SIDE STORY

GOBTA’S BIG ADVENTURE

This is a tale from back when Gobta was just another goblin in the horde.

The sky stretched blue across the heavens, a refreshing breeze flowing in the air.

And the humans advancing on him like always. Today, as lively as ever, Gobta was under pursuit.

“Halt, you! Speed’s about the only thing you’ve got, is it?!”

“How dare you vandalize our fields again! I’m gonna kill you this time!”

The humans, eyes red with rage, were closing in on Gobta.

So he sprinted at full speed. It’d be bad for him, probably, if he let himself get caught. He could only imagine it, since he hadn’t been captured yet, but none of his friends had ever come back alive from such an encounter, so all Gobta could do was imagine the terrifying results.

He could’ve just kept his hands off the fields and gardens, of course. But Gobta and the other goblins didn’t quite grasp the concept of agriculture. All they saw was an open field with lots of fruits and vegetables growing in it. It was human territory, and they knew from experience that getting found would lead to a chase, but nothing could overcome their hunger.

So Gobta escaped down a narrow trail beaten into the earth by the local creatures, chewing the sweet flesh of a melon the whole way. The trail was barely visible at all, the sort of thing only a small goblin could successfully navigate. There would be no entry for the larger humans, who could only stop at a distance and lob insults at him instead.

He breathed a sigh of relief at his good thinking. Finding an escape route’s a basic move, it is! he thought.

Upon arriving back at the village, Gobta found a group of the older goblin elders gathered around and discussing something. They were joined by a few kobold merchants who were in town.

“As I told you, these are too valuable for us to be able to trade elsewhere…”

“But that means this magical equipment will simply go to waste. Are you sure you can offer nothing for them?”

“If they were somewhat smaller, we would be able to wield them ourselves, but…”

“Hmm. I see. Indeed, these are too large for us to handle, either.”

Eavesdropping as he passed by, Gobta figured they were trying to sell some magical something-or-others to the kobolds. Human equipment, barring shortswords and daggers, was too large for goblins.

Armor, too, was out of the question. Clothing made out of things like hard leather could be taken apart and used in piecemeal fashion, but metallic pieces were too much to work with. None of the goblins had that kind of knowledge.

Magic items were a big unknown. Even touching them, they feared, would break them and make them worthless. If not even the kobolds wanted them, it was a classic case of pearls before swine.

“How about this, then?” one kobold suggested to the goblins as they scratched their heads. “If you are willing to travel to the Dwarven Kingdom, they should be able to take these items from you. They would be willing to accept it as payment for dwarven hardware and the like, and they will gladly deliver your purchases to you as well. It will be a fair distance from here, mind…but as long as you travel upstream along the river, it is impossible to lose your way.”

This led to a clamor among the assembled goblin elders. “The Dwarven Kingdom?!” one bellowed. “That is an impossible distance! I have only heard rumors of that foreign land!”

“How long would it take to travel to such a distant place?”

“Yes! And who would embark on the journey? Our young are our most valuable workers; we cannot afford to spare a single one!”

Nothin’ I need to worry about! Gobta thought as he blithely ambled by, paying little attention to the seemingly never-ending bickering.

Fate had different plans.

“Hold on,” the village elder said, stopping him. “You look like you have little occupying your time. Could I ask a favor?”

Gobta immediately froze. Something told him this favor wouldn’t be much to his liking.

“Look at this knife,” the elder continued. “Don’t you think it’s a wonderful piece? If you do this favor for us, I’ll be happy to give it to you!”

The gleam of the blade was more than enough to grab Gobta’s attention.

“Say what you will, sir! I’ll handle whatever you need!” he blurted, immediately forgetting his earlier sense of foreboding. But perhaps that was unavoidable. The silvery gleam on this knife was the product of the magic imbued inside. It immediately robbed Gobta of the ability to engage in critical thought. His mouth had moved before his brain did.

Ah!

But it was already too late.

“You will, then? You will travel to the Dwarven Kingdom for us?”

“Huh? Me?!”

“May we count on you for this?”

Now the elders surrounded Gobta, identical smiles on their faces. The sight of their stern eyes above their upturned lips forced Gobta to nod meekly in response.

It was said that the average goblin’s life span was no more than a fifth of a human’s. Their lineage could be traced back to the ancient fairy-affiliated races, allegedly, but given their current degenerate monster selves, it was a tenuous link at best. Even the longest-lived were lucky to see their twentieth birthday, and most racked up only a decade or so before shuffling off. The age of three, when goblins were ready for reproductive activity, was seen as the start of their adulthood, with full maturity at age five.

They were not very strong creatures, and as a result, their species made up the difference through explosive numbers of offspring. Relatively few survived to adulthood, however, making the cruelty of nature all the more obvious. Only about half of all goblin children reached full maturity, and of those, less than half ever saw that fifth birthday.

It was simply the lot they were given, and considering these short lives, goblins did not have the habit of acquiring language skills. They could speak words, yes, but this was done strictly to communicate their intentions to each other and nothing more. There was no concept of gaining knowledge and imparting it to the next generation, nor any habit of stockpiling resources to improve their living conditions.

This was exactly why the goblins saw no use for magical items apart from selling them in exchange for their daily needs, along with any decent armor they could get their grubby paws on.

