

The Windmill Road

By Aegel-maere Aetre

--Chapter One: Harkor

Morning, as usual, came quickly over the Aren Country. No sooner had the moon set than a first band of red appeared on the eastern horizon, and immediately after that, the sun came up, its light piercing, though the wind would still be cold. These days in the early spring, everyone was used to dressing in layers, because a cold, bright morning almost always meant a scorching afternoon. In the summer, that heat would last all day.

In East Aren Country, where most of the humans lived, the cities of Incria in the northeast and Desdon in the southeast would awake to the new day with hope, promise, and a generally positive feeling that this would finally be the day when those bastards from the other city would make some vital error and lose the war. Nobody could even remember what started the war, but with feudal cities, it may have been as simple as their citizens finding out about each other. One moment in generations past, some traveler out of Incria must have met by chance a traveler from Desdon, and something similar to the following must have passed between them:

“Hello, great day to be traveling, eh?”

“Oh I should say so! Gorgeous weather we’re having.”

“Quite. By the by, where are you going?”

“Don’t quite know. I’m just exploring. I’m from a feudal city named Desdon.”

“Oh really! I’m also exploring, and I’m from a feudal city named Incria.”

“You don’t say! Another feudal city in the Aren Country! Who could have thought of that?”

“Don’t know. Say, our cities should have a war to see whose city is better.”

“I should think so! It’s been a good many years since we’ve ever had any sort of hard times. Some of the boys at home are growing soft. A good old war might just get them into shape. Nothing like a few killings to get the adrenaline flowing, what?”

“Agreed! Ta-ta.”

And then they went back to their hometowns and the war was on. Several hundred years later, not much had changed between these cities. Any observer from the outside would have thought these humans insane for fighting so fiercely—and yet, somehow, semi-politely—against each other. Such was the way of the world, though, and nothing appeared ready to change that.

Meanwhile, in North Aren Country, the vast, nameless forest awoke when the first rays of sunshine streamed through the foliage and reached the ground. There elves, gnomes, fairies, and several woodland animals lived in relative peace. The chief issue of each day was gossip, mostly stories about those hapless humans in the East. Several fairies would act as reconnaissance, since they could fly and therefore cover the continental distance between the woods and the battlefields in the shortest time and least risk of personal injury. Once a week or so, a

reconnaissance fairy would return home with news from the front. This conversation would most accurately be described:

“So! Fairy! Welcome home. How are the humans? Still fighting?”

“Yep.”

And everyone would laugh, and then they would go about their daily business of hunting, gathering, and wandering through the lush greenery just for the sake of enjoying this wilderness and appreciating it for what it was: the ultimate sanctuary from almost every problem in the world.

In West Aren Country, the port city of Pril awoke promptly, and each citizen instinctively checked to make sure his or her belongings were still there. Pirates would come by occasionally, and when they did, it was every household for itself. Pril was a city of several creatures, all of whom grudgingly respected each other much in the same way a wolf respects a hunter.

Despite Pril being a port, it did not communicate much with any other township on the continent. No major roads led out of Pril. It was understood that the most common way in and out of the city was by sea. And while there was a general consensus that somewhere beyond the ocean lay another land, nobody really talked about it much, mostly because nobody here really liked to talk. One never knew who one was speaking with, so all conversation was very cautious, with each side giving away as little information as possible in the context of the discourse. In all of Pril, perhaps three different families knew each other's real names, and these were considered to be uncommonly friendly relations.

In South Aren Country, amid the mountains, no real civilization existed. Rumors spread to the rest of the country that a fearsome dragon resided in one of the mountaintops. This caused many to draw the reasonable conclusion that perhaps the South may not be the best place to build a home. On the other hand, some were curious enough to try passing through, and some were even stupid enough to pick up swords, walk boldly through the rocky region, and yell, “Hey Dragon! Yoo-hoo! Come out, come out, wherever you are! I got a sword right here that has ancient runes on it, so I'm pretty sure I'm destined to kill you... So come out and fight, you fire-breathing coward!”

None of these people, the curious or the stupid, had ever come back from the mountains. The more sensible people viewed this as yet another reason to stay away from the South as much as possible.

However, the lay of the roads in Aren Country suggested that at one time, a civilization had indeed existed in the South. Out of Desdon, for example, came a road running straight into the mountains. And although grass had started to cover the way over the years, the road was still undeniably there, richly paved in cracked brick and eroded stone, testament to some glorious empire's outreach in an age long forgotten.

Another road, unpaved but well trodden, linked several farms in the quiet center of Aren Country. This was the main trade route, and it was shaped like an L, connecting the north woods with the farms and then the East, where it would then fork into different directions to meet the different cities. One of the roads extending from the forks also went south into the mountains, and though nobody could say why this way even existed, it was paved identically to the road from

Desdon.

Nobody could really say where this L-shaped road went to and from, because of its multiple forks and nodes. However, it was commonly known as one single road, not a cluster of separate but intersecting paths. Because of one particular element of the largely rural scenery along this route, it was known as the Windmill Road, and it linked every part of the land except the West.

At the one major corner or bend in this L, almost exactly in the center of Aren Country, stood a village so small and insignificant, it was named after the road running through it. Travelers along the Windmill Road would stop there to rest for the night at the Windmill Hotel, which was conveniently adjacent to the Windmill Tavern. Residents of the village either worked in the hotel, the tavern, or the stables where travelers' horses were kept at night. It was a quiet town, and the vast majority of the world would have seen it as merely one stop along a journey but never a final destination.

For Isa, this was not the case. In all sixteen years of her life, she had never left the village. However, she never wondered or worried about what went on elsewhere—she heard more than enough about it as things were.

Isa was a tall brunette who was neither so comely nor ugly as to draw too much attention to her. Currently, she routinely served as a waitress at the Windmill Tavern. Her father and mother owned the business, and the mere act of running and maintaining it consumed their lives. Isa practically grew up in the tavern, and to her, “home” was just the place across the street where sleeping took place. The rest of the day took place at work.

The tavern itself was not impressive in outward appearance, though it was very large for being in so small a village. Despite its size, it still looked rather shabby. Its unpainted wooden exterior had six ordinary square windows and a large double-door entry. The roof was plain thatch with three chimneys where the ovens and fireplace were inside. The only attempt at decoration on this building was a sign on the outside that read, in plain black lettering, “Welcome to the Windmill Tavern. We are all of us travelers here.”

The crowd of visitors varied from season to season as well as from morning to evening. Spring usually saw the first of the farmers en route to sell their crops in the East. Summer was the busy season, when nearly everyone from everywhere came by at one moment or another. Autumn saw the returning farmers and merchants, and winter was slow except for elves and other woodland creatures headed southward for seasonal vacation.

In addition, morning was the time for departure, while night was the time for arrival. Dinner guests could be expected to stay overnight at the hotel, grab breakfast early, and leave.

The Windmill Tavern opened its doors at sunrise each day and closed them when the grandfather clock inside struck midnight. These long workdays meant little to Isa, though, since she enjoyed almost every bit of what she did. She loved meeting new people as well as the occasional familiar face. Not all of them were approachable for conversation, but some had very interesting stories to tell. Isa was always a willing listener, especially when there were no others to be served at the time or the other waiter (Till) and waitresses (Jinn and Essa) were handling

things fine on their own. Though the tavern was large, it would rarely fill to the brim with customers, and then, this would typically only happen in the summer.

This morning, one customer was up before everyone else at the hotel. He was in his mid-twenties and very handsome by Isa's standards. He wore a neat brown tunic with chain mail over it, and a fancy gilded-handled broadsword was sheathed at his waist. A shame, Isa thought, that he talked and acted like a total idiot. She had seen him in the tavern last night, but she was waiting on other tables and did not have a chance to greet him then. Now as she laid some water, rolls and breakfast fruits before him, she tried a casual conversation.

"So what's got you up so early? Late for a war in the East?"

When the man spoke, his voice was such that he did not so much "talk" as he did "announce."

"Though I am from a town outside Desdon, I am not involved in their war. I have come west and will now go south in search of an evil dragon which has plagued Aren Country for years. Though he breathes fire and has vanquished many, I am Harkor, son of Tunisthius, son of Pelew, son of Varde. I carry Ferblade, the sword of my ancestors, and according to the ancient prophecy passed down in runes, I shall prevail!"

Isa stood wide-eyed. She had seen plenty of would-be dragon slayers pass through in previous years, so she had seen similar displays of melodramatic bravery before. Still, it never ceased to amaze her how these people acted. She picked up a glass and cloth and pretended to clean it, just so she could look busy, as she spoke.

"Wow. That's... impressive. Let me guess: your town has some sort of history with this dragon, even though it supposedly lives in the South and would never go as far north as Incria?"

"No..." Now Harkor was quieter. Apparently the first part of his speech was all he had rehearsed beforehand. "Well, okay. To be honest, I wanted to prove I was better than my brother, who went to fight in the war, and I heard there was a dragon down south, so I left on a quest."

"To go to some forsaken mountain range and meet a deadly creature you don't even know exists?"

"I know it sounds ridiculous... But that prophesy stuff I said, that's true. A wandering mage told me I was destined to defeat the evil dragon. All I did was give him ten alligons and he read my entire fate before me."

Ten alligons? Isa thought. *And I barely make five in a full year's worth of tips!*

"So he took your money and you believed him and went on this mission?"

"Yep!"

Harkor cheerfully swallowed some water, then went back to the rolls.

"And what if this 'prophesy' isn't true?"

"Then I guess I won't be back to complain. It's not like my family will miss me, though. They already have five other mouths to feed."

Isa smiled and picked up another glass, this time one that really needed cleaning. "If you were smart, you'd just start out on your own somewhere else. What makes you think you can beat a dragon, seriously?"

Then Harkor told his story.

“My hometown is called Misty Springs. It’s a quiet and for the most part peaceful town, although a lot of the male children there train from an early age to prepare for battle with the Incria army. My older brother and four sisters have always been fascinated with the war and its battles. So were most of the townsfolk. When Chaas—that’s my brother—and I weren’t in school, we were learning to fight. My father was in the war in his younger years, and he encouraged us to go into combat because it builds character.

“Chaas is a big shot, always has been. But even though he is older than I am, I can beat him at anything, including swordplay. He’s off at war now, and I would have gone with him, but then I heard about the dragon...

“An old man stopped by our campfire as we were journeying south toward the front to join the army. We were about to go to sleep when he came, dressed in a bright white robe that glowed in the firelight. He said he would tell our destinies if we were willing to pay a small price. I only had twenty alligons’ worth of coins on me, but ten seemed to be enough for him...”

Only? thought Isa, but she let him continue.

“He told me that I was destined for greatness, to surpass my older brother. Not heeding my brother’s presence, I suggested he should tell me something I don’t already know.” Harkor chuckled. “It’s the type of joke Chaas would appreciate. Anyway, he then said that I was chosen by fate to rescue all of Aren Country from the clutches of a mighty dragon in the South. For it was prophesied long ago that the one who defeats the dragon will be the second-born son of a warrior, a man who possesses the sacred gilded blade. And then he reached out and touched my sword, and look! It has gold woven into the handle. It did not have that before!

“Then my brother gave the man some of his money and asked what his fate would be. The old mage said, ‘You’re a fool. You’ll make a grave mistake in battle and die.’ And then he left. Then more than ever, I was certain the man was right...”

“Not much sympathy for your brother, huh?” said Isa.

“Oh, we second-borns get it tough enough as it is. I can’t wait ’til I return home with a tooth of the dragon hanging around my neck. That’ll show them.”

“So how do you plan on attacking the dragon? A sword alone doesn’t seem like much protection against fire.”

“My shield’s being stored in the stable with my horse. As for the method of attack? Well, there are some people who think a surprise maneuver is the way to go... But I kinda prefer the noble way, you know? It makes for more drama and heroism. I’m going to face that dragon head on when I see it. I don’t care how big it is or how fierce its flame; it shall not die until it has heard my battle cry: ‘Submit, vile creature, for I am Harkor, son of Tunisthius, son of Pelew, son of Varde, and I shall smite you with my sword, Ferblade, the sword which according to the prophesy is destined to defeat you! Prepare to die!’”

Isa stopped cleaning the glass and let a moment of silence pass before she said, “Mind if I give you some advice?”

Harkor coughed. “I mean no offense, but what does a tavern wench know about fighting dragons that a trained warrior wouldn’t?”

“Well, for one, I can say I’ve seen many gallant young warriors pass by this town before to try and face the dragon on some sort of prophetic mission—it’s more common than you’d think. And all of the ones before you have said they would do the dramatic entrance as you just said you would. I haven’t heard anyone ever say he would attack by surprise. And what’s more, I don’t think a single one of those warriors has ever returned from the mountains.”

“Are you saying I should attack by way of stealth?”

“Yes... Or, at least come up with a shorter introduction. I doubt the dragon would let you say more than, ‘Submit, vile cre—’ before burning you to a crisp.”

Harkor looked away slightly and thoughtfully rubbed his shaved chin.

“You have a point,” he said.

“Or better yet, why even attempt the journey? You could travel to many other exotic places, like the West or North and meet many less deadly creatures.”

Harkor dismissed this immediately. “I want to impress my family, though. No matter how many elves I would slay in the woods, it would never compare to defeating a dragon. I’ll keep it in mind, though, in case things don’t work out for some reason.”

Isa was about to say something to the effect of, “That’s not what I meant,” but Harkor was done with his meal and ready to leave.

The man placed a full alligon’s worth of coins on the table and said, “I don’t know how much my meals cost last night and today, but this should cover the whole tab as well as provide a decent tip for you. The brew was excellent yesterday; a shame you don’t serve it in the morning, though I suppose it is best not to be soused before riding out of town.”

Harkor stood and assumed his overbearing tone of voice once more. “Farewell, fair maiden,” he said. “I will take your advice to heart, and when I return victorious, you will see a tooth of the defeated dragon!”

Then he left. Isa took a look at the gold coins on the bar in front of her, and she put down her cloth and glass to count the price of the meal and her tip. She had just made more than half a season’s worth of money in one morning. She nodded her appreciation when the appropriate amount was safely in her pocket.

Then, as she heard Harkor’s horse trot off into the distance a few minutes later, she mumbled, “Another dragon slayer, another piece of dead meat.”

More people entered as the morning went on, and the other tavern staff came in due time to help with the morning rush. Isa kept her generous tip a secret until her mother and she took a break from serving to eat their own lunches in one of the tavern’s booths.

Isa’s mother, Ewen, was a plump, outspoken woman who at times could be overbearing, though her heart tended to be in the right place. Ewen was more than excited to hear about the morning’s first customer.

“Oh, Isa, that’s wonderful! Did you give him your name? A nice rich warrior like that might just take a fancy to you, and then—well who knows? Men like that need sense talked into them so they stop chasing dragons and settle

down.”

Isa sighed, in the process blowing some stray hairs away from her eyes for a second.

“Trust me, Mom. He wasn’t my type.”

“He’s rich and handsome, though, you said...”

“He’s got about as much intelligence as a wooden plank.”

“Now, nobody’s perfect, dear.”

Isa closed her eyes for a moment and bit her lip in hopes that the conversation would end there. Luckily, Ewen changed the subject.

“So what do you plan on doing with that money you earned?”

“I don’t know... I guess we’ll see what the merchants bring this year... But I can’t think of anything I need.”

Ewen smiled. “Oh, go spoil yourself on some new fancy dresses. Maybe the next dragon slayer to stop by will decide the rest of the trip into the mountains isn’t so great an option after all.”

“Mother...”

“All I’m saying, dear, is that you’re of an age where you should start thinking about such things. Promise me you’ll consider it?”

Pause.

“We’ll see. If and when I meet Mr. Right, you’ll know.”

Ewen reached across the table pinched her daughter’s cheek playfully, and said, “That’s my girl!”

In relative silence, the two finished what little remained of their meal.

--Chapter Two: Winter and the Coming Storm

During the dinner hour, when a light crowd of five travelers (a typical nightly number for this time of the year) were talking heartily amongst themselves around a table and starting in on their third round of ale, an elf arrived: the first in a few weeks. Like most elves, he was blond and had the characteristic ears and sharp, refined features. He was of medium height and build, and he was currently unarmed. Isa recognized his face immediately, though his name escaped her until he made his introduction at the bar.

“Greetings, Isa of the Windmill Road! My, you get prettier every year, don’t you? I’m not sure if you remember me. I’m Diamo... I suppose you get too many elves running through here to keep track of us all, though.”

“Oh, no, actually,” Isa reassured him. “You do look familiar. If I recall correctly, you were with your wife the last time you came.”

“Ah, so you *do* remember! Yes, Anni is home right now. We agreed it would be best if I took this particular journey separately.”

“Really? Must either be important or dangerous... or both...” Isa had mastered the art of asking a question in the form of a sentence; she found it to be one of the best mind tricks to get customers to tell their most interesting stories.

Diamo caught on immediately and smiled. “Serve me a pint, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

She handed him one of the tavern’s best steins, and Diamo, as promised,

told her everything:

“The Woodland suffered a pretty hard frost this year. I’m afraid many of the trees didn’t make it through. It’s been at least seventy years since a winter has been that harsh. The good news is, all of the animal creatures seem to have taken it well. Anni and I were fine; we elves and gnomes coped by using the less fortunate trees for firewood, and while it seems barbaric for an elf to chop a tree, it was necessary that one lost life be used to sustain many others. Such is the way of the world sometimes.

“All of us are now working to plant the seeds of these trees with the goal in mind of planting three new ones for each that fell. The effort is early, but with a little luck and a lot of skill, we should be able to do it...

“The fairies, as usual, flew south with the birds for the winter, and only two fortnights ago did we see the first of them return. They brought news from all over Aren Country—pirate hangings in Pril, wandering mages and sages and minstrels, smoke rising from a mountaintop in the South, where a dragon has long been rumored...”

Isa smirked.

“So you have heard at least some of this... I’m not surprised. Has anyone told you of what is happening in the East?”

Isa shook her head. “I hear the war’s still going, but it’s always been that way.”

Diamo checked over his shoulder to make sure the five men at the table were not paying attention to the conversation at the bar. Then the elf lowered his voice and said, “The fairies brought news of the war, and there are some startling new developments.”

Isa took the hint and lowered her voice as well. “Yes?”

“We heard it from every fairy that took refuge in the southeast: Desdon is pursuing a new tactic to win the war. The basic plan is for their forces to cut off all supply routes going into Incria, which means the north sea—not an issue until summer, when it will no longer be frozen—and the Windmill Road. It is still a design in the making, and the date of its execution is as of yet unclear. Also, I am not so certain the Desdon army would want to bring a sizable number of its troops anywhere near this far west when troops are a scarce enough resource already. They are undoubtedly weighing all options, though.

