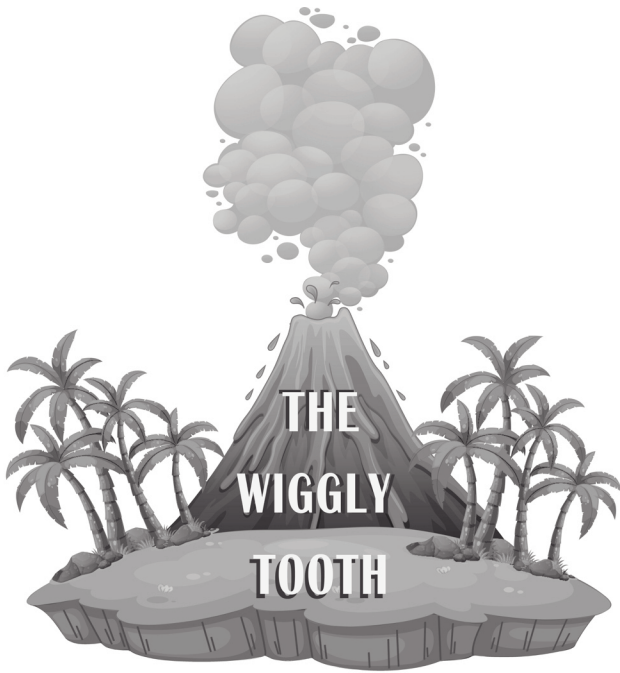


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Once there was a forest packed with dense trees that towered over neighboring shrubs bursting with fragrant blooms. Vines spiraled up the massive trunks and draped over their sturdy branches to reach the sunlight filtering through the leaves. If you walked out of the safety of the forest, you'd be tricked into believing it was another planet. A volcano loomed in the distance, the top concealed by the sluggish clouds dotting the deep blue sky. The black, rocky terrain was the hardened lava of centuries past.

A family of four T-Rexes roamed this land, familiar with every rock and crawling creature who dwelled in the thick humidity of the forest. A house built of logs and giant boulders was tucked between and around the majestic trunks, making a few of the hallways in the home tighter than they would have liked. You might ask, 'why didn't the family clear the land, *then*

build the house?’ It’s simple, really. Rexes were genuine naturalists, and clearing the land disturbed the peacefulness that a dinosaur family craved. Balance in life is everything, after all.

Hunter, the only boy in the rex family, rolled from bed each morning and stood flat-footed against the doorframe of his bathroom. The gouged mark on the wood created by his sharp claw measuring his height grew deeper as his growth seemed to stop altogether. A long, heavy sigh always followed his disappointment. All Hunter wanted in life was to grow into a giant rex like his dad. While the elders in the forest encouraged him to enjoy his youth, they couldn’t understand the hardship of being the smallest in his friend group. And how could they? Older rexes were so massive, they had to walk single file through the trees.

On this particular morning, Hunter’s sleepy yawn was cut short as he snapped his jaw closed. Worry spread from his round eyes to his flaring nostrils as his tongue scraped across the spiky bottom row of teeth. He clasped his tiny arms tight to his heaving chest.

The sharp claws of his feet scuttled along the rock floor. He hustled to the bathroom mirror and leaned on the slick surface with an awkward grin. Though his breath fogged his reflection, the unnerving sensation of the wiggling tooth told him something was wrong. Hunter grabbed his necktie from the bed and rushed to the kitchen where Mom and Dad chatted about the weather.

Hunter barely stepped into the room as Mom jumped to her feet and grabbed his lucky red-and-blue striped tie. Dad helped her wrap the cloth around Hunter’s neck and tied the knot close to his scaly reptilian skin. His fidgety tail made the chore more difficult than usual.

“Are you okay, my little rex?” Mom asked.

When Hunter wiggled his tooth with his pointy tongue, Mom dropped her short arms to her belly and roared, “Oh my stars! It can’t be that time already?”

“You can just say it.” Hunter dropped his chin. “I’m going to lose all my teeth and never get older like my friends.”

“Do you always have to be so dramatic?” Mom rubbed his snout. “You always want to grow. Losing those baby teeth is the first step! Now, lift your jaw higher. I need to feel its looseness for myself.”

Hunter stretched his snout closer to his Mom’s tilted head, wobbling side to side before latching onto the table for stability.