The lack of intelligence among even the elders meant that they truly had no idea what a journey to the Dwarven Kingdom would entail. The round-trip would take several months—a hefty part of a goblin’s life span—and he would have to risk everything he held dear. Yet nobody in the goblin village considered it to be a terribly important mission. To the elders and other mature adults, they were simply taking a rough-sounding assignment and giving it to a child with nothing better to do. They held no ill will toward him—nor, really, the arithmetic skills needed to appreciate the scope of this quest. It was just how it was.

And so, with only a few moments of hesitation, Gobta’s journey to the Dwarven Kingdom was set in stone.

Why is everyone so mean? Gobta whined to himself.

He had a valid point. He was a goblin child, still not fully grown, and they were strapping a load the size of a mountain on his back and sending him off on some grand quest. He had heard from the kobolds that it’d be a two-month walk by itself, but with all this baggage? It was hard even putting one foot in front of the other.

But no point complaining about it. Gobta started to think. Then he had an idea.

Why don’t I put all this junk in a box and pull it behind me?

This, unfortunately, didn’t work. The box refused to move. Gobta scratched his head some more. Then he remembered the really big box he saw once, near a human settlement, with a horse pulling it around.

Oh yeah, that one had some round things on it, didn’t it…?

What he was remembering was a cart, and the “round things” were wheels, although he didn’t have the words for them in his vocabulary. So Gobta foraged around for something that would work in their place. What he found was a pair of abandoned circular shields.

This oughta do it!

Things proceeded commendably quickly from there. He took a straight club, then used his shiny new magical knife to whittle it down to size. Then he put a couple of holes in the box with his belongings and ran the stick through the both of them. He jammed the twin shields onto both ends of this makeshift axle and bound them in place with some handy vines he’d found. A couple extra pieces of wood for handles, and voilà—an instant pull-wagon.

With a few rags piled on top to keep things from falling off—and a few more from the village to keep warm in the evenings—he was set. The elder was kind enough to provide some food and water, too.

So Gobta left the village. Long, sentimental good-byes were never really the goblins’ style anyway.

I’m hungry…

A week later, Gobta was staggering forward in a state of near-total exhaustion. The food on his wagon, which he’d sort of assumed would last him the rest of his life, had disappeared by day five. There was still some water left, but not much, probably.

The wagon, meanwhile, kept getting stuck on tree roots and such, sapping Gobta’s strength. Traversing on foot with his energy running low, Gobta and his journey were in jeopardy. He had now walked for two days without any food.

As his steps grew increasingly unsteady, Gobta struggled to pull his wagon along, but…

I can’t…

He plopped down at the base of a large tree on the side of the path. In an amazing stroke of luck, the moment he settled down, he spotted a mushroom sprouting up from the ground. If he had examined it for a little longer, he probably would have noticed its tremendously poisonous-looking color, but the hunger was starting to cloud his vision.

Ooh, a mushroom! I could fight for three years with this!

He lunged at the mushroom, wolfing it down raw without much of a second thought.

Yet again, though, Gobta’s sheer luck saved the day. The particular type of mushroom he chose was dangerously poisonous, but only if heat was applied to it—grilling, boiling, whatever. The juices of its meat would then transform into a lethal compound, something Gobta had no idea about as he inadvertently chose the safest way to enjoy it.

Having a full stomach did wonders for Gobta’s spirits. He filled his leather skin from a pool of water inside a cavity in the tree, then decided to take a rest, not too interested in traveling any farther that day.

His wagon was set to break apart at any moment, but luckily there were some useful vines nearby he used to lash it back together, as well as some handy sap from the tree to fill in the assorted holes and crevices that had appeared. The bark from the tree did wonders to patch up the largest breaks in the box, too.

With that vital work complete, Gobta slept the rest of the night, relieving his fatigue. He woke up the next morning, surprisingly chipper considering how yesterday had gone, and began foraging, picking up some edible-looking nuts and wild strawberries—and spotting some more of the mushrooms from the previous day.

“I’ve never seen such a dangerous-looking mushroom!” he exclaimed to himself. “Not even I could eat something like that.” So he left them behind, picking a duller-looking mushroom to take along in his pocket. Given all the brightly colored, poisonous-looking mushrooms in the area, he figured (in his hazy memory) that this must’ve been the one he’d eaten.

Man, was I lucky to find this winner among all the poison ones!

So he foraged around a little more before deciding to set off. It was still before morning, and he didn’t have the foresight to stockpile food a little more before departing—so instead he slowed down, searching for more edibles along the way.

A month after he departed his home village, Gobta finally arrived at the large river he was told to look out for. The flowing water was beautiful and almost totally transparent. The occasional glints of sunlight he spotted within must have been fish, he reasoned.

It appeared calm on the surface, probably because it was so wide he couldn’t even see the other side, but just a little below, the current looked as if it would give even a decent swimmer a run for their money.

The sheer size of the river made Gobta’s eyes widen in surprise. He was familiar with creeks and the like, and he loved playing in them, but this was a whole other level of grandness. He had seen nothing like it before. The sight was unimaginable, and it was little wonder that it amazed him.

