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A NEW PLAYER IN LARFALOT

It was a beautiful day, a fun day; but then it was never any different in Larfalot. Here was a place of joy and gaiety where everyone who lived there spent their time playing and dancing and laughing; doing nothing at all that was really serious. Now, someone had to make sure that there were plenty of games for people to play and this was the job of the Tiddles. "I've just thought of a new one," declared Ava. "There's a ball, see; only one, though, and the players have to grab it for their team, and whoever gets it first has to balance it on their nose..."

She seemed to be having trouble with more than that, and her brother, Lon, who was always ready to make fun of his sister said: "Right, right. That sounds like it might be the start of a giggle if it wasn't kind-of silly. So, what happens next?"

"I haven't worked it out yet," replied Ava, "I was hoping someone might come up with an idea." As the group of Tiddles was thinking of ways to make Ava's new game better, a buzzing sounded in the air, and it was growing louder, coming closer. Then it was above them, zooming down and they all ducked. "What was that?" asked Ava as the flying thing went past to climb high into the air, then twist and turn in a series of crazy stunts.

"It's only Nifty," said OJ. "Ever since he got his wings he's been a regular show-off."

"But he's had them for a while now," Ginny reminded him. "Must be something else. He seems to be heading towards The Gaming House. You don't suppose...?"

Nifty wasn't supposing at all. In fact, his head was buzzing as furiously as his wings. He had been summoned, and that hopefully meant the one truly amazing thing he had been waiting for ever since he had been granted his wings. Excitement aside, he was still nervous and the nearer he came to The Gaming House, the faster the butterflies flitted and tickled around in his stomach; so much so that he was finding it hard to fly in a straight line. Then he was hovering before the main entrance. Marshall Ludo was on duty and eyed the new arrival; first with a pretty stern glare, changing it to a smirk as he nodded at the open doorway behind him. "In you go, Nifty," he said cheerfully, "And try not to look so worried. The Grand Funmeister won't bite."

Nifty wasn't sure about this, but he went in anyway and took to following the directions of the Pawns standing in the many corridors. Finally, he was there, faced by two Knights standing side by side guarding the doorway of The Board Room. After a moment, they lowered their swords and parted to leave a gap between them. "Don't keep the Grand Funmeister waiting," advised one.

On entering The Board Room, Nifty found himself drifting over a big floor of black and white squares that made his eyes go funny. By the time he was at the far end he felt quite dizzy. The Grand Funmeister laughed. "I do love this bit. All you Tiddles are the same when you first come in and it's a real hoot. But I'm wrong to call you that – sorry. You aren't a Tiddle anymore, not now you've won your wings." He paused for a moment to watch Nifty's face; then he smiled and nodded. "And, yes, I can see you are ready."

The Grand Funmeister waved a hand. One of his attendants approached Nifty and held out a long, golden pole. It had three spikes at the top like a fork, and stuck on these was a small green ball. "Take it, Nifty," said The Grand Funmeister. "This is your swizzle stick. You have earned it, and now you must use it well. No longer a Tiddle, you are now a Wink. Your new job is to go forth to find unhappy, sad people and bring them here to Larfalot where they can start to enjoy life."

Nifty pondered the stick in his hand, then sent a puzzled frown to The Grand Funmeister. "How will I find these sad and unhappy people; where will I find them?"

"Your swizzle stick will tell you," said The Grand Funmeister. "The green ball on the end is an olive. If in doubt, trust your swizzle stick. When it starts to change colour you will know you are near. Once it glows red like a cherry, you have found your new sad and unhappy person. This is the one you are charged to bring here so that they can begin having fun."

"Bring them here?" repeated Nifty, very uncertain. "How do I do that?"

"Simple, said The Grand Funmeister. "Touch them with the cherry on top; then swizzle the swizzle stick in the air and it will return you both to Larfalot – easy as hop-scotch."

Leaving The Board Room he had to fly along the same corridors he had entered by; but something was different. Each Pawn he passed saw that he was now carrying a swizzle stick, and they all sent him beaming smiles and clapped. It happened again as he left, with Marshall Ludo clapping as well, and saying: "Well done Nifty. I'm certain you are going to be a good Wink."

