, ready to back up Dribbles if things went sideways.

Ronaldo pump faked. Dribbles took the bait, leaping into the air much higher than I expected a dwarf could. In a snap decision, I lunged in from the side, desperate to block

the shot but Ronaldo spun on his heel and dished it to a wide-open Passandra.

My stomach plummeted.

Before I even landed, Passandra rose up with the due grace and undue confidence that most elves carried and released the ball. She touched down as light as a feather, turned to the crowd, and gave a smug little bow like the game was already over.

The arena exploded in cheers. Then, fell silent.

POING!

The ball clanged off the rim and shot straight into the air, spinning, suspended as if the world itself was holding its breath.

Time slowed again.

I stared up, every heartbeat a thunderclap in my ears. Sweat trickled down my palms. The weight of the game pressed heavy on my shoulders. My eyes locked onto the ball as it began its slow descent, every fraction of a second stretching out for an eternity.

This was it. The last moment before loss or legend.

Something stirred inside me, a spark deep in my chest. Power hummed through my veins.

I locked eyes on the falling ball.

This was my moment.

Chapter 10

BLORT THIEF

BEEEEELCH!

The thunderous roar of a troll burp shook the arena, rattling the stands like an earthquake. A Blort rocketed through the air, drenched in troll bile and mystery goo, spinning end over end in a glorious arc of grossness. Stomach sludge rained across the court as the Blort collided mid-air with the spinning basketball...

SMACK!

... sending both tumbling downward with their momentum shattered, hanging there in the air for a single breathless moment before gravity tugged them back to the earth.

I tore across the court, my legs pumping as hard as my heart allowed. My eyes darted between the falling shapes, trying to tell ball from Blort through the spray of slime. I leapt, stretching every fiber in my body to their limit. My fingers fingers closed around something slick, squishy, and *horrifically* stinky.

The Blort.

Of course. It had to be The Blort...

To my left, the basketball bounced once. Ronaldo swept in like a shadow out of the corner of my eye, scooped it up, and with fluid, practiced grace, launched his shot.

The ball traced a perfect arc, slicing through the air...

Swish.

The crowd erupted. Cheers thundered through the stadium.

Game over.

We'd lost. By one point.

The weight hit me like a boulder to the gut. Another loss. Another almost. Another "*We'll get 'em next time, champ.*"

My shoulders sagged until I felt a firm hand clap my back. I turned. Dribbles was grinning, eyes shining.

"Ayy, we did good. We'll get 'em next time, champ."

Before I could answer, Passandra strode over, radiant, and seized my hand. She thrust it high into the air like I'd just won a championship.

"Everyone!" she cried. "Your *true* winners of the match!"

Passandra laughed, spinning to face the crowd. "They cracked my strategy, saved the Blort from a fatal landing, and

gave us the greatest game of the season! Three cheers for our heroes!”

“Hip hip hooray!”

The crowd roared, each cheer louder than the last.

Dribbles threw his arm up beside mine, grinning from ear to ear. “See, champ?” he said. “We did good.”

Maybe he was right.

We hadn’t won the game, but we’d given it everything we had. Even the Blort joined the celebration, letting out three enthusiastic burps and a triumphant little blip. Later, I’d learn that was the highest honor a Blort could bestow.

The court exploded with joy. Music, laughter, and the smell of food filling the night air. Dancers twirled, jugglers tossed Blorts, and a cheese vendor proudly hawked “fresh troll-aged curds” (compliments of Dribblynn). Lanterns floated above, painting the courtyard in gold and amber light. It was a celebration of the highest order and one of the most ram-bunctious I had ever seen.

But eventually, even the wildest parties slow down. The music softened, the laughter dimmed, and the crowd drifted away, one by one. Dribbles and I found a quiet spot on a bench, our limbs heavy with exhaustion. I leaned back, eyes half-closed. The ache of losing still lingered in my chest... but so did something else.

Warmth. Pride.

I hadn't won the game but I'd saved a Blort from an untimely end. I suppose this was a fate worse than being eaten by a troll, judging by the reaction of the crowd.

I guess that counted for something.

But just as I was drifting off...

Zzzzip! Zzop! Zzap!

A harsh crackle ripped through the silence. My eyes snapped open. The air shimmered, alive with static. Blue light spilled across the floorboards, slipping through the gap in the curtain.

"What in the blazes..." I muttered, pushing myself upright. I stumbled to the window and pulled the curtain aside and froze.

In the courtyard below, a swirling portal burned bright as lightning, its edges sparking and spinning like the rim of a storm. At its center stood a tall, robed figure, face hidden, with a wriggling sack slung over his shoulder.

Inside the bag... something *burped*.

Then a voice screamed from the shadows. "SOMEBODY STOP HIM! HE HAS THE BLORTS!"

Adrenaline blasted the sleep from my veins. "Dribbles! The Blorts need us!"

He bolted upright, groggy and disoriented, still half asleep from the night's feast and drink, hair and beard pointing this way and that way. "Wha? Who? Huh?!"

"Grab your gear!" I put on my jersey, shorts, and shoes. "There's no time to waste!"

Dribbles snatched up his pack as I flung open the window. We climbed through, hitting the ground running and racing toward the portal. The figure turned, took one last glance over his shoulder, and leapt into the swirling light. The portal's edges flickered, starting to close. We pushed harder, covering the ground fast.

Only a few feet left...

Chapter 11

A WHOLE NEW WORLD

As I stepped through the portal, a rush of energy washed over me, tingling from my fingertips to my toes. Blues and silvers swirled all around, the colors twisting and stretching like ribbons in a storm, tugging me forward with invisible hands. A deep hum vibrated through my bones, thrumming in rhythm with my heartbeat. It was exhilarating, terrifying, alive and tugging at my skin.

Then, with a final lurch, the colors bled away. Blue faded into violet, violet to a smoky orange glow, until the swirling storm unraveled into stillness.

I stumbled forward, sneakers crunching against stone, and found myself standing in a vast, shadowy landscape. The air was heavy, thick with mist, and the horizon was painted in dull purples and distant embers that licked into the darkness. A massive marble archway loomed behind me, ancient and cracked, the last flickers of the portal pulsing weakly within its frame.

Gulp.

I turned back just in time to see Dribbles tumble through, arms flailing about as he tried to keep balance. With a final

shimmer, the portal sealed shut snuffing out with a *whump* that echoed once, leaving only silence. Wherever we were, we were trapped here now.

Dribbles groaned, brushing dust from his beard. "Next time, let's bring a map, aye?"

"I don't know what good a map is going to do us. It's a bit dark for sightseeing," I chuckled. "You got a light?"

He grinned, rummaging in his bag. "Course I do."

And to my surprise, he pulled out not one, but two already lit lanterns.

I blinked. "How... how are those lit in there?"

Dribbles gave a proud nod. "It's a carriers pack! Holds anything I put into it, even a Blort!" He grinned as he reached in again, and **POP!** Out jumped a Blort, bouncing to the ground with a soft, squeaky thud.

The Blort blinked up at me, eyes wide as saucers and mouth agape, then waddled over and hugged my leg with a happy burble.

"Hey, it's you!" I said, smiling. "You're the same Blort from the game. The one I'd saved!"

He looked up at me, eyes glossy with worry. He knew his friends were in trouble.

Suddenly, he grabbed my jersey and yanked, pointing ahead with a wet, gurgling grunt. I followed his gaze and froze.

Rising up from the horizon like a bad curse you couldn't lift, a massive, dark castle loomed from the mist. Its jagged silhouette clawed at the sky, half hidden behind coils of drifting fog. Its spires pierced the darkness above, disappearing into the clouds.

"How did I not see that sooner?" I muttered under my breath.

The Blort burbled urgently, tugging harder. I glanced at Dribbles. He gave a grim nod. No more stalling. No more pretending we hadn't noticed the haunted fortress staring us down.

We trudged towards it.

As we walked, the mist thickened with, clinging to my skin and seeping into my bones. Its taste was faintly metallic and it reminded me of blood. Somewhere in the distance, faint, mocking laughter echoed through the hollow trees surrounding us. I shuddered. I wasn't built for the spooky stuff, and this was spook central.

Dribbles led the way holding the lantern high, its glow barely slicing through the fog. Gnarled branches loomed out of the gloom, twisted and grasping, snagging at my clothes like bony fingers. I yelped as one caught me, rubbing its bark against my side.

As the fog thinned, the castle took shape. Towering walls of blackened stone, pitted and cracked with age. Moss crawled over the surface in slick green veins and tangled vines coiled

up the battlements like serpents looking for a way in. Slender windows stared down at us, narrow and watchful, glinting faintly in the lanternlight. The spires rose crooked and menacing, like the claws of some ancient beast.

“Look there!” Dribbles suddenly shouted, pointing skyward.

Something passed overhead. Just a silhouette at first, barely visible through the dim moonlight. My heart lurched. Wings. Enormous wings, leathery and slow-beating, stirring the fog with each flap. A long, coiled tail snapped back and forth like a whip.

“Is... is it getting closer?” I stammered, my voice trembling in fear. The hair on the back of my neck prickled as the figure flew behind a cloud.

Dribbles dropped his pack with a heavy **thud**, rummaging through it with the urgency of a man who just jumped off of a cliff and realized he forgot his parachute. His hands closed around something metal, and with a grunt, he yanked free a shield nearly four times his size.

“Get ready to duck behind this,” he said, planting it into the ground with a ringing **clang**.

The shield shimmered with a faint golden glow, the emblem of a hammer striking an anvil blazing across its surface.

“Okay,” I whispered. “So maybe basketball’s not his only thing.”

Above us, the shadow descended. Its wings beat the air with thunderous **whomps**, each one scattering the mist in like waves crashing against the shore. The ground itself seemed to shrink beneath its looming shape as it neared.

“Now!” Dribbles hissed.

I dove behind the shield just as the world **exploded**.

THUD

The impact shook the earth like a giant’s fist. A wave of hot, fetid air rolled over us, thick with the stench of sulfur and rotten... well, I wasn’t sure but definitely rotten. My skin prickled under the heat and the smell burned the back of my throat and nose.

The creature’s breath came in ragged gusts. Deep. Guttural. Each exhale rattled my chest. My heart pounded so hard I thought it might leap out of my chest.

I clenched my fists as I pressed against the shield and braced for whatever came next, closing my eyes against the darkness.
Don’t look. Don’t look.

Don’t look.

Chapter 12

HI, I'M LARRY

“Hi, I’m Larry. Larry the Manticore,” said Larry the Manticore.

I peeked out from behind the shield and my eyes turned to saucers. He wasn’t joking. Seven feet of rippling lion muscle. His golden mane bristled like a halo of fire. A scorpion tail as long as a troll is tall coiled lazily behind him, the stinger dripping something that sizzled when it hit the dirt. Massive eagle wings folded neatly at his sides, each feather gleaming in the lantern light. When he exhaled, it sounded like how I imagine an angry furnace might sound as it huffed away. When he smiled... way too many sharp and pointy teeth.

“Uh... hi,” I managed, stepping out from behind the shield. “I’m Gerald the Great, the, uh... the Hoop Mage.” I gave a quick bow that was only slightly awkward. “And this is my coach, Dribbles.” I pointed to the dwarf poking his out from behind the shield. We’re, uh... looking for Blorts.”

Larry grinned revealing even more of his teeth. I decided it best to stop counting at 65. “Well, you’ve come to the right *and* wrong place for that!” he said, letting out a laugh that shook the ground below me. “Used to be Blorts everywhere.

Couldn't take a step without tripping over one. But then the orcs showed up."

"Orcs?" Dribbles asked in a tone I had never heard from him. "I've not seen an orc in quite some time."

I had never heard of such a thing. "Oar-cuh?" I asked.

"You know, big, green, your height but meaner. Real nasty fellas with really bad tempers. And they eat Blorts. They love them!" Larry chuckled again, his tail swishing with each laugh.

I gulped. The Blort at my side squeaked nervously.

Dribbles crossed his arms. "Speaking of eating... what about you? Fancy fresh meat?"

"Me?" Larry puffed up proudly "I'm a vegetarian. Strictly potatoes these days. Blorts taste like rubbery hairballs, and I *hate* flossing. All that hair just gets in the worst places." He grinned, flashing fangs the size of my forearm. "Besides, I don't like food that looks back at me."

The Blort hesitated, then toddled forward with its stubby little arms raised. Larry gently extended one massive paw and gave the little guy a careful shake, claws retracted, of course.

"Oh, a brave one!" Larry said, giving the Blort a wink. The Blort gurgled proudly, puffing out his round belly like a knight awaiting knighthood.

Dribbles lowered his shield and slid it back into the bag, eyeing Larry warily. Larry tilted his massive lion head, studying the dwarf with a toothy (and boy, do I mean toothy) grin.

“Ahh, I can see you’ve been through some adventures,” Larry mused, his golden eyes flicking toward the overstuffed pack. “That bag’s seen quite the miles hasn’t it.”

“Aye,” Dribbles said with a smirk. “And now I’m teachin’ this Hoop Mage how to play basketball.” He paused, eyebrow raised. “You wouldn’t happen to know what that is, would ye?”

Larry shook his head, arching an eyebrow. “Can’t say I have. We don’t get many visitors, except for the occasional wizard. Folks around here tend to keep to themselves.”

Dribbles sighed. “Aye, didn’t think so. It’s a wonderful game where two teams...”

“Well, anyway,” I cut in, eager to steer things back on track before Dribbles launched into a full lecture, “we’re looking for the orcs. We think. They’ve captured some Blorts. Do you know where they’re keeping them?”

Larry’s grin faded into a grimace. He turned, pointing a paw toward the hulking silhouette ahead. “The Grimlight Palace. Once a jewel of Blortsylvania... now a fortress crawling with orcs. They took it after the king and queen vanished about twenty years ago. It used to shine like gold in the sun. But now?” Larry looked back.