“Hyaaahhhh! This is so great!!” he shouted. The sight of the flowing water never got old to him. He sat there the entire day, just watching it go by, until night fell.

The next morning, fully satisfied at the view he had taken in, Gobta set off early. Only when he was about to start walking did he notice an important issue.

“Huh? They said to follow my left hand once I reached the river,” he whispered, not expecting an answer. “But if I turn around, it’s going in the opposite direction…?”

He was right. He knew he had put a mark on his left hand so he’d remember which one it was when it came time to tackle that important issue. The only problem: It turned out his left hand would point in different directions whenever he moved. Follow his left hand where? That was the hard part.

In the end, he decided to pick up a tree branch he found at the side of the river, let it fall to the ground, and travel the way it pointed. The fact that it wound up facing the correct way was another testament to Gobta’s astounding luck. He followed the branch’s lead, not doubting it for a moment, and the trip went problem-free from there.

Just when the journey was starting to bore him a little with its simplicity, Gobta saw some shallows in the river up ahead. It was a watering hole for the forest animals nearby, although none of them seemed to be fighting each other. They were avoiding confrontation at this spot—a sort of instinctual, unwritten law of nature, perhaps. Carnivore and herbivore were here together, one of the few places in the wild world where you’d ever see it.

That rule, however, was reserved for the animal kingdom. Humans and monsters didn’t adhere to it. Neither did Gobta. What’s more, since most monsters that hunted animals tended to be nocturnal, the animals lowered their guards when it was still light out.

What a chance! My first meat in ages!

Gobta’s eyes began twinkling as he watched the creatures. Large, slow animals enjoyed the feeling of water on their backs; nimbler predators took a drink and quickly left the premises. There were even smaller birds and hares and such, drinking on the far edges to avoid the others.

His eyes swam as he took in all the options. Then he found a wild hare—a slower-looking one, fat and juicy to his eyes. The perfect size for someone like Gobta. Anything larger would’ve been too dangerous.

Approaching his target, Gobta stopped after a short distance and carefully observed his surroundings.

All right. So far, so good.

He grinned to himself, slowly closing in as he gathered a few stones from the ground. In a moment, he was within what he felt was comfortable throwing range. His stealth skills, honed by a long career of raiding vegetable gardens, paid off for him.

“Yah!”

Brimming with confidence, Gobta launched a stone at the hare. His unerring aim gave him a clean hit, and the animal fell into the watering hole. The others around it immediately darted off. Gobta didn’t care. He was already salivating by the time he picked up the body.

Then, a problem occurred.

“Grooooooooar!!”

With a mighty wail, a magical beast appeared from between the trees. It was standing majestically atop a small cliff, and slowly its eyes turned toward Gobta.

This was a blade tiger, the so-called king of this dense forest. It enjoyed a rank of B, pretty well ensuring that an F-ranked goblin stood no chance.

This beast was here for the animals around the watering hole, just like Gobta was—but thanks to Gobta taking action first, all the animals had scattered, leaving the blade tiger with nothing. Nothing, that is, except Gobta himself. And his catch, of course, but that wouldn’t be nearly enough to sate this monster.

“Gehh! Are you after me?!”

The blade tiger leaped from its perch, unfazed by the height of the cliff, and landed in front of Gobta without a sound. It made him flinch, but his instincts told him that running was pointless.

As it was, there was no escaping a fate that ended in the tiger’s maw. What should he do?

Gobta thought as hard as he could. Then…

If this is how it is, I’ll have to struggle as much as I can!

Steeling himself, Gobta readied himself against the blade tiger. There weren’t many options at his disposal. His left hand still had a stone in it, but against a blade tiger, that wouldn’t accomplish much.

Maybe that would work…

He suddenly recalled the knife given to him before his departure. Maybe it could wound the creature? And maybe, if he was lucky, that’d buy him enough time to escape. Once he made that conclusion, there was no time to waste. There was nothing else at his disposal, so he decided to believe in his chances and keep resisting until the end.

First, Gobta lobbed the stone. The knife was his real ticket out of here, but if the tiger dodged it, he was dead. So he used the stone first to distract the beast. The blade tiger easily leaped out of its way, and Gobta, anticipating where his adversary would land, removed the knife from his pocket and prepared to hurl it toward—

Um, this is a mushroom…?

It took a few moments for him to realize that it was no knife he was about to throw at the blade tiger. But he was already in motion, unable to stop, and away the mushroom went. He was kind of planning to eat that later. The one dull-colored mushroom he could find in a grove full of poisonous ones. He’d meant it for a snack and then promptly forgotten about it.

But then something beyond Gobta’s imagination took place. It turned out that this mushroom was a rare poisonous type, one containing spores that were loaded with lethal venom. Gobta had been walking around with that in his pocket the whole time, and then he’d thrown it at a magical beast.

The blade tiger glanced at the mushroom hurtling toward its face, then opened its mouth. It used its Voice Cannon skill in an attempt to vaporize it—which proved to be a mistake. The pulverized mushroom immediately released all its spores, which floated on the breeze and landed all over the tiger’s body. It fell to the ground, twitching, racked from head to toe with pain; the spores had entered its eyes, ears, and mouth and were relentlessly punishing its senses.

