

## “Goblins”

“Alright, Blorg, we-” I said.

“Shlorb,” corrected the goblin.

“Shlorb, right, sorry. Well, Shlorb, we need to find The Red Lady, so keep your eyes peeled and don’t start any trouble.”

“What’s she look like?”

“Not sure, but with a name like The Red Lady, I’m sure we’ll know her when we see her,” I turned my attention to the tavern as we stepped through the thick wooden doors. The creaking of the rickety floorboards was barely audible over the boisterous, drunken crowd. Mugs of ale sloshed and splashed as men, wizards, and halflings sang and gambled at each table and bar top. I grabbed Shlorb’s arm before he could run off and get into trouble, weaving through the dense crowd to the bar.

“Ale for me and something to eat for the goblin,” I said to the barkeep. He nodded over his shoulder as he darted along the bar to keep the beer flowing for the rowdy patrons.

“There ya are lads. Anything else while you’ve got me?” he asked as he set down my request before us. Shlorb greedily scooped up the hunk of bread offered to him and dug in.

“Yes, we’re looking for The Red Lady, Minerva sent us,” I said. The barkeep’s eyes went wide. A strong hand gripped the chink in my shoulder’s armor, forcing me to turn around.

“What’s that old bat want with me now, aye?” said a giant woman with the most aggressive red hair I’ve ever seen. Like a crackling fire, it stuck up every which way. Much like her hair, her face was a violent shade of red, and had a nasty scar that ran from below her right eye disappearing underneath the neckline of her old tattered dress.

“Found ‘er,” Shlorb said with a mouth full of bread. I shot him a look over my shoulder before giving her the politest smile I could muster.

“Sir, I mean ma’am! Ma’am, our friend was gravely wounded in battle. We are in search of a Goldenseal Flower to heal her. Minerva said you knew where to find them and that you owed her a favor,” I said that last part quickly, her hand still tightly clutching me. When I thought she might smush me between the floorboards, she released me.

“Alroght, follow me, boys,” she said, moving behind the bar to a room in the back. I grabbed Shlorb by the scruff of his nasty toga and hauled him after her. He dragged the massive mug of ale I hadn’t gotten to touch along with us, gulping it down as if his life depended on it. We entered a dimly lit corridor leading down to the tavern’s cellar.

“Can’t ave all that noise around for this,” she said, plopping down on a large barrel. “Let’s get to et, then. This is no easy journey. Ya sure yew two are up for et?” I looked back to Shlorb uneasily. He was too busy gorging himself on the cellar’s ale and pocketing anything remotely shiny to listen.

“We have no choice, ma’am. Our friend’s life depends on it,” I said. She nodded solemnly.

“We’ll leave at dawn then. I’ve got one horse I can lend ya, and I’ll take ya as far as the river but after that, yer on yer own. The flowers grow deep within the dungeon atop Mount Misery.”

“Mount Misery, you can’t be serious! We don’t stand a chance, look at him!” I said, pointing to Shlorb. He was flat on the floor, completely intoxicated. “I mean, that place is crawling with beasts, and there’s tell of a dragon!”

“Aye, ets true, the dragon. I’ve fought the bastard meself, gave me this,” she motioned to her face. “But, the beast es weakened, one of me own party wounded et. Ya might just ave a shot if yew can hold yer sword right. Still, Minerva must be desperate to send the two of you alone. I’m sorry, lad.”

“She had to stay behind with our friend. Her magic is the only thing keeping Bee alive until we get that flower,” I slumped back onto my own barrel in defeat just as the barkeep entered the cellar.

“Dear, Boris es up there at et again,” he said quietly, almost like he himself had done something wrong.

“Dammit! I told yew to cut ‘em off an hour ago!” she said. Somehow her face burnt an even brighter red as she came to stand. The barkeep hung his head and stepped out of the room, ashamed. She turned back to me, “Yew get some rest upstairs, first room to yer right. I’ll collect ya in the mornin and control yer goblin,” with that, The Red Lady stormed out, her heavy steps shaking the tavern floor above.

I forced myself to stand and dragged myself over the pile of now-empty bottles that Shlorb had amassed. I bent down, scooping up the very drunk goblin, and held him out in front of me.

“I am not carrying you all the way up there,” I said, to which he replied by opening his mouth and promptly vomiting down the front of my freshly polished chestplate.