I followed his gaze. The castle loomed against the bruised sky, its towers crooked and cracked, windows glowing faintly with sickly green light. The wind carried faint, guttural chanting of what I guessed were orcish voices echoing through the mist.

Larry sighed, rustling his wings. “The drawbridge only drops for their robed leader, or when the patrols march out. They’ve locked the place up tighter than a dwarven vault. But...” His grin returned. “I *could* fly you up to one of the towers. In exchange for a tiny favor.”

My eyes narrowed. “What kind of favor?”

Larry’s tail swished eagerly. “Potatoes.”

“Potatoes?” I repeated.

“**Poe-tay-toes**,” Larry said reverently, eyes half-lidded in bliss. “Golden, starchy treasure. Boil ’em, mash ’em, stick ’em in a stew, fry ’em into crunchy little sticks and, oh, gods above, I can almost taste them...” His stomach growled like distant thunder. Or maybe it was thunder. It was hard to tell in this forsaken place.

I blinked. “...That’s it? Potatoes?”

Larry nodded solemnly. “Bring me the spuds, and I’ll take you wherever you want.”

I glanced at Dribbles, who shrugged like this was the most normal request he’d ever heard.

“Well,” I said, “how hard could *that* really be?”

The Blort burbled in agreement. Somewhere in the mist, thunder rumbled... ominously. Or maybe it was Larry's stomach.

Chapter 13

THE PROBLEM WITH POTATOES

“Go back the way you came, and when you find the fork, take the left path. After a short way, you’ll be at the farm,” Larry had said to us as we walked, his voice fading behind us as we trudged off into the mist.

We followed the winding road, the dirt path lay slick beneath our boots. The air grew thicker with every step; cool, damp, and heavy, and it clung to my skin like a wet blanket. My legs ached as my feet squelched in the mud. The lantern’s glow flickered, swallowed by the fog curling low over the ground.

At last, through the pale haze, a shape emerged crooked and hunched against the horizon. A farmhouse, or what was left of one. Its outline wavered like a ghost in the morning gloom.

The closer we got, the worse it looked.

The walls sagged inward, the wood blackened and splintered by rot. The roof had collapsed into a tangle of beams and moss. A shutter swung limply from one hinge, creaking softly in the breeze like the sigh of something long dead. The place felt... hollow. Forgotten.

Even the earth seemed weary of making an appearance. Patches of brittle grass and weeds choking what might once have been neat rows of crops. No birds sang, no insects chirped or buzzed. Nothing, except for the whisper of the wind as it dragged across the arid ground.

We stepped cautiously through the doorway. The air inside was still and stale, heavy with the scent of mold and damp wood. My footsteps echoed faintly in the silence. Abandoned, just like it looked.

Outside, the first weak light of dawn crept over the hills, bleeding across the mist. The fog swirled lazily over the mounds of earth that dotted the field; large, uneven heaps that caught the dim light and cast long, eerie shadows.

I shivered. Something about the place felt... wrong... off. Like the ground itself was watching... waiting.

“Well, guess we better start looking for some potatoes,” I said, though it seemed unlikely we’d find anything other than dead plants here. The place looked more likely to grow ghosts than crops.

“Over here!” Dribbles called out.

He stood by the far wall, his lantern casting shaky light across the boards. My stomach knotted when I saw what he was pointing at.

Carvings. Dozens of them etched deep into the rotting wood. Oval shapes with stubby arms and legs... and gaping

mouths full of sharp, pointy teeth. Rows upon rows, their eyes gouged into the timber like they were staring right at us.

A chill crawled down my spine. "What do you think it means?" I whispered.

Dribbles didn't answer right away. His face tightened as he set down his pack, pulled out his shield with a low scrape, and handed me a small dagger.

"Never know," he muttered. "Best you stay equipped."

The first rays of morning sun sliced through the broken window, casting long shadows across the floor. Dust drifted in the air like ash. I turned slowly, letting my eyes scan the corners of the rooms, the shadows, the warped floorboards. Something flickered at the edge of my vision, just outside.

"Hey, Dribbles," I said softly, gulping in an attempt to force my voice not to shake. "You... don't think those carvings are a warning, do you?"

"Dunno." His eyes darted towards me. "Why?"

"Well..." I swallowed. "I think I saw something move over there." I pointed out the window to where I thought I saw the movement.

We both turned. The world outside held still. Silent. The grass waved lazily in the breeze. Nothing else. For a long moment, we stood there frozen in place listening... watching.

Dribbles finally exhaled. “Ayy, maybe your imagination’s workin’ overtime. Still...” He raised his shield. “Keep sharp.”

That’s when we heard it.

A rustle.

Quiet. Almost imperceptible... but there.

Close, but just far enough away to not be quite sure.

The tall grass shivered, then stilled.

My fingers tightened around the dagger until my knuckles went white. I could hear my pulse pounding in my ears and I could feel it in my fingertips.

Another rustle. This time louder, closer, followed by the faint crunch of dead grass. Dribbles lifted his shield higher, his eyes peering just above the rim.

Something was out there watching, waiting, and moving closer.

The weeds thrashed, the rustling growing louder, closer, like a wave of claws scraping through grass.

Whatever it was, it was coming right for us and *fast*.

I inched toward Dribbles, my dagger trembling in my grip, my breath held tight in my chest.

WHOOSH!

Something burst from the grass.

The Blort came rocketing out like a bouncing ball of panic, arms flailing behind him as he went, eyes bulging out from their sockets. He gurgled a stream of frantic blips, blops, and bloops as he barreled toward us.

“Ayy, was just the Blort,” Dribbles said, lowering his shield with a sigh.

Unfortunately, it was not *just the Blort*.

The weeds behind him began to move again, gently rustling. Then violently.

One by one, shapes sprung free from the overgrowth. Large, heavy, and... lumpy.

That's when *they* stepped into view.

From the weeds emerged a dozen humanoid potatoes the size of Dribbles. Their bodies were bulbous and mottled with patches of rot, and covered in dozens of eyes. Dark, beady, and unblinking eyes that were scattered across their rough skin. When they shuffled forward, their feet scraped and squelched against the soil, like roots tearing free from the earth that fed them.

The Blort let out a terrified squeal and dove through the window, rolling into the house.

“Do we fight?” I whispered, gripping the dagger tighter.

Dribbles squared his stance. “We have to,” he said. “The Blorts are countin’ on us.”

Their many eyes fixed on us as they dragged themselves closer...

Chapter 14

SOMETHING COMES

As the first potato lurched through the window, Dribbles roared a thunderous “HYAH!” and brought his axe down in a blur. The blade split the creature clean in two. Chunks of starchy flesh slapped against the floor with a sticky splat. Its eyes still moved, watching. Another potato clawed its way in, only to meet the same fate. A sharp grunt, a flash of steel, and it was diced. Its rotting mass went down with ease.

But for every one he felled, two more pressed against the window, their lumpy bodies squishing together as they scrambled to force their way inside. The frame creaked under the weight of their numbers.

“Back up!” I shouted.

We retreated deeper into the room, step by step. The Blort, bless his brave, foolish heart, darted forward and threw a flurry of wild punches. His tiny fists thudded uselessly against a potato’s rubbery, rotten hide. *Thwop-thwop-thwop-thwop*. He tried his best but could only leave a dent where they were the squishiest. Which, if you didn’t know, dents don’t do much against zombie potatoes.

I tightened my grip on the dagger, its cold hilt slick in my sweating palm. My eyes darted between the window and the potatoes pushing their way inside, each one looking worse than the last. They came towards us with reckless abandon. Their smell began to overcome my senses; musty, earthy, like a root cellar gone bad. The feeling of rot and damp soil filled my lungs with every breath I took. Flies buzzed madly around the invaders, landing on their cracked skins as if they were already corpses. Some of them oozed brown and green sludge from their bodies, dripping behind them as they shambled.

The potatoes pressed harder, their blank eyes fixed on us, unblinking and hungry.

One potato tumbled through the window, dragging two more down with it in a heap of writhing roots and limbs. Three zombie potatoes now squirmed across the floor and who knew how many still outside.

I lunged forward, slashing wildly. My dagger tore through one with a wet, squishy *schlork*, spraying chunks of foul smelling mash across the floor. I wiggled my fingers to conjure a spell, hurling the mashed remains straight into their eyes. They staggered blindly, tripping over their own knobby feet.

Dribbles raised his shield high and slammed it down with a mighty **THUD!** The impact split a potato clean in half, sending a puff of earthy rot into the air. "That's how you mash 'em!" he grunted.

The Blort tried helping again. It scurried over to one of the remaining zombie potatoes and slapped it a few times, though it barely seemed to notice. After a moment, he looked up at me, confused and terrified.

“Here. Try this,” I said, handing him my dagger. “See if you can peel it.”

The Blort nodded, blipped, and then waddled back over to the zombie potato. With great enthusiasm, he began peeling it with the dagger. Strips of skin curled off in thick sheets until the zombie potato gleamed smooth and shiny... and still came lumbering forward.

“Oh no,” I muttered. “That didn’t help.”

The skinned brute lurched and grabbed The Blort by the leg, dragging him close and opening its mouth wide for a bite.

THWACK!

Dribbles’ shield came crashing down, flattening the thing into a mound of steaming, gunky, mush. Potato guts splattered across the floor, dripping from the walls like slime.

Dribbles wiped his shield with a grimace, then chuckled. “Mashed potatoes, anyone?”

Another potato zombie clambered through the window, but this time I was ready. I wiggled and wagged my fingers, magic sparking at the tips, and focused on the heap of mashed potato guts splattered across the floor.

With a sharp flick of my wrist, I sent the pile flying into the zombie's face. It had worked before, why not do it again? The creature staggered, blind and flailing, before tripping over its own stubby legs and collapsing to the ground...

Right on top of The Blort.

My heart lurched.

"The Blort!" I shouted, sprinting toward him.

No. Not my little buddy. I had to save him. I had to free him from the weight of that big, nasty, rotting potato.

But how? I couldn't use my magic. Not on something that size. My telekinesis only worked on things the size of a basketball or smaller. Mashed potatoes? Sure. But a six foot tall zombie spud? Not a chance.

Every step I took was another second wasted. I had to think fast. I had to reach him in time. I had to...

The pile twitched.

A gurgle bubbled up from the mess... then a dagger burst through the goo like a periscope, slicing wildly. Out popped The Blort, dripping in slime, blinking through clumps of mashed potato. He gave a victorious grunt, waved the dagger like a trophy then turned his mushy glare to me.

"Sorry!" I called, trying not to laugh.

He answered with an indignant *glurg*, shook a potato chunk off his head, and stomped back toward the window, ready for more.

Only a few more left. We could handle this. Or so I thought.

The ground beneath us began to tremble. It was faint at first, just a light rumble underfoot. Then it grew stronger. I could feel the vibration rising through the floorboards, shaking the entire room.

Dribbles' eyes met mine. The Blort froze mid-step, his dagger trembling in his grip.

Something was coming.

Chapter 15

MEET KING KING

The window frame gave a long, miserable groan as the floor quaked beneath us. Each boom outside rattled the walls harder than the last. More potatoes pressed against the cabin, their lumpy bodies squishing through the cracks like dough forced through a sieve. Splinters popped from the wood as the boards bowed inward.

We could hear them out there. Hundreds of soft, wet thuds as their bodies shuffled and bumped against the walls. A low, moaning squish rose from the horde, the sound of hundreds of spuds hungering in unison.

"I'm sorry I got you into this mess, lad," Dribbles sighed, putting his calloused hand on my shoulder. "Didn't think it'd end like this."

"It's... okay, friend," I put my hand on his. "Try to take as many of them as we can?"

Dribbles nodded once. A tear glimmered at the corner of his eye before he blinked it away.

Then the window frame splintered inward. A potato zombie had just begun to crawl through when a massive hand shot down from above and snatched it up like it weighed nothing.

“G-G-G-Giant!” Dribbles whimpered, his voice barely a squeak.

“**Fe fi fo BLORT!**” bellowed the voice from above. “**I smell the blood of a little... *uhhh*, Blort!**”

The Blort’s eyes went wide with terror, letting out gurgles in a panicked pitch.

“Don’t worry, little buddy! I’ve got you.” I wiggled and waggled my fingers, pouring every ounce of focus I had into the spell.

POOF!

Where The Blort had stood, a basketball bounced twice on the floorboards.

Above us came the wet, slobbering sound of a giant devouring something huge and starchy.

Then, a voice like rolling thunder boomed down from the heavens. “**Who dares enter my kingdom?**”

Dribbles trembled in his boots, clutching his shield close to his chest. I scooped up the Blortsketball and tucked him carefully into Dribbles’ magical backpack.

“Come on, we need to go,” I whispered.

“Ayy... just... give me a moment, lad,” Dribbles stammered, eyes locked on the enormous shadow spilling through the window.

The shadow grew larger until...

SMASH!

The world shook. The giant’s foot came crashing down outside, flattening the remaining zombie potatoes in a single, glorious stomp. The air filled with a puff of earthy dust and the scent of rotten starch.

“Well,” I said, catching my breath, “that’s what *I* call mashed potatoes.”

Dribbles didn’t laugh. Fair enough. Maybe this wasn’t time for a joke.

I scrambled to gather my things and shouted up through the shattered window, “Hello! We’re not your enemy! We, uh... we have some potatoes we can share!”

“**Share?**” boomed a voice from above. It was deep, resonant, and far too amused. “*Ha!* These are **my** potatoes! Have you been stealing them? Did Larry put you up to this?”

“Yes! Larry did!” I blurted, perhaps a bit too fast. “But,” my voice cracked, “we’re not from around here! We meant no harm! Maybe you could, uh, tell us about this place?”

The ground rumbled as the giant leaned closer. His breath smelled faintly of rotten potatoes and our certain doom.

“Certainly,” he said, his tone dripped with mock civility. “But first... tell me who *you* are. And why I’ve stopped smelling Blort.”

I swallowed hard, trying to push that nervous lump in my throat back down to my stomach, then stepped forward, sticking my head out the window.