"Now," Nifty said to himself once he was flying outside The Gaming House, "The Grand Funmeister said this was going to be easy, but I'm not so sure. Where, I wonder, do I start? I'm guessing I have to look further afield than Larfalot, because everyone who lives here is already happy. The sad people must be somewhere else." The decision made, he rose high in the air and headed for the distant border of the land. This was the first time he had ventured so far and, not knowing what to expect, he pulled up short when he came on the mist. It was like a thick blanket that hid everything beyond. Should he fly into it; did he dare? The words of The Grand Funmeister came back to him: "*If in doubt, trust your swizzle stick.*" Looking at the olive on the spikes of his swizzle stick, it appeared much the same as it had before; but when he lowered it to touch the edge of the mist it seemed to change to a darker green. Or was it just imagination? Plucking up courage, Nifty took a deep breath, then went for it, straight into the mist.

Coming out of it on the other side he found himself in a land that didn't look much different to Larfalot; but the colour of the olive on his swizzle stick had grown even darker, so he assumed he was definitely in the place he needed to be. He carried on flying, over green fields and hills, over rivers and lakes, watching to see if the olive had changed again. When it hadn't he was beginning to think he would never find a sad person. Then he was approaching a small town with lots of houses and gardens. As he came closer the olive became almost black, until it went back to green again. That was strange. He had thought he was getting close. Maybe he'd flown too far over the town and the unhappy person was in one of the houses he'd left behind. Nifty turned and retraced his flight path. Sure enough, the olive went black again; and as he neared a particular house it changed even more, first to a very dark red, then to a lighter shade which he was sure was glowing a bit.

By the time he had dropped down into the garden behind the house, the olive on his swizzle stick was shining brightly, and it seemed to be getting brighter still as he approached a wooden box on a table in the shade of a big tree. There couldn't be someone in that little box, surely? Coming closer, he noticed there was wire mesh on the front door of the box; and peering out

through it was a strange furry creature. Being polite as he always was, Nifty said: "Hello, who are you?"

"My name is Mo," replied the furry creature, "At least, that's what my friends the children of the house call me."

"And if you don't mind me asking," said Nifty, "exactly *what* are you?"

The little creature frowned and replied in a grumpy voice: "I'm a hamster, of course."

"And not a very happy hamster, by the sounds of it," said Nifty. "Why is that? You say you have friends. Don't they play with you?"

"Not for ages," said Mo. "They've gone on holiday. The only one I've seen lately is the lady from next door who comes every day to give me fresh water and food; then, after a quick 'hello and goodbye' she leaves. Believe me, it's not much fun stuck in this cage day and night with nothing to do but eat and sleep."

"Fear not, little furry Mo," declared Nifty, flapping his wings really fast, "I, Nifty the Wink, am here to save you from your unhappiness."

"Oh, yeah," sneered Mo, "How are you going to do that, then?"

"With this," said Nifty, showing the hamster his swizzle stick.

Mo frowned. "You can't be serious."

"Serious is not in my job description," stated Nifty proudly. "The bringer of frivolity and happiness is my calling; and very soon you will be enjoying all of the former, and more." Before Mo could reply, he added: "Now move back a bit and I'll see if I can open your cage door." The instant the glowing cherry on the end of the swizzle stick touched the hook holding the door, it flipped up and the door swung open. "There, what do you think of that?" he asked proudly.

Mo shrugged as only hamsters can and sneered again: "Big deal. Anyone can do that."

"Ah," said Nifty, "That's just the start." He moved to one side and pointed at the grass in front of the cage. "If madam would care to step out, we can get going."

"Going?" said Mo, frowning. "Going where?"

"To Larfalot," said Nifty.

Mo was part way out of her cage, but she hesitated and shuffled backwards into it. "I don't know that I'd like that. It sounds weird."