As promised, The Red Lady arrived at our door with the sun. We ate a quick meal, dragged Shlorb out, and loaded up our horse. It wasn’t until midday we reached the river on the outskirts of the kingdom, but with Shlorb balanced on my lap it felt like years. Once again, The

Red Lady kept her word and departed from us here, claiming business elsewhere and her debt paid.

“Are we there yet? I’m bored,” Shlorb said.

“We should reach the cusp of the mountain by nightfall. But first, we have to swim across. This horse isn’t strong enough to make it with us on her back,” I said.

“Uh oh.”

“What, Shlorb?”

“I can’t swim.”

“I’m done carrying you, goblin. Figure it out,” I said as we dismounted. I slowly trudged into the water, leading the horse behind me. Shlorb, with sudden gusto, backed up and ran full speed toward the river. I suppose he thought if he moved fast enough, he might just magically run across. Pathetically, he quickly disappeared below the surface, leaving only a few bubbles and bread scraps in his wake.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” I said to the horse. I dropped the reins and carefully dove in after him as the water was only about four feet deep at this point. He floundered below the surface, smacking me away as I tried to rescue him. Once I grabbed hold and yanked him up, he breached the surface in a fit of screams and coughs, thrashing wildly. I did what any good samaritan would do; I slapped him.

“Ow! Hey!” he said, finally looking at me while holding his little green cheek. I set him down again on the shallow edge, looking for the horse.

“Great, you’ve spooked the horse.”

“No!” Shlorb said, shocked.

“Yep, she had most our supplies too,” I said, while trying to dig through my soaked pack for anything useful. “I think you have a better chance of killing us than the dragon at this rate. Come on.” I squatted slightly, allowing him to clamber onto my back, and began the cold swim across.

The trek to the mountain was dreadful. Shlorb insisted that I must carry him while he recovered from the drowning incident. The sun was deep below the horizon when we reached the old abandoned village at the mountain’s base. We settled in the most intact house we could find, gathered what scraps of food and bedding were left, and then built a small fire.

“I’ll take first watch. Get some rest,” I said, stirring the fire. It was a quiet night, nothing but the small hoots of owls deep within the woods and the crackling of the fire. It was almost pleasant.

“Dude, what color do you think the dragon is?” Shlorb asked, rolling over and destroying my peace.

“I can’t believe that’s what you’re thinking about right now. Go to sleep.”

“I think it’s gold since it guards the Goldenseal Flowers. Do you think there’s gonna be treasure? Dragons love treas-”

“Enough! Bee will die if we don’t get one of those flowers, and this is what you’re worrying about? Just stop,” I said, shooting up to my feet and marching over to the large window. The mountain loomed over us, taunting me, laughing at my pathetic situation.

“Pat, pat,” said Shlorb as he thumped his grubby hands against my shoulder. “We’ll get the flower, and I’ll take the first watch.”

“You sure?” I asked, sniffing. I hadn’t even realized I started to cry.

“Yea, I slept while you carried me earlier, so I’m good to go, bay-bee.”

We set off in the morning after eating the scraps of soggy bread Shlorb had left in his little pockets. The road leading up Mount Misery was overrun with wild plants and even wilder hogs. We hadn't gone more than 50 feet up before encountering a particularly territorial pig. I took my eyes off him for one second, and the beast knocked Shlorb over the side of the path down a short drop, but enough of a drop for him to refuse to walk any further. At least the battle ended with us having real food for the journey. I finally set Shlorb down when we settled in a shallow cave about three-quarters of the way up to rest for another night.

I didn't bother trying to force Shlorb to walk that morning. We both knew he'd end up on my back sooner or later, so I just carried him from the start. The path slowly thinned out as we ascended, and the temperature only got colder, making it even harder to navigate. But the hogs tormented us no longer, staying on the lower sections of the mountain where it was warm. I kept my eyes trained on the thin path, taking extra care not to trip.

"Woah, dude!" said Shlorb, gripping my chin and forcing me to look up. The entrance to the dungeon was massive, with jagged rocks jutting through the air in every direction. An ominous red glow emitted from deep within. It grew eerily quiet with each step we drew closer to the opening. Shlorb slid off my back and entered the dungeon. "Hello?" he shouted into the cave, his voice echoing and bouncing off each rock as it traveled deeper below.