“I’m Gerald the Great! Hoop Mage extraordinaire! Some call me... Slamdalf.” I gave my best heroic smile. “This here is my friend and coach, Dribbles the Dwarf. Give him a wave, Dribbles.”

Dribbles, shaking from head to toe, poked his arm out the window and gave a quick gesture, and darted back to the comfort of the half destroyed house.

“We hail from Ballendore,” I called out, “and I’m on a quest to become the greatest basketball player in history. But, someone stole all the Blorts from Passadena, and we’re here to bring them home! It was the right thing to do, after all. That’s also why you probably smell a blort.”

I waved up at the giant, grinning like an idiot.

The giant was enormous. Easily a hundred feet tall, maybe more. His shadow swallowed the entire field. His clothes were a patchwork of every fabric imaginable. Denim stitched to velvet, burlap sewn to silk. All of it like someone had raided a hundred wardrobes and decided to wear them all at once. The seams groaned in protest as they were barely holding together as they stretched across his belly.

Perched on his head was a crown that might've fit a toddler, cocked at an angle. His face was surprisingly soft for something that could squash a house, round and gentle like a babies except for the enormous wart on his chin from which sprouted a single wiry hair that swayed in the breeze like the branches of an old elm.

I cleared my throat, doing my best to sound casual. "So, uh... what's your name, big guy?"

The giant's booming laugh rolled across the hills like thunder chasing its own echoes. "The name's *King*. **King** *King*." He puffed out his chest with pride. "You can call me King King... or, you know, just King!"

He grinned, and for a moment it felt like the entire horizon was smiling back at me. Rows of teeth as large as wagons, glinting in the morning light.

Dribbles trembled beside me, gripping his shield so tight his knuckles had gone pale.

"It'll be alright," I whispered, trying to sound confident for both our sakes. "We're going to get out of this alive. Just watch."

Chapter 16

TRICKED!

For breakfast, King King and I bonded over every kind of potato dish imaginable. French fries, hash browns, mashed, wedged, skinned, scalloped, baked, and at least a dozen more ways I didn't know potatoes could be cooked. Between bites, I told him about our adventures. How I'd lost to a goat, how we defeated the Net Goblins, how we almost beat an elf named Passandra in a game of Basketball...

"Passandra? An elf?" His voice thundered across the farm.

"Yes," I said. "She taught me how to pass using Blorts. You know, they don't like being bounced and..."

King King exhaled so hard my hat flew off. "Oh, thank the roots. I'm glad she's alright. Her brother, on the other hand..." He sighed again, this time heavier, like a sack of overripe potatoes dropping off a wagon.

"Brother?" I asked. "And, you know who she is?"

He nodded slowly. "Twins. Passandra and Passanova. Their parents once ruled this kingdom. Well... until the manticores came." His brow furrowed, shadowing his eyes. "Passanova is why this place is the way it is."

"This farm being ruined is Passanova's fault?" Dribbles asked, chin in hand, eyebrows furrowing into the shape of a question mark.

"No," King King said quietly, at least for a giant. "Everything is his fault. The farms. The forests. The mountains." He stared toward the horizon. "Before the orcs came, Blortsylvania was a peaceful land. We raised Blorts for trade with wizards. Never knew what they used them for but the Blorts seemed happy to go."

His expression fell like the last fry out of the bottom of the bag.

Ok. Enough of the potato puns.

"But, Passanova betrayed us." King King's head hung low. "He used to be the prince of these lands. Back then, Blortsylvania was beautiful. Fields of flowers that shimmered in the wind, plains that rolled like waves as far as the eye could see, forests so thick with game you could trip over dinner."

He stopped, a tear welling in his massive eye. It hit the ground with a *splat* big enough to water several plants.

"Go on," said Dribbles, his earlier fear gone. "Tell us what happened."

"The kingdom came under siege by manticores. Vile things with wings, claws, and too many teeth for one face. Just like Larry but meaner. Nastier. Bigger. He's small for his kind. We were losing. The prince grew desperate and in that

desperation, he made a deal with a dark wizard to summon orcs to protect us, or so the rumor goes.”

“Orcs...” Dribbles muttered under his breath.

King nodded grimly. I was surprised he could hear Dribbles. But, I suppose giants do have big ears. “Orcs feast on Blorts. And on other small creatures... like humans. And dwarves.” He blinked, realizing exactly who he was talking to. “Ah. My apologies.”

King stared out toward the horizon. “After that, everything fell apart. The orcs devoured the Blorts. Our trade with the good wizards ended. And, when the wizards had no need for us, they left. So did most of the people.” Another tear rolled down his cheek, landing with a splash that drenched my boots.

I glanced at Dribbles. “Well, someone stole all the Blorts from the town we were in. Honestly, I’d never even heard of one before we got to Pasadena. Had you, Dribbles?”

“Can’t say that I have there, nor anywhere,” Dribbles said, scratching his beard.

I stared at him a moment longer. There, nor anywhere? The way he said it made me wonder. Where had Dribbles been before all this? Come to think of it, I don’t think I ever asked him about his past. Maybe he wasn’t just a coach after all.

I glanced toward Dribbles. “We came here to save the Blorts because... well, it felt like the right thing to do. But now?”

I looked back at the giant. “Now I’m not even sure what we’ve stumbled into. And we don’t exactly know how to get back.”

“If ya don’t mind me asking, Mr. King...” Dribbles began.

“King is fine, friend,” said King.

“Aye, apologies. If ya don’t mind me asking, King, are the Blorts from here?”

King nodded. “They are. This world is called Blortsylvania. Before the wizards arrived, it was just me, a few elves, and the Blorts. It was a peaceful and simple life.”

I thought for a moment, weighing our options. “King, it sounds like Passanova really wrecked things around here. But back home, his sister’s kind of a legend. If you could help us get into the Grimlight Palace, we could free the Blorts and get them back to Passandra for safekeeping. Larry said there’s a way in from the top.”

King’s laughter roared like an avalanche. It shook the ground, the log I was sitting on, and possibly even my soul. “Larry told you that, did he?”

Chapter 17

THE YAWNING CAVE

“Did Larry lie to us?” Dribbles asked with worry flickering across his face.

“Yes,” King said with a chuckle. “There’s nothing on top of The Grimlight Palace. No entrance. No way down. Zero. Zip. Nada.” His laugh rumbled across the valley like a rockslide.

“But,” King continued, lowering his voice to a rumble, “there is another way in. A cavern that starts not far from here and winds all the way into the castle’s dungeon. I’ll show you the way... if you’ll honor one small request.” He leaned in close, his breath like a gust of warm mashed potato.

Dribbles groaned, rolling his eyes. “Not another one...”

“Ha!” King’s booming laugh sent a gust of wind almost strong enough to knock us off our feet. “Fear not! All I ask is this! When you save the Blorts, leave a few behind. I will care for them in hopes that the wizards might one day return to right the wrongs done to this land.” He put his gigantic hand over his gigantic heart.

Dribbles and I exchanged a look. We still had no idea how we were going to get home but maybe, just maybe, we could help King King and Blortsylvania along the way.

“Alright,” I said, nodding. “You’ve got yourself a deal.”

“Splendid!” King thundered. “Follow me. I’ll take you to the cave’s entrance. But first, let’s gather up some lunch!”

After picking through and scooping up the non-rotting remains of the zombie potatoes and stashing them in his bag, Dribbles pulled out a basketball and began to dribble.

King tilted his enormous head. “What’s that thing? It looks... kind of like a Blort but without arms or legs or hair or eyes or a mouth.”

Dribbles and I burst out laughing. “This? This is a basketball,” I said. “We use it to play basketball. You’d make one heck of a defender though...” Dribbles nodded thoughtfully, already lost in strategies involving a 60 foot tall giant.

“I sure hope that’s not our friend,” I whispered under my breath, hoping King wouldn’t pick them up with his enormous ears.

“Shh. I... I need this right now,” Dribbles muttered, letting his worries bounce away with each *POING* of the ball.

Dribbles began to travel down the road, dribbling the ball, as he had always done. Dribbles hated traveling, and you can’t travel if you’re dribbling. Or, that’s what he tells me.

King told us to follow the road down a ways, to keep going straight, and that he'd meet us at the front of the cave. "You can't miss it," he said. "Or, at least you won't miss me."

When King King's heavy footsteps finally faded into the distance, I glanced over. "What did you do before you were a coach? You know, before you found me."

Dribbles' eyes stayed fixed on the road ahead. "Ayy, don't worry about that now, lad. Keep your eye on the road and your mind on the Blorts. Who else is gonna save them but us?"

He started whistling a very energetic tune at an obnoxious volume. I got the message. He definitely didn't want to talk about it. Not now, at least.

It was only a ten-minute walk before we saw the cave's entrance. The road to the cave was not well kept and had seen better days. Cobblestones were cracked, missing, or swallowed whole by slick, green moss that squished underfoot. Grass and weeds poked through every gap, waving like little flags of nature reclaiming its land. Mostly, it was a pain in the butt to walk on. King didn't seem to notice. Probably because he had feet the size of rowboats.

The cave yawned wide before us, jagged stone teeth jutting every which way like a monster mid-scream. The air around it turned cold enough to make my skin crawl, or, maybe that was just the feeling of a hundred invisible eyes watching from the dark. Well, that, and it was particularly spooky.

This did not look like a fun time.

“This is it. Creepy Crawler Cave! Or, as the locals used to call it, The Spider Queen’s lair,” King said.

“The *what?*” I croaked, frozen mid-step.

“Creepy-Crawler Cave!” King repeated, far too cheerfully.

“N-n-no. The *other* part.”

“Ayy, he said it’s The Spider Queen’s Lair,” Dribbles chimed in, ever helpful.

Spiders. Why did it always have to be spiders?

“Well, have fun!” King said, turning to leave. “I’ll try to cause a distraction in a few hours.”

Have fun, indeed.

Chapter 18

SPIDERS. WHY DID IT HAVE TO BE SPIDERS?

Lantern? Check. Shield? Check. Dagger? Check. Basketball? Double check. We were ready for whatever nightmare waited inside. Dribbles and I had agreed to keep The Blort out of harm's way.

The cavern stretched ahead, a narrow throat of stone lined with jagged stalagmites clawing up from the ground and stalactites dangling like broken teeth from above. Every step echoed against slick walls that seemed to lean closer, as if the cave itself was listening. The air grew colder the deeper we went, a damp chill creeping down my spine. When I looked back, I saw a massive hand waving farewell. I really hoped that giant hadn't tricked us too.

The cave wound on for what felt like miles, twisting left and right until we reached a fork.

"Ayy, looks like a fork. Good thing we already ate!" Dribbles said, cackling.

I rolled my eyes so hard I tripped.

To the left, the tunnel narrowed, its ceiling low enough that the stalactites would brush against my hair like a crones claws grabbing for me. The floor gleamed wet and uneven and the air stank of mildew and old secrets. We'd have to tread carefully through that one.

To the right, the tunnel widened. Almost *too* inviting. The walls were smooth, polished, as though someone, or something, had carved them with care. A soft trickle of water echoed from deeper inside, promising life... or luring us towards our death. The air was fresher, but wrong somehow. Too still and too perfect for a cave like this.

"Which way do we go?" I asked, eyeing both tunnels nervously like one of them might jump out and bite me. These were tunnels, of course, and weren't capable of such a thing.

"Larry told us to go left, and that was a mistake," Dribbles said, puffing his chest. "So I say we go left again. Can't be wrong twice!"

"That's not how probability works," I muttered.

Dribbles beamed a smile a mile wide through his beard. "Exactly."

"I don't know," I said, glancing down at the basketball tucked under his arm. "Why don't we ask The Blort? He probably knows the area better than we do. They're supposed to be from here, after all."

“Don’t be silly. That thing doesn’t know its head from its feet.” He shook the ball like a scolding parent. “So. Left or right?”

“Hmm...” I rubbed my chin, trying to look thoughtful. “We could flip a coin?”

“Ayy, well, with what coin do ye got?” Dribbles quipped, raising one of his bushy eyebrows at me.

“Don’t you have something like that in your bag?” I shot back at Dribbles, raising a not-so-bushy-but-still-probably-a-little-bushy eyebrow back at him.

He gave me a look. “Aye, I packed a dagger, a whistle, three spoons, a half-eaten sandwich, a single marble, and plenty of things I will not mention now... but no coins. Who carries coins anymore?” He was being overly sarcastic. He definitely had a coin. He definitely thought my idea was stupid.

I sat for a second, frowning at the fork. “If we go left, and it’s wrong, that’s two lefts that have been wrong. But, if we go right, and that’s not the right one, then that means the left one is the right one.”

Dribbles blinked. “Ahuh.”

“So, if the left one is the right one, and the right one is the right one, then we should definitely go with the left one, right?”

Dribbles stared at me for a long time with his mouth pooling a bit of drool in the corner as the wheels turned in his head. Then, he shrugged. “Can’t argue with logic like that.”

“Left it is!” I said, far too confidently for someone who had no idea what they were doing.

The left path squeezed tighter the deeper we went, until the walls were practically hugging us. There were places so narrow we had to turn sideways and shuffle through one breath at a time. One wrong move, and we’d be wedged in there like bugs in amber.

The lantern I carried was of little use as the shadows of the stalactites and stalagmites danced around the cramped walls. We had seen no creepy crawlies, bugs, or bats outside of the entrance of the cave. I sure hope we don’t...

Click.

My foot sank half an inch into a loose stone.

A pressure plate.

The walls trembled. The ground growled. Rocks scraped and shifted all around us.

“Now ye’ve done it!” Dribbles barked, yanking up his shield above his head.

A thousand tiny claws clattered against stone. Clicking. Skittering. Coming from every direction.

My blood turned to ice as I froze in terror. I'd heard that sound before. Once. And that was once too many.

I knew what was coming.

"D-D-Dribbles..." I whispered.