Nifty laughed. "It is that, alright; and it's filled with fun and laughter. People playing games with people all day every day might sound weird to you; but that's what we do in Larfalot. I can take you straight there in a flash, Mo; but the choice is yours. Do you want to stay here and be sad, or come with me to Larfalot and be happy?"

Mo thought for a bit, then said: "Put like that, I guess I'd be silly to refuse." She pondered a moment longer before saying: "Okay, Nifty the Wink, let's do it before I change my mind."

"Now, just stand still," said Nifty, extending his swizzle stick towards Mo. "It won't hurt a bit." Whether it would or wouldn't, he had no idea because he had never done this before; so all he could do was hope. The olive that glowed cherry red shone brighter still as it touched Mo's fur; but nothing happened and they were both still in the garden. Nifty was puzzled until he remembered what he had to do next. Holding the swizzle stick in the air, he swizzled it around as if he was stirring a drink. Suddenly, there was a bright flash; then the garden simply wasn't there anymore and the two of them had suddenly appeared in Larfalot.

Lots of Tiddles were waiting for them, and Ava said: "Welcome back, Nifty. I see you've brought a new playmate for us."

"This is Mo," said Nifty, "And she's a hamster who has been very unhappy recently because her friends have gone on holiday. I know she's only small, but I'm sure you can find something fun that she could do."

“Oh my word, yes,” chirped Lon. “Ava’s come up with a new game and Mo will fit right in.” Picking up the little hamster, he tossed her to another Tiddle. “Here’s our new Diddalo. Come on everyone. Let’s go and play nose ball.” Off they rushed to the playing field, and Lon declared loudly: “Here’s our new ball Mo. She’s very furry and will tickle our noses when we balance her on them, and that will make the game even funnier.” Mo was completely bewildered, but everyone was laughing so she supposed they were enjoying something, even if she didn’t know what it was. Presumably she would find out soon enough.

A number of Tiddles carrying sticks divided into two teams while the rest stood in a circle around the playing field. Lon had hold of Mo again and was on the field between the teams. “Ready?” he called out; then: “Set...” pausing for what seemed a long time before saying finally: “Go!” And he tossed Mo high in the air. Up she went, and as she came back down the closest players were all grabbing for her, bouncing her around from one to another. It was quite frightening and nothing like the games her friends the children played with her. In a moment, however, she had stopped bouncing and was perched on the nose of a Tiddle.

Nifty was watching from the side and asked: “What happens now?” He was soon to find out, and so was Mo. The crowd watching the game had begun to chant: “Wack the Diddalo, wack the Diddalo!” With that, all the players rushed towards the one with Mo on his nose and began swinging their sticks trying to knock Mo off the nose; and all the time the chanting got louder: “Wack the Diddalo, wack the Diddalo!” Then a stick connected and Mo went flying off the nose and into the crowd.

Everyone was cheering and laughing, all except for Mo and Nifty. He rushed over and took the little hamster from the Tiddle holding her. “That wasn’t very nice, hitting Mo with a stick,” he declared.

“But it was fun,” said Ginny, and everyone seemed to agree.

“Not for Mo it wasn’t,” chided Nifty. “How would you like it if someone hit *you* with a stick?”

The crowd went quiet. Finally it was Ava who spoke: “You’re right, Nifty; and we are truly very sorry Mo; but I promise we’ll make it up to you. OJ has a really good game that I’m sure you’ll like. Come on, let’s go up the snowy mountain and we can start to play it.”

Nifty thought it best that he carried Mo, but one of the Tiddles grabbed her from him and went running off with the others, and all Nifty could do was fly after them. Once they had reached the top of the mountain, he simply hovered and watched. “It’s really easy,” said Ginny. “Show them OJ.” Lowering himself to a sitting position, OJ waited for someone to give him a push start. In seconds he was sliding on the slippery snow down the mountain. Others thought this was really great and began doing what OJ had, and soon there were lots of Tiddles giggling and laughing as they slid down the snowy slopes.

“I suppose that looks harmless enough,” commented Mo. “And it does seem like fun. Do you think I should give it a try, Nifty?”