“Maybe a few days or so,” Mom guessed.

“Oh, no.” Dad waddled to the shelf and grabbed a pair of pliers with a jaw longer than his tongue. “Why put up with days of waiting when we can yank it right now?”

Hunter sought adventure and sports, but everyone knew he went to great lengths to avoid knee scrapes and ramming into trees. The mere thought of pliers wrenching out a tooth still connected to his jaw had him tugging at his tie. “I have to go. I promised to meet my friends at the lava fields. Bye, Mom. Bye, Dad.”

Hunter rushed from home and along the winding path toward the fields next to the base of the volcano. He kept his mouth closed tight the entire way, embarrassed at the tooth on the verge of shooting out of his mouth. What if it flicked someone in the eye or somehow got stuck up his nose? Stranger things have happened.

Racing from the tree line, Hunter waved to his friends who kicked and ran after the round fruit cruising over the ripples. Though the cliffs and dips of the lava grounds were perfect for hiking, the large flat area of the field was ideal for sports.

Connor, a brontosaurus with a boulder-shaped torso and a tall, droopy neck, chased after the speeding ball. His momentum built as he straightened his neck to reduce the wind resistance. The ball caught in the groove of a large ripple and rolled close to the cliff’s edge. Connor skidded across the graveled terrain. The

end of the field had his feet pounding the ground, smashing the fruit into a gooeey puree.

“Not again!” said Dominic, the bird-like pterodactyl. “I can’t keep asking my mom for new fruits. She accused me of tossing them into the volcano for fun!” Dominic’s wing flapped as he felt the vibrations of Hunter’s approaching feet. “What took you so long? The game’s already over because of *you know who!*”

Hunter’s tail swooshed as he hurried to the middle of the open field. “It’s okay. I probably couldn’t play, anyway.” Hunter pointed his first claw toward his wiggling tooth.

“Awesome!” Connor bounced his long neck in approval. “Can I have it for my collection when it falls out?”

“Why is it still in there?” Dominic asked. “If you don’t pull it, you could swallow it and grow extra teeth in your stomach!”

Hunter shrugged. “What’s the hurry? Eventually they’ll all fall out, and I’ll become smaller and turn back into a baby. At least Mom would be happy. She keeps saying she wants me to be little again.”

“Who told you that?” Connor asked. “Basically, I have two older brothers, and their new teeth grew extra big. I actually wish they’d turn into babies, then I could have my own room. I keep all the old teeth I can find in glass jars. Some still have small chunks of food on them, not gonna lie.”

Dominic flicked his beak sideways and squinted at Hunter’s row of teeth with a skeptic’s eye. “Maybe we could rip out that tooth. Then we’d know for sure if another one was growing under it.”

“I know just what to do!” Connor exclaimed. “Basically, we tie the end of a string to your loose tooth, and when I jerk my head, that tooth will yank right out.”

Connor ran from his confused friends and returned with an old, dirty string. Hunter trusted his friends, and Connor did say he had experience with loose teeth. What could go wrong?

Dominic’s four-fingered hands looped the string around the

base of Hunter's tooth. A knot sealed the deal. Connor grabbed the loose end in his mouth, yelling through clenched teeth. "Weddy? Go!"

The brontosaurus catapulted his head to the right, giving the thrust extra power by raising his front legs and balancing on his back ones. The string pulled tight, and Hunter lifted from the field and trailed the sky like a small meteorite. His vision blurred, and his brain tickled until he hit the ground with a thud.

"That was the most awesomest thing ever!" Connor said. He clamped his mouth over Hunter's head and lifted him to standing. "Now where's that tooth?"

Hunter wiped the brontosaurus drool from his head to the grass. "It's still in my mouth."

"Leave this to me." Dominic tapped the claws of his two hands. "My family pulls each other's teeth, and no one ever goes flying across the room, which seems backward because my family has wings. Come closer and open wide." Moving closer to Hunter, he snapped his narrow beak a few times for practice.

"I don't know about this?" Hunter stammered. "I kinda like the tooth, you know. I've had it most of my life."

"Don't be a fraidy dino. It'll only take a minute." Dominic tilted his head to locate the loose tooth. "Okay, wiggle the tooth again. I don't want to pull the wrong one."