"S-s-s-SPIDEEEEERS!" I shrieked in terror.

Chapter 19

THE SPIDER QUEEN

Being wrapped by spiders is not a good time. You're picked up like a ragdoll and spun around while sticky butt wire wraps around you one little strand at a time. Each pass of those spindly legs wound me tighter, the silk pulling at my clothes and skin until I could barely breathe. Somewhere in the middle of my panic, one thought managed to bubble up.

Why does this stuff have to be so sticky?

The spiders hauled us through cracks and crevices barely big enough for a person, scuttling along walls and ceilings like it was nothing. We were swung left, dropped down, jerked up again, down walls, this way and that way, and around corners so fast it made my head spin. My stomach wasn't far behind.

Then, **WHAM!** One hard turn later, my shoulder smacked a rock wall. I winced but felt the blessed snap of webbing around my wrists loosening. A jagged stone must've cut through it. I flexed my fingers just enough to wiggle them. Phew. A little freedom. Not much, but I'd take it.

Eventually, the spiders dragged us into a massive chamber that smelled like something died. Like lots of something died.

The air was thick and damp, and the whole place shimmered with slimy, green glowing silk hanging from the ceiling. It pulsed faintly, lighting up the cavern just enough for me to see shadows of spiders scuttling in every direction.

As I glanced around the room, my eyes darting left and right for any kind of escape, I saw a towering figure creeping toward us. Out of the shadows came a gigantic spider lady... thing. Part spider, part human, part eww. Fortunately, the human half was her torso and head. In retrospect, I suppose nothing about this was fortunate at all.

This had to be the Spider Queen King warned us about.

The spiders chittered and chattered away as they dragged us forward, their legs clacking against the stone like a thousand bony fingers on glass.

“Ahhh... guests for dinner,” the Spider Queen hissed, though her voice soothed like silk. “What a lovely surprise! I do so love company especially when it’s so... fresh.”

She glided closer, her spider legs moving with unnerving grace, each step making a faint *tch-tch-tch* sound against the rock. Behind her was a glittering pile of treasure. I spotted our gear already tossed into the heap; Dribbles’ bag and shield, my dagger, and the basketball that was our friend, The Blort. Poor Blort. He was going to waste away as a basketball in a dark cave for eternity.

The Spider Queen’s long and numerous joints of her fingers wrapped around my body, gripping me tightly as she lifted

me off the ground. Up close, her “human” face wasn’t any comfort. Where her eyes should’ve been, there were *dozens* of them. Tiny, twitching this way and that, and unblinking. Each one whipping around from point to pint, sizing me up.

I tried not to scream. Or, maybe I couldn’t. Fear is weird that way.

“Hmmm...” she purred, spinning me in her hands like chicken on a stick. “Not much meat on this one.”

How rude. Not enough meat? What did she expect? A banquet? “*Great...*” I mumbled to myself through the sticky web goo. I’d been judged by royalty and failed their dietary approval. What’s next?

Well, I’ll tell you what was next.

She dropped me to the ground like a discarded apple core and then she grabbed Dribbles.

The Queen’s spindly fingers wrapped around his dwarven body like he was a stress ball, and she started spinning him around like she had done to me. Around and around he went, a dizzy dwarf tornado. But this time, she didn’t wear that look of disappointment in her cluster of creepy eyes.

No.

This time, she licked her lips.

Dribbles’ muffled screams for help came out as panicked hums from his web bound mouth, and his eyes darted to-

ward me, wide and pleading. His feet kicked helplessly, boots brushing against her armor-like chitin. I wanted to help. I really did. But I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't even wiggle my fingers but, wait.

Yes I could.

Eureka!

My hands! The sharp edge of that rock must've loosened the strands even more than I thought they did. I gave my fingers a little wiggle... a little waggle...

POOF!

I cast polyblort on the basketball.

The Blort blinked awake, letting out a yawn and smacking his lips as if he had been in a deep slumber for years. A moment passed. And then another. And another. Finally, after several moments, with Dribble still being spun by the spider, The Blort realized that something was wrong.

The Blort let out a little terrified squeak and dove behind Dribbles' bag.

Peeking out from the top of it, something caught its eye. His pupils grew ten times their normal size as he leapt into the pile of treasure. A few coins scattered like drops of water after diving into a lake. If we survived this I'd be sure to grab a handful for Dribbles' bag.

“Well, that wasn’t very useful...” I thought to myself, frustration and desperation bubbling up from within. Maybe Dribbles was right. Maybe The Blort was worthless.

At the top of the pile, half buried beneath gold trinkets and broken armor, was a dagger just barely within reach of my magic. It wasn't my dagger, but a different one. Shinier. Its outline shimmered faintly in the eerie green light, like it was whispering, "*Pick me, pick me.*"

I wiggled and waggled my fingers, trying to pull it toward me. The dagger gave a half-hearted twitch. Then another. Then, it wiggled right back in place.

Really? Now’s not the time to be shy! Come on, dagger!

No use. My hands were too tangled to shape the spell properly.

Dribbles was still in the Spider Queen’s grasp, her drooling mandibles hovering inches from his head. His eyes ran wild as his muffled screams echoed in the cavern.

The situation was looking dire. Dribbles was moments away from being dinner for a spider, and I was next. So much for the adventuring life. So much for basketball. So long, Dribbles. Tears started to drip down my face.

And then...

A voice I had never heard before echoed inside my head.

“Hey! Watch this.”

Chapter 20

OUR HERO IN NO ARMOR

I'd never had a voice enter my head before. Was I going crazy? It would make sense. After all, being about to get eaten by spiders could do that to a person.

I darted my eyes around the room, trying to find the source of the voice. Dribbles? No, not his voice. Too squeaky. The Spider Queen? No, hers is more hissy. So who could it be?

Then I saw him.

The Blort stood proudly, or as proudly as a basketball with limbs could muster, on top of the pile of treasure, waving his noodly arms like a maniac. In one hand he held a dagger, its dark hilt wrapped in leather, the blade etched with tiny spiderwebs. It gleamed like it had been carved from a fang. Around one arm dangled a delicate silver bracelet studded with green gems that caught the torchlight.

"Slamdalf! Watch!" the voice echoed in my skull again.

The Blort crept and crawled his way over to me. Or, at least it tried. His tiny arms and legs flailed around as if they'd never been used before. In fact, it was more like a wobble than a crawl. Its large eyes kept darting back and forth between the

spiders and I. Luckily, the spiders and their queen were too busy watching their soon to-be Dwarf meal to notice.

What luck! Because, stealth was not The Blort's strong suit.

"I am going to free you. Then, you'll free Dribbles. Then, we'll get out of here," the voice told me.

The Blort finally reached me and began slicing through the webs with the dagger I'd tried to summon to myself earlier. The sticky strands clung to my face like melted cheese between two slices of bread, coming off in glops. Once my arms were loose, I glanced toward Dribbles' bag, took a deep breath, and gave my fingers a wiggle and a waggle.

The bag zipped towards us like a silent bolt of lightning and landed gracefully in my hands. "Is that you in my head I'm hearing?" I whispered to The Blort.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I heard in reply.

I peeked into the bag. This was my first time looking inside of Dribbles special bag. He always seemed to have everything we needed in it.

Nothing.

Not leather. Not shadow. Not even the inside of a bag. Just... nothing. A bottomless void of literal *nothing*. I reached in, hoping for something. Anything.

Nothing.

"The Dwarf knows," said the voice. "Let's free him."

The Blort handed me the dagger. It felt strange in my hand and I felt compelled to hold on to it. It urged me to just take one... little... stab.

As quickly as that urge came, it went away. I had one chance. That's all I had.

I gave my fingers a little wiggle. Then a waggle. The dagger lifted from my hand and began to glide through the air toward Dribbles. The Spider Queen was still toying with him, dragging him back and forth like a cat with a ball of yarn. I had to be quick and careful with my magic. I needed the focus of a surgeon and the speed of... erm... something that goes really fast.

I positioned the dagger midair, guiding it toward the web binding Dribbles' arms. The knife wobbled back and forth as if a shaking hand was holding it. I needed to focus but all I wanted was to hold that dagger again, to feel the etched handle in my hand. To touch the cold fang in my hand once again.

I exhaled, closed my eyes, and continued.

"Down a little more. A little more. Hold it right there!" the voice said to me.

My head was starting to get light, and I could feel the weight of my focus hammering away at my brain as the Spider Queen continued to spin Dribbles around, examining her meal like he was a roast on a spit. That dagger is mine, not Dribbles.

SLICE

The Blort bounced on its toes, if it even had toes, letting out an excited, bubbly gurgle. Dribbles squirmed, flexing against the remaining webbing until...

The dagger cut through the sticky silken strands, freeing one of Dribbles' arms. The Blort stare excitedly at Dribbles, letting out a little gurgle with its open mouth. Dribbles began to squirm and flex a little bit when...

RIP

He tore himself loose. I shouted, "Grab it!" just as my focus cracked. The dagger dropped through the air, and Dribbles snatched it mid spin.

CUT

He slashed through one of the Spider Queen's legs. She screamed, a piercing, unholy screech that rattled the stalactites overhead. The sound was so sharp I thought it might split the cavern in two.

All around us, the spiders turned, their hissing chorus swelling into a wall of noise. Their chittering and chattering turned into a thunderous hiss.

They'd finally seen us.

The Spider Queen reeled back in pain, letting out a cacophonous screech that echoed like a banshee through the cavern.

The chittering and chattering of the spiders turned into a thunderous hiss as they had finally seen us.

“GET ME MY BAG!” Dribbles roared.

It was time to make spider kabobs.

Chapter 21

DRIBBLES' BAG

Bags come in all shapes and sizes. Some are little coin pouches that jingle when you walk. Others are so big they could hold a Blort and still have room for leftovers. Some hold specific objects, like a bowling ball or marbles.

Not this bag.

This bag... was different.

On the outside, it looked perfectly ordinary. A simple flap, a tarnished buckle, and scuffed leather worn smooth by years of travel. But when you looked inside? Nothing. It wasn't empty. There was just... nothing. A whole lot of nowhere folded into a single satchel.

Dribbles had called it a “bag that holds lotsa stuff.” Supposedly, it could fit anything inside. Weapons. Gold. Even an army of Blorts. Personally, I thought that sounded like nonsense, but we were out of options and out of time. Dribbles needed to be saved.

I gripped the worn leather that felt rough under my fingertips and held it like a basketball. It was now or never.

Drawing on every lesson Passandra had drilled into me, I took aim.

“Catch!” I shouted, launching the pass toward Dribbles.

The moment the bag left my hands, everything slowed. The air thickened. The echo of a thousand skittering legs filled the cavern. Dribbles lunged forward, arms stretched wide and...

Too far.

No! Not again!

I stared at the bag as it flew through the air past Dribbles. Time paused for a moment as I gasped.

Dribbles dove with a grunt, snatching the bag just before it hit the ground, tucking into a roll like a seasoned player diving for a rebound. Behind him, the Spider Queen writhed in pain, her leg oozing thick black ichor.

Then the walls started to move.

The spiders. Thousands of them. Crawling. Pouring from cracks, from ceilings, from every shadow.

We were surrounded.

Dribbles came out of his roll in one smooth motion, unbuckled the flap, and plunged his arm into the bag, shoulder deep. He bit his tongue and scrunched his eyes as he rummaged through the bag for a moment before an orange flicker bloomed between his fingers.

It was a torch.

Wait... a torch?

Before I could even question it, Dribbles hurled the flaming brand into the nearest wall of webbing.

WHOOSH!

Fire exploded outward in a rush of heat and light. The green gleam of the spiders' silk spiraled against the inferno, their colors twisting and pulsing like wizards weaving their spells. The air filled with the smell of smoke and burning... I'm not sure what spiders and webs smell like when they burn, but probably that.

"We must hurry!" the voice in my head urged.

"Run, you fools!" Dribbles bellowed as the flames began to loom ever closer.

I didn't need to be told twice. My legs kicked into motion before my brain could even argue. Flames raced up the cavern walls, casting wild, stuttering shadows that made every stone look alive. Behind us, the fire spread fast; an inferno that devoured everything in its path. The spiders hissed and retreated as the webbing curled and burned away. Some were caught in the flames, losing their grip and falling from the ceiling into the pit below. Their screeches and hisses pierced through the roar of the flames.

Then I heard Dribbles shout, "My shield! I can't leave it!"

I spun around and wiggled, wagged, and begged my fingers to work. Nothing. The shield sat stubbornly in a heap of gold and trinkets, catching the firelight. The faint blue hue from earlier popped like a start in the sky against the flames.

“Forget it!” I yelled. “We can get another one!”

“Leave it to me!” the voice said.

The Blort sprinted toward the shield, bounding through the flames and landing on top of it. With a swift kick, it slid down the heap of treasure. Gold coins and rubies scattered as it carved a trail through the glittering pile. It burst through the fire and came to a stop beside Dribbles and I.

We just stared. How did it do that? The sharp scent of burnt Blort hair and webbing filled the air. I guess it wasn’t exactly a critical success.

“Let’s go! Quickly!” the voice echoed in my head.

The Blort raised its arms like a child asking to be picked up. When I lifted it, my body tingled. A rush of magic surged through me. Sparks of energy crawled up the cavern walls, and every muscle in my body buzzed with power. As the light faded, a sudden gust blasted from me, sending the flames roaring even higher.

Dribbles and I tore through the tunnels until the chattering chatter of spider legs on stone finally died away.

I set the Blort down and caught my breath.

“So, you can talk?” I asked.

Chapter 22

CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?

There was a long pause as the Blort stood there, staring at me with those big, round eyes. Its mouth hung open and a little drool slid down its lip which plopped onto the floor in an unceremonious pool.

“Never couldn’t. You just weren’t listening,” the voice said again.

“What’d he say?” asked Dribbles. “I heard it, too, back in the spider’s den.”

“He, uh... said we just weren’t listening,” I replied, shrugging.