“On my mare, Hesra, I went directly over the fields and through the brooks all the way to Desdon to see if this were indeed the case. I saw every single suspicion of the fairies confirmed, and this when I had spent less than a day inside the city’s walls. The bottom line is that the war is moving westward. You may see human spies evaluating your village as a crucial point along the supply line for both cities, which makes sense in a way, given this town shares the name of the road. While this may be a brilliant tactical move for Desdon, though, it is one we woodlanders have always dreaded, since it brings the problems of mankind that much closer to our own homeland. Undoubtedly, a war would be bad for your little town as well.

“Listen: the woodlanders would hate to lose the ability to travel over the

Windmill Road in peace, and your town has been very gracious to our kind for many generations. It is long since time we had an opportunity to repay you for your hospitality.”

Diamo reached under his collar and procured a piece of cloth tied to a string around his neck. The cloth was gray but showed a red and gold vertically striped shield on it.

“This is the seal of the Desdon army,” said the elf. “If you see it on a uniform in this town, you’ll know you are speaking to a spy. Also:”

With his left hand, he slipped the cloth back beneath his tunic, while with his right hand, he lifted a flap on one of his pantaloons pockets. A small fairy flew out, glowing a dull green. It landed on the bar.

Diamo took a chug of his as yet untouched pint and then said, “Isa, this is Cerie. Cerie, Isa.”

“Pleased to meet you,” said Isa.

Cerie’s glow warmed for a second in reply.

“You may not be able to understand fairy language,” said Diamo. “But Cerie can understand you, at least. She’s agreed to stay in this town throughout the entire year until winter. She will mostly keep out of your way, but she has one very important instruction you should know: if your town is at all in trouble, or if it becomes clear the war will come here imminently, then on your command, Cerie will fly to the woodland. Then we creatures of the forest will come at once to defend your town.

“Please do not misunderstand me: it is my sincerest hope that this never becomes necessary. But the war is changing, and I would rather we play it safe. Do you understand?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Diamo drank the rest of his pint and said, once again up at his normal volume, “You’re most welcome, Miss Isa.”

At this point, the men at the table wanted yet another round of ale, but Jinn was there to wait on them, so Isa had nothing left to do that night after Diamo left for his room at the hotel.

Left with nobody else to talk to, Isa looked at the fairy—still an unidentifiable, glowing green sphere of mist to the naked eye.

“So what do we do now?” asked Isa.

The fairy squeaked and flew over her shoulder, onto a shelf where some of the tavern’s decorative glasses and plates rested. Cerie dimmed significantly, and Isa could hear her snore.

“I suppose it is getting late,” Isa mumbled as she looked at the clock. “But that’s still a pretty rude way to respond to a simple question.”

When Isa and Jinn closed up the tavern for the night, they walked out into the brisk night air, and the former told the latter about Diamo’s visit. Jinn, a twenty-year-old, tall, thin redhead who lived on a nearby farm, showed excitement at the mention of the war.

“It’s coming here? Oh, I don’t know if that’s bad or good. I mean, I hear war is supposed to be bad and all, but men in armor can be pretty hot...”

Isa sighed. “Is that *all* you think about?”

“Oh, you know I’m joking. I have no idea what a war is like. I guess I wouldn’t even know if I wanted one to come here or not until I actually saw it.”

“Diamo treated it like it was the worst thing in the world.”

“Well, if an elf says something like that, it’s usually true...” Then, after a pause, Jinn added, “So when can I meet this fairy?”

“I’ll show you tomorrow when she’s not asleep. She just flew over me one moment, and the next, I hear little squeaky snores.”

“Aw, how cute!”

“Yeah...”

Jinn went to the stables, where she mounted her horse for the late ride home. Isa simply crossed the street and opened her own front door. When the next morning came, Diamo was not there for breakfast, though he had left his tab for last night’s pint as part of his hotel room payment. Apparently, the elf had left just before sunrise, saying he was already late in his travels, and his wife would miss him back home.

--Chapter Three: Garroner

Part of the reason why The Windmill Road was such a small town could be attributed to its being only one stop on a path and rarely anyone’s final destination. Had someone with insight and knowledge of urban planning come across the location, it would have struck them as the perfect place to build a city. Many were already beginning to treat it as a temporary home. They would come to The Windmill Road in the late spring to gather and decide who would follow which trade routes to the East this year.

These were the farmers, who lived scattered throughout the heart of Aren Country. They all wanted to sell their goods in the East, but in order to get the best prices for their products, they would have to avoid competing with each other. So if there were three wool traders this year, one would go to Incria, one to Desdon, and one to some of the smaller towns in between. This crafty, systematic monopoly stayed a secret to much of the rest of the world, though of course, because their chosen place of conspiracy was also one of the most visited taverns along the most traveled road in the country, rumors did spread. No one except for the tavern staff and the farmers knew for sure, though... And they were not going to talk about it anytime soon.

The late spring meeting was the first of three to happen each year, and it was always the first truly large crowd of the year for the Windmill Tavern. They descended on the village on the fourth full moon after the frost, when the spring crops were to be harvested. They came with wagons and carts filled with commodities, and since there was very little room in the town for every one of these transportation devices, most of them remained parked in the grass behind the hotel.

Isa, Jinn, Till, and Essa knew the night would come, but they never had gotten used to the sudden crowd. The tavern bustled with activity all night long, keeping the staff awake and very busy long past their usual closing hours.

Isa recognized most of the farmers from past years, though occasionally a new face showed up: a son or daughter now old enough to travel the trade route and learn what the family business was all about.

Apparently the big news was that the hard winter had a few unexpected benefits, chief among them the melted snow giving the ground enough moisture to make up for last year's drought. Moderate rainfall the past few fortnights meant that most of the spring crops were doing well. Only the animal farmers, whose cattle had not been free to roam lately, and the two vineyard owners, whose grapes were too large to make good, sweet wine, could say that this was a bad year. Others were ecstatic, and the mood never left the building even long after the last of the visitors had left for the night.

Isa needed a break after the first two hours of dealing with the incoming crowds. She knew, though, that she would get no rest, because the others were as exhausted as she and needed her help. She went behind the bar to trade places with Till at present, and in response to an old man on one of the stools, she reached for some brandy and a glass to pour it in. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Cerie, still a little green sphere of foggy light, and although Isa could not see a form or expression beneath the glow, she fancied the fairy was watching the whole scene with somewhat of an amusement. Cerie had not moved much in her three fortnights there, except occasionally to fly out the window in search of whatever it was fairies ate in the wild... Isa did not know. Flower petals maybe?

The old man properly thanked Isa for the brandy and went back to talking to a younger man next to him. Isa overheard enough to learn that they were cotton farmers from separate families. They had already agreed that the younger one would head northeast while the old man went southeast.

Since fabric farmers were often involved with other professional heartland merchants, especially tailors (who not only fixed clothing but made it by hand as well), Isa asked out of curiosity, "Do either of you know where the tailors are in this room? I've been hoping I could buy a nice new dress..."

One of the understandings the farmers and the townsfolk had in The Windmill Road was that the former would get discount lodging and meals during their stays for the meetings, and in return, the latter would receive discounts on any number of the goods in transport.

Therefore, Isa's question did not strike either of the men as odd. The older one smiled and pointed with his thumb to a booth on his right.

"Watch out, young lady," said he. "There are four of them this year. Bit of a miscommunication, that. Nobody knows where the fourth among them is going to go, but he'll probably be forced west to see if he can trade at port. They're drawing straws for who gets to trade where."

Isa understood immediately. It was a rare yet unfortunate event that there would be too many merchants of one product to let all of them travel eastward. The one going west would have to make it through to Pril, and that was never the easiest or most rewarding of trips, since that entire city viewed trade on land in such a way that one might as well imagine an entire city pause to look in silence at the merchant and wonder for a moment... "Trade by land... You can DO that?"

When the four tailors were done deciding each other's fate, three of them

left for the night. One stayed at the table, and while he did not exactly look dejected, he was clearly not in the best of spirits. *So this is the loser*, Isa thought. She walked over to him and said, "Down on your luck?"

The man leaned his face into his hands and said, "I guess so." He was a plainspoken and otherwise simply plain man, the type one could easily ignore in a crowd: brown hair, medium build, no accent, neat but simple beard... He looked to be in his thirties, though Isa had never been able to tell the age of men with beards, mostly because the hair covered too much of time's wrinkles to tell how many were there.

Isa knew her request for a dress would cheer the man up, but she worked into it gradually. Eventually he agreed to show her his materials before sunrise the next day. Isa did not learn right away what type of clothes this man specialized in, but at least she found out his name: Garroner. He had traveled the Windmill Road in previous years and never expected a fourth tailor to show up, but...

"Well, what's to be done?" he said, followed with a sigh. "That's just the way of the market sometimes. New ones come, old ones go." He did try to smile, though, since he was, after all, speaking to a customer.

"I have a few very nice dresses that will fit you; see what you think in the morning."

Despite Isa's total exhaustion when she finally went to bed for the night, she woke up early, excited. She took some of her money and walked outside to where a cart stood outside the hotel. It was the only one whose owner had woken up this early after such a late night, and its horses were facing west, ready to ride out of town.

Garroner had dark circles under his eyes, and Isa imagined she did, too. Nonetheless, the man was very attentive. He said, "I have four dresses that might fit you. My wife made two of them, I made one, and my daughter did most of the work on the last one. She's still learning, but I gave it a few touch-ups... Well, judge for yourself."

The tailor had set all four of these dresses on the top of the giant fabric heap beneath the cart's rain cover. The first dress was a simple blue number, which looked informal but comfortable. Isa could get a lot of use out of a dress like that. The second dress was much more formal: white with a red sash around the middle. The third and fourth were both lightweight, summer dresses, and they looked almost identical except that one was beige and the other was dark green.

Isa liked them all, so she decided to buy all four. Garroner's eyes opened wide at her request, but he did not refuse. Almost cautiously he asked what price she was willing to offer. (This was the usual way of negotiations and haggling throughout Aren Country: the buyer named the first price, and the seller would try to bid up from there.)

Isa took her coin purse off from where it hung around her neck and opened it. She offered fifty linnes (half an alligon) and took four gold coins out of the purse to show she had the money.

Garroner did some mental math and said, "Make it sixty and you have a

deal.”

“Sixty it is, then, minus five for your tab last night.”

Garroner smiled when the exchange had been made. “Wow. At least now I don’t feel so bad about having to travel west... You just covered most of my expenses for the fabric this year.”

Isa rested her new dresses over her left arm and said, “I was wondering about that, actually. Why are there four tailors this year? I only remember two from last spring...”

Garroner leaned back against the side of his cart and said, “Well, the other two aren’t from the towns; they’re from Incria. You see, not all of us tailors are wandering salespeople. In the cities, there are tailors who keep shop all year round. They mend and manufacture most of the clothes people wear in the eastern cities and surrounding towns. Many of these clothes are of fairly poor quality, made and sold cheaply. What we travelers deal in are called “western-style” clothes, and they’re considered luxury items. That’s why we’re still able to travel with our carts to the different places and manage to sell for decent prices. The city tailors see us as competition, which I suppose is fair enough.

“The way I understand it, there were two tailors from Incria who wanted to move into the business of cross-country trade. They did not know our customs at first, but they asked around. Other merchants told them that if they wanted to join in the heartland trade routes, they should get their goods ready over the course of the winter and spring and meet at The Windmill Road as we did last night. So they learned enough to know what to make and where to go; they did not know the rules of competition until last night, though.

“Bryar—he’s the other tailor you saw last year—and I met these newcomers yesterday just as everyone was coming into the town. Even though they were new and we were the veterans of the trade, we decided to treat them fairly and draw straws to determine who would go northeast, southeast, east, and west. I got west.”

Garroner shrugged. “There’s really not much more to it than that. My family and I worked on these clothes all winter and early spring. I was thinking I wouldn’t get a chance to make a profit this year, but... well, I guess I’m back and business, and I have you to thank.”

“Well, your family and you make such lovely dresses... You know what? I bet you could just go east and follow one of those city tailors and compete against them. They’re probably trying to sell their same old cheap wares at an inflated price.”

Garroner nodded. “I wouldn’t be surprised. But rules of the trade are rules of the trade. So I’ll head west into whatever market lies out there. I’d better start early so I can return home in time to make more for the autumn trade.”

Isa said sympathetically, “I don’t suppose it occurs to me often, but you really have to spend a lot of time away from your family, don’t you?”

The tailor cleared his throat and said, “For me, it’s only four fortnights a year: two in the spring, two in the fall. Some of the others, farmers mostly, make three trips: spring, summer, fall; they have it a bit harder.”

The sun would rise in only a few minutes. Isa had to prepare the tavern for

the morning rush—and it would be huge today, as all the merchants set out.

Garroner thanked Isa again and mounted a seat in front of his cart. Isa waved as his two horses trotted steadily away from the sunrise.

--Chapter Four: The Coming Storm and the First Clouds

A few days after the traders left on their various routes, everything was more or less back to normal for The Windmill Road. The next big event would be vacation season, which would not be far off now that the days were getting sufficiently warm. Relatives would travel to see each other, or others would want to head west to “get away from it all.” The occasional southbound dragon slayer could be found among these people. Also, every now and then a traveling entertainer or mage would stop by. Isa did not like traveling mages much, though, mostly because she did not trust them. She attributed this to the fact that half their tricks could be explained by the words, “It was up his sleeve.”

The first of the seasonal travelers were just starting to come. One night there were four to show up at the tavern—an extremely light crowd, but this would pick up in coming days. Though none of these four knew each other, they were content to eat at the same table and talk. Isa eavesdropped while performing her usual stunt of pretending to clean dishes behind the bar.

Of the four, three were men. The woman and one of the men were newlyweds from the heartland. They were now going east for their honeymoon. One of the other men was headed west for a family funeral. Isa listened to these stories, but she found nothing spectacular in them. The last man, though, told a tale she could not believe.

“I just set out one day to travel wherever the road would take me. Now that I’ve made it this far and seen so many things, I think I’ll turn back; wouldn’t want to worry the family back home, you know.”

The reason Isa could not believe it was because in her years growing up and listening to thousands of stories, nobody had *ever* stopped at The Windmill Road and turned back. She looked at him carefully and decided there was something not quite right about his appearance. His clothes were too heavy for long travel for many days in the sun. They were also bulky, as if he were wearing several layers. His skin was well tanned, and his coal-black beard was long and slightly unkempt. Still Isa could not put her finger on exactly what seemed odd about him...

And then she noticed it: on his tunic’s right shoulder was a tiny emblem, a shield with red and gold vertical stripes. This man was from the Desdon army, and he was lying about his origins. Isa did not know what to make of it, so she tucked the information away in her brain until later, when all but the bearded man, who had introduced himself as “Nidric,” had left the table to go to the hotel for the night.

Nidric stood up to his full height of two meters and addressed Isa directly as he walked toward the bar.

“Hi,” he said, nodding. “Mind if we just talk for a bit? I’m not tired enough to get some sleep yet.”

“Sure,” said she, putting down her latest “dirty” glass. Then she added, “A bit surprising that you wouldn’t want to go any farther than this little village on the Windmill Road...”

Nidric said, “You know, I’ve been wondering about that name. Is ‘Windmill Road’ the name of the road or the town?”

“Both,” said Isa. “The village is just so small, it ended up getting named after the road. Besides that, it’s really hard to travel the entire road without going through here.”

Nidric nodded and scratched beneath his beard. “So they say. Is it true that all the merchants in the heartland meet here before traveling East?”

Isa thought for a moment. How much information was it wise to give a spy? “Well, they all travel the road, and like I said, it’s hard to travel the road and not go through here.”

Nidric continued his nodding. “Understandable,” he said. “So what other types of people go through here?”

“All types,” said Isa. “I wish I could be more specific than that, but literally everyone from everywhere goes through...”

“Everyone from everywhere,” Nidric repeated softly. “Well, thanks! That clears up a lot. I should get going now.”

He stood up and made to leave. Just as he was standing in the open doorway, Isa said, “Have a safe trip back to Desdon.”

Nidric froze in his tracks, turned around, and closed the door. “Who told you I was from Desdon?” he asked.

Isa pointed to her shoulder and then folded her arms. “You have the emblem of the army.”

“Ah.”

“Listen, Nidric—if that is your real name. We’re simple people in this town. We haven’t been involved in any war thus far, and we don’t want to be involved in one anytime soon.”

Nidric put a hand up and said, “Do not worry. Our army would never attack this town unless it were controlled by the forces of Incria. We have an interest in the trade route, however. If we don’t secure it, Incria will... And that would be a huge blow.”

“But if you secure it, won’t Incria attack to get the route opened for them again?”

Nidric shook his head and made to leave again. “Most likely, at this point, they won’t even know what hit them. Oh, and by the way: I’d appreciate it if you didn’t go around telling everyone old Nidric was here. All the same, worry not. The sooner the trade road is in Desdon hands, the sooner this horrible war will end—and that would be best for everyone, after all.”

Isa considered this long after Nidric left. She wanted to believe his last sentence... but it was really hard for her to trust a man whose first words she overheard were a blatant lie.

Then, just when she was about to close up the tavern for the night and go to sleep, she remembered Cerie. The fairy was already asleep, resting on top of a pickle jar on one of the shelves behind the bar. Isa called her to attention, and she

woke up, flashing a brighter green to signal that she was listening.

Isa said quietly, "A Desdon spy was just here. The whole army might show up in a matter of days. Go tell Diamo."

The fairy flew with alarming speed to the door, where she slipped beneath the crack in the bottom and went off like a shooting star into the night.

Nidric appeared with the others in the morning, but Isa was not the waitress; it was Jinn's turn. Isa had to ask Jinn later about the man from Desdon.

"Oh, I didn't pay him much attention. That married couple was so cute." After a pause, she remembered something, though. "When he paid his tab, he said he wanted me to give you a tip for last night. We each got five linnen—not bad."

"Not bad at all," said Isa, taking the coins offered her. In her heart, though, she knew this was not a tip for her service; it was a ransom for her silence.

--Chapter Five: Dwarf Tales

Isa did not spend much time worrying about the Desdon spy. For one thing, she had already done everything she could do about the situation, and now all she had before her was time to wait. Also, activity quickly picked up in the tavern; vacation season was officially underway.

Two nights after Cerie had left, several people from the woodlands, heartlands, and east gathered here to rest on their respective ways past each others' paths. On this particular evening, a minstrel and two gnomes were competing to be the center of attention. Some of the easterners had never seen a gnome before, so the miniature couple attracted many eyes... But the entertainer knew his trade well and told stories all night for the crowd.

Isa had heard most of the minstrel's tales sung before, in one variation or another, so she was among those most interested in the gnome couple. They were small enough to share a single bar stool (once they were able to climb up onto it). Isa thought they looked absolutely adorable.

"Are you traveling together?" she asked as she poured them each their drinks and set small fish platters before them.