Anchoring his feet, Dominic jabbed his long beak into Hunter's quickly closing mouth, missing his tooth entirely but hitting the corner of his eye.

"Wait!" Connor said. "Don't you wear glasses?"

"Only for flying," Dominic said. "You're not worried, are you? Don't be worried. I was just a tad off. How could I miss two times in a row? I've seen my dad do it a hundred times. Easy stuff."

Hunter trembled as Dominic's eyes narrowed, and his beak shot at his face faster than the last time. At the last second,

Hunter lowered his chin and yelped as Dominic's beak slid into the warm cavern of Hunter's nostril.

"What was that?" Connor asked, his cheeks red from holding a laugh. "You really need to wear your glasses all the time, basically."

"Sorry about that," Dominic said, scraping globs of slime off his beak. "There must be a trick. I'll run home and ask my dad."

"I know you're trying to help," Hunter said, "but maybe we could just play tag instead. We haven't played prey and predator in a long time."

"That's because you're at the top of the food chain," Connor said. "What chance does a large, slothful dinosaur have against your speed?"

"Tag! You're it!" Dominic yelled as he slapped Connor's leg and flew into the sky.

"No fair! Flying breaks the rules!" Connor said.

And the afternoon of chasing, hiding, and pretend stalking began freeing Hunter from the burden of his tooth problem. Running wild is the best choice when you expect to revert to babyhood.

The sun set behind the volcano and outlined its jagged crown. Hunter trudged across the field toward home. Being with his friends for most of the day kept him in high spirits, but that changed when he noticed the pliers still on the kitchen counter.

"Dinner!" Mom yelled as she marched into the room. "Good thing you're here, Huntie. Could you put dinner on the rock?"

Hunter grabbed the wide wooden bowl and laid it on the flat rock in the middle of the kitchen floor. Mom, Dad, and his younger sister Riley sat around the roasted meat that set Hunter's stomach growling.

Grabbing a turkey leg off the top, his warm breath grazed the crispy outer skin, but his stomach grew nauseous as the wiggly tooth rocked in its socket. Putting the meat back into the bowl, he folded his arms across his chest. He didn't want to take a

chance at swallowing the loose tooth and having it grow in his stomach. What would a tooth even do in there?

The others chewed and licked their turkey legs. Hunter's stomach rumbled louder than before, and his eyes drooped at the cleaned bones piling into the bowl. Dad lifted it to the counter. "Off to bed, you two. Tomorrow, you have stalking lessons."

Riley kissed Mom on the cheek and raced ahead of Hunter to the room they shared. Hunter paid no mind and gave his mom a faint grin.

"Don't worry about the tooth," she said, patting his snout. "It'll come out when it's good and ready."

Hunter's heavy feet carried him out of the kitchen and to the bedroom archway when a bird-feather pillow slung around the wall slammed across his snout.

"Oh, no, you don't!" Hunter grabbed his own pillow and swung at his sister, who ducked. Taking turns pouncing and ducking and giggling and laughing, Riley froze—her eyes trained on Hunter's snout.

Her trembling claw pointed to the blood puddling on his jaw. "I hurt you, and Mom's going to be roaring mad at me!"

Hunter ran his tongue along his jaw. The loose tooth had become a missing tooth. Stomping from one side of the room to the other, he peeked under the furniture and toys strewn along the floor. He almost gave up when something glistened under the bed. Crouched low, the wet tooth fit perfectly in his palm.

"What's all the commotion?" Mom asked, hurrying into the room.

Standing proudly, Hunter waved the tooth. "It came out, just like you said."

"Do you feel the new tooth growing in the empty place?"

Hunter located the mushy hole. "There *is* a new tooth, and it feels sharper than the old one."

"We must celebrate!" Mom turned from the door, and the entire family followed her to the kitchen and around the rock.

Mom put buckets of ice cream in front of them. “We have Swampy Delight, Creamy Leaf, and Muskrat Swirl, plus fish-flavored sprinkles and sweet tree sap. Hunter lost the tooth, so he gets to choose first.”

While Riley only liked Creamy Leaf, Hunter inhaled two scoops of each flavor. A sticky ring of cream and sugar covered his snout, and his tongue slurped up the mess. Mom rubbed the parts he missed with a leaf.