Dribbles and I exchanged a look, then turned back to the Blort. It didn’t look very smart. It hadn’t talked before, either, but here it was. Or maybe it was thinking at us? I wasn’t entirely sure which.

That’s when I noticed the green gems on its bracelet swirling with a faint purple light.

“The gems...” Dribbles whispered to me. “That must be it.”

Dribbles had noticed them too..

Strangest of all, the bracelet actually fit the Blort's tiny, noodley arm.

"What are you staring at?" the Blort asked, tilting its head.

I crouched down and touched the bracelet. It was cool and smooth, like an ice cube but warmer. Slippery, too. Really slippery. Like an ice cube, too.

"Can you take that off and try talking to me?" I asked, rubbing my fingers over the metal.

"Certainly. I don't know what this bracelet has to do with anything, but I'll have you know that..." the voice cut off as the Blort gingerly slid the bracelet off its arm.

"I think you've found something special," I said as it handed the bracelet to me. It was too small for my wrist, sized more for a halfling, a gnome, or maybe a dwarf with dainty wrists.

"Let me see that!" Dribbles said, practically bouncing over. "Maybe I can figure out what it is."

I passed it to him, and he squinted at it under the faint cave light, one eye closed like he was inspecting a fine gemstone. He turned it over in his stubby fingers, mumbling and humming to himself before finally declaring, "Ayy, this is an artifact."

"An artifact?" I asked. "How can you tell?"

"I'm an artifact hunter," Dribbles said, puffing out his chest a little. "Or, uh, I was back in my home world. Before I ended up in Ballendore."

He sank onto a nearby rock, the torchlight flickering across his beard. The usual merriment on his face sank away like a stone tossed into a pond.

"You're not from Ballendore?" I asked. My suspicion was right. There was more to Dribbles than he'd let on.

"Nope," he said with a wistful sigh. "I'm from the world of Raventhorn. Used to travel with a band of adventurers, cataloguing their treasures and antiques. This bag, my shield, both artifacts. The shield especially..."

He paused, running his fingers through his beard for a moment and tugging at it. "That one holds a special place in my heart."

Dribbles reached into the bag and pulled out the oversized shield. Its metal gleamed dully in the flickering light, etched with the image of a hammer striking an anvil, surrounded by intricate runes that seemed to hum with old power.

"This was my clan's," he said quietly, closing his eyes for a moment as if he could still hear the sound of that forge ringing through the halls of his home.

"Raventhorn was a beautiful world," he continued. "Three hundred years of peace and a dungeon behind every waterfall, in every mountain, every plain, abandoned castle... you

name it. An adventurer's paradise! Gold and glory, food and fortune as far as the eye could see." His voice softened. "Until the great wizard came with an endless army of orcs."

He stared into the polished metal, the reflection of the flames dancing across the symbol of his clan. "Probably the same wizard who struck that deal with Passanova."

"I'm sorry to hear that, friend," I said, handing him the edge of my shirt. "Here. For your nose."

Dribbles let out a small chuckle, grabbed my shirt, and blew hard into it. "Ayy, thanks lad." As the shirt left his nose, a big stringy booger clung to it. *Great.*

The Blort sat cross legged beside us, eyes wide, listening in silence.

"The wizards of Raventhorn opened portals when the end came," Dribbles said after a moment. "That's how I ended up on Ballendore. Most left once they realized there wasn't much adventuring to be had here." He smiled faintly. "I stayed when I discovered basketball."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" I asked.

He blew his nose into my robe, sighed, and traced the hammer-and-anvil symbol with a calloused finger. "Didn't think it mattered," he said. "Eh... maybe it did." He looked at the shield one last time, eyes heavy with memory. "Besides," he murmured, "I left that life behind."

“You said your world had wizards that could open portals,” I asked, trying not to gag as I looked down at the glob of snot hanging from my shirt. Gross. “Did any of those wizards have Blorts?”

Dribbles wiped his nose again and shook his head. “Never seen one before this little one. Most wizards kept cats or chickens. Some had imps, if they were the edgy sort. I even knew one who kept a broom around.” He squinted at the Blort, who was busy poking a burnt coin with one stubby finger. “Can’t say I know what anyone’d use a Blort for.”

He trailed off, frowning, as the air around us hummed faintly like the aftertaste of a spell that was just cast.

Then, clear as day, the voice echoed in my head again.

“I think I know.”

Chapter 23

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The Blort waddled over and grabbed my hand. I hadn't noticed before, but it only had four fingers, like the cartoons the gnomes were always drawing. It wrapped its fingers around the back of my hand, pressed both thumbs against my palm, and proceeded to stare at them, its huge eyes darting between my hands and my face.

"That's strange. Nothing's happening," it telepathed to me as it kept looking at my face and hands. "What happened in the cave back there?"

"The spiders trying to eat us?" I asked, already regretting this level of physical contact with a Blort. His fingers had a sort of squish to them that felt like a bag of mushy water.

"No, where your body made sparks and light. The unusual thing that happened back there." It continued to poke and prod me with its hand and thumb.

"Oh, that. I think I leveled up. That's twice in a few days now. First time was when I touched a basketball. Then again when I grabbed you back in that cave," I said as it finally released its grip on my hands.

Dribbles rubbed his beard. “You don’t suppose these little blobs unlock magical power, do ya?”

I shrugged. There was no telling.

Turning back to the Blort, I asked, “How far back can you remember?”

The Blort blinked at me a few times. The gears were turning, but nobody was home.

“Well, it was worth a shot,” I said. “Okay. So I think I can learn a new spell. We’re in a cave with spiders, and there are orcs in the castle up ahead. Probably. Any ideas?”

“We could always use Ice Armor, Thorn Whip, Meteor Shower, Dazzling Colors, Spitfire Flame Burst, or Earthquake. Any of those should do!” Dribbles declared, chest puffed out like he was listing off a dinner menu.

“How about invisibility?” the Blort gurgled.

“Whatever it told you, *definitely* not that,” Dribbles snapped. “Look, I don’t care what ye pick, just make it useful. Like Ice Blast. Or Fireball. Or, oh, you’d love this one, *Mordekai’s Void Pit*.”

I rubbed my chin, pretending to think deeply. Dribbles had a point, though. We were heading into the lion’s den with no clue if we’d come back alive. But then again... I wasn’t trying to become a hero. I just wanted to play basketball. A fireball might blow up some orcs but I’m pretty sure I’d get kicked out of a game if I used it in one.

I closed my eyes and focused. Five minutes passed. Then ten. Then another ten. When I opened them again, Dribbles and the Blort were hovering over me like anxious parents.

“Well?” Dribbles asked.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? I gave you a perfectly good list of spells that will surely blast any orc to smithereens! What’s wrong with summoning a meteor shower from the sky or freezing any enemy that comes your way?” Dribbles huffed and puffed while furrowing his brow and frowning at me. “What’s wrong with raining fiery death on our enemies?”

I looked him dead in the eye. The kind of look that evoked not a tinge of sarcasm. “I want to play basketball,” I said. “And I don’t think summoning flaming rocks from the sky is going to help me do that.”

Dribbles huffed and puffed, crossing his stubby arms like a disappointed parent. “Fine. Think o’ something quick, then. Besides, we haven’t eaten since morning, and I’m starvin’. And it’s gettin’ late... I think. How long have we even been in this blasted cave?”

He wasn’t wrong. My stomach had been rumbling for a while. Luckily, we still had a few potatoes left from when King helped us with that whole zombie fiasco.

I pulled out my dagger and cut the potato wedges into more potato wedges and handed them to Dribbles.

“Want one?” I asked the Blort, extending my arm out to hand him a wedge of potato.

“Food? No thanks. I’m still full from last year,” the Blort gurgled.

I blinked. “Last year?”

It just stared back at me, unblinking, with his mouth agape and tongue lolling out the side.

“Right. More for us,” I said, passing Dribbles another wedge as we dug into our very unbalanced, possibly cursed meal of zombie potatoes.

After a few bites, I looked over at the Blort. “Say, what should we call you?”

“My name? Oh, that’s a long one. Are you sure you want to know it?” the Blort asked.

“Yeah, I mean, how else can we address you when we find the other Blorts?”

The Blort straightened up proudly. “Okay, well... 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, Mogrificator of..."

"Bill," I interrupted. "Your name is Bill."

The Blort blinked. "Bill." It nodded solemnly. "Yes. That's much easier."

Chapter 24

NO TRESPASSING!

After catching our breath, we pressed deeper into the cavern. Dribbles led the way, his shield raised high in one hand, lantern held out in the other, pressing on into the darkness ahead. The ground had smoothed out some, but we still moved with care, testing each step like the floor might bite, or, perhaps another trap that would bring about a thousand more spiders upon us.

Bill the Blort gurgled along behind him, arms flailing in random directions, wobbling like a gelatinous toddler. I brought up the rear, watching Bill jiggle and trying to decide which spell I should learn next. Every so often, Bill would freeze mid step, spin around to stare at me, blink three slow blinks, then turn back around and keep flapping its arms like nothing happened. He really freaked me out sometimes.

Eventually, the tunnel widened into a chamber dominated by a massive steel door. A crooked wooden sign hung from a single bolt at the top. The door itself was dented and scarred, its rivets crusted with rust from years in the damp.

Dribbles approached the door and read the sign aloud.

“No trespassing! No solicitors, either! Especially no wizards or dwarves traveling with a Blort named Bill!”

I blinked. “That’s an oddly specific coincidence. And look, it’s in quotation marks. Did they just copy down what somebody wrote?”

“Aye. Keep your head on a swivel,” Dribbles warned, tightening his grip on his shield.

He passed me the lantern and cracked his neck. “Alright, Bill, help me out here. On three, push. One... two... three!”

They shoved. The door didn’t budge.

Dribbles frowned, reset his stance. “Alright, other way. On e... two... three!”

He yanked the handle this time.

Still nothing. Not even a little creak.

“I think it might be locked,” I said with a chuckle.

“Oh, no kidding? I couldn’t tell from the part where the door didn’t open,” Dribbles snapped.

“Step aside,” Bill’s voice echoed in my head.

The Blort waddled forward, pressed its face against a hole in the steel, then turned toward me, blinking like it was solving quantum equations. After a long pause, it looked at Dribbles, opened its mouth, and gurgled a series of wet, uncertain noises..

“Ahh, you mean this?” Dribbles said, pulling out the dagger he’d stashed after our run in with the Spider Queen.

Bill nodded enthusiastically, or maybe just jiggled in approval. Either way, Dribbles handed him the dagger.

Bill caught it, spun it once in the air, and jammed it into the narrow gap between the steel door and the stone frame. The screech of metal against rock made my teeth itch.

The Blort cracked its... knuckles? blobs? Squishy digits? Whatever they were, and closed one eye, tongue poking out in concentration. It wiggled the blade back and forth, grunting softly.

CLICK

The door swung open.

Bill the Blort spun around and struck the biggest *TA-DAH!* pose a ball like creature could manage. I was halfway through being impressed until I saw what waited on the other side of the door.

Two hulking, green-skinned brutes filled the doorway. Leather armor, bone decorations, and tusks protruding from their mouths like daggers. Each one stood twice my height and about four times my width. They looked mean.

Real mean.

“Orcs!” Dribbles shouted.

Before I could blink, he hurled his shield. It cut through the air like a bird of prey before, **wham**, smacking the left orc square in the face. Down he went, out cold.

Bill let out a startled “Blrblrblr!” and retreated behind, tossing the dagger into the air, me as the second orc charged.

Eureka!

I thrust my palms forward and thought about the coldest day I’d ever experienced. A patch of ice shimmered into existence beneath the orc’s feet. He took two steps, then started windmilling his arms trying to keep balance.

I stepped aside as he slid past me, toppled backward, and cracked his head on the stone floor with a heavy **thunk**.

He didn’t get up. Out cold.

“Ice?” Dribbles asked, eyebrow raised.

I beamed a smile at my friend. “Yep! Just slip a little ice near their feet and watch ‘em go! Imagine if it was somebody going for a dunk down court!” I laughed.

Dribbles shot me a look so flat it could’ve been used as his shield. “These are orcs, not basketball players. This isn’t a time for joking around.”

He sighed and rummaged through his pack. “Come on, help me tie these two up before they wake. And, hand me that dagger, will ya? Never know when it will come in handy.”

I reached for the dagger and dropped it into the bag, watching it disappear into the nothingness. The urge to reach in after it and hold it was strong but... why?

We looped a length of rope around the orcs, standard fifty footer, just like the one that all adventurers carry, and knotted them together back to back. Once they were secure, I couldn't resist. I grabbed the sign from the door and hung it around their necks.

"No trespassing! No solicitors, either! Especially no wizards or dwarves traveling with a Blort named Bill!"

Chapter 25

MEET PASSANOVA

The other side of the door smelled like dirty gym socks that had lost a fight with a swamp and had sunk to the bottom only to be dug up by a quite angry skunk that was spooked by the fart of a troll. Goopy and globby piles of trash accented the stonework and flagstones tastefully in a way only an orc could appreciate.

The hallway stretched wide enough for the three of us to walk shoulder to shoulder. Faded carpets sagged underfoot, their colors long buried under layers of dirt and who knows what. Every step we took echoed through the halls, bouncing off the stones with the clip-clip-clip of our shoes.

The three of us inched forward slowly, creeping around every corner, trying to find our way through the maze of corridors that made up wherever we were. We saw a few orcs here and there, but it seemed pretty empty. Or so we thought.

“Look there!” Dribbles whispered, pointing down the corridor.

At the far end, a robed figure glided across the floor, the same one who had stolen the Blorts, from the look of it. Three orcs

followed close behind, armored to the tusks. Their shoulder pads were so tall they practically had their own atmosphere. Massive swords hung at their sides, and their muscles looked like they'd been sculpted out of spite and rage.

They were mean, green fighting machines; grizzled veterans of a hundred battles.

And us? We were a dwarf, a wizard-in-training, and a basketball blob named Bill.