For the first time since birth, the blade tiger was experiencing a truly indescribable level of pain. Gobta wasn’t very smart, but he was smart enough to take advantage of the situation.

Whoa! I don’t know what happened, but this is my big chance!

A greater adventurer would have closed in to stab the final blow. Not Gobta. Quickly, he planned his escape, making sure to pick up his hare before he left.

Reaching his battered old wagon, he tossed the bunny corpse on top of the load and ran away at full speed. He kept going as long as his breath would let him, until he finally made it to what seemed to be a safe place.

He breathed a sigh of relief, having escaped what had been the greatest danger ever to occur in his life.

Being freed from certain death immediately reminded Gobta that he was hungry. He recalled the hare in his possession, but not even he was simple enough to let his guard down here. He decided to move over to the riverbed, which would give him a good view of his entire surroundings, and used some stones and dead sticks to fashion a serviceable outdoor stove.

The danger of the past few moments was now firmly behind him as Gobta’s thoughts turned to his appetite. He drained the carcass of blood, bristling with anticipation, and skinned and gutted the animal.

Before long, it was arranged on a stick atop the fire. Now all he had to do was rotate the stick around and make sure the surface was fully cooked. It was a simple recipe, combined with some berry juice squeezed over the carcass, and it took only a few moments to wrap up.

“This is great! This is so great!”

Gobta chewed on the meat, not minding the oils dripping down on him. There was nothing more delicious than the first meal after staring death in the face. In Gobta’s case, after living off wild strawberries and assorted nuts for the past X number of days, the first meat he could remember tasted as though he had ascended to heaven. Nothing could have made him happier.

As far as he was concerned, the fear he’d felt before the blade tiger was all in the past. His brain had already processed it as just another incident in his life. It was the first time Gobta had gotten to eat his fill in a while. This he did, with gusto.

“Right!” he said. “I have a feeling tomorrow’s gonna be a great day!”

To Gobta, the past might as well have been a faraway oblivion. All that really mattered was the next day.

The blade tiger run-in turned out to be the last major trouble Gobta encountered for the next month of traveling.

The hazy mountains that had seemed so far away long ago now loomed so large that the peaks were no longer visible, even if he looked straight up. The buttes above him had been weathered down by the rain to form a beautiful, powerful-looking, sheer wall. Everything was a new sight to Gobta, and everything grabbed his interest.

But he didn’t have the time to leisurely take in the sights. He was almost out of food again. He was already in lands more or less under the protection of the dwarven king, mostly grasslands outside the Forest of Jura. He tried to collect as much as he could before he took up the mountain road, but not only would there be no replenishing his stockpiles—those stockpiles were starting to look pretty meager.

The breathtaking views around him helped Gobta forget about his hunger, but it was now time to face reality. And that wasn’t the only problem. Gobta wasn’t the only one on the road to the Dwarven Kingdom. As a neutral trade hub, it played host to all kinds of different species—not just magic-born creatures and people but also humans.

As Gobta discovered, most travelers along this route preferred to stick to large groups if at all possible. All races were guaranteed safety in the kingdom, as a rule, but security forces could reach only so far in the borderlands. People needed to and were expected to fend for themselves. That was common sense to the merchants, but Gobta neither knew nor cared about any of that.

This was why, while he was distracted over the food issue, he ran into a wholly different kind of problem. Just as he was thinking about how he’d better find some real nourishment soon, he heard a voice.

“Yo,” it said, “what’s a lone goblin doin’ here cartin’ valuables around, eh?”

Gobta didn’t understand him. Goblins communicated with each other using a method not terribly far from the Thought Communication skill. A few broken words of human speech were the best they could handle.

He was, however, still sensitive to the malice behind the statement. He hadn’t noticed the human’s approach, and looking up at him, Gobta could already sense the danger.

Uh-oh… This can’t be good.

Gobta grabbed at the handles on his wagon, preparing to run away at full speed. But…

“Ohhh no you don’t!”

Another human appeared in front of him—a fighter in metallic armor. The other man, wearing lighter gear, peered inside the wagon and let out an appreciative whistle.

“Whoa! I wasn’t expecting much, but these’re magic items, aren’t they? Boy, are we lucky today! All we gotta do is kill this little guy, and we’ve already earned the money for our shopping trip!”

“Oh? I was expecting just a little spending cash, but what a stroke of luck. Can’t wait to see the faces on those bastards who were too lazy to join us!”

Gobta ignored the exchange as he thought about what to do next. Running into this unexpected trouble so close to the Dwarven Kingdom surprised him—but there was no time to ponder his fate. He calmed his beating heart as he searched for a decent solution.

What should I do?! If this keeps up, they’ll take all of it. And I think my life might be in danger, too…

As he thought about it, it was clear these men might be after more than some magic doodads. Only then did Gobta realize the extent of the danger.

Soon he realized he was right. Blocking his path of retreat, the men began attacking him. Considering Gobta’s childlike size, it wasn’t a fair fight. The men were fully armored and boasting the strength of rank-D adventurers. Gobta didn’t stand a chance. Without a stroke of luck equivalent to the one that helped him survive the blade tiger, it would be the end of the road for him.

But once again, the goddess of fortune smiled.

“What are you people doing over there?”