Hunter and Riley waddled to their beds once again, and this time Mom followed, tucking them in on the side closest to her arms. She patted each one on the head. “Sweet dreams, my little rexes.”

Hunter clasped his hands and lay in bed, brainstorming the ways he could show off his new tooth. Smiling seemed the most practical way to highlight his new stage in life, but it’d be tricky. Smaller dinosaurs never trusted a grinning T-Rex, especially one with a missing tooth.

“I’m actually gonna grow,” he whispered to himself. “I can’t wait to tell Connor and Dominic.”



“Twenty minutes!” Mom’s voice echoed through the forest, starting the countdown to bedtime.

Connor, the brontosaurus, swayed his head toward the house, his eyelids feverishly blinking. “Guess we’ll have to cut practice short today.”

“No way!” Hunter said. “We got a whole twenty minutes. Besides, Dominic is still running the course, and I want to see his time.” Hunter checked the ticking seconds on his wristwatch and stared back into the trees.

“But your mom called. Basically, I always come when my mom calls. Know why?”

“Because you always follow the rules?”

“The neck, actually.” Connor tucked his long tail near his feet. “A bronto mother will lift you by the hind leg and dangle you all the way home. It’s embarrassing, not gonna lie.”

“But that was months ago. You’re much bigger now. How could she possibly lift you?”

“All I know is to never doubt a bronto mother. They may look sweet and kind, but they have the spirit of a raptor!”

Branches rustled in the forest, and they turned to the row of rocks formed into a finish line of sorts. A breeze drifted from the woods before Dominic strutted into the open, his wings outstretched. “How did I do?”

“What does it matter?” Connor asked. “You used your wings, and that’s basically cheating.”

“Did not! Didn’t you see me walk out of the trees?”

“Yeah, and I enjoyed the nice breeze just before you showed your cheating beak,” Connor said. “If we all just follow the rules we agreed to, then, I don’t know, maybe the official times would be fair in judging who is the fastest.”

“Why don’t we just drop the rules?” Dominic asked. “Connor is super long, and his steps move him faster naturally. And Hunter can jump really high. I’m smaller than both of you, so why can’t I use my wings?”

“Fifteen minutes!” Mom shouted.

Dominic clasped his hands in front of his chest. “I thought I heard your mother from the woods. We need to skedaddle. Your mom is scary when she’s angry. Come on, Connor.”

“But I haven’t had my turn,” Hunter said. “I promise Mom won’t get angry because my time will be extra fast!”

“An angry bronto mother is terrible, but an angry rex mom is a serious no-go, for real.” Connor lifted his head high into the trees and turned onto the trail. “We can try again tomorrow after foraging lessons.”

Hunter dropped his arms to his tummy as the friends marched into the golden rays of sun glittering at the forest’s edge. I still have fifteen to get in a practice run, he thought. Tomorrow I’ll show them I am the fastest.

Jogging in place revved his engine, and he darted into the

trees, ready to tackle the first test of skill. He dodged the staggered saplings growing in the shadow of the much bigger trees. For the top predator, this should be an easy feat, but in this case, soft grasses hid the spindly young saplings.

A deep breath propelled him to the boulder in the middle of the track. This was the easiest part for Hunter, whose legs were built for jumping. Dangling from the branch above him was his orange-colored flag. The blue and red ones were plucked and dropped to the ground by Connor and Dominic on their earlier runs. A half-hearted jump and the fabric draped from Hunter's teeth. He roared into the forest and spit the cloth to the ferns at the boulder's base.

"Ten minutes," Mom cried out. "Hunter, you better get a move on!"

Jumping from the boulder landed him at the end of a fallen tree. The twisted and stiff roots stuck straight upward, having been yanked out of the dirt by the last wind storm, making the trek across the 'bridge' treacherous. Hunter reached for the roots and bent them outward, pushing his feet through the tight slit. Each foot trod carefully on the trunk, one before the other. The slow, steady motion carried him from the roots, along the scratchy bark, and finally to the dead leaves on the opposite end.

"Five minutes!" Mom said with that growl of irritation in her throat.

The thorn-laden vine dangled in front of Hunter and tickled his legs. Swinging from vines or any other object proved difficult when you have tiny rex arms. Hunter skipped the vine and ran along the forest floor. After all, time was running short, just like Mom's temper.