“That’s really up to you, Mo,” said the Wink by her side. “I’ll push you off, though. One of the others might be too rough.” He walked along with the little hamster until she found a spot that looked okay. Sitting up like OJ had, she waited for Nifty to give her a gentle push to start her sliding. At first it was fine and she was beginning to enjoy the ride; but the further down the slope she went, the faster she was going. Then she lost her balance and tipped forward. The next thing she knew was that she was rolling, over and over, and getting very dizzy. Eventually she came to a standstill and Mo looked around; only there was really nothing that she could see because she had become completely covered in snow. Not only that, but she was feeling icy cold. “Help me, Nifty,” she called out, hoping he would be able to hear through her thick coating of snow. “I’m freezing!”

Nifty heard Mo's call as he flew down the mountain and came close. By this time the Tiddles who had slid down first were adding extras to the large white ball with Mo inside, turning it into a snowman. "Isn't this great," declared OJ. "Mo's given us another game." And he laughed along with the others.

"Nifty," Mo called from inside her snowball, "Get me out, please!"

"Stand aside," Nifty commanded the excited Tiddles. "This is no good for Mo and you're being very unfair." The olive on his swizzle stick was glowing bright red as it should because there was someone near who was really, really unhappy; and that, of course, was little Mo. Stroking the outside of the snowball it began to melt. Soon enough it had all gone, and Mo was standing shivering in a big puddle of water, her fur dripping wet. Nifty held the swizzle stick over her and after a few moments she dried out and stopped shivering. "I'm sorry, Mo," he said apologetically. "I really didn't think it would be like this. I brought you to Larfalot to enjoy yourself, but that hasn't happened."

"You're not wrong, Nifty," said Mo. "Maybe it would be best if you took me home."

This was a disappointment for Nifty, because it seemed he had failed on his very first job. Surely there was something he could do for Mo to make her happy? "I know," he said as an idea came to him, "I reckon the problem is that you are so small that the Tiddles just think of you as a toy. I believe if you were the same size as them, you could join in the games and not have to worry about being a Diddalo or a snowman."

"Maybe," said Mo uncertainly. "Could you do that?"

"Well, I'm prepared to try, if you want me to," offered the new Wink.

Mo took a deep breath and gave a little nod. "Okay. One last try."

This time Nifty absolutely needed to make it work right. Closing his eyes, he thought really hard: "*Grow, Mo, grow. Bigger and bigger.*" He began swizzling his stick around, faster and faster, continuing to think: "*Grow, Mo, grow.*" Then he heard something. It sounded like: 'Woah, Nifty, Woah!' So he stopped swizzling and opened his eyes, expecting to see Mo looking a bit bigger. She was certainly big; in fact she was huge and towered above him. "I think I might have overdone it," he gasped. "Sorry, Mo; but at least the Tiddles won't be using you as a Diddalo anymore."

Far from it, the Tiddles around them were all running away, frightened of this massive, furry creature that hadn't been there a moment ago. So much for third time lucky! Nifty, it seemed, had made a total mess of it and he knew he had to put Mo back to the way she was; at least, he hoped he could. Swizzling his swizzle stick in the opposite direction, he whispered: "Make Mo small again," and he added: "Please," just to make sure. Breathing a sigh of relief, he watched Mo shrinking down, and as soon as she was back to her normal size, he stopped swizzling.

"I didn't like that at all, Nifty," she said unnecessarily, "And I think I was better off at home. Can you take me there now? I've had enough of what you call fun in Larfalot."

So, Nifty swizzled them both back to Mo's garden. He waited for her to climb into her cage before flipping the hook over to latch the door. Just then there was first the sound of a motor car pulling up, then voices and giggling coming close. Nifty shrank into some bushes where he hid and watched. The next instant children came running over to Mo's cage. "Oh, Mo," said one of them excitedly, "We've missed you so much." Another of the children opened the cage door, took Mo out and started stroking her very gently, saying: "I bet you've missed us too."

Mo squeaked happily, the way hamsters do when they talk to human people. Nifty, however, understood every hamster word and knew she was glad to be home again. So, it all turned out right in the end; and he promised himself that he would do better with his next job.