"Yes we are," answered the blond-bearded male. "We're going away to get hitched, you see."

"Oh, that's wonderful!" Isa could not hold back her excitement. "But... don't they do woodland weddings in the forest? Why do you have to go elsewhere?"

"We're eloping," explained the female. "Bonz is from an oak tree. My family lives in a maple. They said it'd never work out."

"That so?" said Isa. "Why would trees make a difference?"

Bonz answered, "Well, it doesn't really. But eloping is so much more exciting than a regular wedding anyway. Isn't it, honey?"

"You bet!" She pecked him on the cheek.

"Actually," said Bonz, "there is a real reason why oaks and maples don't get

along. The colors on each tree don't quite turn the same colors in the autumn. That makes them look odd next to each other—not good for decoration.”

Isa still did not understand. “And this is... enough to keep people from getting married?”

The bride-to-be said, “Not people, silly. Gnomes. It means a lot to some gnomes that trees of a leaf stick together. We're breaking convention!”

“Down with the system!” Bonz agreed. “Dezzi and I are headed south to catch some more warmth. We won't go as far as the mountains, but I figure the moment we find a quiet town with a chapel that accepts gnomes, we'll get married. Then all that's left to do is find a tree to call home. We've agreed to look for an elm of some sort. That way there'll be no more of this oak-maple mess.”

Isa thought about this briefly. The Windmill Road did not have a chapel; the nearest one Isa knew of was in Brook Shore, a day's travel south. These gnomes would not have to wait long for their wedding.

An applause went up throughout the tavern; the minstrel had just finished a story titled, “The Dragon and the Sword of Destiny.” He was now going to start another tale: “The Sword of Destiny Strikes Again.” Isa smiled and shook her head lightly. She had never heard a single fictional story that did not involve the words “destiny,” “fate,” or “prophecy” in some capacity. What if—just once—there would be a story where absolutely *none* of the prophesied events came true? Then it would be much more realistic... In addition to this flaw of fate, Isa also noticed that lately, minstrels seemed to be getting lazier and lazier...

“Once upon a time,” the man in front of the fireplace sang, putting flute notes at the end of the phrase to fill in the beats. “...Oh, once upon a time in the southern mountains...” (flute) “...there was a Sword of Destiny, and according to an ancient prophecy, it was destined to strike again!”

Then he paused for dramatic effect. The crowd let out a series of noises, some of which were intelligible as “Wow!” or, “Then what happened?”

“Then...” sang the minstrel, resuming his flute. “Then one day, suddenly...”

He paused a second time, his whole body crouched but tense, his eyes wide open. The crowd silently but anxiously anticipated the climax.

The minstrel yelled, “...Suddenly... IT STRUCK AGAIN! The end.”

The crowd roared again in cheers. Isa rolled her eyes.

One man in the audience then asked, “But what did the Sword of Destiny strike?”

The minstrel answered, “First, I will get some dinner for myself. Then, in one hour, I will tell the third tale of my trilogy: ‘The Sword of Destiny Strikes the Rock of Fate.’ Then, and only then, will you get the answer to your question!”

Isa turned back to the gnomes. “That minstrel has the easiest job in the world...”

“Oh, I wouldn't think so,” said Bonz. “Seems to me it'd be pretty hard to tell a story that bad and get so much applause. I think that's what most of the people are clapping for anyway.”

Dezzi said, “Yeah. I mean, if it were any less believable, it would've had dwarves in it.”

Isa laughed. “Dwarves? You mean like from children's tales? Ha ha, yeah,

that would be something.”

Everyone knew there were no such things as dwarves.

Another man at the bar heard Isa’s comment, though, and he too laughed. “Hey everybody!” he yelled. “We don’t have to go without a story for an hour! This lady says she’s got one about dwarves!”

Quickly, all eyes were on Isa, and the people were demanding their story. Isa’s coworkers looked at her with awkward smiles that suggested both confusion and a sentiment of, “This ought to be good...”

Isa looked at Dezzi briefly, but neither said anything. Without warning, Isa leaped on top of the bar and almost bumped her head on the ceiling. She looked over her audience. She had no instrument, so she would have to rely on spoken word.

“This...” she said, “is a tale titled, “The Dwarf and the Prophecy.””

The crowd showed signs of approval. One man nodded nudged someone who appeared to be his wife and said, “I’ve heard this one before. It’s good.”

“Once upon a time,” said Isa, “there was a dwarf. And at the same time, there was a prophesy that the dwarf would one day battle a fierce dragon.”

If she did not have everyone in the room’s attention before, she did now. “The dwarf had only an axe, but it was a trusty one he’d used many times. The day came to pass that he went into the mountains to search for rare mountain timber —because that’s part of what dwarves do—when suddenly, the dragon **ATTACKED!**”

The whole room reacted in horror. Isa was starting to get into this...

“The dragon **ROARED** and breathed fire all over the landscape. But the dwarf *leaped* out of the way just in time to dodge the white-hot flame. He ducked behind a rock to hide for a moment, and while the dragon was looking for him, he snuck to around one side. When he saw his chance, the dwarf ran out and wielded his axe for one fateful blow.

“The dragon saw him as he was about to strike, and the monster shuffled with surprising speed to one side. This time, the dwarf did not have any rock to dive behind! The dragon inhaled mightily, intending to roast its prey in a wave of dreaded fire. The dwarf had only one option: with all his might, he threw his axe at the dragon’s heart...”

She paused here for that ever-so-precious dramatic effect.

“And then the dragon dodged and exhaled, and all of the dwarf was consumed in flame. Said the dragon afterward, “That’s what you get for not having “destiny” in your name.””

Nobody knew how to react to a story like that. All anyone could know for certain was that it would take quite an effort from the minstrel to top it...

Ah, but alas: the minstrel, knowing he had been outmatched halfway through the story, had already crept out of the tavern and was now riding out of town in the dead of night.

Isa’s only regret from the affair was that the minstrel had forgotten to pay his tab.

Meanwhile, in the southern mountains, a dragon named Crispo watched

the surveillance video from his high-tech lab, hidden beneath the peak of Mount Bertrice. He always kept an eye over the goings on in Incria, Desdon, Pril, and this little but highly active village called The Windmill Road, since the vast majority of dragon slayer wannabes would introduce themselves in one of these locations before attempting a later attack. In short, the network of cameras, which his imp minions had placed in the cities, provided quite a convenient amount of information, which helped to protect him from surprise slaying. It also helped him find people traveling alone whenever his food supply was running low.

Tonight, though, he did not watch purely out of the interest of self-preservation or hunger... As Isa finished her tale, he almost welled up in tears of joy. He wished he were in that bar to ask questions like, “And how delicious was the dwarf?” But unfortunately, he was too far away for her to hear him.

The answer, therefore, was left to his imagination. He went to his king-sized adjustable electric bed that night and had some of the best sleep of his life. That tavern lady sure could tell a good bedtime story...

--Chapter Six: Diamo's Return

For the next two days, Isa was in such high spirits, she completely forgot about Nidric and the war. When Diamo walked into the tavern at noon, she was almost confused as to why he should look so serious.

“Greetings, Isa. Thank you for sending Cerie immediately. I have more news of how the situation is developing. Uh...” He looked around. The tavern was empty, since most travelers would not come to the tavern until evening. “I take it we are alone?”

“Yes,” Isa answered.

“Hm. Well, the rest of the people who live in your town should probably hear this as well. I'll have to trust you with spreading the word to whomever it concerns. But keep it away from travelers' ears, since you may not know exactly who is listening.”

“Come have a seat, will you?” It was just beginning to sink into Isa's mind that this might be a good time to stop feeling so giddy and start being more attentive.

Diamo sat in a barstool and said, “We've learned more from the fairies. Here is where things stand:

“Desdon reconnaissance is, as you've noticed, picking up. They are now determined to come to this village and cut off all land trade to Incria, but this will not be easy for them. Spies are quick, but it takes a large effort to mobilize an entire infantry to a certain location—especially if the plan is to keep that infantry's movement a secret. It is unclear whether or not Incria has noticed Desdon's interest in the heartland trade routes. On the one hand, Incria's forces show no sign of moving in the same direction. On the other hand, Desdon is being so *obvious* about its plan, in spite of itself. One cannot just move that many soldiers and not have the other side notice.

“The good news in all of this is that it will take a few fortnights for them to

get here, assuming they keep their current pace. For our part, we woodlanders are keeping check of all this movement. If need be, we will do everything in our power to stop either army from going this far west.”

Isa was still smiling, if only a little.

“So what are we supposed to do here in The Windmill Road? Just sit and wait for things to develop?”

Diamo nodded. “I see your point. Yes, I’m sorry to say, there’s not much you can do right now. I thought you should be aware of it all, though.”

Isa sighed. She knew Diamo was right, but still, it bothered her that such events should ever even come close to her peaceful town. In a way, she wished Diamo *hadn’t* made her “aware of it all.” But that wishful thinking would get her nowhere in the end...

Later that night, after Diamo had left, more travelers came to gather and share stories. There was no minstrel this time; Isa was worried that within days, every minstrel in Aren Country would be warned to stay away from this tavern because the competition was too fierce.

One young man in chain mail sat at the bar and ordered himself a pint of brew. When Isa first looked at him, she shrugged him off as yet another dragon slayer. When she handed him his drink, she asked what brought him here. She expected a rant about swords and prophecies... Instead, though, she learned this:

“My family in the north sent for me. Their town has been under siege, and Incria’s army needs recruits. So I’m headed to the battle to help my hometown.”

Upon hearing this answer, Isa looked the man over more closely. He was tall, blond, and very attractive, yet he did not speak as though he had intelligence equivalent to that of an eggplant. There had to be a catch...

He went on. “I left my family only a few years ago. It’s sort of a custom that boys should go out on their own and seek adventure or join the army at age sixteen. I chose adventure. I wanted to see it all: the fabled woodlands, the dusty plains... For three years I roamed this land, and I’ve been through this town many times before, though you may not remember me, what with all the people you must see every day.”

Isa did not remember him. She realized that this man was telling her far more information than she had asked. This was usually only the case with people who had gone far too long without anyone to speak to... Most of these talkative cases were actually introverts—sensitive people who had kept all their feelings to themselves before this moment.

Isa had other customers to tend to, but she wanted to hear this man out. He was already gorgeous, smart, and sensitive... There *really* had to be a catch. Homosexual, maybe?

He continued talking, since Isa would not interrupt him.

“I’ve seen all there is to see, basically, and I find it all fascinating. I guess all that was left for me was to find a nice girl and settle down somewhere...”

Not homosexual. Must be lying about something. Maybe he was trying to trick her... talking smoothly just to take advantage of her.

“...But then two days ago, I got word that several villages in the area of

Incria were under attack. One of these was my own. Now I have to head back. I'm sorry I ever left my family like that... I hope I arrive before it's too late."

Here it comes, thought Isa. He'll try to make his move...

The man finished his ale and stood. "I have to be traveling all night. Here's for the drink..." He put his coins on the bar. "Goodbye."

Isa stood stunned for half a second. "Goodbye?" she thought. *What kind of move is that?* Then something in her snapped, though she could not tell what it was.

"Excuse me, sir?" she called to him as he had turned his back.

"Yes?" he said over his shoulder. His demeanor really was that of a man in a hurry. "May I ask, what is your name?"

"Asmir. Asmir of Peadston."

"I'm Isa."

"Uh, nice to meet you, Isa. But I have to be going." He made a motion as if to tip his hat, but because he had no hat, this was pointless. Then he turned and strode out of the tavern.

Isa went back to serving customers, but it was a long while before she could get Asmir's image out of her mind. If that man were telling the truth...

Well, it's best not to think about it, she concluded. If he's going to war, he might die anyway. Then what would be the point in getting interested in him?

For some reason, this last thought hit hard on her heart. What hit hard on her brain was the inability to explain why that was. Most of all, she could not help but feel that she just missed some sort of opportunity... one she could not even prove existed in the first place.

--Chapter Seven: Salt, Part One

Visitors from Pril were rare, but when they did come, Isa knew they had some of the most interesting stories. This was in part because they spoke of things Isa could hardly even imagine (an ocean, for example, was a completely foreign concept to her, though every description she had heard of it made her want to go there someday), and partly because people from Pril talked so rarely at home for fear of whom they might be speaking to, that when they were this far inland, they tended to equate "land-lover" with "harmless," and to that end, they would break into epic anytime someone in the heartland expressed enough of an interest to listen.

Four days had passed since Diamo's last visit when an old man walked into the tavern only a few minutes before midnight. The rest of the place was empty, and Isa was about to close up; right at that moment, she was just finishing a last sweep of the floor.

The man saw her and said, "I know I'm late in getting here... Are you closed?"

Isa instinctively checked the clock and said, "Almost. I can get you a drink if you want, but we're only open until midnight."

"I understand," he said. Tiredly, he lumbered his way to the bar and took a seat.

Isa set her broom aside for the moment and looked over this late-night customer. He was burly and gray, from his outfit to his hair and even eyes. He may have been strong in his younger years, but age had taken more than its usual toll on his features. His skin was heavily tanned and wrinkled, and his charcoal-colored hat showed many years of wear; a combination of holes and water stains lay claim to practically the entire fabric. Every aspect of his body looked tired, almost defeated.

He leaned on his elbows at the bar. "Pardon my manners," he said. "But it's been a rough road, and I'm not used to traveling the land."

Isa nodded as she stepped behind the bar. "What'll you be having?"

"Oh, anything's good. Just so long as it can ease an old man's nerves."

He received a glass of the house ale and said, "Thank you" before drinking.

Isa looked over at where her broom lay against the far wall and decided that the rest of the floor was clean enough, really.

"So what brings you here? You say it's been a rough road."

The man smacked his lips in satisfaction at the ale and said, "Aye, that it has. Especially considering there's not really a road to speak of from the west up to this point. I come from Pril."

Isa had already guessed that much, but she smirked a little when he confirmed her suspicion. He definitely seemed like the type who would need little encouragement to tell his entire life story. She would give him the necessary budge, though...

"Pril? Wow, that's a long way. We hardly ever get travelers from there. I've heard stories, but I still can't even imagine what it's like. I've never even seen a sea before."

The man kept his eyes focused on his glass, but he smiled and almost chuckled. Under his breath he said, "Land lover." Then he added at normal volume, "Oh, it's very different from what you're used to, I suppose. For one thing, it's a whole lot wetter than out here."

They both laughed a little at that comment.

The old man sighed and said, "The sea is really the only good part about Pril. The people aren't much, most of 'em. And the land is all rocks, hills, and cliffs. There's nothing that you'd call a pasture, and not a single tree grows in the soil. It's an ugly city in almost every way, except the sea."

He was slipping away into reminiscence, and Isa was not about to stop him. She grabbed a nearby stool and sat down so she could rest and listen at the same time. The clock chimed midnight, but neither seemed to notice.

"The moment you see that sun set out over the waters... that bright red that promises calm waters in the morning... That's when you know why people came to this city in the first place. I've spent many days chasing that sun. I've been to the Far Continent and back. There's something about setting out to find that red horizon. It's one of the most dangerous businesses out there... yet if you need to find your reward, it's always right in front of the ship's bow."

"So why are you going east?" Isa asked.

The man sighed and drank again. When he had finished his glass, he said, "Look at these hands."

Isa looked. They were fairly ugly hands: freckled, wrinkled, and rough.

“These hands are never again going to look any younger than they do now. I told myself that when I was a little boy, and again when I was grown, and again only last year. It was my reminder that if I’m going to get things done, there’s no better time to begin than right now. Because there’ll come a time, I knew, when these hands couldn’t do anything anymore.

“Well, that time has come. I’m just not as young as I used to be, and sea travel is out of the question for me anymore. On my last voyage, we came across a storm, and three younger men almost died because these hands failed them. I was to hold a rope steady, like I’d done in many gales before. I slipped...”

The man paused and closed his eyes, his head still facing the empty glass on the bar.

“It pains me not to be able to go out at sea anymore. I guess that’s the hard part about chasing the sunset; eventually, the sunset always wins...”

“But as long as I’m still alive, I’ll still have adventure in me. That’s partly why I’m headed east: I’m curious what’s out there.”

“There’s a war in the East,” Isa answered.

“Oh.” The man opened his eyes again. “Well, that wouldn’t be too good a thing to ride into, now, would it?”

“Probably not.”

“Let me ask, then, since my other reason for going east is to try and find a particular man: my brother’s son, Geppith of Desdon. Which way would one travel to find that place?”

“Keep traveling east, and when the road forks, head southeast. If it forks again, keep to the right side of every fork until you meet either the army from Desdon or the city itself. If you meet the former, and you introduce yourself as an ally, they’ll point you in the right direction. If you meet the latter, well, then you’re there.”

“Sounds simple enough.” The old man stood and said, “I thank you kindly. I’ll be up at the break of dawn to ride, so here’s for the ale and the advice.”

He paid her only two linnes, just enough for the ale with no tip. Isa smiled and thankfully pocketed the money. She realized the man probably was traveling with little more than that on him, and to get to Desdon, he would need all he had left.

Isa never learned the man’s name, but because he never learned hers either, all was fair. Maybe that was just how people acted in Pril.

She washed and cleaned the man’s glass, then swept the rest of the floor just so she would have time to herself to think before going home to bed. The way the man had emphasized the advantages of youth made her consider her whole life up until the present. It did not make for much of a life story: born in a small town, raised there and brought up to serve drinks as a common waitress. All her years, she had stayed in an area of a few hundred meters’ radius. Why, then, did she feel as if she had been everywhere and seen all there was to see? When she closed her eyes now, she could envision perfectly the western sunset over the ocean, just as the old man had described it. She even added her own details to brighten the picture: oranges and yellows enveloping the red sun, a dark sea with

a piercing glare reflecting off it... twilight moving in with a soft sea breeze. On a previous occasion, Isa had learned that the ocean was made of saltwater. Now, she could imagine breathing salty air, even though she had never really experienced it before.

She finished cleaning and blew out all of the tavern's candles. Then she left and locked up for the night. When she took her key out of the door, she paused and looked at her hands for a moment. They were of course young, though suited to practical purpose. She wore no nail polish, and a few calluses had naturally built up where heavy ale and water pitchers' handles had leaned against her forefingers during pouring. Otherwise they were fairly light and healthy.

Isa put her key in a small but convenient pocket in her dress and walked home.

--Chapter Eight: Meanwhile, On Top of Mount Bertrice

Crispo stood atop his snowy summit in the middle of the southern mountains and surveyed the valley below. A human was trespassing. This one, like the vast majority before him, was content to travel alone and yell out various information about how very truly destined his sword was. Crispo liked it when humans were this easy. Other times, when they traveled in hunting parties, it might have been difficult to roast them all in one breath. Maybe one or two would run away, and then it was a matter of finding them, which could be tough, what with all the snowdrifts and rocks to hide behind. Oh, and if one of the escapees had a bow and arrow, well... then there had to be extra caution, of course.