Nearing the stream's bank, he ducked in and out of the bushes, sniffing for the pair of turtles. Maybe the mud of the bank was extra comfy, or perhaps the light from the sun warmed their shells because they sat in the same spot most of the day. Hunter checked the red-berry bush, and the two turtle heads

emerged from the edges of their shells and gazed at him in unison.

Grabbing one in each hand, his wide feet splashed across the warm water, creating waves along both sides of the stream. He gently placed the pair next to the yellow flowers sprouting from a sticky plant on the opposite bank. While one snapped his jaw over a bloom, the other nodded at Hunter, “Thank You.”

“Three minutes!” growled from a window, but this time it was Dad. And when Dad got involved, it meant Mom was losing her cool.

The back slope of the rocky cliff stood between Hunter and being home on time. Getting a running start, he jumped and bounced his way past the small ledges and sharp rocks leading to the mostly flat surface. Hunter jogged on his toes and pumped his fists in the air as he reached the top.

“What’cha doing?” Riley asked, looking up at him.

His celebration came to a halt. It had to. How could he celebrate with an annoying sister watching him? “What are *you* doing up here?”

“Planting this flower. I found it near the lava fields, and I knew it wouldn’t survive in the hot sun.”

“You can’t put that there!”

“Why not? There’s already a nice pile of dirt.”

“I carried all that dirt up the cliff to make a seat for myself and not for flowers.”

“So?”

“So, you can’t use it. I need it for—”

“One minute and I *am* coming out there!” Dad roared louder.

Riley dropped the plant and shoved Hunter to the side. Sliding down the smooth dirt path, she landed in the pile of dead leaves Hunter and his friends had gathered to create a soft landing. Riley waved as she ran to the house. “Bye, big brother!”

Instead of sliding, Hunter ran down the loose dirt and skidded around the side of the house. He blew through the front

door and straight into the kitchen. Mom sat next to a round pot and cracked fresh, green stems into small pieces. This is what Mom did when she was angry. Holding his breath, Hunter waited for her to react, but she only ignored him as he continued into the bedroom.

Riley wiggled her toes from the comfort of her bed. Her eyes trained on him as a whisper flowed like pollen from her jaw. “Ten, nine, eight....”

He rushed to the bathroom and wet his toothbrush. Time allowed only one pass along the outside of his teeth to remove leftover bits of dinner collected in the gaps. The wooden brush quaked in his mouth at the stomping of his approaching parents. Hunter ran to his bed and slid under the blankets that rose and fell with his panting.

“Where are those rexes?” Dad growled as he sniffed the air. “I’m gonna find them. I’m gonna get them!”

Riley giggled as Dad turned toward her. She ducked under the covers, but his claws gently tickled her tummy until she cried from laughter. Hunter pulled the covers over his face, hoping Dad would forget him. Hunter was a very ticklish rex, you understand.

Dad kissed Riley on the snout and started for Hunter’s bed. “Where is my other rex? I know I had two of them.” Dad dropped his nose to the covers and snorted hot air through the blanket.

“He must be in the kitchen!” Dad said. Hunter listened to the stomps of his feet as they moved away from the bed. Sighing, he peeked from under the covers to find Dad towering over him. “There he is! My delicious little rex!”

Hunter covered his belly with his arms. But it did little good. Dad was quick with the tickle fingers after years of practice. Stopping short of tears, Dad rubbed snouts with Hunter and pulled the covers back to his shoulders. “Did you beat your friend’s time on the course?”

“I think I did, only because I was afraid of being late to bed.” Hunters’ eyes dilated. “Do you think you could yell at me tomorrow when we record our official times? That way, I’m sure to move faster.”

“I thought you’d never ask. What should I say? Something like ‘Come clean your room!’ or ‘Get in here and play with your sister!’”

Hunter crossed his arms. “Maybe not that last one.”

“That’s enough.” Mom pushed Dad from the bed and switched off the light. “It’s bedtime. You can scheme in the morning over fresh frogs.”



Fort Bend-a-loo was the secret meeting place of Hunter and his two friends, Connor and Dominic. Built deep in the woods, it was far enough from the stegosaurus lands to be a peaceful retreat, yet close to Hunter's house in the event they ran out of snacks. They had trained vines to create walls along the trees, and boulders made natural walls to keep out the cold in the dormant months. The rest of the domed shelter was a combination of fallen trees and thick spider webs.