The robed figure and its entourage walked up the stairs we were headed towards. Naturally, we followed behind them until they disappeared up a staircase.

I gulped. "So... remind me again why we're following *them*?"

Dribbles adjusted his grip on his shield. "Because we're either very brave," he muttered, "or very stupid."

"Fifty fifty?"

"Generous," he said.

Still, we followed them up the stairs.

Naturally.

The stairs twisted upward in a crooked spiral, every step cracked or missing a chunk of stone. Trash and broken weapons littered the way like breadcrumbs left behind by a violent storm that had broken into an armory.

Dribbles paused halfway up, set down his bag, and tucked his shield inside. "I think I'll need ol' Faithful for this," he muttered, pulling out his axe. He didn't bring that axe out often. When he did, it meant things were about to get very, very serious and very, very loud.

This was going to be one of those occasions.

We crept up the final stretch, pressing ourselves against the wall. At the top stood the robed figure, framed by the flickering light of an altar carved from obsidian. The three orcs knelt before it with their heads bowed.

The figure began to move its hands through the air in deliberate, swirling motions. Then it sprinkled a red powder over the altar with a dash of his hand. The room erupted in a flash of crimson light. Red and black flames shot ten feet high, writhing and coiling until they formed the shape of a hooded face inside the fire.

"What do you have to report?" the flaming visage boomed, its voice echoing like a thunder trapped in a canyon.

Dribbles' eyes went wide. "I'd recognize that voice anywhere," he whispered. "That's the wizard that invaded my old home!" Dribbles whispered.

The robed thief bowed his head. "I have successfully secured the remaining Blorts," he said. "However... I believe I was followed by... a hoop mage." His voice trembled.

"You fool!" the fire roared. The black flames flared violently, licking the ceiling. "You must deal with them immediately, Passanova! Do not let them interfere. As long as I hold the Blorts, the army marches on Ballendore at dawn."

Passanova bowed, the flickering red light dancing across his hood. "Yes, my liege," he said quietly. Then, with a long, weary sigh, "I will handle them."

"You will do this, or they will suffer. Do you understand? They will suffer!" the flaming face hissed, each word blasting us like a furnace. The black and red blaze guttered, cooling to orange embers that winked out one by one until none remained.

Passanova stood motionless with his head held. Dribbles' hand jabbed at me and Bill in a quick, urgent motion. "Go back down," his gesture signaled.

Then Passanova turned.

He peeled back his hood and the stairwell seemed to shrink. For a heartbeat the world tilted. Passanova's face was Passandra's. Same sharp cheekbones, same mischievous curl at the corner of the mouth, same dark hair falling like a curtain around his face. He looked exactly like her, but colder.

His eyes slid over us with the casual cruelty of someone who has already rehearsed the torment he plans to cause.

“I guess you overheard that, didn’t you?” he said, the softness of his voice was disarming but sharp like a blade. “I’m supposed to deal with you.”

Chapter 26

UNDER SIEGE

Passanova snapped his fingers.

The sound cracked through the chamber like lightning.

In perfect unison, the three kneeling orcs rose to their feet. The dying flames of the altar threw their shadows across the walls. Towering, monstrous shapes that swallowed us whole. Their armor creaked and groaned as they stood.

Dribbles squared his stance, tightening his grip on his axe. The first orc roared and charged. Their weapons collided with a thunderous *clang*, sparks flying from the dance of steel connecting with steel.

Bill, meanwhile, let out a ferocious (and admittedly high-pitched) battle cry... then immediately turned and bolted down the stairs. "Strategic retreat!" his voice echoed as he vanished into the dark. Thanks for the help, little guy!

The second and third orcs advanced. I thrust my hands forward, ice streaking from my palms to the stone floor. One orc's foot hit the slick patch, sending him flailing before crashing onto his back. The other vaulted clean over the frost, landing with a thud that rattled the walls.

Then, everything stopped. A gentle sound, so soothing, so pleasing...

Passanova had begun to sing.

His voice crept through the air like a fog rolling in across the sea at dawn. It carried a haunting, lilting melody that slipped between the stones and into our bones. The air shimmered violet as a soft purple glow radiated from him, bathing the room in its soft embrace. My breath caught in my throat. My arms froze mid-motion. Even Dribbles' axe hung suspended in the air.

"Please," Passanova's voice echoed, every word drenched in sorrow. "Do not make me do this. Run while you still can."

"Not without The Blorts!" I sang back to him. Why was I singing?

I clamped a hand over my mouth. Why was I singing?

"The Blorts are not yours," Passanova's voice turned warm. The orcs, mid-step, began to sway as though drunk on his melody. "You do not understand what you are doing. I do not wish to harm you but I will not allow you to bring more suffering to my parents."

As he finished singing those words, he reached beneath his robe and pulled out a flute carved from something that shimmered like bone and glass. The moment he raised it to his lips, the air shifted. The haunting tune that poured out twisted through the hall like smoke, wrapping around us.

The soft purple glow faded, replaced by a burning crimson that pulsed to the rhythm of his melody.

The orcs stirred. Their eyes snapped open, now glowing red, like coals stoked by rage.

Not good.

The nearest orc turned, swinging his sword wildly, not at us, but at his companion. The blade whooshed past, missing by inches, and he lost his footing, crashing onto the ice with a thunderous **thud**.

The second orc lunged to help, or maybe to fight, only to slip on the same patch of frost, holding his arms out trying to find balance as he toppled backward into a pile of bones. The third orc, offended by the chaos, let out a roar and swung his hammer in blind fury shattering one of the first orc's enormous spiked shoulder pads clean off.

The room erupted into total pandemonium. The orcs fought one another as Passanova played his flute. They slipped and slid all over the ice, swinging their swords at one another in a violent dance of death.

Dribbles and I exchanged a look that said everything.

Nope.

We bolted.

Down the stairs we ran, hearts pounding in our chest and boots slipping on the stone. I flung my arms out behind me,

covering each step with slick, fresh ice. If those orcs chased us, they'd be slipping the whole way down.

As we rounded the final bend, there he was, Bill the Blort, standing at the bottom of the staircase with his arms raised high. An orc stood with a spear pointed at Bill, inches away from his... chest? Head?

"Oh, I've had enough of this," Dribbles grumbled. He wound up and hurled his axe.

The axe spun end over end, sizzling through the air, slicing clean through the orc's spear like it was made of straw. The top half clattered uselessly to the floor. The Blort, suddenly emboldened, stepped forward, dagger in hand, and pointed it straight at the orc.

The orc blinked once, twice, gulped, and turned tail, sprinting off down the hall.

"That's one way to handle them," I said, trying not to laugh.

But my smile didn't last long. "Did you hear what Passanova said?" I asked Dribbles, my voice dropping. "He's going to invade Ballendore."

"Ayy, we can't let that happen. Hurry!" shouted Dribbles.

Before we could take another step, the ground began to rumble. Dust rained from the ceiling as a deafening **boom** shook the corridor. The massive front gate exploded inward in a shower of splinters and stone.

Through the smoke came a foot. A giant foot. A giant's foot, in fact. Then, a familiar smell came. A moldy smell. A zombie potato smell. Hundreds of zombie potatoes stormed into the hole left by the foot. And towering above them all, King King, our colossal tuber loving ally.

"Just in time!" Dribbles cheered as he picked up his axe. "Let's take advantage of the situation and find The Blorts."

Bells began to clang from deep within the castle. The metallic echoes overlapped with shouts of panic and the rhythmic pounding of war drums.

"TO ARMS!" an orcish voice bellowed from somewhere unseen. "WE ARE UNDER ATTACK!"

Smoke. Screams. The clash of metal. The squish of rotten potato.

With zombie potatoes in front of us and Passanova behind us, the only safe way for us to go was left, which was the right way to go.

"Run!" Dribbles yelled.

And so we ran, sprinting through the twisting corridors with everything we had left. The ground trembled beneath our feet, the war of green flesh and putrid starch erupting behind us.

Chapter 27

BLORTS IN A CAGE

The sound of orcs making mashed potatoes out of zombies was punctuated by the occasional boom of a giant's fist against stone. Shouts of confusion and clanging armor bounced through the mossy corridors. Dribbles and Bill the Blort were both in their element. Dribbles had a battle hardened focus, as if he had done this sort of thing a thousand times before. Bill flailed his arms about wildly as he gurgled down the hall, which he had done a thousand times before.

Meanwhile, I was just trying to stay alive.

We raced down the left corridor as the synchronized ***clank-clank-clank*** of orc armor grew louder. As we turned the corner, ten orcs, shoulder to shoulder, marched straight toward us. Bill did a perfect about face and bolted back the way we came. It had a real knack for running whenever the odds weren't in our favor.

The orcs hesitated for a heartbeat, just as startled to see us as we were them, then roared and charged.

“Why don't you orcs pick on someone your own size?”

We spun around. Larry the Manticore stood there, lips curled into a snarl that showed off his sword like teeth. His whiskers twitched. His eyes narrowed into sharp golden slits. His scorpion tail pincer, dripping with poison, arched above his head ready to strike.

“Larry?” I blurted out. I couldn't believe my eyes. What luck! “But don't you hate Blorts?”

“Yep, I sure do,” Larry laughed, swiping an orc so hard it sailed down the hallway. “But King offered a years worth of potatoes for helping out. So you better find those Blorts and get them outta here before I change my mind, otherwise, you'll be next.”

He let out a thunderous roar, spraying me with a fine mist of manticore spit. It stung my eyes and smelled faintly of onions.

Then Larry launched himself into the orcs, batting them around like toys, ducking, weaving, and roaring with unholy glee. He was enjoying this a bit too much.

“This place is so weird,” I muttered to Dribbles as we hurried past the carnage.

At the far end of the hall, two orcs stood guard in front of a closed door. They weren't exactly model soldiers. One was elbow deep in the other's nose, and they were flicking bright green projectiles at each other like children at recess.

"I've got these two," Bill the Blort's voice echoed in my head as he finally caught up.

Dribbles and I stopped to watch its master plan. Bill the Blort stretched from side to side, touched his fingers to his toes, cracked his nonexistent neck, and then started to run right at them. Bill ran past the two orcs, screaming at the top of his lungs with its arms flapping behind him like a deranged bird.

The orcs looked at one another, looked at Bill, and then back at one another again. A shared moment of dumb understanding passed between them before they both screamed and took off after him.

Dribbles and I exchanged a silent shrug and turned back to the door. I pushed it open. A cold gust of air rushed out from the black below.

"Another cavern?" Dribbles huffed.

"Can't be, can it?" I muttered, matching Dribbles' frustration.

"Only one way to find out," he grumbled, stomping down the stairs one angry, deliberate step at a time. "I've just about had enough of this tomfoolery."

The light from above faded into a sickly amber glow as Dribbles pulled his trusty lantern from his magic bag. Its flame flickered against the walls, revealing a vast, hollow chamber below.

When we got to the bottom of the stairs, through flickering lantern light, I saw what I can only describe as “a cage filled with Blorts.” This was because it was a cage filled with Blorts.

The room stretched endlessly in both directions, the walls smooth and polished, as if someone had spent decades sanding them just to make them unsettlingly perfect. In one corner loomed the cage, its bars glistening with dampness. In the cage two crystals floated above the ground, motionless except for the flow of liquid across their contents. Two figures, or pieces of figures, floated, their fragmented forms emoting a sense of longing and pain. They twitched as the liquid moved over them, as if it were causing pain.

In the other corner stood a pedestal, solitary and ancient. Dignified in its authoritative positioning in the room. The true center piece of whatever this room was used for.

“We found them!” Dribbles bellowed, the sound echoing through the chamber. “Let’s get ‘em out!”

The Blorts gurgled and gargled with glee, slapping their little hands against the bars and pointing toward the pedestal. I walked over, lantern light dancing across the rough-hewn stone. The pedestal’s surface was worn smooth by time, but at its center was a perfectly round indentation about the size of a basketball.

“That won’t do you any good,” came a voice from the darkness.

I turned toward it.

“You don’t have the orb.”

Passanova stepped into the light.

Chapter 28

RENTOK SMASH

Passanova stood at the base of the stairs with his arms crossed, the torchlight painting deep shadows across his face. His brow was furrowed, his jaw trembled, but it he didn't have hatred in his eyes. It was sorrow.

"I can't let you do this," he said quietly. "If you free them... the Dark One will hurt them."

His fists clenched and his knuckles turned white. A single tear cut through the grime on his cheek. "Please," he whispered, his voice breaking. "Don't make me fight you. Just... go."

I stepped forward slowly. "We don't want to fight you. We just want to save The Blorts and protect our home. Who is The Dark One going to hurt?"

Dribbles took a cautious step away from the cage, his axe lowering but still at the ready. The Blorts' joyful gurgles faded into uneasy silence. "Ayy, lad," Dribbles said. "Who does he have? Your parents?" His eyes never left Passanova.

Passanova's gaze fell to the floor. His shoulders trembled. Tears struck the stone, one after another, splattering into little drops that faded away like a memory long lost.

I felt my grip loosen and reached out a hand. "It's okay. We can help."

Passanova's head snapped up.

"No!"

The single word hit like a war drum. The air exploded outward, slamming into my chest and hurling me backward. My lungs seized as I hit the ground hard. Wind howled through the room, spinning dust and light around Passanova in a furious cyclone.

Dribbles ran toward me and helped me to my feet. I gasped for air, and it took me a moment to catch my breath. "If it's a fight ya want, it's a fight ya'll get," Dribbles shouted.

Dribbles raised his axe into the air as his stubby legs swiftly waddled toward the young elf. Dribbles swung for the elf, pushing the weight of the axe through his strike, but Passanova stepped aside effortlessly. "It's enough!" Passanova shouted at Dribbles.

The force from the shout hit Dribbles in the back. He let go of his axe, and it flew through the air, sticking into the stone wall in front of him. Dribbles fell to the ground with a thud and lay motionless on the floor as Passanova began to walk toward the pedestal.