Another disturbing trend among humans was toward the use of surprise attacks. Fortunately for Crispo, his surveillance systems thwarted all of the attempts to date. But these were nuisances, and there was always that fear in the back of the dragon's mind that his cameras just might miss one person among the hundreds he had killed over the decades. If the electronic gear were to fail, there were always the imps to warn him... but how far could one really rely on imps for personal security? He would have to devise a better system at some point later on.

Just to be absolutely sure the human was alone, Crispo grabbed his ScopeTronic 4000 telescope and zoomed in the sight. Yes, there was only one dragon slayer this time. The GPS reading, which was visible from the telescope lens's aim option, put the target at thirteen degrees and four seconds north, twenty degrees and one second east.

Crispo took some warm-up breaths (author's note: no pun intended, honestly) until he was ready to blow fire at full strength. Some dragons, he knew, cheated by using flamethrowers or the latest ultramodern weapons. Crispo would never sink to that level, though; he was of the old school of training. The ability to fry a horde of prey using nothing but one's own belly fire was something these young'ns today with their fancy "machine guns" and "layzors" could use a bit of, he thought.

The dragon took to his wings and immediately dove toward the still-yelling human. While he flew, he went through the usual drill of mentally assessing his opponent's condition: *He has a one-handed, double-bladed broadsword and a*

metal shield. The shield is large enough that it could deflect my flames, so I'll have to strike wisely. Other than that, this shouldn't be much of a challenge... Just remember what Momma said: "Kill it like you mean it, and don't play with your food." Crispo had always followed that advice. After all, it had (and has) always been a really, really bad idea to disobey a mother dragon. For one, mothers tend to give very sensible advice. For another, it just generally does not make sense to cross a dragon.

The human was starting his cyclic rant all over again. "Hey, Dragon! Come out and meet your doom! I am Vilbur of Dersiztos, and I am called by ancient prophecy to—"

Crispo landed behind him with a thud. Vilbur turned around and raised his shield. Crispo, wisely, saved his breath. The human regathered himself and attempted to introduce himself again.

The dragon held up a giant green claw and said, "Stop. Please. I heard you the first thirty times. You don't need to repeat it again."

Vilbur had his courage together now. He yelled some battle cry of his ancestors and, sword raised in the right hand, ran furiously at the dragon. Crispo flapped his wings once and went right over the human's head, out of his sword's reach. Then, Crispo abruptly turned and fried his adversary in a matter of milliseconds. Some of the surrounding valley grass also went up in flames, though this was of no concern to Crispo, as any fire here would never reach the top of his mountain.

The dragon inspected his prey. It was hot to the touch, but not too hot for a dragon. Crispo estimated that it had been cooked at a thousand degrees centigrade or so—perfect for a human this size. Momma would have been proud.

Half an hour later, Crispo was on top of his mountain again, surveying the countryside to the north and east. His security cameras could monitor the towns, but it still took old-fashioned gazing to determine what was happening in between the human settlements.

With his ScopeTronic 4000, he zoomed in on what looked to be a massive migration out of the Desdon region. It was an army division headed west. Try as he might, Crispo could not figure out why an army division would go west when the battles were clearly to the north. Then again, he thought as he swallowed the last leg of Vilbur, so many human actions were stupid to the point where they could not be explained. Besides, as long as the army was not headed toward the south mountains, Crispo had nothing to be concerned about.

The dragon checked the lands next to the mountains to make sure nobody was actually coming toward his abode. And it was a good thing he looked, too, since there was indeed a figure riding south on a surprisingly fast white horse. On closer inspection, Crispo saw it was a woodlander, probably an elf. This was very confusing; in all his years of battling (and defeating) humans, Crispo had never been attacked by a woodlander. In fact, when he came to think of it, he had never even met a woodlander close up. Other dragons who knew of them described them as peaceful...

Diamo came to the famed entrance into the mountains, the appropriately named “Road of No Return,” which ran between two stark, foreboding mountains that ended the heartland meadow lands, abruptly changing field into rocky peak, gorge, and valley. The elf stopped his mare at the entrance and looked around. Something was moving just beyond a bush to the right of the path.

“Come out,” said Diamo in the direction of the bush. “You have no reason to fear me. I must speak with the dragon called Crispo.”

An imp crawled out from behind the bush and stood at a full height of three centimeters. A squealing voice said, “You wish speak with fiery one?”

“Yes.”

“You wish battle fiery one?”

“No. I just want to talk.”

“Go in, third mountain on right.”

Then the imp took a miniature electronic device from his tiny pocket. He put the device to the side of his face and said, “Tell Master Crispo he have visitor.”

Diamo rode at a steady pace into the mountains. Imps were very good for spy work and surveillance, but the woodland’s fairies were better; the woodlanders all knew much more about the dragons of the South than the dragons knew of them. More and more, dragons were relying on inventions and technology to strengthen their societies—which were vast in scope and sophistication compared to any other species in Aren Country—but woodlanders would always have the advantage when it came to nature and the old ways. Part of the reason why Diamo had chosen specifically to set out to find Crispo was because that dragon, according to the reconnaissance reports, still used his natural abilities before any mechanizations. Diamo admired that; it showed a certain respect for tradition... it showed character.

Diamo did not have to ride up to the mountain; instead, Crispo came down to meet him. The dragon was huge, even for one of his own species. Green scales covered the entirety of his body, and this plus an enormous dark green wingspan were enough to block all of Diamo’s line of vision when he looked forward.

“I come in peace,” Diamo said quickly.

“What do you want?”

The voice had both annoyance and curiosity in it. Diamo would try to exploit the latter.

“My name, noble dragon, is Diamo, and I come from the woodlands far north of here. I have a proposition, if you are willing to listen...”

Crispo snorted, smoke rising to the sky. “You have one minute before I finish preheating. Explain quickly.”

--Chapter Nine: Profession of the Future

Isa bit her lip and tried not to get in the way of the night’s entertainment at the tavern; a wandering prophetess was reading customers’ fortunes for a price.

Some people saw prophets and prophetesses as magically gifted servants of fate. Isa saw them as frauds. *Why, she thought, would a person who knows the future—who could manipulate that future for whatever purpose—end up*

spending a lifetime traveling from town to town and living off the pocket change of others?

So many people actually fell for the tricks, though... mostly because prophets had a habit of telling everyone exactly what they wanted to hear. To the young male, they would say, "You are destined for greatness." To the young female, "You will meet a knight in shining armor." To the older people, "You have done more great than you will ever know," or, "Your offspring will achieve greatness." It was all so predictable a scam, and Isa would have kicked all such people from the tavern, but her mother said that prophets were good for business; they made people stay longer, thus buying more rounds of brew and more courses of meals.

Tonight's prophetess wore a white dress and headscarf. Her specialty seemed to be cold reading, and Isa was able to pick apart all of her methods as they came.

Said the prophetess to a young alpha male, "I see you are strong... and yet, you are always striving to be stronger in your own way. You attract many friends, but some of these friends can be intimidated by your strength."

Flattery, Isa thought.

"I see that one day, you will become famous. Your heroism will go down in books for the ages."

Yeah, right next to the ten other men you've met tonight, all of whom will also go down "for the ages."

This went on for two more hours, and when the tavern was ready to close for the night, the prophetess was the last to leave. She had made about as much money that night as Isa had in tips the past two days.

Just before the woman could go out the door, Isa called to her, "Pretty good evening, wouldn't you say?"

"Pardon, child?"

Though Isa could not guess the woman's age, this prophetess was clearly old enough to justify calling Isa a "child." Nonetheless, Isa took it almost as an insult.

"You seem to make a lot of money telling fortunes. Before you go, could you tell me one thing for free?"

"Ah, nothing comes free, dear. I have to feed myself, you know."

Isa grabbed her broom from a closet to the side of the bar. She started sweeping and said, "Too bad, then. I was just curious, anyway."

The prophetess could smell the possibility of yet more profit, so she took the bait. "Curious about what, dear?"

"Oh... It's not much. But I was wondering... You said a number of times tonight that you had read various prophecies on ancient scrolls. Well... That means you can read, right?"

"Yes, child. I can read."

"Well, I can't. I was never taught to. There's a sign on the outside of the tavern door behind you, and I've always wondered what that sign read. I was just curious if you could read it for me."

"Oh..." Well, this the prophetess was willing to do for free. She made to

open the door, but Isa interrupted her.

“Why do you need to open the door to look at the sign? I thought you were a prophetess. Don’t you know already what is written there?”

The prophetess paused and smiled. “Now I see your game. You are one of those who have no faith in the power of the psychic mind.”

As correct as that assessment was, Isa reminded herself that this was only a trick—a cold reading used on several minds in the past.

“So what does the sign say?” Isa continued sweeping nonchalantly.

The prophetess frowned but thought for a moment. Isa imagined the woman was trying to remember the sign from when she had first entered the bar. As it turned out, her memory was not completely bad—either that, or she was at least a reasonable guesser.

“It says, ‘Welcome to the Windmill Tavern.’”

Isa nodded and continued sweeping. “Anything else?”

“Well... No, I do not think there is anything else.”

Isa said, “Okay, then. If that’s all it says... I guess that’s it. Goodnight.”

The prophetess wanted to continue working the potential customer, but the waitress’s smile was too big. The prophetess had guessed wrongly on the sign. She turned the doorknob, swung the door outward, and walked around to take a look on the other side. As she did, the waitress’s voice called from inside the tavern, “Welcome to the Windmill Tavern. We are all of us travelers here.”

The prophetess yelled back, “You lied about your illiteracy, you know.”

“True enough,” said the voice from the tavern. “How about this: I’ll keep my mouth quiet if you do, too?”

Isa stilled her broom for a second. Though the prophetess was no longer in view, Isa could imagine her turning her head from side to side to make sure no one was around to hear.

At last, the old woman said, “Deal.” Then the door closed.

--Chapter Ten: Helping Hands

By chance, Ewen happened to be headed up the front staircase at the same moment Isa came home that night. The mother turned around to greet her daughter, but the latter could only respond with a tired sigh.

“Something wrong, dear?”

Isa answered, “Just exhausted.”

“Well, no wonder, dear; you’ve worked so many long days and nights lately. Maybe you should take tomorrow off. We’ll get Till to close up or something.”

Isa nodded. This sounded like good sense. She could definitely use a break.

“Say, Mom?”

“Yes?”

“Have you noticed anything strange about our customers lately?”

“What do you mean, dear?”

“I mean... There are a lot of soldiers around.”

Ewen walked back down the stairs (she had stopped halfway up) and said,

“Why yes. Yes I have noticed that. There were three I saw today, all saying they were from Desdon. They seemed like fine young men, too, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

It was all Isa could do to keep from rolling her eyes.

“That’s not what I mean, Mom. There are... Look... An elf stopped by, and he said that the war in the East is coming here pretty soon. I don’t know if that’s really going to happen, but with all the Desdon troops here lately...”

“Oh, but they aren’t fighting over our little town, are they?” Ewen tried to take a comforting tone, since this was her instinctive reaction whenever Isa looked worried about something—regardless of what that something actually was, or whether or not it warranted concern. “I mean, you see Inciria troops, too, right?”

“I haven’t seen one for days now, and including him... that’s only one this whole year. Desdon doesn’t care about our little town, I don’t think... but what Diamo said—”

“Who’s Diamo?”

“The elf, Mom. Don’t get your hopes up so quickly.”

Ewen sighed so deeply, it looked as if she would deflate. “Go on.”

“They want the road. If Desdon can control the road, they can control land trade, and if they can control land trade, they think they’ll win. But if they come here, Inciria will come soon enough... I think we might be in the middle of a battle.”

Ewen put her right arm around her daughter’s shoulder and led her up the staircase, which was barely wide enough for both of them.

“Well, if the elves are saying it, it must be true,” said Ewen. “Have you told your father?”

“No... I haven’t told anyone.”

Ewen nodded. “Probably best. That way people don’t get too scared. When are the troops supposed to arrive?”

“I don’t know... All I know is, we don’t have long. Diamo said he’d try and do something about it, but I don’t know what he has in mind.”

“Okay. Tell you what we’ll do.”

They had reached the top of the staircase. From the other side of a bedroom door at the top, both of them could here Isa’s dad, Harro, snoring at his usual pace.

“We’ll tell your father and all the town residents in the morning. None of this is to get out to our visitors, though. We wouldn’t want to concern them or tip off the Desdon soldiers that we know something about their plans. We’ll make some preparations, but we’re not going to evacuate. As for fending off any sort of invasion—no matter how preposterous that is in this village—we’ll just have to trust this Diamo or whoever that he knows what he’s doing. Now, get some sleep, and don’t worry about waking up early tomorrow. Just rest. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Ewen gave Isa a warm hug and said, “Goodnight, dear.”

Isa did not fully wake until noon. Even then, she did not feel like getting

out of bed. In her bedroom, the lonely light came from the window to her right—and it was raining outside, so the gray that streamed in did little to stimulate Isa to want to stand up. With her head propped up on her pillow, she looked over the room, only to find every object in it just as nonchalant as she. The wardrobe and mirror stood like statues in the shadows of the far right corner. The door to the left was open, but nobody else was stirring in the house. The sight would have been eerie had it not been for the rain hitting hard against the window, each drop a subtle reminder that the rest of the world was still moving, even though Isa was not.

Eventually she did rise, though she could not guess how much time she had spent awake in bed. She dressed, took care of her basic hygienics, and when she looked in the mirror and saw she was ready for the day, she went downstairs and grabbed her wooden umbrella from beside a coat tree in the front hall. Even if she were not going to work at the tavern today, she still needed to go there for breakfast. Her own home, having been designed specifically for the purpose of housing the tavern owners, did not even have what one could call a real kitchen—just a wood-burning stove and a water pump in the same general area of the living room, with no counter space at all.

When Isa entered the tavern, she was surprised to see it lively. For one, rainy days were usually very slow for business. Also, while Isa knew she was there later than normal, it certainly was not evening or anytime close to then, and normally, there would not be a crowd this early.

At least twenty customers were there, though. Isa saw that they were all wearing the habits of healing friars. This was a rare occasion but a welcome one; healing friars were always very nice customers, even though by custom they paid no price for their meals (the trade-off being that nobody had to pay the friars for medicines and such; it was a mutual charity at work).

Healing friars were often from third-borns of families in the East. Because no friar would ever fight in the war, the brothers saw each other as equals no matter their place of origin. Likewise, any place in all of Aren Country (except perhaps Pril, because that city was an exception to almost every rule in the land) would accept the friars, since it was an unwritten law that no one should ever turn a healer away from their door.

Till had just arrived at the tavern to learn that his shift would involve overtime today. He did not mind; this only meant more tips for him, assuming anyone would come tonight... He sincerely hoped the rain would ease up soon, though that looked doubtful.

Isa walked to the bar and thanked him personally for taking over for the night. Then she asked him for a light breakfast and, when he left to get her usual rolls and tea, she turned on her stool to examine the friars more closely.

They were all in good spirits, as friars usually were: calm, smiling, talking (truthfully) about how the rain had soaked their outer robes through and through... The tavern floor was practically soaked from the water dripping off the clothes, and the friars seemed very apologetic for this, though it really could not be helped. And now the rain was getting worse... Isa wondered how so many people could spend the majority of their waking hours talking about the weather

and its effects; every time she saw them, albeit not a common event, she heard them talking about sun, rain, wind, or temperature... whichever of these were in effect at the moment of conversation.

One of the friars at a table in the middle of the tavern had apparently gotten much too wet outside; his face looked red, and his body shivered. He sneezed gently into the sleeve of his drenched robe.

Immediately, every other friar stopped his conversation, and the room went silent. What followed was as entertaining a turn-based dialogue as ever Isa had witnessed, with every healer talking at random:

“Are you alright, Benjin?”

“I think Benjin’s sick!”

“A cold. I have some herbs.”

“He doesn’t need herbs; he needs some warm soup and a dry habit.”

“But we don’t have any dry habits.”

“We can still warm him up. Get him over to the fireplace.”

Five friars at once lifted poor Benjin, still in his chair, and carried him across the room to be next to the fireplace.

“Does he have a fever?”

“Let me check.”

As one friar put his hand to Benjin’s forehead, Isa looked at Till and said, “Quite impressive; I hope if I’m ever sick I should be lucky enough to have these guys around.”

Till nodded and set Isa’s breakfast before her.

“I suppose I should tell Harro to make some soup,” he said.

Isa laughed. “That would be a good idea, yes.”

Till smiled and went around the bar to the door leading to the kitchen. Isa had always admired Till’s wit, and from time to time she wished he were her age instead of twice her age. The waiter, who was the second son of a nearby farmer, had come to work at the tavern twenty years ago (twelve was seen as a good age for children to start part-time work). He understood fully that Isa was being raised to take over her family’s business one day, but while he may not have admitted it, he could probably have run the entire operation himself if he had the ambition. He was smart and quick to learn, but he had never been taught much except for how to cook basic meals and serve drinks. Farmer’s sons generally were not expected to be scholars. Isa wondered from time to time whether or not that was fair. Still, Till seemed happy doing his job, and like the others among the staff, he enjoyed it mostly for the wide variety of customers. He also took comfort in the simplicity of his life, another quality Isa respected in him. All too often, some people would make the most out of the tiniest problems and not count their blessings along the way. Perhaps it was because Till had met so many people over the years in the tavern, and some of those people had much more serious issues from day to day than a village waiter might ever have in a lifetime. For this or whatever reason, Till was generally content with his life, and his cheerful demeanor tended to brighten those around him, as well. If Till had one flaw, it was that he could at times be so content, he would slip into laziness over things that really needed to be done, as he had a few years ago when he took a full

month to fix a simple leak in the thatch roof or the numerous times he had forgotten to clean all the dishes before the dinner crowd arrived.

By the time the soup arrived, most of the chaos surrounding Benjin was over. Two friars still watched him closely, but most everyone else was back to the usual routine of talking and eating.

Isa would have gone back to her house, but she did not know what she would do there to keep from being bored. She considered helping the staff, since her parents and Till were the only ones serving the friars at the moment, but then she pushed that idea aside. A day off was a day off, after all; she would not waste the opportunity while she had it.

She asked Till for another cupful of tea, since because of the dreary day, she was still tired after her first serving. When she had her cup refilled, she walked over to one of the tables where three friars were sitting and politely asked if she could join them. They, of course, acquiesced. She introduced herself, then found out their names were (from her left to her right) Commus, Waller, and Detonne.

“It’s been the longest time since we’ve seen friars here,” said Isa. “So pardon me if this question seems kind of silly, but... What’s it like being a friar? Do you guys just decide where to go one day just because you haven’t been there for a while, or is there a reason you go places?”