Hunter pushed open the door made of twigs, stomped into the middle of the clubhouse, and spread his plush blanket on the dirt ground, avoiding the sticks and chunks of lava rock strewn about. Hunter walked around the fort, picked up a few stones in his tiny hands, and tossed them out the doorway.

"Well, that's a fine way to greet a friend!" Connor, the brontosaurus said, flicking the lava chips from his snout.

“Sorry. I was just cleaning up the mess from last time.” Hunter looked at the bag looped over Connor’s neck. “Did you bring some of your mom’s breaded tadpoles? They’re swamp!”

“Basically, no. I actually asked her to make some, but she wanted me to catch the tadpoles, and your idea to camp left no time.” Connor drooped his neck, and the bag slid to the ground. “But I did get some lizard tails and sugared moss.”

Hunter dumped the contents of the bag onto the ground. Fern-shaped candies and tree-sap drops outnumbered the moss several times over. “What’s this?” Hunter picked up a homemade book with thin paper pages and crisp corners, dropping it as he tried not to think about Connor turning the pages with his tongue.

“I made those books, actually,” Connor said. “See that one. It’s called *‘The Adventures of Dino Girl.’* She has the power to take the form of any dinosaur to defeat evildoers. She’s by far the best comic character I’ve invented, not gonna lie.”

The twig door slammed under a gust of wind, alerting them that Dominic had arrived. He walked into the fort on four legs with a bag over his neck and sat on Hunter’s blanket, emptying the bag’s contents between his legs “My wings are beat after carrying this bag so far.”

Connor reached for the jar of insects. “Such massive specimens for light bugs. In what part of the woods did you find them?”

“I didn’t *find* them,” Dominic said. “I bred them in my room from a normal pair I found. They grew so large because I fed them a bunch of tree sap.”

“Really?” Connor asked. “I thought they actually only ate smaller species.”

“That’s why you haven’t been able to raise monster-sized light bugs!” Dominic looked around. “I’m putting my bed on the right this time.”

Connor rolled the sleeping bag toward Dominic. “Don’t you want the left side? It is the luckiest of sides, not gonna lie.”

“You always say that so you can have the right,” Dominic said. “I know you have a hang-up about the left of everything, but it’s getting old.”

“It’s not a hang-up. It’s actually the truth. Bad things happen to left-side dinos.”

With all the blankets arranged in order of luck, Connor lifted the Dino Girl Comic in his teeth and dropped it in front of Hunter. He stretched his tongue, and Hunter grabbed it before the sticky saliva drenched his blanket.

“Dominic can turn the pages while you read the story aloud.”

“That’s a great idea,” Connor said. “Since I actually wrote it, I know where to emphasize the action bits, which is basically the entire book!”

Connor read the lines scribbled across the first page as Dominic grabbed handfuls of sweetened bugs and crunchy moss, tossing them to his friends. As darkness covered the forest, Dino Girl had turned into a T-Rex, a diplodocus, a triceratops, and finally a raptor. With three more comics to read, Dominic pulled an extra jar of bugs from the covers.

Hunter tossed the handful of bug treats to the air and snapped them up in his spikey teeth. “If I had a superpower, it would be to fly! I would soar through the sky and sleep on tree branches during the night.”

“Would you now? I have wings, and even I don’t do that,” Dominic said.

“The power to conjure ice cream,” Connor said with a look of inspiration. “Would it look wrong if I was the hero of the next comic book?”

Dominic shined the light at his chin, giving him a sinister look. “I wouldn’t have superpowers because then I would have an arch-nemesis to contend with, and who’s got time for that.”

Suddenly all the friends’ eyes shot to the front door. Some-

thing ran its long claws down the wood, very slowly and very spookily.

“What was that?” Connor slid closer to Hunter as the scratching grew more intense. “If one of us must be sacrificed, I vote Dominic—he is on the left side.”

Dominic stood and rolled his eyes. “Being on the left side is nothing but plain superstition. I’ll go outside and prove to you I don’t have bad luck.”

“You really shouldn’t, not gonna lie.”

“It’s just the wind. Are you guys scared of the wind?” Dominic asked.