"Shhhh! Are you trying to get us killed? There's a dragon in there, remember?"

"Whoopsies."

We pressed forward, my drawn sword helping to light the way by reflecting the ominous red glow. The further into the dungeon we traveled, the brighter and warmer it grew.

"You made this place sound a lot scarier than it is. I mean, where are all the beasts and the mighty dragon?" said Shlorb with a dramatic wave of his arms. I shot him a look as we

entered a large opening in the cave. Suddenly, from out of the shadows crawled more monsters than I'd seen in my entire life.

"You just had to open your mouth, didn't you?" I said to him. Trolls, orcs, and creatures I'd never seen before drooled at the sight of us, the first idiots to enter that place in a while.

"My b," said Shlorb, and with that, the creatures charged. Fighting broke out before they even reached us. They grappled each other, clawing eyes and ripping out teeth to reach us first. My sword barely made contact with one before a deep rumbling shook the earth below us. Everything went still as a horrible silence washed over us. Beasts began shoving each other out of the way to exit the cavern, funneling into smaller caves and pushing past us to go out the way we came in.

"There's always a bigger fish," I mumbled, widening my stance and readying my blade once more. The dragon burst through the other end of the cavern, too great to fit through the opening, sending rocks and trolls into the air. Shlorb scrambled around, trying to dodge the falling wreckage before using me as a human shield.

"I knew it!" he called out. The Golden Dragon rained fire on straggling fiends and struggled against the dungeon's ceiling. Hunched over, it waded through the carnage and tried to spread its wings for more space.

"There!" I said to Shlorb, pointing to the underside of the dragon's right wing, "There's the injury The Red Lady spoke of, and the cave limits its mobility. We might actually have a chance!" Across the dragon's right side, a vicious scar spread with no scales growing over it, leaving the area unprotected.

The golden beast spotted us and sent fire careening our way. We split up, rolling and scurrying to opposite sides. It turned its horrible gaze on Shlorb. Perfect, I thought to myself.

“You keep it distracted while I get in close!” I called out.

“AHHHHHHHHHHHH!” was all I got in response as he wildly jumped and ran dodging falling rocks and fire. I charged forward, rolling to avoid its massive tail and sliding to the side as its hind leg came down before me. I raised my sword and slashed at its leg, deep crimson poured out, coating me. I could barely see through the thick layer of dragon blood. I stumbled around frantically trying to remove it before tripping on a piece of rubble. I crawled across the ground frantically trying to find my sword that I dropped when I fell.

“NO!” Shlorb screamed. I turned as the demon’s jaw opened before me, scooping me into its mouth. The pain was unlike anything I had felt before. I couldn’t breathe as its powerful bite pressed against my armor. I could make out Shlorb’s green form running full speed at the dragon before it dropped me to shoot fire his way.

My left leg hit the floor with a horrible crunch as I watched the goblin fly helplessly into the air and slam against the cavern wall. I frantically snatched up my sword and watched the dragon limp toward my friend’s unconscious form. The scream that left my mouth was horrible. It sent blood flying as adrenaline forced me forward into battle. In its injured state, the beast could not turn to meet me fast enough as I sliced a wide arc against its side, sending it crashing to the floor. I raised my sword to its neck and cut down with all the strength I had left.

I collapsed before it, my sword clattering out of my hands once more. My chest heaved; each breath I took was horribly labored. A sad wheeze to my left shocked me from my state. I crawled pathetically across the floor to Shlorb.

“We did it, buddy. It’s dead!” I said desperately. Nothing, not a sound, not even a sassy remark. “Shlorb?” I shook him, nothing. “No, no, no, no.”



“Damn, what happened to him?” said a familiar voice behind me. I turned. It was the goblin.

“Dude, come on. How many goblins are we gonna go through before you take this campaign seriously?” said Sara, our dungeon master, with her head in her hands as she laughed. Jacob mock gasped at the accusation.

“I’ll have you know I have loved and treasured each of my goblins: Morb, Blorg, Shlorb, and now Florg, deeply!” he said dramatically. “Besides, I wouldn’t have died this time if bozo here,” he pointed at me, “didn’t roll a five while fighting a literal dragon!”

“Hey! I’ve saved your ass more times than I can count,” I said, laughing too, “but, seriously, man, I don’t think I can handle another tragic goblin death, as annoying as they may be.”