Gobta and his attackers turned around to find a goblina staring them down—a fighter, judging by her muddy red hair. They could see a kobold merchant caravan behind her—she must have been a bodyguard.

The men took a moment to size up their chances. They numbered two, and they’d potentially be taking on an entire caravan led by a professional warrior. Hobgoblins of either gender were high-level creatures capable of language, far more intelligent than their goblin relatives. In terms of skill, meanwhile, the men were still rank amateurs.

This was no match a sane man would take. And even if they just wanted to make off with this doltish goblin’s baggage, it was too late for that.

“Pfft,” the armored one said. “We’ll let you go this time!”

“Best be glad to still be breathing, worm!”

And then they left, leaving Gobta miraculously alive yet again.

Gobta must have been so elated at this stroke of fortune that he lost consciousness, because the next thing he knew, the clattering of the horse wagon had started to rouse him. The bruises the men had landed on him stung enough to wake him up fully.

“Oh, are you up?”

He looked up to find the red-haired goblina at his side—almost human in appearance, unlike the apish goblins. A single glance made Gobta her prisoner. He instantly forgot all about his injuries and immediately fell in love with the woman.

“An angel. An angelic woman from heaven! Please! I want you to birth my children!”

When it came to romance, goblins never took things slow. The rest of the wagon’s occupants took it as a joke.

“Bah-hah-hah-hah! Nice one, kid!”

“Oh-ho! You heard him!”

“Silence, you two!” the goblina snapped. “Stop with the chitchat and stay on alert!”

The sarcasm flew straight over the head of Gobta, his burning eyes still fixated upon his new ideal. Reality, unfortunately, was not as kind.

“Look,” the woman said, “cowards like you just aren’t my type. Letting yourself be bullied by humans that weak? I’d never let a man like that into my life! I’d at least like someone who could rescue me, if need be.”

Thus Gobta’s first romance ended several seconds after it began. The physical pain returned.

“N-no… I can’t believe it…”

Then he fainted again, the sense of loss too much to bear.

The kobold caravan wound up taking him all the way to the Dwarven Kingdom, at least, which saved him the trouble of being killed by roadside scavengers at night…

His first love didn’t quite work out, but at least his first quest did.

Thanks to his newfound kobold connections, Gobta was quickly taken to a dwarven shop willing to purchase his luggage. The employees were a bit surprised to find magical weapons underneath the stained rags covering his wagon, but the rest of the transaction was handled with trademark dwarven customer service.

The dwarves here were so accustomed to dealing with monsters that they could even communicate with them to some extent. One of the staff pointed at Gobta’s hips.

“Hey, are you selling that?”

He looked down to find his knife resting against his hip.

Oh! I had it along my side, not in my pocket!

No wonder he had plucked out a mushroom instead.

“No, this is mine,” Gobta replied. “Not selling.”

The dwarf nodded. “It’s a good piece,” he said, “but its magical force has almost run out. It’d only work one or more two times, I imagine. Do you know how to use it?”

“No, but…is this a magic weapon?”

“It is. It’s called a Flame Knife. It’s made of silver, but it’s been imbued with magical force. It was originally made as self-protection for human nobles. I could teach you the incantation if you like, but don’t expect it to last long when you use it.”

“Really?!”

“Really. Just take good care of it. It’s a dagger of Dwarven Kingdom make, after all!”

So the good-natured dwarf gave Gobta the correct spell to use, apparently deciding that the idea of a goblin with magic dwarven weapons was amusing enough to warrant giving some help.

Gobta’s business here was now over. He had accepted items instead of money for his load, but there’d be no need to cart it all back—the cost of shipping was factored into the deal the dwarves gave him. Gobta’s terms: as many kitchen knives, large pots, and other everyday goods as could fit in his wagon. He also arranged for some breastplates, knives, and other pieces suitable for goblin use.

He brought it all to the transfer station for registration and shipment. They gave him a magic-infused tube that, once he placed it where he wanted it, would transmit his items right to that point. It would work only once, of course. Inexpensive purchases like Gobta’s could also be sent by Heavenly Transport, but that was available only for short distances, and besides, Gobta didn’t have the language to express exactly where he lived. For him, even though it added to the price, magical transfer was the only option.

Gobta didn’t hesitate to take the offer, not exactly champing at the bit to pull a full wagon all the way back home as well. It’d save him from more potential raiders and unburden him to boot. The decision would prove to be the correct one later on.

After he was done at the transfer station, Gobta returned to the seller from before, hoping to express his thanks to the dwarf who had referred him. “Hello!” he said. “They’re going to transfer my purchases for me. Thanks!”

“Oh, you again? Well, wonderful. Oh, and you can have this back. We can’t sell this piece.”

The dwarf gave him a thick coat made of the animal pelts Gobta had been using as a blanket. He had taken several more wild hares, saving their skins for later sale; the coat was made from all of them, offering the wearer shelter from the cold. The dwarf had offered to return them, but he must have crafted the item specially for Gobta.

“Huh? Are you sure?”

“Mm-hmm. Besides, if we took all those pelts, what would you sleep on at night? You need to prepare well before setting off on a journey, you know.” Then the dwarf took out a well-used backpack. “Take this, too. Instead of giving you your change in money, I put some dried food in there. It should last you a week or so. Safe travels.”