Waller answered, “There is reason, indeed. We go wherever we are most needed at any time. For years, we have helped towns afflicted by the horrid war East of here. Whether they are towns in the Incria area, or whether they are by Desdon, there are innocent people everywhere who need our help.”

“Do you help the soldiers, too?”

“We used to,” said Commus. “But in an effort to stem the tide of war, we have made a pact with other bands of friars that says, ‘No soldier shall be helped unless they promise not to fight again when healed.’ Soldiers who promise and then fight, we do not even offer to help anymore.”

“It was a tough decision to make,” said Detonne, “but we all felt it was necessary.”

“There are exceptions for people fighting in self defense,” Commus added. “But in general, the rule stands.”

“I see,” Isa said. “I didn’t know the war was that bad; we’ve never seen it around here... at least, not yet.”

“Indeed you haven’t, Miss Isa,” said Waller. “But I am afraid that will not be the case for long. You see, there are troops now coming westward. Both armies are converging on the road. Hopefully, they will see each other and fight before they get this far, but in case they do not, we have come here ahead of them—and treading through the downpour to do it, I might add. We mean to warn all the citizens of this town to take shelter.”

Said Detonne, “We have already told the man who owns the hotel next door, and we warned several farmers on the way here in the past few days. A few moments ago, Trand over there told the man and woman who own this tavern. We don’t mean to cause panic or alarm, but what is coming cannot be stopped.”

Isa did not know how she should react to the news. She knew she ought to

be thankful for the friars' presence in a time when healers may very well be necessary, but on the other hand, they had just confirmed her worst fear: not just one army, but instead, the entire *war* was coming to her village. Isa wondered just how many villages in the East had seen the war already. How had they fared? From the armies' collective point of view, The Windmill Road was just another piece of territory, a strategic location, the conquest of which would mean tactical advantage, one step toward reaching some far away victory. But to Isa, this was more than a place on a map; this was the only home she had ever known. What if these armies were to destroy the village's buildings, or worse, harm the people in the heat of battle? She had not seen true war yet, but deep down, she already knew she hated it more than anything else in the world right now.

"Cannot be stopped," Isa repeated under her breath as she looked down at the table.

Waller tried to cheer her up. "Not stopped, no. But at least the rain will delay both armies' movements. Even so, if they are to come here, all is not lost. Everyone in the town should be fine so long as they stay inside."

"You've warned and tended to villages before?"

Waller answered, "Yes we have, Miss. Yes we have. We have gone all over the East, and we have seen many battles before. We have stayed with innocent citizens in the village and helped them recover losses afterward. Usually, both armies are good about not attacking people who stay inside their homes. The majority of all battles take place outside the towns, anyway; there's more room in the open fields for cavalry and infantry to fight. Eventually one side retreats, and the other side knocks on everyone's door either to brag about the defensive victory or to say, 'Hello. You've been conquered.' The most common worst case scenario is when a stray lighted arrow or catapulted rock goes off its target and hits a building in the town, sometimes forcing people to evacuate that place. If that happens, it's best just to run as quickly as possible to another building and take shelter there. It is very dangerous to be out in the open."

"The armies try not to destroy the towns, so that's pretty rare," Commus said. "They're smart enough to know that a victory doesn't mean much if all they win is dominion over rubble."

"Well, I hope you're right," said Isa, thinking aloud. "And I hope it passes quickly."

"Most battles do," said Detonne, nodding. "The average length is a day, give or take depending on how many troops are involved and how important each side sees the battle."

Isa shook her head slowly. "How can you all be so merry right now? I mean, you clearly have seen some horrible things to know so much about war... How do you keep your spirits up?"

The friars looked at each other as if to ask with their eyes, "Who wants to field this one?"

Eventually, Commus answered, "It is true that we've witnessed some of the worst sides of humanity, but we have also witnessed the best. We've seen people come together and rebuild. We've seen the joy on mothers' faces when an injured child is healed. We've seen many uplifting moments, and I think I speak for every

friar here when I say that for all the troubles we've seen, we could not imagine a more rewarding way of life."

This made Isa feel better. If these men, who had experienced so many battles before, could be so calm before the coming of another fight, then why should Isa be afraid? Nonetheless, a nervous voice called in the back of her mind and said, *I still wish it would all be over with soon...*

--Chapter Eleven: A New World Record for Dragonkind

The sun rose the next day, and heat set in early. The Desdon army arrived at noon. The Incria army arrived one hour later. These two opposing forces kept most of their fighting away from the village, but the residents and friars could hear all the sounds of battle from the hotel, their chosen place of shelter.

Isa sat in a corner of a room on the third (and highest) floor and hugged her knees. Her parents and Brother Waller were there, too, trying to make the best of the situation by playing a friendly card game.

"Won't you come join us?" asked Waller. "Cards are much more fun with four people."

Outside, one man screamed, "Charge!" while another just screamed in agony. Try as she might, Isa could not simply brush that aside.

"No thanks," she said weakly. "You go ahead. Maybe I'll get in the next game."

All three adults looked at her with concern but, at the same time, understanding.

Waller tried to keep his expression as comforting as possible and said quietly, "We'll start with ordinary rummy."

"I don't know that game," said Harro.

"Oh, I'll teach you, then," Waller replied. "It starts like this..."

Meanwhile, soaring over the Aren Country and headed straight for The Windmill Road, Crispo called to the elf riding on his back.

"I tend to land a little rough," said the dragon. "So sorry if it ends up bumpy back there."

Diamo clung for dear life, his arms wrapped around Crispo's neck. The elf was lying flat and keeping his eyes closed, since the last thing he wanted to think about right now was the drop down. Just hearing the dragon talk about a rough descent and landing was enough of an insult to injury, because from Diamo's point of view, the entire ride had been rough from the start. Right at this minute, he was thumping violently and only by sheer grit could manage to stay aboard his ride. Elves, Diamo decided, were *not* good fliers...

At long last, Crispo said, "Okay, I see the battle and the road up ahead. I'm going to land at the east edge of the village so that I face both armies. Whoa... There are a *lot* of humans fighting... I don't think I've ever charred this many before."

"R-r-r-r-real-ll-y?" said Diamo, shaking and still not opening his eyes. "Wh-what's-s-s your r-r-rec-c-c-ord?"

“Well, there was that time when a hunting party thought it could take me... That was, oh, I’d say about fifteen humans. Right now, though, I’d say there’s at least a couple thousand out there, plus some horses.”

“B-b-b-b-ut-t-t you’ll-l-l t-try?”

“Try? Well, of course! Hey, just because I don’t think any dragon in history has faced this many humans at once doesn’t mean it’s impossible. Besides, there’s gotta be a first time for everything, right?”

And with that, Crispo plummeted to the ground and, as always, assessed his enemies. There were many of them, but the majority were infantry fighting within a fairly tight space along the road. Cavalry rode around them for the most part, resulting in what Crispo could only amusedly call a target-and-bullseye setup. Some archers were farther away from the action on both sides, though; the dragon would have to watch out for these. He would compensate by landing between two of the village buildings and using those as his shields. Hopefully, if he could fry enough of both armies to make his presence known (he figured about fifty would have to die), he would scare the rest and make them run away in horror. He could feel the fire ready in his throat, but he churned up even more of it as quickly as he could. This would have to be the greatest flame of his life in order for him to succeed...

Crispo landed perfectly between a two-story house and what looked to be a hotel. Then he turned on a dime and saw that only a few of the warriors had noticed him; the rest were just too busy fighting to pay any attention to the newly arrived dragon. Subconsciously, Crispo realized that his own insides were about to burn up if he did not release the fire soon. He was starting to get light in the head. This had never happened to him before.

From the dragon’s neck, a nervous and still clinging Diamo yelled, “Well?”

Crispo violently threw his neck back, flinging the elf off. Fortunately for Diamo, the previous day’s rains made the road a soft, if very dirty, landing. Then, Crispo’s head went forward, and out from his mouth came a roar and flame so intense, it spewed for a full minute at white hot before finally cooling down and diminishing. The dragon’s roar was louder than every other sound of the war combined.

The hotel’s foundations shook, and for a brief moment, Isa thought the world was descending into chaos. She could see the creature outside the window, but she could not believe her eyes. What kind of horrible beast would be that loud and sprout fire from its mouth—and then it hit her, since there really was only one answer to that question.

“So dragons *do* exist!” she said softly but with all the appropriate amount of surprise for the situation. All the adults could do was to look on, terrified.

When Crispo’s fire finished, he was so dizzy that he could barely stand. The world was a smoky, hazy blur for a long time. Then, for an instant, he was able to see enough of the countryside in front of him to know that nobody was still standing to challenge him.

At this point, he let his weariness get the better of him, and he fainted.

--Chapter Twelve: Aftermath

For half an hour, silence reigned over The Windmill Road. None of the people hiding inside the hotel dared to come out onto the street, even though the dragon clearly appeared unconscious to everyone looking out of their windows.

Eventually, Diamo woke where he lay in the mud. He stood up and shook himself off, and then he looked around to try and figure out what had happened. First, he ran over to where the dragon lay on its side. Diamo saw the creature breathing slowly but steadily. Then the elf looked at the place where the battlefield and, for that matter, the road had been. All of it was laid to ashen waste.

At first, Diamo wanted to kick himself. He had not meant it to be this way. If his plan had been successful, there would have been only a few deaths—twenty at most—and the rest would run away at sight of the dragon. Then Diamo would have shouted a warning to the fleeing armies. Basically, that warning would have been along the lines of, “Whoever attacks this town has to deal with Crispo here! So stay away!”

It would have been great if it had worked... But why would plans matter now? Diamo had underestimated the dragon’s power—even the *dragon* had underestimated the dragon’s power—and here was the consequence: thousands dead, the fields destroyed for at least half a kilometer.

Well, it really did not make that much of a difference for the soldiers whether they died by sword or by fire, because in the normal course of battle, everyone fought until the other side was dead or had run away, and in practice, the grim reality remained that very few ever ran away. So most, if not all, of those dead on the burnt land now would have been slaughtered anyway, in many cases much more slowly and painfully than by the dragon’s fire.

Diamo sighed and went to the tavern in search of Isa. The Windmill Tavern was empty, so he went next door to the hotel and walked inside. He saw three very frightened friars and the hotel manager in the lobby.

“Peace,” Diamo said. “Is everyone taking shelter here?”

“Yes,” answered one of the friars. “Is it safe to come out now?”

“Not... just yet. I need to speak with a young woman named Isa. Is she here?”

Isa went with Diamo at once when he came to her door. Her family and Brother Waller stayed behind at the elf’s request.

Once Isa and Diamo were headed down the stairs, the former asked, “How did the battle go? And why are you so dirty?”

“The battle’s over,” said Diamo. “That’s really all I can say about it... And the mud? Well, let’s just say that a little uncleanliness is nothing compared to what most of the soldiers got.”

Diamo explained his plot to bring the dragon from the South to chase away the warriors. Ordinarily, no dragon would ever openly attack a human (much less an army), but the elf was able to convince Crispo that if the war could come to

The Windmill Road, it would just as easily come to the South, West, or North. Dragons liked to live in peace unless they were either attacked or plagued by short food supply—in that case, they would fight to kill and show no mercy. The last winter had been hard on everyone, including the dragons and their backup storage of meats collected over the years and frozen within electric freezers hidden in the mountains. While no dragon was starving yet, there were worries that the reserves would not be sufficiently replenished by next winter. Because of this, Diamo was able to make a deal with Crispo: if the dragon would help to protect The Windmill Road, the elf would let him (and the other dragons) keep any soldiers killed as a stock for the future. The only condition of the deal was that no civilian should be attacked.

(At this point, Diamo and Isa exited the hotel to stand before the sleeping giant blocking most of the road.)

The elf then explained to Isa that he had never expected the dragon to kill this many people; Crispo himself had said that while he had no sympathy for soldiers and people who lived by war, he preferred eating less intelligent beings, like mountain goats or deer, since when they died, it felt more like hunting food and less like killing. Even dragons had consciences, after all.

The sheer extent of the damage amazed and frightened Isa. She had never witnessed death this closely before, and now it was right in front of her in all its morbid glory. The creature that did this, Isa decided, must either be very evil or at the least very violent.

Yet, not all of the dead people on the road had been killed by flame. Many had arrows in them or limbs missing, suggesting that the people who fought here were just as evil and/or violent as the dragon.

Just at that moment, Crispo woke up. He did not stand, but a simple snort got the attention of the elf and human in front of him.

“Don’t worry,” Diamo said to Isa. “He won’t hurt you unless you attack. Right, Crispo?”

The dragon, for all his obvious might, looked very weak right then. His eyes were bloodshot and his voice soft and grainy:

“Water. Please. Water.”

Isa’s heart beat as fast as it ever had. “What’s he saying?” she asked the elf.

“He wants water,” Diamo answered.

“Water...” The dragon really did look pitiful, but Isa thought that no matter how it looked, it was still a very dangerous creature. And when it said it wanted water, would anyone be wise to deny the dragon its wish? Crossing such a monster could prove very dangerous indeed.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Isa said. Then she ran as quickly as she could into the tavern. She grabbed a glass and a pitcher, but then she remembered the dragon’s size and realized a bar glass would not be sufficient. Next to the broom in the kitchen’s cleaning closet were a mop and large pail. Isa grabbed this pail, quickly rinsed it out, then hand-pumped water in to fill it.

When she returned to Diamo and Crispo, ten minutes had passed. Crispo was still moaning for water. Isa struggled to lift the giant pail and not spill its contents. Diamo ran to help her carry it, and together they presented it before the

dragon.

To Crispo, it seemed as if he were being offered a shot glass when he had asked for an ocean. Regardless, he needed all the help he could get, so he reached forward with his right front claw, grabbed the pail, and swallowed the contents. A small amount of steam came from Crispo's nostrils when he was done.

The dragon coughed but set the pail down and said, "More..."

The process repeated three times before Crispo had at least enough to calm whatever pain he was feeling. He stood up and thanked the two for what they had done.

"I'm sorry, I really am," he said. "I've never had a fire that big before. How many people did I—Oh my..."

Crispo looked out on the destruction and added, "Oh this is not good... I wanted a few dead, just enough to keep the rest from coming back."

Diamo gave him an expression that read plainly, "You too, huh?"

"Although... at the same time, I must admit, I'm kind of impressed. All of this, done with natural fire—no machines, no flamethrowers, no cheating—and in one shot!"

Isa was clearly not so impressed. In fact, she was on the verge of tears.

"Aw, hey... Don't cry," said Crispo. "We did this to save your town."

"I don't care," Isa said, wiping her eye with the sleeve of her new dress, the dark green one Garroner had sold her. She sniffled and continued, "Why does there have to be so much killing?"

Crispo did not know if he could truly answer that question, but he tried anyway. His voice still cracked from the soreness in his throat, but fortunately, he did not have to speak very loudly for Isa to hear.

"Well... I guess I understand why you're upset. You've probably never seen death like this before. On Mt. Bertrice, where I live, I see death all the time... have since I was barely out of my egg."

Crispo shifted his position so he could lie down and rest while he faced Isa and told the remainder of his side of the story:

"I think it's just part of being a dragon: someone, usually a knight or the like, is trying to hunt any one of us down. They come into our territory and they try to kill. Why? Is it because they need food? No. A warm hide to use for clothing? No; dragon scales aren't much good for that, and they aren't in fashion anyway among humans. So what is it that brings these people to want to get us? Fame. Honor. The fulfillment of some ancient 'prophecy.'

"Dragons are carnivores, and there's not much we can do about that. However, over the generations, we've learned to kill only for food or in self defense... and often, ironically, both at the same time. The idea is that if we only kill humans in defense, eventually they'll learn not to attack us and leave us be. I've always thought that idea was pretty dumb, frankly. Some humans can't even learn to let their own species be.

"I've also thought, though, that there's some good to every being in Aren Country. I can see that plainly enough in all the humans like yourself who are being attacked, like my kind are, for no good reason whatsoever... and yet cannot defend themselves as dragons do. I hate watching those people suffer, I really

do...”

Diamo, figuring he could not get much dirtier, had sat down on the muddy road. In a way, he envied the dragon for having scales that repelled the muck instead of clothing, which absorbed it. He watched Isa’s reactions, though, and he saw her eyes slowly drying up. Isa wanted to believe the dragon, but at the same time the image of what had been part of the eastern Windmill Road only that morning was still fresh in her mind.

“I’ll tell you what,” said Crispo. “You don’t want to see anything like this happen outside your town again, right?”

“Right,” Isa said.

“Well, I’ll never come back, then. You have my word. Any military attempts to reach your town will be stopped at a point so far east, you won’t ever have to worry about it. And in addition to this, I promise that from this moment on, I will never kill unless I am attacked first. How does that sound?”

At this point, it was all Isa could hope for. “Sounds good,” she said, sniffing again.

“And in return, I only ask for two small favors,” said the dragon.

“What do you want?”

“First, I want you to remember never to attack a dragon. And any dragon slayers who come by this town, do them and me the kindness of guiding them in the wrong direction. It’ll save their lives, and it’ll make mine less stressful. That’s the first favor.

“The second favor is a little more fun...” Crispo could not help himself; he had to ask while he had the chance: “Before I leave, could you please tell me a story?”

“A what?”

“A story. Surely you must have heard some pretty amazing tales from people traveling all across the country. Pick your favorite. Or better yet, tell me something you made up. Perhaps something about dwarves... and a prophecy...”

Isa opened her mouth slightly, confused.

“If such tales exist, that is,” Crispo said.

Isa sniffed and said, “Well, there... there is this one I know...”

Even though she was definitely not in the mood to tell a story, Isa found it easier to do as she got into it. She repeated, to the best of her memory, her story of the dwarf and the dragon. She missed a lot of the earlier details, but she did not forget who won in the final battle. And while Isa was nowhere near the level of cheer she had been in that night when she first told the story at the tavern, when she finished, she at least felt a little better.

Crispo smiled and stood. “That’s about as good a story I’ve ever heard, Miss. Thank you. And now that you’ve held to your end of the bargain, I shall hold to mine. The first step will be cleaning up this whole mess I made... Hm...”

Just then, some figures showed up on the south horizon, and they were headed quickly toward the village. Crispo looked up at them and said under his breath, “Whoa... This is handy...”

Four dragons, each much smaller than Crispo, landed in the battlefield. They were red, brown, orange, and yellow, respectively, and from the way they

talked, Isa was able to deduce that they must have been fairly young—at least for a dragon; however many human years that meant they had, Isa could not say.

“Check it out!” the red one yelled. “Old Crispo did all this?”

Crispo sighed and walked over to them. “It was a necessity you kids wouldn’t understand. Normally, dragons are *never* to attempt anything like this.”