“Please... don’t do that again. I don’t want to hurt you. You won’t be able to unlock this cage, anyway. You don’t have the orb to unlock it with,” Passanova pleaded with us as he held back tears.

I ran over to Dribbles to see if he was alright. I knelt down and turned him over. “Ayy, I’m fine, lad,” Dribbles said as I helped him to his feet. No sooner had Dribbles regained his balance when we heard the tell-tale sound of a Blort gurgling in the distance.

It was our friend, Bill the Blort, being chased by a lone orc. “This one’s smarter than the rest!” he telepathically said as he bolted between my legs.

“Oi! Looks like we got ourselves a right proper bash ‘ere!” snarled the orc with a gravelly, guttural growl. “Wot’s da orders, boss?”

“Rentok, do not let that Blort near the pedestal,” ordered Passanova.

Chapter 29

PASSING ON A PRAYER

Small grains of dust and grit drifted down from the ceiling as the chaos above tore the castle apart. King King ripped stones loose like a child pulling at a sandcastle; his footfalls made the walls tremble, and his horde of zombie potatoes kept most of the orcs too busy to notice anything else, except for one. Rentok, the orc Bill just couldn't shake.

Rentok lunged, his muscles bulging with malice and his massive sword raised above his head like a tree waiting to fall. The blade screamed through the air the sound of its whine cut my ear like a knife. Bill froze, all wrinkles and bulging eyes, mouth hanging open letting out a horrified little gurgle.

"Bill, NO!" I shouted, pleading with whatever was up above that this wasn't the end for my little buddy.

CLANG

Dribbles' axe met Rentok's blade inches away from Bill. Sparks spat into the smoky light as metal kissed metal, both blades striking the ground to the others side.

Bill snapped out of it and leapt back, scrambling away from the swinging steel towards the pedestal. Dribbles, still riding

the recoil of that clash, rolled away to safety as Rentok reared and struck again. The arch of the second swing smacked into Dribbles' axe yanking it free of his grip and sent it flying in a bright arc and clanking on the floor.

"Don't waste your time on him. Go after the Blort and that wizard. I'll handle the dwarf," Passanova commanded.

"Roight, boss! Oi'll krump 'em good!" Rentok bellowed as he thumped his chest with his large, heavy fist.

Passanova lunged at Dribbles, his fists flying in a flurry of strikes that cracked like thunder against the dwarf's shield arm. Dribbles braced himself against the blows, grinding his boots into the stone, taking the hits with a grunt before answering back with a swing himself. Passanova weaved aside, sidestepping the blow, but Dribbles persisted, landing blow after blow into Passanova's chest.

Meanwhile, Rentok barreled toward us, his massive sword slicing arcs through the air that hummed with death. Every swing forced us farther from the pedestal. Sparks flew as his blade scraped against the stone walls with each miss. We ducked, dodged, stumbled back until our heels hit a wall. I glanced at Bill. The little guy's mouth hung open in a soundless scream, eyes wide with terror.

Rentok reared back for a final swing. His muscles bulged like boulders about to snap free from the earthy grip of a mountain. I raised my hands, fingers twitching as I summoned a spell.

The sword came down.

POOF

In an instant, Bill was gone, replaced by a bouncing, rubbery basketball. The blade whooshed harmlessly through the air as the ball dropped between Rentok's feet, bouncing once, twice.

The orc blinked, confused, scrunching his nose and brow together trying to get a few of his brain cells working hard enough to figure out what had happened.

Rentok only knew one set of outcomes: Blade cut, thing scream, blood come out, thing die. He didn't understand blade miss, or poof of smoke, or ball bounce between legs.

While Rentok was thinking through this peculiar set of outcomes, I dove between his legs, scooping up the once-blort-now-basketball, rolled into a run, and dashed away. "Get to the pedestal!" I shouted, sprinting past Rentok's swinging blade as I instinctively started dribbling my friend.

POING

POING

POING

Passanova blocked the path to the pedestal; perfect setup for a pass. I launched the ball toward Dribbles just as Rentok's pommel slammed into my shoulder. Pain exploded down

my arm and ribs. I hit the ground hard, watching the ball spiral through the smoky air toward the dwarf.

Passanova opened his mouth and unleashed a howl of impossible sound, a shrill piercing cry like a choir being fed through a meat grinder. The blast knocked the ball off course, sending it wobbling toward the floor.

I clenched my teeth, forced my focus past the pain, and flicked my fingers, giving them a wiggle and a waggle. *Come on, come on.* The air shimmered as my Telekinesis spell snapped into place, grabbing the ball mid-drop and floating it neatly into Dribbles' hands.

He didn't hesitate. The dwarf bounced the ball through Passanova's legs, spun left, and surged forward toward the pedestal. Passanova turned to follow. Too slow, too late.

Dribbles leaped with the ball, jumping towards the pedestal with Passanova jumping along right beside him. The two rose through the air like dancers leaping across a stage... except, you know, not.

At the peak of his jump, Dribbles rolled the ball off his fingertips. It spun toward the center of the pedestal. Passanova swiped at the air, missing the ball by inches. The two of them crashed to the ground beside it, gasping, staring upward.

The ball teetered in the indentation, once, twice, three times, until...

Chapter 30

THE PECULIAR THING ABOUT BLORTS

There's a lot to say about Blorts. They're a curious species of cheerful idiots who somehow wield immense power without ever realizing it. A Blort can do anything, and I do mean anything, as long as it believes the plan will work. You can't convince them of a thing. But if they convince themselves? The universe had better make room.

The trouble is, Blorts don't think in the traditional sense. They don't plot, reason, or reflect. They just... are. They're content to wander through life in ones or twos, occasionally stopping to stare at a tree, a rock, or each other, with their mouths open, of course. In fact, most Blort activities involve open mouths. Running, sleeping, staring into the distance. It is their third most observable trait. The second being that they are round furry creatures and the first being... Well, that's for another time.

Which is what makes what happened next truly historic. For the first, and only, time in recorded history, the Blorts were about to do something intentional. *Together*. They had a plan. Whether this plan was communicated telepath-

It's hard to overstate how monumental this was. Blorts, for as long as anyone can remember, have been famous for centuries to simply not, but also, to simply be. They exist in a state of cheerful inertia. So, whether by accident or miracle, the fact that they all did the same thing at the same time was history in the making.

Maybe it was coincidence. Maybe there's more to Blorts than we ever gave them credit for. Bill certainly seemed exceptional, in his own gurgly way.

The cage began to vibrate with a low hum. These vibrations crept along the floor, ceiling, and walls until they reached the pedestal. They continued up through the pedestal and into the basketball as it spun around for the fifth time until...

The Blorts stopped gurgling.

They gasped.

Being a living ball, the amount of air that a Blort can hold is impressive in and of itself but not particularly impressive in the grand scheme of things. Many creatures have a higher mass to "air in the lungs" ratio. But, with this many Blorts? Now, that's a different story. The change in air pressure in the room caused by this maneuver was just enough for the basketball to stop moving and then fall into the pedestal.

And then... nothing.

Silence.

"Change me back." Bill's voice echoed in my head. But... he was a basketball. How did he do that?

Rentok's shadow fell over me. His sword raised high above his head ready for a killing blow. I closed my eyes, wiggled my fingers, and hoped for the best.

POOF.

Bill was back. And in that instant, light exploded out of him; blinding, shimmering, and pure. The chamber filled with an iridescent glow that swallowed shadow and stone alike. The ground rumbled beneath us, a deep, grinding quake that threw Rentok off his feet. Somewhere in the chaos, gears groaned to life, ancient stone mechanisms clattering awake after centuries of silence.

From across the room, Passanova screamed, "Noooooooo!" The kind of scream that comes from deep within the soul. The kind of scream you make when someone close to you dies.

The cage shuddered, then began to rise, dragged upward by the chain above.

We watched as the Blorts spilled free in a great, orange, furry wave, undulating, bouncing, and marching in unison. Each step landed with a thunderous beat that shook dust from the ceiling. Their fur rubbed together in a frenzy of motion, building static until the whole mass crackled and sparked like a living storm.

There's always been debate about Blorts, whether they act on purpose or by accident, and whether the difference even matters. But one thing's certain. Fortune smiles on those who help them.

As they stomped past the crystals that lay in the cage with them, the static charge released in a flash. I threw my hand over my eyes as light burst through the room. The air hissed and popped, and then came the sound of ice fracturing.

"Mother... father...?" Passanova's voice trembled as the crystals split and shattered, the brilliance fading to reveal what had once been trapped inside.

From the shards of crystal, two shapes began to form. First the feet, then the hands, each fragment snapping into place with a soft chime. Bit by bit, the pieces whirled together, building toward something whole.

"Mother! Father!" Passanova's voice cracked as he stumbled toward them.

The pair of elves inhaled sharply, as if taking in that precious gulp of life for the first time.

"Are you alright?" Passanova asked, voice trembling between hope and disbelief.

The two stood blinking in the dim light, still dressed for a royal banquet that had ended years ago. The queen's eyes swept the ruined chamber, confusion softening her regal poise.

“Where... are we?” she asked.

Chapter 31

THE DAY IS SAVED?

Dust from the stampede of Blorts still hung in the air, swirling in lazy clouds that refused to settle. Their distant clamor faded up the stairs, but still the battle raged on above.

"Where... where are we? Passanova? What is going on?" the king asked, turning in slow confusion. His eyes landed on us. "And who, pray tell, are they?"

"I... I don't really know to be sure," Passanova stammered. "They uh... well, it's complicated."

Dribbles stepped forward and gave a little bow. "Aye, your Highness. Name's Dribbles, this here's Slamdalf, and, of course, our good friend..."

"Ahh Blortulum, my friend! Why, I knew you'd be involved in saving us in one way or another. How is your uncle doing?" The king asked, sighing deeply in relief.

Bill gurgled and gargled a response that sounded mostly wet.

"Ah, splendid, splendid," the king said with a satisfied nod. "Do send Albanor our regards when next you see him!"

Bill replied with a few enthusiastic gurgles and a bobbing nod.

"Now, Bill tells me that the two of you are responsible for freeing us as well as the blorts. Is that true?"

"Well... yes, your Highness, in a manner of speaking," I said. "Honestly, we were just trying to get the Blorts back to Passadena."

"Passadena!" the queen exclaimed, her face brightening. "Ah yes, from Ballendore! You know our daughter, Passandra, has always had a fondness for that realm."

She brushed dust from her gown and turned to her son, her voice trembling. "Have you seen her? Is she alright?"

Passanova nodded slowly with a smile. "She's safe. I saw her only a few days ago. She had been keeping the Blorts hidden in Passadena while Gorzod ravaged this land." His voice faltered. "I... I had to do terrible things while she escaped to keep him satisfied... to keep you alive."

The queen stepped forward and pulled him into her arms. "Whatever you did, my son, we understand. You did what you thought was right. Do not burden yourself with guilt."

"The Dark Lord Gorzod... how we've been deceived by that menace." Passanova frowned, anger contorting his face. "That monster came to our castle and sold us a list of lies! Generations of peace and prosperity if we simply let his orc army in to patrol the gateways. But... he lied. He took control

of our world so he could use it to attack other worlds... like your Ballendore."

"Or my Raventhorn..." Dribbles murmured as his gaze sunk to the floor.

The king turned to me, studying me through the dim light. "So tell me, young one. You helped save us?"

I shrugged. "In a roundabout way, sure. But really, it was the Blorts who did it."

The king smiled faintly. "And what is your name?"

"His name is Slamdalf!" Dribbles laughed.

Before I could say anything, the ground trembled. A deafening **boom** thundered from above, shaking dust loose from the ceiling.

The king glanced upward. "What in the heavens was that?"

Dribbles laughed nervously. "Ah... that'd be King King. Probably ripping a wall off your castle or making a new front entrance with his foot."

"The giant?" The king's voice boomed as his face bleached ghostly white. "Why in the blazes is he tearing down my castle?"

Dribbles rubbed the back of his neck, knocking his hat askew. "Ah, well... we thought he'd make a decent distraction. Him and, uh... his potatoes."

The king stood in silent disbelief, blinking between long stares. "My poor castle..." he finally said. "Besieged by a giant and his tuberian army." He let out a long, weary sigh, then laughed. "Well, if ever there was a time to rebuild, I suppose this is it. Come, let's see how bad the damage is."

We climbed the stairs into bedlam. Above, the hall was a battlefield of potato chunks and groaning orcs. The Blorts' stampede had carved a clear path through the chaos, leaving behind only smears, splatters, and a faint smell of rotten potato. We followed the trail of destruction to the main gate, where Larry and King King had secured the area.

"I see you've brought a prisoner!" Larry said, licking his lips and baring his teeth at Passanova until he caught sight of the king and queen behind him. "Ah! Your Highness! I was, ah, merely joking." He hastily wiped mashed potato from his whiskers and forced a grin.

Both Larry and King King bowed deeply.

"No, no, there's no need for that," said the king, motioning for them to rise. "I can see you've both been instrumental in freeing this castle from Gorzod's grasp even if your methods are not what I would have preferred. I don't know how I could ever repay you."

King King cleared his throat, shaking the ground around us. "I have a suggestion, your highness."

The King craned his neck to look up at the towering figure. "Well then, King King, what is this suggestion of yours?"

“Your Highness,” rumbled King King as he bowed, “for many years I’ve tried to tend my little farm at the edge of your lands. But the orcs raid it near every season. If I may be so bold, I’d ask that the land be turned fully over to me, so I might rebuild it in peace.”

The king rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Hmm. A far better bargain than the last one I struck.” He smiled. “Very well! But, with one condition.”

King King leaned in, his shadow stretching across the courtyard. “Yes, Your Highness?”

“In exchange for your help in rebuilding the castle, your tithe will be voided.” The king turned toward Larry. “And as for you...”

Larry froze mid paw lick, his eyes narrowed to snake-like slits.