“Really?” Gobta said, astonished at the dwarf’s kindness. “I thank you!”

“Ah, don’t worry about it. I actually made that knife you have, you see, and I wouldn’t want to leave its owner in the lurch. I’ll be praying that you make it home safely.”

Then the dwarf stepped away, off to handle another customer. Gobta nodded at him one more time, although he doubted his new friend noticed.

He’s right… If I left here empty-handed, I wouldn’t even make it to the forest. What a kind dwarf that was!

Putting on the coat, then the backpack over that, Gobta left the shop. His mission was complete, but he wasn’t about to set off that quickly. “I’ve made it this far,” he whispered to himself. “It’s all right if I see the sights a little, right?”

The Dwarven Kingdom was built inside a large, natural cave, preventing Gobta from seeing the sun directly. Thanks to some clever engineering that allowed natural sunlight to enter the city’s living spaces, however, it was more than bright enough to see by. At night, the fluorescent moss that covered the cave’s walls provided about as much light as a full moon.

One issue was how people handled fire. The kingdom wasn’t an enclosed space, but the cave made it easy for clouds of thick smoke to form, making ventilation a priority. As a result, whether indoors or “outdoors,” the use of fire was restricted, with firemen required to be on hand at all times near workshops, kitchens, and any other workplace that handled flame.

Which meant that cooking food was allowed only in certain places, always indoors.

Usually, if he was uncomfortable, he could just douse himself in some water. But Gobta had just wrapped up a long journey. To be blunt, he was rank. It was to be expected, given goblins’ lack of regular bathing habits. He didn’t stand out too much in the shops near the entrance, which were packed with freshly arrived adventurers just as smelly as he was, but things were different in the lodging quarters. There was ventilation, yes, but Gobta’s natural smell was more than enough to alarm the people around him.

In the merchant areas, passersby and visiting merchants visibly crinkled their noses. It was enough to make even Gobta feel socially awkward.

I don’t really like it here… Maybe I should leave sooner rather than later.

Feeling ashamed, Gobta decided to head home.

That was the right decision to make. For one thing, he had no money and no way of eating while he toured the city. He didn’t even understand the concept of money, for that matter, which was why he had just wrapped up a huge bartering session with that dwarf. There was no way around it.

So Gobta decided to wrap up his little tourist jaunt and get back on the road—and then he saw it. A store festooned with beautiful, eye-catching decor, filled with goddess-like women chatting with each other. The goblina bodyguard from the caravan had seemed divine to him before, but these women were different. They had long, flowing blond hair, their long ears poking out from below. They were elves, particularly fairylike members of the sprite races.

Concepts like beauty and ugliness would normally be dependent on the race or species one belonged to. There were no absolutes. However, when it came to goblins, their likes and dislikes were closer to people’s than not. It was a relic from their fairy heritage, and while their looks had retrogressed more than a little over the years, they were still magical in nature. It was to the point that some particularly senseless goblins would even attack people with procreation purposes in mind.

So lovely! I wish I could make friends with a pretty elf girl sometime, too!

Gobta wanted it to happen. And he knew that getting stronger was the only way to do it. Just as that caravan guard had said, if he was stronger, beautiful women would like him—that was how his thought process worked.

It was with that new goal in life that Gobta spent his single night in the Dwarven Kingdom. It seemed foolish to depart for the wilds at night, so he camped out in the park near the main gate instead. The cave at least prevented him from getting rained on, and the coat that nice dwarf had made for him kept the cold at bay. It was a more comfortable night than he’d expected, and Gobta awoke bursting with energy.

The fountain in the park apparently used spring water as its source, allowing passersby to drink from it. Gobta took his skin out from the backpack, filled it up, and set off, leaving the Dwarven Kingdom behind him.

Someone spoke to him right after he passed through the gate.

“Oh, is that you, kid? Is your work done here?”

Gobta looked up to find a kobold merchant. Two hobgoblin fighters were behind him, along with the goblina with the muddy red hair.

“Oh, it’s you!” Gobta exclaimed.

The caravan was also just about on its way. Richer merchants would spend several nights in the city, enjoying the assorted entertainment options it offered, but the smaller-time caravans didn’t have that luxury. Get in, do your business, get home, and relax with your own kind—that was how they normally worked.

The kobolds invited Gobta onto their caravan after greeting him.

“We’re taking the same route, aren’t we? We have room, so why not join us? Just provide us some protection if any bandits or magic beasts show up,” their leader said with a grin. He was expecting nothing from Gobta, of course—this was just a polite excuse to get him on the wagon. Gobta, completely insensitive to sarcasm, laughed with him, a little proud to be offered such a role.

The group proceeded along the river path, blessed with an uneventful journey as they pressed through the grasslands and plunged into the Forest of Jura. Gobta had ample wild birds to hunt wherever they rested, a decent supply of nuts and fruit to gather—and he did his part, pooling his resources with the caravan’s.

“You’ve got a real talent for this, don’t you?” the leader said, a tad astonished. “Look at all the food you’ve tracked down for us…”

“Indeed,” another kobold interjected, “you must know the Forest of Jura like the back of your hand. In the woods, you’re a lot more help than I’d ever expect.”