“Oh we know,” said the yellow one. “We saw you take off earlier, though, and we thought you might need help. So we asked our mom, and she told us we could help you as soon as we’d cleaned our caves, and then when we did that, we said, ‘Can we go now, Mom?’ And she said—”

“Enough,” Crispo interrupted. “I get the idea. And you know what’s ironic about this? You finished cleaning, and now you’re going to do some more clean-up work!”

The children immediately greeted this with simultaneous groans.

“Don’t worry, I’ll help. We’ve got to get all these bodies home for winter storage, and we’ve got to clean up as much of the ash as possible. And we’ve got to do it today and tomorrow. We should be done by the next day’s sunset. Understood?”

Four sad but compliant voices said, “Yes, Mr. Crispo, Sir.”

“Alright, then: get to it!”

Crispo started walking away from the village, but Isa called him back. He looked over his right shoulder and waited for her to say something.

Said Isa, “I... I think I should say... Um...” She sighed. “Look, what I want to say is, thank you. This is all very hard for me, and it’ll be hard for everyone here, but... I know you were at least trying to do the right thing... in your own way.”

Crispo smiled. “That’s the first time a human has ever thanked me... You’re welcome, Miss.”

Isa went back into the hotel with Diamo and told everyone there that although the battle was over, they would have to stay inside while “things were cleaned up.” Many of the people in the hotel had watched the exchange between Isa and the dragon. These friars and citizens nodded in understanding and commended Isa just for looking a dragon in the face and not fainting.

When she reached the third floor, Isa hugged her mother and father and Brother Waller (so he would not feel left out, Isa said).

In her mind, Isa only had one thought. It was more than a wish, but less than a prayer, since it could not have been said to target any deity’s attention. In a way, it was a plea to every being in Aren Country, though she kept it to herself and never breathed it out loud:

May this never happen again.

However, in her heart she knew that things could have been much, much worse. So another half-prayer running through her mind added, *But if it does happen again, may we always have a dragon on our side.*

--Chapter Thirteen: Recovery, Someone, and a Coming Winter

Four days after the battle, all was almost as if nothing had happened at

The Windmill Road. The only major change in the town is that the road east of the village remained covered in ash, but that too would blow away with the autumn winds, and greenery would inevitably return the next spring. To all the travelers who asked what had happened to the road, the village residents would answer half-truthfully, “There was a fire.”

Business picked up after the summer trade session. When fall came, and the final traders’ meeting took place, Isa looked for Garroner among them. For one thing, she was curious how he had fared out west. For another, she was wearing the white dress and hoping to show off how well it fit. Garroner was not there, though. In fact, none of the tailors were. This disappointed Isa, but she would not let her spirits down just because of this.

The next day, a dragon slayer came by—oddly enough, the first Isa had seen since the battle. He was tall, dark, and handsome like most of the ones who came before him. He was going through the typical introduction monologue when Isa interrupted him and said, “Save your strength. You won’t beat the dragon. Go back home.”

This was a very confusing statement to Someone, son of Someone, son of Someone, son of Someone, son of Someone (as Isa knew his type well enough, they might as well all have the same name... even if “Someone, son of Someone” was a bit of a tongue-twister).

“But...” said Someone. “But... there’s... a prophecy! It says that only the purest of heart will defeat the dragon, and I’m the purest in the land!”

“Oh?” said Isa. “How’s that?”

“Uh... Well, I’m a virgin...”

“Okay.”

“I’ve got a sword that has a bunch of writing on it...”

“No doubt you do.”

“And... and...”

Isa took a deep breath. “And you want to defeat the dragon so you’ll get all this praise from the folks back home because you’re some type of hero for defeating a fire-breathing creature that didn’t attack you or otherwise give you any legitimate reason to attack it. Maybe there’s a sibling you want to show up. Maybe there’s a maiden you’re thinking of—though the way you’ve been looking at my breasts all night makes me doubt that. Maybe you’re a coward and you’re doing this to get out of going to war and dying that way. Maybe you aren’t aware of the fact that dragons are thousands of times more dangerous than any soldier. *Maybe* you should give up at this point, go home or to some new town, and start fresh. Raise a family. Do something constructive. How does that sound? Better than chasing some stupid ‘prophecy’ on which you probably paid money to get what was, unbeknownst to you, faulty information?”

Someone was silent for a good thirty seconds.

“Want another pint?” asked Isa. “Alcohol ought to soothe that unhealthily humongous ego of yours.”

“Please.”

One hour and two pints later...

“I don’t know what I was thinking,” Someone said between tears. His head rested against the bar, and Isa patted it from time to time. She was fully aware they were making a scene, but because most of the humor was at Someone’s expense, Isa was able to join in the audience’s amusement.

“I mean, I try and I try and I try,” continued the dragon slayer, “but does she understand? No. No she doesn’t. For years I’ve tried to tell her I love her, but she only turns me away and never tells me why or what’s wrong...”

Hmm, Isa thought sarcastically. There’s a woman out there who’s actually not interested in Someone? I wonder what could ever be the problem with him!

“So I tried to get my hands on a sword or something, and we had this one in the family for generations, and I thought it looked neat, and then I thought... I...”

“There, there.” Isa said, resuming the head patting. “Maybe there’s someone else out there for you. I’m sure there are lots of girls who would like such sensitive men.”

“Do *you* like ‘sensitive’ men?”

“Uh... yeah... sort of... Let’s put it this way: you’re not exactly *my* type, but then, different women, different tastes.”

This only made Someone cry harder.

And THIS man wanted to defeat a dragon? Isa thought. The rest of the people in the tavern, staff included, were now laughing at what they saw. Isa decided to end this before it got even further out of hand. She walked around to the other side of the bar and picked Someone up from the table by his collar. Then she slapped him.

She said, “Get a hold of yourself, man! You look like a baby. What happened to ‘I’m Mr. Brave Man out to fight the mighty dragon?’ You can’t even face the women back in your home town! I’ll tell you what you do: first, you pay your tab, since you’ve drunk three full pints and had a massive beef dinner, and I’m not going to let you out of here until you fork over the due amount. Second, you go home at once and ask this girl once and for all if you have a chance with her. If she says yes, well, fine. If she says no, then you’re just going to have to take it like a man. Get it? Or do I have to go to your town myself and explain to this woman that you made a fool of yourself here and cried over her?”

Someone nodded vigorously, paid his tab, and ran out the door. Everyone in the tavern applauded Isa afterward. Isa curtsied but did not take much time gloating. She said, “It’s almost midnight, people. Last rounds now.”

She wondered if every dragon slayer in the future would be that emotional. She doubted it... But then, if anyone in Aren Country could have been said to lack stable mental capacity, it was the type of person who chased the deadliest creature on the planet and boasted a prophesied victory in the process.

Much to Isa’s regret, no more especially memorable moments occurred by the time the first signs of winter came to The Windmill Road. All the farmers’ almanacs predicted a mild winter this year. All the traveling prophets said there would be massive blizzards. Based on these two common views (and from whom they respectively came), Isa determined that she probably would not even need

an overcoat until the season was halfway over. She was right.

--Chapter Fourteen: The Days Gone By

It was a surprise at first, but the more Isa thought about it, the more she realized she should have seen it coming. Till and Essa had just announced they were engaged. Both of them were at such an age (thirty-two and twenty-nine respectively) that they should not have been able to marry, but they had known each other for such a long time, and Isa had heard Essa talk about wishing she could raise a family... So really, there was only one question on Isa's mind:

"Why did you wait so long?"

Till shrugged but kept his right arm around Essa as the two sat in one of the tavern's booths. It was noon, so the rest of the tavern was empty.

"Better late than never," he said.

Isa took this to mean that he finally got around to doing something he had wanted to do for years. This sounded like Till, alright. As for Essa, a rather plain and soft-spoken woman, she probably never had the courage to ask for anything from Till in the way of romance.

The couple must have courted strictly when they were off work, because Isa's family and Jinn had no idea they were interested in each other until the announcement came. In such small towns, it was often very difficult, if not impossible, for people to keep secrets like this for very long. Yet, when asked, Till and Essa explained that they had been seeing each other for almost a full year as a serious couple. Most of the meetings between them would happen either at his or her home farm. While there were times when Till had considered telling the people of The Windmill Road, he kept silent, mostly because Essa would not have wanted all the attention on their relationship.

Essa leaned in further against Till and said, "I suppose there was no point to that in the long run, seeing as how we're bound to get plenty of attention now through whenever the wedding is.

"You know, I was just thinking about that," said Till. "We should try for late spring or early summer; that way the weather will be nice. We can go up north, then west to the beaches..."

"I was hoping we'd marry earlier than that," said Essa. "Why not early spring? This winter's been so mild, I doubt the weather will be an issue."

Isa nodded. Essa rarely spoke, but when she did, it was usually because she had something sensible to say.

"We'll need you both back here by the time things get busy in the summer months," said Isa. "But I do like the idea of going to the beaches. The water will be cold, but the scenery will be nice. Some of the woodlanders say there's a town up there called Quennebur. It's supposed to be a good vacation spot."

"I've heard of it, too," offered Ewen, who had been listening in on the whole conversation from across the room, where she was at that moment wiping some crumbs off a table. "Gorgeous place, they say. A hotel room might be expensive, but I expect prices aren't as bad during the early spring. You two should be just fine."

“Sounds like a plan,” said Till. He hugged Essa closer and kissed her forehead. “Can’t wait.”

Later that night, Isa was able to talk with Essa alone.

“I still can’t figure it out,” Isa said.

“What’s that?” said Essa.

“If you and Till were really interested in each other, why did this take so long? I could have sworn Till was a confirmed bachelor, and you never even gave us any hints! How did you keep this from us?”

Essa smiled as she sat on the tavern stool next to Isa’s. The women had effectively served each other’s dinner only minutes earlier, a common practice during the winter, when few customers arrived.

“Well, I’d known him for years. I just... I guess I never really thought of us being together until he asked me last year to come over to his place for a visit with his folks. We started seeing each other more often, and... as you’d imagine, it went from there. I guess I was nervous about telling anyone. Our families knew, of course, but I mean anyone else.”

“Aw, now come on. What would you possibly have to be nervous about?”

Essa blushed and looked at her feet, which were crossed at the ankles, since her dress was long enough not to make her cross her legs at the thighs.

“I was nervous because I’ve never been in love before.”

This struck Isa somehow. Up until this point in the talk, the sixteen-year-old had been treating the twenty-nine-year-old like a child in need of comfort. However, Ewen’s answer turned things around. Isa had never been in love.

“If you don’t mind my asking,” she said, “what’s that like?”

“Love? Oh...” Essa smiled. A gleam in her eye reflected her inability to find all the right words. “You’ll know it when it happens. For some, it comes in an instant. It sort of snuck up on me... You find yourself thinking about that person at the most random times, no matter what you’re doing. You sometimes end up going out of your way for that person. I once tried learning to bake a cake so I could impress him. It was a terrible cake when I’d finished with it—it was leaning to one side, and it was very dry—but he said he liked it anyway, just because of the thought that went into it. See, when you care about the person so much that everything else in your life becomes secondary to your relationship, that’s when you know you’re in love.”

Isa nodded. “So for you two, it wasn’t ‘love at first sight’ or whatever.”

Essa said, “No... No, I’m sure I don’t even remember the first time I met Till. It would probably be the first day I came to the tavern when my dad said I should get a job to help the family. I know I met all of you then, but that was so many years ago. I was seventeen, and you... You could barely reach over the bar!”

Isa laughed, but Essa went on.

“My first real memory of Till was... Oh, let me think... I remember when he had the problem with bumping into the hanging pots in the kitchen, so he built a stand to hang them on and put it on the other side of the room. But he forgot to tell your mom, and the next day, she had the hardest time finding her cookware. Turned out it was right under her nose, but since it wasn’t in the usual place, she

couldn't deal with the adjustment too well. Till almost got fired when he showed her the new stand and it was right behind her. Your dad and I were in the kitchen, too, and we thought it was the funniest thing; Till really thought his job was at stake, when Ewen was just playing up the event to get back at him."

Isa did not remember this incident; it must have been a long time ago, though, since for as long as she had been old enough to notice such things, she was used to seeing the pots hang from the stand in the far corner of the kitchen.

"I didn't know Till made that stand," Isa said.

"Oh, he made that and quite a few other things around this bar. He could have been a good carpenter if he were quicker about his work. He takes his time, though, always acting like he has all of forever to get any task done—until the last minute, when he does it in an instant." Essa snapped her fingers at that last word. Then she sighed. "I hope he doesn't want to wait too long for us to have kids."

"Something tells me you'll just have to make him act faster. I know you can't change him, but... I'm sure he loves you enough to listen."

Essa's blush deepened. Clearly it was one thing to be nervous about loving someone, another to be nervous about being loved.

The two talked late into the evening, but eventually, Essa had to head home.

Isa locked the tavern door and walked across the street to her house. There were too many clouds to see any dark blue in the sky that night, and the wind made it seem colder than the air actually was. Isa stopped in the middle of the road and looked off into the distance along the eastern road. There, above the horizon, was a break in the overcast, and through this break, Isa could see one star. She had wished upon stars as a child, but it never seemed to do her much good. Now that she was older, she knew *why* it did not help things... After all, a star was only a star. Wishing to it would not change the world. Such magic things just did not happen in reality...

With one exception.

While Isa stood looking at the star, she thought about what Essa had said regarding love. For all Isa could reason, there was nothing at all logical about that emotion. She could not see any way to explain how one fell in love, and the more she considered it, she could not see how *she* would fall in love. Would it just happen one day, or would it creep up on her as it had Essa? And even if it did, would she ever understand it? To Isa, the world existed in order to be explained. Events happened in order for stories to be told and history to be written. Because love did not fall into the general equation, Isa feared the emotion—though she probably would not have admitted that until this night.

So if love did not make sense, and neither did talking to a star... She would take a leap of faith tonight.

"If you can hear me," she said softly, "I have a wish. Show me what love is. I want to know."

The wind picked up to the point where Isa could no longer ignore it; she would have to go inside. Her last thought before going to bed that night was that she should not rush something like love. If it could happen for Essa at twenty-nine, then Isa still had time to work with. And in the days that passed between

this night and her own wedding, she would just have to be patient.

So much of life was a waiting game... *In the end*, she wondered, *what are we waiting for?*

--Chapter Fifteen: A Friend Returning

It started just like any other ordinary winter's day. Isa's woke up late and walked to the tavern to get some breakfast. Harro would have opened the place earlier in the morning. And while no customers were expected, as usual, at least one person had to tend the tavern at all times just in case a traveler came by.

When Isa walked in, her mother and father, along with Dauvit (the hotel manager), surrounded a man at one of the tables. He was wearing chain mail that Isa recognized as the type Incria's soldiers wore. His face she did not recognize: ugly and scarred across the right cheek, but not mean. He spoke with a rasp in his throat, but he sounded merry.

"Oh, Isa! You're here just in time," said Harro. His broad face looked even more jovial than usual, and his hands beckoned her quickly to come hear the man speak. "This man brings news about the war!"

"What news?" asked Isa, skeptical.

"It's over," said the man. "Incria has won. Desdon's generals surrendered yesterday. Now all lands east of the Yearling River are part of the Kingdom of Incria."

"The Yearling River..." Isa repeated as she walked toward the gathering. "That's still very far east of here, I think..."

"Yes. Incria cannot claim any lands west of that due to a pact with the elves. The heartlands remain neutral territory by treaty."

Isa's face showed her confusion. "So... if Incria is still east of here, and you're an Incria soldier, then why are you this far west?" she asked.

"I went to war to help my family back home. But now that I'm done, I can get back to what I was doing before: searching the country for a place to settle down. My father has offered me the inheritance to his watchmaking shop, but my little brother loves that place so much more than I do, so I'm letting the family business pass to him."

Ewen was impressed. "That means you've been traveling all over this land, haven't you?"

"Before the war hit my town, yes. I did quite a bit of traveling indeed. I have even been to this village several times before, and I have eaten in this very tavern. I know because I recognize you." He indicated Isa. "You probably don't remember me... what with all the customers you must have every year—and it's been so long, too."

Isa shook her head. "Sorry, I'm afraid I don't know you off the top of my head."

"That's alright," said the soldier. "To be expected, in fact. My name is Asmir of Peadston."

Said Ewen, "Well, Asmir, you're a nice young man, and I must say your news is very welcome in these parts. We'll cook up a good meal for you; you must

be so tired after being out on the road this long.”

Asmir laughed. “Believe me, ma’am: after the war, a few days on the road means nothing.”

The hotel manager, who had come for his breakfast and stayed out of curiosity, decided it was time to take his leave; several of the rooms would need to be tended and repaired in some places before the next busy seasons arrived.

Harro and Ewen, meanwhile, left to start cooking. This left Isa alone with Asmir.

Asmir seemed nice enough and was more than willing to talk. Isa’s face, however, showed an emotion decidedly less cheerful than his.

“What’s the matter?” asked Asmir.

After a pause, during which Isa looked him over carefully, she said, “I do remember you... Or that is... I remember your name...”

“Really?”

“Yes... but the last time I saw you, you looked very different.” Forgetting her manners for a moment, she asked, “What happened to your face?”

“Oh.” Now Asmir lost his smile, and his voice cracked as he said, “War does this type of thing. It’s unfortunate, but I fared much better than some, I assure you. Suffice it to say, just because you win in the end does not mean every outcome was good along the way.”

Isa tried to look past the scar and hear past the broken voice. It was not easy, but when she paid close enough attention to the details, she realized that this man was in truth the very same man she had seen the previous summer. He was the man whose image lay ingrained on her mind for a long time after he left...

“Tell me,” Isa said. “How exactly did Ineria win the whole war so quickly? This thing had been going on for generations...”

“Well, as I understand it, Desdon put a lot of stock into a scheme to take over the trade routes from the West and heartlands, but every time they sent troops, none came back. There were rumors but no confirmed reports that a dragon was blocking the way.”

Said Isa, “Uh... Well...”

“Yes?”

“Let’s just say I can officially confirm those reports. But I’m pretty sure the dragon never hit a single person who did not attack him first, with the exception of one battle.”

“Really, now! Have you seen the dragon?”

“Talked with him, as a matter of fact. His name’s Crispo. Nice guy, generally good heart, but don’t get on his bad side or wield a big sword in front of him.”

“Makes sense,” said Asmir. “But how do you know for certain that he would only hit people who struck him first?”

“He promised me he wouldn’t kill any innocent people. I’m just taking him at his word and hoping he sticks to it. Unfortunately, I have no proof... I prefer to think positively.”

“Huh. But there’s still one thing I don’t get, if indeed the dragon is the explanation as to why Desdon lost: there must have been so many Desdon soldiers sent to face him... Yet I saw no remains or bodies along the road to get

here. A lot of black ash, yes... But no bodies. What would a dragon need with so many people?"