“No, but—” Hunter froze mid-sentence when the sound of dragging feet moved to the left side of the clubhouse. The clawing became more frantic, and a screeching cry set their teeth on edge. Dominic dropped to the blankets and clung to his friends as they huddled for safety. Hunter’s eyes danced around the fort, kicking himself for not making a hiding spot.

Suddenly Dominic jumped to his feet and walked to the door with the jar of glowing bugs. “I will go search out the noise, then we can get on with the comics.”

Shining the light under the front door caused the intruder to scurry. Dominic’s foot inched out the doorway, followed by his chest, wings, and beak. The faint light glistened the water droplets on the spider web wall before the jar dropped to the ground. Dominic let out a curdling grunt. Hunter and Connor embraced each other inside the clubhouse.

Not the creak of a branch or the rustling of leaves came from outside the fort. Hunter stared at the doorway and scanned what little he could see in the moon light. “Dominic, are you there? Dominic?”

A tiny critter wearing a black mask seemed to glide through the doorway. Hunter and Connor covered their eyes and yelped at the thought of being eaten by a woodland ghost.

“What’s wrong with you?” Dominic said, popping his head into the tent with the raccoon in his beak. He spat it to the floor.

“It’s Ricky!” Hunter said. “You scared us to death.”

“If you don’t mind, you see, I prefer to be called by my full name—Ricky the Raccoon.”

“We should all call you Stalker,” Dominic said. “What are you doing sneaking around here after dark?”

“I didn’t mean to. I am so sorry, it’s just, well, I am a raccoon, and we forage at night, you see. I’m truly sorry. Since I’m here now, might I join you?”

The three friends gave each other a glance of doubt. Ricky had a reputation of being rather wild and hard to manage at social events.

“Of course, you can,” Hunter said, “but no more scaring.”

“Oh, right. I’ll be helpful. I could be in charge of the snacks. Just make yourselves comfortable.”

Hunter, Connor, and Dominic lay back on the blankets, reading in the book where they’d left off.

Ricky scurried over to the food and wrapped his long arms around the snack pile, dragging them a foot from the blankets. Like a well-trained artist, his slender fingers grabbed a sugared moss and tossed it into Dominic’s open beak. Hunter caught a piece of grilled beetle. Connor chewed his snack, and the crunching from his teeth was louder than usual.

“Did you get a bad beetle?” Hunter asked.

“Nho...I kink e cou be a rock.”

“It might have been a rock,” Dominic said. “Have any of you noticed that for every bite Ricky tossed, he ate five pieces? And he’s only one-tenth of my size.” The friends glared at the crouching raccoon.

“I’ll just sit over here and listen to the story,” Ricky said, crossing his legs and clasping his paws in his lap. His shyness and calm spirit, both excellent traits for a raccoon, were short-

lived as sugar from the snacks coursed through his arms and legs, creating an abundance of energy.

Ricky bounced along the dino's backs. Ricky burrowed through the blankets like a mole on a quest for snacks. Ricky swung from the small hook on the roof branch meant to hold a lantern.

“Woohoo! I’m So Glad You Invited Me To
This Excellent Party.”

Dominic glared at the raccoon who had taken to running laps along the fort's perimeter and jumped over the dinos' legs, growling like a baby rex hungry for more purple fruit. Dominic thumped the comic book shut. “What is your deal? Can't you sit still till we finish this?”

“I Could Read It For You,” Ricky mumbled as he hopped across the dirt.

“Please, go outside,” Hunter begged the raccoon.

“Why, This Tent Is Proving Very Fun And
Quite Different From Anything Outside.
I’ll Stay For A Little While Longer.”

Dominic leaned close to Hunter, and Connor lobbed his head alongside. “We could throw some snacks out of the fort, and when he follows it, we seal the door closed!”

“That would be great,” Hunter said, “if he hadn't already eaten all the candy.”

“I actually forgot about that detail,” Connor said. “What a devil!”

Ricky climbed the webbed wall of the fort, belting out the raccoon motto.

Garbage Is My One Delight

EasilyFoundMostEveryNight.
 StaleBugsAndBeetlesGalore
 ISlinkThroughTheForestForMoreMoreMore!

Connor rolled his eyes and whispered to his friends. “I have an idea. Basically, just do what I do.”

Connor licked open the book, mechanically turned to Hunter, and spoke in a monotone. “Hello, Hunter. By chance, have you heard about the grand dessert party the Ceratops were hosting this evening?”