“Quite true. I had no idea you had this kind of talent!”

Gobta, his latest catch in one hand and a spare stone in the other, couldn’t hide his joy at this. Nobody ever praised him this much in the village. He enjoyed it.

One day, they came across those poisonous-looking, brightly colored mushrooms again—just like the one Gobta had inadvertently eaten to quell his hunger.

You can’t eat these… But hang on. Huh? Those normal-looking mushrooms over there look kind of dangerous, too. Was that really the one I ate?

There was a spark of self-doubt in his mind—but those mushrooms were too colorful, and too bloodred and foreboding as well, to be considered edible at all. Even Gobta, who was rapidly letting all the praise get to his head, was a little iffy about trying it.

“Um, those plain ones? You can’t eat those,” the goblina told him. “Those are known as firespores, and they’re deadly. The stronger ones even explode if you expose them to fire, spreading poison all over the area. I won’t stop you if you want to try, but don’t expect to survive.”

Gobta nodded appreciatively. Of course he did. No way would he ever eat anything so dangerous.

Ignoring the firespores, Gobta and his friends focused on gathering nuts and fruits instead. In addition to the group he was in, there were others by the river, replenishing their water supply, as well as cooking the food they’d found.

Just as they all had finished their jobs and were about ready to prepare dinner—

“Groooooar!!”

—they heard a terrifying, earth-shattering roar. A magical beast appeared, exuding rage as it eyed the caravan. It was that blade tiger again, the B-ranked beast that Gobta had inadvertently defeated a few months back. The poison spores had damaged it, but it had been lucky enough to be near a lake that must have helped it recover. It was still as angry as ever, though, more than angry enough to convince the low-ranked goblin that had once escaped it that all was lost now.

The beast, proud by nature, had sworn it would avenge the slight upon its reputation. With another roar, it used Voice Cannon to cleanly blow one of the guards away. The single blast made it all too clear how powerful the blade tiger was—even the stoutest of hobgoblins would face grave injuries after taking the brunt of it. If it weren’t for the full-plate armor protecting him, he would have died instantly.

“My brother!”

Another hobgoblin let out a yelp of surprise, but he was too petrified to move. All he could do was hold an unsteady ax in his hands and keep a watchful eye on the blade tiger. No one could blame him. Hobgoblins were ranked C or so. They weren’t made to take on a tiger like this.

“Don’t prod him,” the female guard quietly warned. “This guy’s dangerous. It’d take ten of us to have at least a chance of taking on a blade tiger. Merchants! We need to give up our goods and slowly step away from the area.”

She knew that angering a blade tiger would do nothing but make the situation even more treacherous. She at least wanted her clients to survive the encounter. While the tiger was feasting on their horses, they could at least attempt an escape—if they were lucky, they might even make it.

But that hope was quickly dashed. The blade tiger didn’t want a meal. It wanted revenge. It eyed the rest of the guards slowly, seeking out the goblin it really wanted. Then it snarled at the kobolds slowly edging away from their encampment. The merchants fell to the ground, understanding they’d be allowed no mercy.

“Well, this is it,” one of the guards muttered. “It’s not gonna let us go.”

“What should we do, miss? We can’t win this?”

“Guess we gotta charge it. Merchants! Once we’re on our way, I want all of you to run like hell! And don’t bunch up, either, unless you want to die.”

The guards were ready to sacrifice their lives for the sake of their clients, using themselves as bait to let them survive. Despair filled the air around them, but one among them failed to read the mood. That was Gobta, of course, who took the blade tiger’s roar as nothing less than his big chance.

It’s that tiger, isn’t it?! The guy I chased off with that mushroom? Even I could beat him!

It would have been a fatal mistake for anyone else, but Gobta was the only one in the camp not completely stricken by terror. He leaped forward as the blade tiger let out another sinister snarl.

“You fool!” the female bodyguard shouted. “What could you ever do?!”

“You can leave this to me!” Gobta shouted back with a smile. Then he dashed into the forest. The blade tiger immediately gave chase, ignoring everybody else.

The rest of the group were left dumbfounded, if only for a moment.

“That idiot… How could he be so reckless…?”

The seemingly selfless move shook the guards to the core, but they knew they couldn’t let this chance go unheeded.

“Everyone! Get out of here now! We’ll hold that thing off here!”

“But…”

“Don’t worry. This is our job. If we can get away from that monster, we’ll send a flare up to signal you.”

“He’s right. We’re not intending to die here, either. I’d kinda like to see you guys again, all right?”

With that, the guards piled the merchants into the wagon. Gobta wouldn’t give them much time to work with, but if the guards stayed behind, that would open up a chance for the merchants to get out safely. They waited for the wagon to set off, then plunged into the forest where Gobta left them.

Meanwhile—

Ahhh! This is scary! This is so scary!!

Now the sight of the blade tiger catching up to him was getting a bit unnerving. It deserved every bit of its B rank when it came to speed, and soon it was right on Gobta’s heels.

Maybe I shouldn’t have tried to act all cool back there—

There was no point regretting it now. Gobta was too busy trying to widen the gap to care. But even as his chances of being cornered grew by the second, another brilliant idea entered his mind.