Isa shrugged. "Got me there," she said.

Meanwhile, in the southern mountains...

"I'm telling you, Crispo. You killed too many! There aren't enough freezer reserves in all of Aren Country to take care of this! We're already full up, and the mild winter isn't helping to relieve us of the supply. What are we going to do with all these humans?"

Crispo considered this as he and the Chief of Agriculture (an orange female dragon) stood in front of a valley full of newly transported human carcasses.

"How about a party," said Crispo. "Call every dragon in the land together for a celebration. It seems the only fitting thing to do, after all; the war is over, and once word spreads to Incria's citizens that they won because of a dragon, we may never have to be attacked again!"

"Hm. Sounds good, actually. Been a while since we could celebrate something, right?"

"My thoughts exactly."

"Wow," the Chief said under her breath, almost not believing the situation. "A day when humans and dragons can actually coexist in peace... Do you really think it'll happen?"

"I know it will! I've always, in the back of my heart, believed that if only we understood each other, we could get along. In my five thousand years of life, I've never given up that hope... that dream. Call me a bleeding heart or what you will, but I think that with a little healing, our two species will begin to realize that it is our similarities that bind us and our differences that, rather than divide us, make us stronger in the end. It is only a matter of time before we come to see each other not as rival species, but as coexisting entities on this planet. We will be united in our goal for peace, and we will take heart in mutual support—shared happiness in the good times and shared grief in the bad. Our bodies may be different, but when all is said and done, we will know that our souls are in fact made of the same spiritual fiber... That is my vision for the future..."

"Wow. Very touching, Crispo."

"Thank you."

"Now, let's get arrangements made so that all these baked humans don't go to waste."

"Good call. I'll go phone Ferdy. With any luck, we'll be reheating these people for feast by nightfall!"

--Chapter Sixteen: Imps

After a large meal of ham and eggs, Asmir took his leave to go to the hotel and rest for the remainder of the day. Isa went home briefly to grab a book she could read while tending the tavern into the evening hours. She picked one called, *Halmut and the Witch's Prophecy* (and had to resist rolling her eyes at the title),

and when she returned to the tavern and lit the torches on the wall for light after sunset—she would not bother with the fireplace unless it got too cold—she sat down at a table, opened the book to where a handkerchief acted the part of bookmark, and picked up where she had last left off:

“The witch cackled and said, ‘If you want your question answered, first you must pass the Test of Fate...’”

And then Isa saw it: from the corner of her eye, she noticed something scurrying across the floor to the far corner of the room. Whatever it was, it hid itself quickly by sliding between the fireplace hearth and the wall—about ten centimeters separated these, and that tiny area within the gap lay entirely untouched by any light in the room.

The tavern had seen its share of mice in the past, and Isa knew it was long since time for her family to get a new cat to alleviate the problem. She continued reading for now and made a mental note to tell her parents about this later. She resumed her reading.

“Then Halmut boldly walked up to the witch and said, ‘Give me the Test of Fate, for I am not afraid!’

“This made the witch frown, for fear, which she usually instilled in her adversaries, had long been her greatest advantage...”

And then it happened again. Something ran swiftly past Isa’s table and went in the direction of the fireplace. She saw the creature more clearly this time, though, and to her amazement, it had only two feet! It took Isa the better part of a minute to realize what it actually was, and by the time it hit her, the thing had escaped to exactly the same place as had the one before it: between the fireplace hearth and the wall.

“Imps,” said Isa, putting her book down after replacing the handkerchief. She could not recall ever seeing an imp up close before, but, as with most things in Aren Country, she had heard many stories about the tiny beings. Some people in the East called them “half-gnomes,” and that perfectly described them perfectly... at least so far as physical elements were concerned. Imp personality, though was a whole different matter. Isa had heard everything from “hyperactive” to “dimwitted” to “evil,” and she had a hard time creating a picture in her mind from these very different adjectives.

Isa stood up and walked toward the fireplace. Her eyes intently watched for any movement or activity coming from the dark space in the corner.

“Hello?” she said. “Is anyone there? Imps?”

A small figure hopped out of the shadow. “You called?” Its voice had an incredibly high pitch, and Isa got the feeling that if it were to yell, it would be exceedingly annoying.

Isa cocked her head to one side and looked the imp over. She decided that “half-gnome” was grossly inaccurate; “eighth-gnome” would have been much more fitting. It could not have been more than four centimeters tall. The clothes, at least, were similar to what a gnome would wear, but it was hard to make out any details on them without a magnifying glass.

“Why are you running around and hiding?” Isa asked.

“Oh, we just get some food. Plenty of crumbs on the floor, all good.”

“We?”

The imp nodded. “My buddy and me, we eat pretty good here. You mom and dad good cooks.”

“Thanks... Do you... live here?”

“We do until Crispo sends us home.”

“Crispo? You mean you work for the dragon?”

“Most imps do work for dragons, yes. Mostly spy, see if any dragon killer coming.”

Isa smiled and put her hands on her hips. “And how do you get back to Crispo to tell him someone’s coming?”

“That’s a secret!” a second voice screamed from the crevice. The imp in hiding, the “buddy,” had an even screechier voice than his friend.

“Yes,” agreed the imp standing in front of Isa. “We cannot tell human all our ways.”

“Imp spies doing undercover dragon work... Well now I’ve heard everything!” Isa said, genuinely amused.

“No,” the imp retorted. “That’s our job.”

“Oh.”

“Crispo say he like you, though. You turn away dragon killers, help him many times. He say thank you.”

“He’s very welcome... I think.” She paused for a second and then asked, “Is it really true that the war is over?”

“Yep!” The imp bounced with enthusiasm. “Big human fight over. North city wins.”

Isa sat down on the hearth and said, “That’s what I heard from Asmir today... Did you hear it from somewhere else?”

“From Crispo himself,” the imp assured her. “By method of secret.”

“So what is it that makes imps work for dragons? I’d think it were a pretty odd match...”

“Nod odd at all. Imps go and help protect dragons from dragon killers, and dragons give good (but very secret) ‘technology’ things to help protect imps from get stepped on or eaten by big animals.”

“Sounds pretty secretive.” Isa almost laughed, but she could tell the imp was trying to be serious, so she would try, too.

“Oh it is,” said the imp, as gravely as a squeal could manage to sound. “But don’t worry. We also keep you safe. We watch over place, make sure no one come and burn down village.”

“Buuuuuuuuurn!” said the voice from the shadows.

“No, no,” the imp called back to his friend. “No burn things now. *Stop* things from burning.” He turned to Isa and said, “My buddy had problems with fire pills years ago. Bad addiction. He still recover.”

“Fire... pills?”

“Natural flame enhancement drug. Made for dragon, not imp. Crispo never use. Say they not natural at all. Make dragon flame big, because some female dragon think size of flame matter. Don’t do much good for imp except make really, really stoned.”

“I understand...” No, she did not. She wanted to sound sympathetic, though.

“They starting campaign to keep kids off fire pills. Most think good idea. It very bad for imp get hooked on fire. Many stories about that. One kid, he good kid, get good scores on espionage training, he try fire pills... Next day, he wake up and all he can say is ‘Buuuuuuuuurn!’ and start set things on fire. He escape from home, run away and get more fire pills, eventually get match, burn himself. Not pretty.

“Some imp, like my buddy, they find out early and save life. Now buddy don’t burn things anymore. He still working on vocabulary.”

“I am on road to recovery!” boasted the shadow.

“Good for you,” said Isa. She hoped her tone did not sound ingenuous. “May I ask what your names are? I’m Isa.”

“We know,” the voices said in unison.

The imp in the light said, “No imp have name except ‘imp.’ Never understood need for name. You want speak with someone, you point at them and say, ‘Hey you, I want speak with you.’ You want talk about someone when they not there, you don’t say specific who is, because it not polite talk about someone behind back.”

“Fair enough.”

“We think so.”

“Do you really live in that little space between the hearth and the wall? And how long have you been there?”

“We find mouse hole back there. No mouse, though. So we live in mouse hole. Little space between outside siding and inside wall. Plenty for imps.”

“Mouse hole... That reminds me,” said Isa. “My family might be getting a cat in the near future to make sure we don’t get mice. Is that okay with you, or would a cat eat you or something?”

“Aw, you get kitty? Kitties so cute. Get it quick! I wanna pet it and ride it!”

“I wanna burn it!”

“Buddy, no!”

“Sorry... Sorry...” If a shadowy space in the corner of a tavern could look remorseful, this one would have then. “It was moment of weakness. I am ashamed.”

Isa heard a horse trotting outside. “I have to see who this is,” she said. “It’s been nice talking with you, though. I hope we get to do this again...” Then she added, to the shadow, “And I wish you a speedy recovery. Bye, now.”

“Bye,” said the imp in the light.

“Burrrrrr—bye... bye...” said the shadow, straining.

“Excellent self control, buddy. You be fine in no time.”

--Chapter Seventeen: The Dark Arts

The man riding into town wore a brown body-length hooded cloak. A mask covered his face above the nose, and black gloves covered his hands. When he saw Isa, he dismounted.

“Good day to you,” he said. His voice was sufficiently bland, the accent unidentifiable. “Might this, by any chance, be the village whose name is the same as the road?”

“It is,” Isa said. She had already labeled him in her mind as “mage, probably of the dark arts,” but beyond that, she could not identify anything peculiar about him. Dark mages went around the country wherever they pleased, usually looking for a challenge. Eventually they would travel to some town where a wealthy person needed a favor. Then in would come the mage first to make that person believe in the power of the dark arts and second to work out a deal for payment. The best mages never worked for free, but the biggest perk of their job seemed to be the thrill of getting away with bigger and bigger scams every time and trying to break personal records. At least, this is how Isa saw them; some would have said mages had real powers. Isa would not believe this, though.

Many people feared these mages, especially the ones who claimed to be practitioners of the dark arts, because of the “evil magic” involved, but Isa feared these mages for a different reason: they were too underhanded for her liking, and a person always had to keep his or her guard up when addressing such a rogue. Isa would be polite and answer the man’s questions as well as she could, but she would not give more information than absolutely necessary.

The man smiled and said, “Ah, well, what do you know. It was actually as easy to find as I was told. I wish all directions were so simple to follow as ‘Go straight on this road, and you’ll hit it eventually.’”

It was a simple jest. Isa smiled.

The man approached her and said, “I do not suppose you know who I am or have heard of me?”

“You look like a mage,” she answered, “but I do not know who you are.”

“Good intuition,” said he.

Isa’s father, having heard the horse as well, walked out of the house. Isa saw him and waved. The mage turned.

“I see I’ve attracted a bit of attention...”

Well yes, thought Isa. But that’s what you meant to do. Now, what is it you want?

The mage turned back to Isa and said, loudly enough that Harro could also hear him, “My name is Sosstrikahs. I am a mage of the Warrik Order, fifth rank. I am here because an employer sent me for the specific purpose of finding out a simple fact. Would you be so kind as to tell me: was there or was there not a battle on this very spot last summer?”

“Yes, there was one battle.”

“One battle,” Sosstrikahs repeated. “And was it part of the war between Incria and Desdon?”

“Of course,” Isa said slowly. *Would it be for any other war?* she wondered.

“One last question, then. Was there a dragon present, and if so, did he determine the winner of the battle?”

“There was a dragon,” said Isa, “but he did not determine the winner, because nobody won the battle.”

“Pardon?”

“The dragon killed every soldier. If there were any left alive from the battle, they must have run away.”

“You don’t say...” He turned to Harro, who by this time had walked up to them and was listening. “Did you both see this?”

“We watched from the hotel window,” Harro said, nodding. “We saw the dragon and the aftermath.”

The mage quickly mounted his horse and said, “Thank you. You have both been very helpful.”

Then he took off toward the East, the same direction he had come from.

“What was that all about?” asked Harro.

“I don’t know,” said Isa. “But we just saw a mage who actually didn’t bother to show us any magic... That’s not normal...”

“It means his employer hired him to get information via whatever means possible,” Harro said. “Usually the only ‘magic’ those mages have is a dagger hidden in a sleeve. If they have to go to certain lengths to find things out, even if it means making certain threats in the process, they’ll do it. Be thankful he got what he needed without it.”

“Who do you think sent him?”

“We’ll find out soon enough. He said he was from the Warrik order; I’ve never heard of that one.” He walked back to the house and said, “Best not to worry too much about it, dear. I’ll tell Till, Roth, and Dauvit. If the mage returns, one of us should be there to see to it he doesn’t play foul.”

--Chapter Eighteen: Peadston Tale

No one else came for the rest of the day, so at dinner, only Asmir and the townspeople showed up. This turned out to be a communal and almost formal gathering that hardly fit the tavern setting at all. At first, though, Asmir and Roth (one of the stable workers) carried most of the conversation. Roth was impressed by Asmir’s steed, so these two men had a time of discussing equine various subjects, from breeding to battle performance.

Isa never had thought much of horses; they stank, were difficult to care for (as opposed to cats, her favorite pet by default), and the one time she tried riding on one as a child, she thought it was very uncomfortable. Still, she knew Roth took horses and their breeding very seriously, so if he said this steed impressed him, then it must really have been quite the horse indeed.

The more Isa heard Asmir talk, the more she liked him. The rasp in his voice and his scar, she could now deduce, had come from the same injury: a wild strike of a sword across his face and neck. The weapon had caught him in the cheek and swung down through part of his throat. This injury must have been fairly recent, too, since some signs of infection on the throat meant he had not fully healed yet. A man in that condition probably should not have been so quickly traveling on the road. But if he still needed time to recover, then why was he in such a hurry to go and see the country? Isa made note of this and later, when they had a moment to themselves, she asked him.

Everyone else had left for the evening to get a good night’s sleep. Isa took

upon herself the duty of cleaning up after dinner, and Asmir, to be polite (and because he had nothing better to do), stayed to help her.

They talked casually at first, but eventually Isa brought up the scar and said he should really let that heal before doing much more traveling.

Asmir followed her into the kitchen and set the plates in the sink to be washed. “Oh, it’s just hard to keep me away from the road for long, that’s all.”

“Seems to me almost as if you’re running from something,” said she, dropping the dinner utensils in the sink as well. The water glasses were still on the table; she would get them later.

Asmir sighed. “Yes, I guess it does seem that way, doesn’t it? I’ve been told that before, actually. I don’t really think of it as running away, though.”

“Oh? Then what do you call it?”

“I don’t know...” He leaned against the counter and said, “My village was one of the last Desdon attacked in the war. We lost a few people in the battle—some very close friends of mine, in fact. None in my family were hurt, fortunately, except for me. This was about three fortnights ago.

“There were no friars in our town after the battle, I suppose because by then all the healers were headed south to deal with the aftermath of Incria’s final assault, the one which would go on to end the war. So in Peadston, we were forced to fend for ourselves, more or less, after we won against the invaders. We had one local apothecary caring for over fifty wounded, myself included. We ran out of medicine, which is why my wound has not healed completely as it should.

“As soon as I was at least able to withstand the pain, I stopped accepting any help from the apothecary; there were too many other people who needed assistance more than I did.

“Damaging as the war was, we still managed to get everything in the town back in working order in only a fortnight. Other than the few people lost, who of course we could never replace, everything was back to normal. Some people from other towns were already talking about how in future years, this would on the whole be considered a very minor battle—if that, even—and to anyone but the residents of Peadston, it would have no major significance at all.

“That’s when I decided to leave again. I don’t really know that I was running away from anything in particular; I simply wanted out. I was sick of the war, and I didn’t like thinking about a town I’d fought to save as being ‘insignificant.’ Imagine if someone said that about your village—that just because it had so few people in it, those people were inherently less important than those living elsewhere... That’s what I couldn’t stand.

“Also, my family was getting along fine without me, and I knew I would have to leave again at some point. Better sooner than later.”

Isa walked past him to go back to the main room so she could grab the glasses and thus clear the rest of the long table.

“I see,” she said, knowing he would follow her. “You should still do something about that infection, though. Maybe Roth has some horse liniment to help the healing. You can ask him or whoever is tending the stable in the morning... Might be Jhaddel.”

“Horse liniment?” he said. “Hm, I never would have thought of that. I’ll

ask, then. Thank you.”

Isa smiled. “You’re welcome.” She picked up four of the glasses (two in each hand, all held by her fingers pinching the rims), and he took care of the rest.

When they had finished clearing the table and stood in the kitchen, he asked, “Does my face really look that bad?”

In her most neutral tone of voice, Isa answered, “It looks like it will get better with time.”

Asmir nodded. “I hope so,” he said. “Because to me it looks terrible.”

Isa kept silent. She would not touch that one.

“Listen,” said he. “I thought about what you said, that I should get more rest before traveling.”

“You do look better after your afternoon nap,” said she. And it was the truth.

“I think I’ll stay here a few days, then. I have more than enough money for the hotel and meals...”

“Sounds like a plan,” said Isa.

The two parted ways when they left the tavern. Isa walked into her house only to find her mom waiting, sitting on the steps. Isa did not know for sure what was coming, but she could guess...

“So what did you think of him, dear?”

...And as it turned out, she guessed correctly.

--Chapter Nineteen: Five Days Later

The first snow of the season had come overnight. It was just a light dusting, and this came already late in the winter.

Isa liked the snow; it was the wind of winter she could not stand, and fortunately, there had not been much of that this year. Snow, when it came without wind, was peaceful. If she watched the sun come up over the whitened plains in the distance, she would see the ground gleam like a diamond. It was one of her favorite things about winter, and Isa would not miss it if at all possible. This morning was no exception.

Isa had a very warm woolen coat and a few pairs of warm pants and gloves for days in freezing temperatures, so she put these on very early and went outside. She walked east along the Windmill Road until she reached the top of a small hill. From here, she could look out on the countryside for a few kilometers into the distance. The sun would rise in about half an hour; a band of indigo had just begun to creep up on the eastern horizon.

She yawned and brushed the snow off a rock to the side of the road. Then she sat on this rock—it was about the right size for her to do so—and waited. There was something surreal in the whole experience, she thought. The air lay stagnant, the land silent to the point where her breath was the only thing she could hear. Snow had stopped falling hours ago, and the clouds had departed, leaving the sky a perfectly dark blue. Isa imagined that she was inside a marble, looking out—that sky could be made of glass, she thought. The stars, which were out in abundance this morning, could be reflections of light off a glossy but

uneven sheen. And she may not have been able to tell, but when she looked up at that clear, cold sky, she may have been looking out on an entire world. She mused, *There were many people from places east, west, north and south... so why not up, too? How would one ever know?*

Maybe someday, if she were lucky, someone from that world beyond would come down on his or her way to somewhere else... and stop by The Windmill Road during the journey and have a drink or two at the tavern...

What types of stories would a person like that tell?