“Larry, you are to be my official royal scout. In trade for twice a day patrols along the outskirts of the kingdom, you can roost at the top of the castle and have your pick of our finest vegetables. Except for King King’s, of course.”

Larry resumed licking his paw as though he hadn’t heard a word. After a long, deliberate pause, he nodded. “I suppose that’ll do nicely.”

The king chuckled. “Good. Then it’s settled.”

I glanced around. “Say... where did all the Blorts go?”

“I ate them,” Larry said, licking his lips with a sly grin.

“What? But you... you said you were a vegetarian!”

“I am,” Larry said, his grin curling. “Just kidding.”

I laughed. Dribbles laughed. Even Passanova cracked a smile.

Everyone laughed. Except Bill.

“No, really,” I said, scanning the empty field. “Where did they go?”

King King chuckled, a deep, rolling sound that made the stones beneath us tremble. “They’re here, there, and everywhere! The moment they crossed the bridge, they scattered to the winds. They’re Blorts! Wandering is sort of their thing!”

His laugh echoed through the ruins, fading into the quiet hum of morning. The castle loomed behind us, its broken towers catching the first light of dawn. The orange glow spilled across the land, warming the frost-bitten fields and dead branches.

It was the start of a new day.

“So...” I said, scratching the back of my head, “how exactly do we get home?”

Passanova smiled, brushing a bit of crystal dust from his sleeve. “The same way you arrived. Just use the portal.”

“Just... use the portal?”

“Yep. Just... use the portal,” he said.

Chapter 32

THE DAY IS SAVED!

“As for the three of you...” The king stroked his beard thoughtfully. “I want to personally thank you for whatever it is you did. Defeating an army of orcs is no small feat. For your bravery, I would like to extend the honor of knight-hood to you both and charge you with a royal duty; to serve as bodyguards to my son, Prince Passanova, as he joins you on your journeys.”

Passanova’s eyes went wide. “But... Father!”

“Don’t but Father me,” the king snapped. “Every elf of noble blood must complete a royal adventure before they can rule. You’ve avoided yours long enough. Besides, rebuilding a kingdom is dull work. Go make some stories worth retelling.”

“Now,” the king turned to Dribbles, Bill, and me. “The three of you are on an adventure? Correct?”

Dribbles and I nodded. Bill gurgled something that sounded affirming.

“Excellent,” the king said. “And what, may I ask, is your quest?”

I straightened up, puffing out my chest. "To become the greatest basketball player of all time!"

The king blinked. "I... see. And what is a basketball player?"

I laughed. Dribbles laughed. Passanova laughed. Everybody laughed... except for the king.

"Oh," I said, rubbing the back of my neck. "It's, uh... a sport. From my world."

"That is your journey?" The king stroked his beard in contemplation. "Well, I suppose it is just as noble as any other."

He gave a formal bow, which I quickly returned.

"Please protect my son. He is strong in spirit. You will find no finer companion even if his actions are sometimes of questionable... well, I suppose you'll find out."

"Ayy, we will," Dribbles said, tipping his hat. "Besides, I think Passanova can handle himself just fine!"

Passanova nodded proudly.

"Then be off with you," the king said, straightening his crown. "We have much work to do. Passanova, do not return until you've completed your adventure."

"Yes, Father. We'll succeed. Slamdalf will become the greatest of all time or die trying."

"It's... Gerald," I whispered as we turned toward the portal. "Wait a minute!"

"Your name is Gerald?" Passanova laughed. "That's not a name for a powerful wizard such as yourself!"

King King and Larry fell in step beside us on the short walk to the marble archway; the gateway, as Passanova called it. A few Blorts had gathered there, rolling and bouncing around, happy to be free once again. For the first time since we arrived, I heard the sound of birds chirping. The air glistened in the morning sun, tasting slightly sweet, as a breeze carried with it a renewed sense of hope for Blortsylvania.

I glanced at Bill. "Can you ask if they want to go back with us?"

Bill gurgled something deep and wet toward the crowd. The Blorts gurgled back in a flurry of bubbly syllables. Bill shrugged. "If they come, they come," his voice echoed in my head.

I smirked. "Fair enough."

After a pause, I asked, "Say... how did you keep that bracelet on after I transformed you?"

Bill's eyes widened. Slowly, he tilted his head back, gazing up into the sky as the clouds broke apart. Shafts of sunlight spilled through into his mouth as he stood there.

He didn't blink.

I waited.

And waited.

Finally, I sighed. "Right. Should've known better than to ask."

The sunlight lit the marble, revealing what the darkness had hidden from us when we arrived. Fine etchings shimmered in the light, forming words that rippled like water.

Ballendore - Pasadena.

"How does this thing work?" Dribbles asked, squinting at it like it might answer back.

Passanova raised a brow. "You've never used a portal before?"

"Not one like this!" Dribbles exclaimed. "Usually a wizard waves his hands around and I step into it that way."

"Here, let me show you." Passanova walked over to the archway and pulled a lever that was sticking out of the marble. Why didn't I see that when we got here?

I blinked against the glare as the archway filled with swirling energy, the air tasting faintly of ozone and... maybe cinnamon?

Passanova turned back to us with a small smile. "After you."

The Blorts went first, bouncing and gurgling their goodbyes as they vanished into the glow one by one. Dribbles, Bill, and I exchanged a look, or whatever it is that a Blort does with its mouth when it's happy, and stepped through the portal together.

The world folded, stretched, and snapped. And then, we were home.

The people of Pasadena erupted into cheers. Before I could catch my breath hands hoisted us into the air. Dribbles whooped, Bill burbled like a happy fountain, and I laughed as confetti (where did they get confetti on such short notice?) rained down like rice at a wedding.

Passandra ran forward, beaming a smile a mile wide. "You're back! And with the Blorts! We thought you'd been..."

She stopped mid-sentence as Passanova stepped through the portal behind us.

They collided in an embrace that quieted the crowd. For a moment, the air itself seemed to hold its breath. Passanova smiled into his sister's shoulder.

"I'm glad you're alright, Passandra," Passanova said softly. A single tear cut down his cheek, glinting in the sunlight.

"But... what of our parents?" she asked.

"These three, and your blorts, freed them from their crystal prison, Passandra." Passanova declared, gesturing toward us. "They are heroes!"

The crowd erupted. The celebration began anew.

Jugglers juggled Blorts, who seemed perfectly content about it. Passandra led a chorus that echoed down the cobbled streets. Food stalls multiplied like mushrooms after rain of-

fering goblin gazpacho, ogre onion rings, pre and post wedge mashed potatoes, griffin-egg fritters, boiled eel sausage, siren s'mores, and, my personal favorite, troll-cheese tacos, were being handed out for free to anyone within arm's reach.

Faeries fluttered through the air, making rainbow swirls with their dust. A goblin barber snipped at invisible hair while shouting, "Highest bidder wins a free cut!" Elegant tapestries flapped in the breeze as elves danced in the wind. Even Dribblyn had found work giving children rides, laughing as he galloped in slow, careful circles.

After a while, Bill gurgled up beside me with a concerned look on his face. "Have you seen Dribbles?"

I paused mid bite, taco halfway to my mouth. Come to think of it, I hadn't. Dribbles was never one to miss a party. Not if there was food, music, or attention involved.

I started asking around. No one had seen him. Not the goblin cook, not the elf fiddler, not even the Blort pretending to juggle himself.

On a hunch, I headed back to our quarters. Sure enough, there he was kneeling amid a sprawl of gear, trinkets, and papers, sorting and cataloging each piece with methodical care.

"Hey, man!" I said, wiping cheese from my chin. "You're missing the party! They're literally chanting your name out there."

Dribbles looked up, a glint in his eye. “Ayy, they can wait. Come, sit. There’s something I want to show you.”

Chapter 33

MEMORIES

Dribbles had lined up about a dozen items in two neat rows, each one telling a story I hadn't yet heard.

On the left sat his shield, a lantern, a torch, a coil of rope, his keys, and a small jar labeled in shaky handwriting: "Mustard for the *Distinguished Gentleman*."

On the right, a plain clay vase chipped at the rim, a monocle, a cloth-wrapped bundle, a ring, his axe, and two daggers. The ring caught the lantern light; a braid of gold and silver bands twisting together, the face engraved with a cursive D.

In front of him lay a folded sheet of paper, its edges soft and browned with age.

Dribbles patted the floor beside him. "Come on, sit."

I sat down cross-legged, still chewing on the last bite of my taco. "What's all this?"

He exhaled through his nose, eyes drifting over the array. "These are from my world."

"Raventhorn, right?"

“Ayy.” He nodded. “Family things. Heirlooms... memories.” His hand hovered over the row until it stopped on the folded paper. “This one belonged to my son, Grundar.”

A tear welled and slipped down his cheek as he opened it carefully, as if the page might crumble if he breathed too hard. The paper unfolded to reveal a childish drawing of two stick-figure wizards locked in battle over a round orange shape between them.

“My boy gave me this when he was just a wee lad,” Dribbles said, voice soft and breaking at the edges. He smiled faintly, the kind that hides the hurt. “Before...”

He swallowed. “When the orcs invaded, we were separated. I... I didn’t know what to do. A wizard opened a portal and forced us through to safety. I fought and fought, but I...” His words faltered. He gripped the drawing gently, the paper trembling in his hands.

“The wizard shut the portal as soon as we were through. It took us to Dribbleton, and that’s when I saw it, the round orange object.” He folded the paper carefully, as though tucking away the memory itself, and set it back on the ground.

“I knew then what I had to do. So, I changed my name to fit in here and went looking for another wizard who could help. Maybe one that would help me get back home. Years passed before I finally met you.” Dribbles laughed, wiping a tear from his cheek.

“What was your name?” I asked.

“Shortsy. Shortsy the Rogue.” He made a face. “But I prefer Dribbles. Less degrading. Isn’t that right, Slamdalf?”

He chuckled.

“So what about these other things?” I asked, nodding toward the scattered items.

“Oh, these?” He waved a hand. “All junk, really. Except the shield. And the axe. And my keys, of course. Never know when you’ll need to get back home!” Dribbles laughed again, the usual warmth setting back into his voice.

“Even the ring? It’s got your initial on it,” I said.

“The ring?” He grinned. “Ha! That’s a story for another day.”

He rose to his feet, brushing the dirt from his knees. “Come on. Let’s celebrate. Tomorrow, we leave for new lands. I’ve heard tale of a church hidden deep in the jungle, where the greatest basketball players train under a master.”

One by one, he packed his belongings into the magical backpack. Each item vanished the moment it touched the mouth of the bag.

“I’ll join you in a bit,” he said softly, still staring at the folded drawing.

Chapter 34

THE END OF THE BEGINNING

The morning sun slipped through the small window of the inn, landing squarely in my eyes. I groaned and rolled over, turning away from the light. Dribbles was already up, tightening straps and humming to himself.

“Ah, you’re finally awake!” he said brightly. “Ready to continue our adventure?”

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

Dribbles went to the door and opened it; both Passandra and Passanova stood on the other side smiling.

“Good morning, you two! I brought you some food for the road,” Passandra said, handing over a stack of troll cheese. “Courtesy of Dribblynn!”

“You’re not coming with us, Passandra?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No. Passanova and I talked it over. I’m not the adventuring type. I’m much more managerial. Way better with politics than swords and magic. My place is here, as mayor of Passadena. The people need me, and, I think I

need them, too. Plus, someone has to help the 'rents fix up Blortsylvania while you're gone!"

"I understand. Thanks again for teaching me how to pass. It really came in clutch back there, didn't it, Passanova?"

I smiled. Dribbles smiled. Passandra smiled. The Blort smiled. Passanova... did not.

"Haha, yeah, guess you're right!" he said with a delayed laugh.

"Oh, I almost forgot!" Passandra said. She whistled, and an elf hurried over carrying a basketball. She took it and passed it to Dribbles with a grin.

Dribbles caught the ball and began to bounce it. "My favorite basketball!" Dribbles' shouted. "How did you fix it? After the net goblins spit roasted it I thought it was done for! Thank you so much!"

"Elvish secret," Passandra laughed. "You're very welcome! It's the least I could do!"

Bill the Blort, Passanova, and I watched as Dribbles made his way down the stairs, headed towards the road, still dribbling, still whistling, as he usually did.

"He's serious about this basketball thing, isn't he?" Passanova said.

“He just hates to travel,” I said.

POING

POING

POING

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I hope you enjoyed this book. Please leave a review if you did. If you didn't, leave one too. It's the only way I can improve. Seriously, an honest bad review is worth more than a fake good review.

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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!

A SAMPLE FOR SLAMDALF THE
HOOPMAGE 2

Chapter 1

RIVER RAFTING

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 stretching out at the start of a new day. The reflections of the 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 it. The canopy was thick like a wool blanket that let only slivers of light 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 that I didn't understand; symbols and sigils patterned across the faces of the cards in a nonsensical 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, it just stared, mouth hanging open as if it could taste the air around it. He blinked once. Slowly. Deliberately. Then, as slowly as it turned to me, it 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.

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, I thought to myself. And 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 goat. He knows I get mad whenever he mentions it.

"I'm pretty sure it doesn't know up from down, let alone that it has a brain. Or, whatever it is it's got in there," 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 light up off the cards as he whispered an ecstatic "Yes!" to himself.

Maybe Dribbles was right. Maybe the bracelet only worked in Blortsylvania. 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 it 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 friends 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!" Bills' 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 caw'd. 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

WATER IS WET

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 festooned 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, soaking us all.

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 flow 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 wagged 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, my hat 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 the water's surface the green and blue hues of the jungle canopy and open sky greeted me. I gulped in a lung full of air.

My grip tightened on my walking stick as it flew higher and higher into the air. 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 mages grip is more suited for basketballs than sticks. As I ascended my fingers began to betray me. My grip weakened with each passing moment. 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. 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 wind 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 in 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. 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 thought to myself as my body collided with something very hard.

THUD