Maybe if I use this—

Gobta stopped, standing his ground, and took something out from his pocket. With a defiant grin, he threw it straight at the blade tiger. The creature stopped, more surprised at the sudden end to this chase than at the object hurtling toward its head. This would normally be when the blade tiger used Voice Cannon, its mightiest weapon, to pulverize whatever was in front of it. But the memory of its past errors made the tiger hesitate.

It was intelligent enough not to repeat the same mistake twice—but what would normally be an advantageous trait spelled doom for it. Instead of Voice Cannon, the blade tiger figured it would bite down on the incoming object to stop it. With its reflexes, it would be an easy thing to do.

But the moment the object was between its teeth, Gobta shouted:

“Unseal!!”

Before the blade tiger could understand it, the incantation took effect. Just as Gobta had hoped, the magical tube provided to him by the transfer office did exactly what it was made to do—unfurling all the pots, pans, weapons, and even his wagon inside the tiger’s mouth.

This had exactly the effect Gobta had been hoping for—it ripped the blade tiger’s jaw off its head.

“All right!” Gobta shouted in joy. But that wasn’t the end of his plan. He still had one final weapon on hand—his Flame Knife. Considering a blade tiger’s performance in battle, merely losing its lower jaw wouldn’t be enough to send it down for the count. That was why Gobta figured his pride and joy—his one magic weapon—would be what it took.

Then Gobta noticed the (slightly bloodied) items strewn on the forest floor.

But if I burn this here, I’m going to burn my stuff, too, aren’t I? Maybe I should try to lure him deeper in.

Once again faced with an agony it had never known, the confused blade tiger was starting to lose its ability to make rational decisions. Gobta’s fleeing enraged it. It could no longer consider its adversary’s schemes or ultimate goals. Instead, it followed instinct and gave chase again.

The pain was intense, but it was the humiliating loss of Voice Cannon that made it especially furious. All that filled its mind was a consuming desire to kill Gobta for good.

After creating a measure of distance between him and the tiger, the small goblin dove into a dense thicket. This reduced the blade tiger’s advantage and further widened the gap between Gobta and his pursuer.

Turning around, Gobta focused on the blade tiger. Just as he’d thought, it was making a beeline for him.

Okay! I can’t miss from here!

Caught up in the dense underbrush, the tiger found itself robbed of its mobility. A straight throw, Gobta figured, was all he needed to hit home—and he had magic to trigger, too. Not even a magical beast would crawl home from that in good shape.

With Voice Cannon gone, the blade tiger had nothing to block with. Gobta knew it. So he threw the Flame Knife.

“Fire!” he shouted, the word the dwarf had taught him. That activated the knife. Flames encompassed it as it zoomed toward the blade tiger. A magic weapon like this would normally be nothing to a B-ranked magical beast, but the tiger was on its guard. Fatally so, as it came to be.

Using one of the bladelike fangs on its upper jaw, the blade tiger deflected the flame-infused knife. Gobta gasped in despair…but that was exactly what he needed. The Flame Knife bounced off the tooth, hurtled downward, and thrust itself into the ground. There, as it happened, grew a mushroom with certain special qualities. A kind that spat out lethal poison when exposed to heat. One that was fully mature, ripe, and packed with spores.

The firespore exploded in all directions around it, triggering cascading explosions across the area. The blade tiger was right in the thick of it, with no escape, its body exposed to every one of the searing spores. It had deflected a strike that would’ve been merely a flesh wound at best, only to expose itself to devastating damage instead.

Too tired to take another step, Gobta was greeted by some familiar voices.

“Wow, nice one! We’ll handle the rest!”

“Dang, kid… You’re one hell of a fighter after all, huh? That’ll learn me!”

The guards could handle a blade tiger this injured well enough. Soon, it was all over. Gobta was victorious.

It was now time for them to take their own paths—Gobta deeper into the wood, the caravan back along the river to the demon lord’s lands.

“I broke my treasure in the battle,” Gobta whined, “and I’ll have to pull that wagon all the way back home, too…” The smile on his face, however, indicated he wasn’t especially torn up over it.

“Well, thanks to that, you saved us all,” the head merchant said. “We really need to thank you again.”

Gobta grinned sheepishly at them.

“You know,” the goblina guard stammered, “I—I think I could—”

“I’m gonna get stronger, miss! I’m gonna beat another magical beast just like that—all by myself! So I can save your life sometime!”

“Huh? Um… Yeah. Yeah, exactly. Keep it up!”

Gobta had stopped her before she could finish the sentence. Which was probably a good thing. It likely gave Gobta all the encouragement he needed to keep striving for loftier heights, besides.

Thus the two of them parted ways. Gobta’s love would have to remain unrequited, maybe for his whole life.

Pulling the wagon behind him, Gobta walked deeper into the forest. The guards and merchants watched as he did.

“You know,” the female guard whispered to herself, “I wouldn’t mind bearing children, if they were his.”

“Not too late, miss!” one of her friends said with a laugh.

“No, it’s fine. He’s probably different from the likes of us anyway. He’s got something, you know? He has to. Otherwise he never could’ve survived any of this.”

“Maybe so, maybe so… You’re right, I think.”

They stood there until Gobta finally disappeared from sight.