“Why yes, I did,” Hunter said dryly. “They set up five tables of cakes and pies and live snacks, only to have to trash most of the desserts when no one showed for the event.”

“How distressing?” Dominic added, “Imagine all those cupcakes and tarts all alone in the waste bin.”

Ricky stopped swinging on the hook at the mere mention of sweets. He snapped his head toward the conversation of the dinos. Each description of finely spun icing left his head spinning. Somersaulting to the dirt, he bowed to the dinos on the blanket.

“It’sBeenSwell,MyFriends,ButIMustGoNow!” Ricky hastily fled the tent, and his paws pattered away from Fort Bend-a-loo.

“That was close,” Dominic said, dropping his head to his folded arms.

“Only because you argued about the left side,” Connor said.

“Are you still on that? There is no *curse* or *bad luck* or whatever for sleeping on the left. For a rules-based bronto, you sure are superstitious.”

“I’m just glad he’s gone,” Hunter said. “He needs to stay away from the sugar and stick to trash scraps.”

“Okay,” Dominic said, examining the comic book. “Where did we leave off?”

Connor thrust his head to the ceiling and his eyes grew. “Gooberknot dared to threaten our fearless heroin!”

“Yes...” Dominic said with a smirk. “You’re really taken with your own story, huh?”

“Start reading there.” Hunter pointed to the paper, fending off another argument. He was, after all, the peacemaker among the them despite his top predator status.

“Just then, Dino Girl spotted the six-armed Gooberknot lifting from the tar pit, fire and rage burning from his—”

Hunter and Dominic’s heads jerked to the doorway.

“I’mBack!” Ricky said, dancing his two thumbs upward.

“ICouldn’tFindThatParty.OhWell!”

“Confound it!” Dominic said. “We don’t have any more snacks for you, bandit!”

Connor raised his head to the lantern hung from the hook and blew out the small fire flickering inside. “I’m calling it a night.”

“Wonderful!

ILoveTheDark.DidYouKnowThatICanSee
MagnificallyInTheDark?”

Bested by the furry critter, Hunter sighed and curled into his blanket. “Good night. This is too much fun for me.”

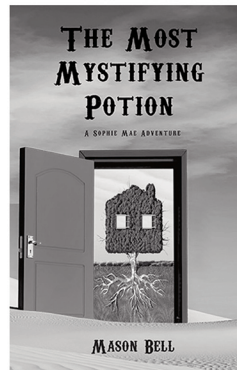
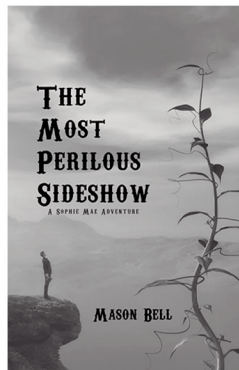
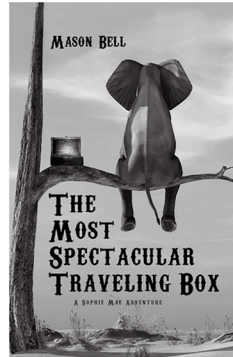
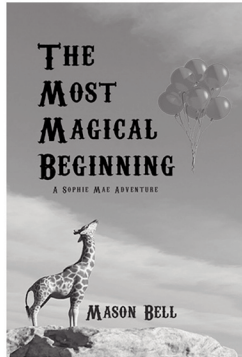
Mason Bell was raised in the Great State of Texas, where long summer days felt like living next to a volcano. Sidewalks were hotter than flowing lava. Many days you could cook an egg on the cement, but that's a different story, I think. These days, Mason Bell lives in South Texas with her husband and two cats, Frodo and Fat Hobbit.



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ALSO BY MASON BELL



COMING SUMMER 2021



Galactic Fun Park finished the summer with record attendance, but the uptick in guest complaints about rodents overshadowed the feat. Theme parks thrived on public perception, leaving management no choice but to hire exterminators who set traps near the animal's burrows and hovels.

The threat of certain death forced the nocturnal animals into action. Losing their extended families and rich culture to the fearful humans wasn't an option. But pride ran deep within each species, weakening their chance of success.

Could the animals put aside their differences and unite for the good of all? And more importantly, would the effort be wasted on humans who doubted an animal's intelligence?