Time went on, and to Isa, the chill in the air only added to the calm of the atmosphere. It made her hold her coat in closer to her body, but it would not, she determined, be enough to make her catch a cold. Once the sun had risen, she would get a hot cup of tea back at the tavern.

As she continued to wait, she thought (as she often had over the course of the last few days) about Asmir. He had taken her advice and spoke with Roth about using a horse liniment to help his face heal. He already looked much better for it, too. The only part of him Isa was convinced would never heal fully was his voice—though for all she knew, maybe that too would only be a matter of time.

Asmir and the townspeople spent most of the time these days during his visit by trading stories. Asmir learned about the trade routes that went through The Windmill Road, the seasonal patterns of visitors, and some of the ways of simple country life. Meanwhile, he described his home town in detail, then described his family and friends... by the time he had finished, practically his whole life story, or the main events in it, at least, were all out in the open. Most interesting to the villagers were the stories of his trips to Incria, the great city of the Aren Country Northeast. It was hard for Isa to imagine that city, even when he painted such a vivid picture of it, she thought; for one thing, she could scarcely envision a wall so large it could surround an area over a hundred times larger than her town. And within that wall, which stretched upward above every building in the city except the enormous clock at its center, more than a thousand people lived. Now that Incria stood victorious and its highest general (a man by the name of Kelshin) had declared himself king, there were plans in the making for a palace to be built. This would necessitate whole sections of the wall to be torn down and rebuilt later, in a larger perimeter, around the new edifice.

The part that confused Isa the most was how Asmir could talk about such things as if they were commonplace, trivial, and even to be taken for granted. To her it sounded like he said nonchalantly, “Yeah, it’s a big wall... but all you have to do is tear down part of it and build it up again. It’s not big deal.”

Well, maybe it was not a big deal to people who lived in that city. Then again, maybe some of the things Isa took for granted, such as the vast countryside now before her, would seem unbelievable to a city resident. All this land, she mused, would make for a very large yard in the city, indeed.

Simple country life...

Isa repeated the concept to herself and knew it was true. For people living on farms, there were very real hardships to overcome every year, but for a tavern waitress? Her life never met with any trials or tribulations that amounted to more

than being out of ingredients for the meal of the day. Aside from the one day when she saw war firsthand, she was so far away from what anyone might consider to be the real problems of the world. And this was, for the most part, fine with her. So what if the rest of the world, more or less, went on without her and did not care? She knew she was not in any position to change the world or save it from itself. The ones who could do that (or, more correctly, the humans among them) were born far east of The Windmill Road. They lived in privilege and surrounded themselves with power. Now with Desdon defeated once and for all, only one man apparently wielded that type of power in all the East. Now that he had it, Isa wondered, how would he use it? She might never know the answer to that... though she had a hunch that she would find out sooner or later thanks to travelers' stories...

A breeze blew across Isa's face and brought her out of her thoughts and back to reality for the moment. The sun was about to come up. Lighter and lighter blues lined the sky in front of her, and the first sign of yellow appeared then over the next hill. Isa knew enough about the sun not to look at it directly, but when it came, its brilliance astounded her nonetheless. One second, the land was dark, and the next, it glowed, each snowflake on the ground reflecting the cold but piercing light of the morning. The temperature did not change, but Isa felt somewhat warmed anyway—until the wind picked up in an instant and reminded her of her earlier thought: getting a hot cup of tea at the tavern. She would get to that in a minute, she now decided; most of the hill in front of her still lay in shadow, and she wanted to see things get just a little lighter...

About half an hour later, she found herself shivering. At that point, she stood up and turned to go back into the village. When she was halfway there, she looked back and saw the whitened road go over the hill, where a silhouette of a rock jutted from the ground to the side of the path. That rock, where she sat to watch the winter sunrise, was the very farthest she had ever wandered from her home.

--Chapter Twenty: When Logic Collapses

When Isa opened the tavern door, she saw the imps (who, despite their lack of a naming system, she now called One and Two) gathering what they could for breakfast on the floor. Isa wondered how they were finding enough, given that she had just swept that floor last night. On closer inspection, she saw that some materials had slipped between cracks in the wood planks. Then she wondered exactly how sanitary it was for these imps to eat off the floor... But apparently they were not concerned with such things, since they both looked quite satisfied with the morning's haul. And if it did not worry them, she thought, then it should not worry her.

She greeted them with a friendly wave, and they shouted back, "Hello!" She smiled and walked to the kitchen to get a kettle warmed up. When she lifted the kettle from its mount on the rack in the far corner of the kitchen, she remembered what Essa had said about its maker. Isa could almost picture a

younger Till grabbing at a saw and some leftover firewood... cutting out the pieces and only putting it together once it was all prefabricated and waiting for some nails to hold various parts in place. That was how Till would do it, she thought: save the actual building for the last minute, but do a decent job in the end... just as he had saved marriage until he was very old for a new groom, but would probably prove to be a decent husband in the end.

Isa filled the kettle and set it over the wood stove. Then she grabbed some tea leaves from the pantry, put them in a filter, and placed this all in a large ceramic cup designed for holding warm liquids. Isa never had thought that a teacup was enough for her thirst; she used these larger cups for everything from tea to coffee and sometimes even soup. Within a few minutes, the water was warm enough for tea, so she took it off the stove, filled her cup, and went back out into the dining room. She picked a stool at random and set her drink on the bar. She rested her head on her right palm, elbow on the wood, her table manners temporarily cast aside. With her left hand, she took the chain attached to the tea filter and used it to stir the steaming liquid.

A small voice from the floor asked, "What you thinking about, hm?"

Isa removed her elbow and looked down. The imps were both eyeing her with intense curiosity. She supposed she must have looked deep in thought to them, though in truth, she was only tired.

"You thinking about *him*?" One asked.

Isa sighed and said, "No, but I actually was earlier. Why do you ask?"

"You love him?" said Two, who really was not all that bad a guy once he stopped hiding in the corner and telling things around the room to catch fire ("commanding" them, in one instance, as if he had a special power to burn any material at which he would point; fortunately, no real fires had yet resulted).

"I don't know," said Isa. And she did not. "I have only known him for five days."

"But what you think of him, then?" asked One. "He seems think you are very nice."

"I think he's very nice, too. Clearly my mom wants to see something more happen so we can have a relationship, but then, Mom's been trying to marry me off since I was twelve, so... I do not know that there is anything in that."

"What are you drinking?" asked Two. His eyes may have been drawn to the cup by the steam (read: looks like smoke) coming from its top. Or he had a very short attention span. Either way...

"Oh, this?" said Isa, thrown off at first by the rapid change of topic, "This is tea. It's made with water and some herbs in the area... We preserve the herbs over winter so that we can have something—" She stopped herself there. She would have said, "something hot to drink," but she knew by now that any mention of the word "hot" might be a risk she was not willing to take. So instead, she said, "...something tasty to drink when it gets cold outside."

"Oh." This did not interest the imp very much—most likely a good thing, Isa reasoned—so the two little friends said their parting words and went to their hideout behind the fireplace

Long after they had gone, and long after she had finished drinking her tea,

Isa thought about Asmir. Every way she reasoned it, she could not see herself in love with him. Several excuses ran through her mind:

“I haven’t known him long enough.”

“He’s from the city area and I’ve never left this village; we’d be too different.”

“I still don’t know his age, but I’m sure he’s at least twenty, and I’m only sixteen.”

“No matter what the imps say, I’m sure he probably doesn’t like me. I mean, he’s a traveler who can hardly stay in one place. Why would he want someone who would keep him in one spot? After all, I have to stay here to take over the family business. It’s not like I could just leave anytime I wanted to, like he can. How could I ever ask him to give up that kind of freedom for me?”

Still the thought persisted. Why? Why, after all this logic, would Asmir not leave her mind? *Because love doesn’t follow logic*, she reminded herself. Was there anything else in the world that behaved that way? On the night when she made her wish to a star, she had thought there was nothing else that followed the same pattern, but now that she thought about it, quite a few things in the world did not always fit in with the normal order of events: war, hate, kindness, and care, to name just a few.

Then, when the logical side of her brain had quit from exhaustion, a thought came from a part of her mind that, up until this point, had remained untapped. This said, *It comes down to this: no matter how many times you think about it, the way you look at Asmir will never make sense. But then, maybe that’s because it’s not supposed to. Ever think of that? Don’t try to justify it; instead, ask yourself a few questions. First: do you want love or not? Second: if yes, is this man from the East at least worth a try? And third, is there anything really stopping you?*

These may not be the easiest questions to answer—not because you cannot answer them, but because you might not want to admit how you really feel here. If nothing else, then, remember that you at least owe it to both him and yourself to be honest about this. Do you get all of this so far?

The logical part of her brain nodded halfheartedly; it could not argue in its current state. Maybe when the caffeine from the tea would kick in...

Good, said the unknown part of her brain. *Now, here’s what I want you to do. When he comes in here for some breakfast—*

The thought ended there, because at that moment, he came in. “Hi,” said Isa, surprised. “You’re up early.”

Asmir shrugged. “It’s not so early, really. The sun comes up late in the winter.”

He took a seat next to her. She looked at her empty cup and said, “It looks like I need a refill. Want me to get you some, too?”

He held up a hand and said, “Please, just a moment, if I may.”

She was halfway standing, but she sat back down again.

“I’ve enjoyed it here these last few days, and I wanted to say thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” said Isa. She could not figure out what was wrong with Asmir; he looked healthy enough, but something in his manner seemed either

nervous or at least uncomfortable.

“More than that,” he continued. “I wanted to tell you I like you, and I like being with you.” An awkward silence passed, and he said, “I spoke with Roth yesterday, and he said the stables could use an extra hand. So I’m making arrangements in the hopes of being able to live and work here.”

“But I thought you set out on the road for adventure or something,” said she. “You wanted to tour the whole country...”

“I’ve been to every place there is to be seen, except the mountains,” he said. “I set out this time so I could find a place to stay and call home. And I’ve found that place now. I like the people here, the setting, everything... It just feels like home to me, even though I’ve only been her for this short a time. There’s only one thing I’d have to know if I stay here, and that is if you and I could be together. Maybe nothing serious; take it one step at a time, and all that.”

The words escaped Isa’s lips before she could stop them: “Are you saying you love me?”

“Uh, well, I wouldn’t go that far just yet—we’ve only known each other for what, five days? And I know there’s an age difference between us; I’m nineteen, and you’re what, fifteen?”

“Sixteen.” Isa smiled. So he had been thinking the same exact excuses as she... *I guess this is something human, then, and not only me going crazy*, said her brain’s logical side. *This is somewhat of a comfort to know...*

Shut up, said the other part of her brain. *I’m calling the shots here. Initiate hormone sequence in ten, nine, eight, seven...*

“Ah,” said Asmir. “The point is, we’ll see what happens. I think you’re an interesting girl, and—”

Whatever words were going to be said, Isa stopped them with a kiss to his lips.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, a voice said, *Mission report: stage one successful. Keep estrogen flow at two-thirds power. Introducing tongue sequence in twenty, start new countdown...*

Watching his security camera screens from Mt. Bertrice, Crispo grabbed a tissue and did a bit of directing of his own as he said into his headset microphone, “Good, now zoom in on the kiss. Start romantic music on the sound playback... now. Aw yeah.” He shed a tear. “That’s beautiful.” He sniffed. Then he blew his nose... and, in the process, instantly incinerated the tissue. “Oops,” he said.

At that moment, three of his helper imps walked in.

“Something wrong, Master?” said one of the tiny creatures. “We hear you cry.”

“No...” Sniff. “Nothing’s wrong. I’m just... It’s so touching, that’s all.”

“If it so great,” said another imp, “Why not you get someone? Dragoness?”

Crispo considered this for a second. “We’ll see if any show up for the solstice party come summer. You’re right, but with these types of things, it’s always good to wait until the mating season. You try any other time of the year, and if you get rejected, those female dragons will do more than merely slap you for proposing a date...”

The imps nodded in unison. Dragon wrath was something they all understood very well.

The first imp said, "Gargum's here, also. Wants to go hunt. Should we tell him you coming, or should we tell him you too busy watching soap opera thing?"

Crispo picked up his remote in a flash and turned the camera off. Immediately his eyes dried off. "No no, don't tell him anything. I'll be right there." When a dragon was going to go anywhere with his hunting buddies, it was best things like "soap opera" remained out of all conversations.

Gargum was indeed outside Crispo's cave. Gargum, a younger gray dragon who used a grenade launcher as his weapon of choice, nodded to Crispo and said, "Going unarmed again, man?"

Crispo snorted smoke and said, "Never have and never will."

--Chapter Twenty-one: Battle and Attempts at Deception

In Aren country, there was no exact calendar. Days and fortnights and seasons and years passed by in succession, and nobody really questioned specific dates. The concept of a "birthday" was therefore rather abstract. Usually, there was one celebration in every town, and this happened four times a year. On these occasions, the people would recognize those who had been born in each season. For example, in Desdon on the spring equinox, an entire parade was held for the quarter of the citizens who were born in the spring.

In The Windmill Road, the celebrations were much simpler, and they only happened twice a year, since as fortune would have it, all of the village's residents were born in either spring or autumn. Isa was among the spring birthdays. So regardless of her actual birthday, she officially "turned seventeen years old" on the equinox. The townspeople had a toast in honor of each of the birthdays this season, and once they drank their fill, that was more or less the end of the celebration. Nobody bothered with birthday presents, since gifts suggested formality of some sort, and this was definitely an informal event.

By this time, Asmir's new house, placed on the far side of the hotel, was almost completely built. He and Dauvit had to travel north a few kilometers to find the nearest carpenter (Dauvit knew him from many years back), and work had been steady throughout the late winter.

As had happened last year, the tavern's first guest of the new season was a dragon slayer. This, however, was not the ordinary go-it-alone type; this man came with two companions: a prophet and the mage Isa and her father had seen during the winter. When they arrived, Isa was in the kitchen and Jinn was at the bar. Jinn ran back into the kitchen and told Isa that three men had arrived, and they were looking specifically for a waitress whose description fit Isa very well. Isa took the pot she was working with off the stove and came out into the main room immediately. She nodded to the mage, who was the only one of the three she could remember seeing before. The mage smiled back. Isa did not know whether or not that was a good sign.

The dragon slayer introduced himself with all the normal gusto for his

type: “I am Chaas, brother of Harkor, son of Tunisthius, son of Pelew, son of Varde. Last year, my brother set out after a dragon while the war still raged. Now that he has not returned, and a dragon has been blamed for eliminating so many of the Desdon army, I seek revenge. I wish to avenge my brother’s death as well as the deaths of all those thousands who perished by the dragon’s flame. And I will not be denied!”

While Chaas ranted, Jinn slipped out a back door in the kitchen and ran to tell the other townspeople what was happening.

“Do you recall my brother?” asked Chaas. “He was a noble young man—never could defeat me at anything, but his heart was in the right place. He may have stopped by here on his way to the mountains last year.”

“I see many people headed south in search of dragons,” she said cautiously. “It’s fairly common, even though none ever come back from a journey.”

“Really?” said Chaas. “That is most intriguing... Also, according to Sosstrikahs here, you’ve seen a dragon up close. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” said Isa. “I saw a dragon. There was a battle here last summer, and that was when he came.”

“And did he, as reports indicate, eliminate the Desdon army?”

“Actually, he eliminated both armies... I thought it was very even-handed of him.”

Chaas’s face barely kept itself from scowling. He said, “You say this almost as if you admire such a destructive creature.”

Isa nodded and said, “He stopped the war from spreading any farther west. In fact, word around here is that he put a stop to the entire war...”

“By murdering my fellow Desdon fighters—soldiers and lieutenants under my command! Well, I may not be able to reverse the outcome of the war now, but at least I will have my revenge!”

“You very well might,” said Isa. “May I ask, then: why did you need to hear from me on this matter?”

“Because I seek your help in locating this elusive dragon. I want to get to him, not scour the countryside until he finds me. If there is one thing that I learned while rising in the ranks to be a major in only one year (a record rate of personal achievement, I might add), it is that the element of surprise is crucial when engaging a foe. My one mistake in the war was to think that the forces of Incria were my only enemy. Clearly a greater power now exists, and if it is not stopped, it may soon wreak havoc on thousands of innocent civilians. When the day has come that the Great Dragon of recorded legend flies out of the mountains to attack humans, we must fight back.

“You must also understand, however, that this means even more to me than merely saving human lives; for me, this is personal. My army lost the war because of this dragon. I have been discredited as a leader and as a major for this simple fact. I must restore my honor.”

Naturally, thought Isa. *To you, honor is always more important than human life... That’s why you’re a warrior and a dragon slayer.*

“All I know,” said she, “is that he is somewhere in the southern mountains with all the other dragons.”

“Other dragons?” Chaas’s eyes lit up. “You mean there are *more* of them?”

“Of course,” she answered. “Though I don’t know why you would want to attack the one who came here. Like I said, he was just as cruel to both armies. Yet he left the village intact and did not harm a single innocent civilian. He even promised me personally that he would not kill unless he were attacked first.” Isa knew she was making the dragon slayer angry. She did not care. “I think that’s pretty fair, don’t you?”

“Are you saying you trust a *dragon* not to attack? Even when he has done so much killing already?”

Isa could see where Chaas’s argument came from, but she did not agree with it. In all, the very end of the war was more than enough to justify the deaths, she now thought. Sure she would have liked it if things ended more peacefully, but now that the war was over, future generations in the East would not have to fight this way. No one would ever know for sure how many lives the dragon *saved* simply by ending the discord.

There was no telling Chaas this type of logic, though.

“Well, if you want to kill him,” she said, “I cannot blame you for wanting to avenge your brother’s death. However, I’m afraid I cannot give you more advice than to say that he is south of here, in the mountains, and that no human who has gone there has ever come back.”

Chaas turned to his prophet. “What say you to this lady’s claim?”

The prophet eyed her, at first curiously, and then accusingly. “She is not telling the whole truth,” he said. “She knows of a way to contact the dragon and bring him here if need be. Ask her to bring this dragon here for a challenge. If she does not wish to comply, then we must take more drastic measures to get information out of her.

How does he know I have a way to contact Crispo? she thought. *Granted, technically I would not be the one to contact him; it would have to be the imps, by way of “secret.” Either way... I wonder what he means by “drastic measures.”*

Sosstrikahs stood up just then and held his hands palms-up so as to hold a bowl or something within them. A small blue orb of light formed in the mage’s hands.

“You will contact this dragon at once, and you will tell him to come here. If you do not, Sosstrikahs will have to work some of his magic on you. And I can tell you, I’ve seen him in action before, and what he does is not very pretty...”

Just then, Harro, Roth, Asmir, and Jinn all entered the tavern. Chaas turned his head to look at them briefly, and then he motioned his hand to Sosstrikahs to proceed with whatever he was doing.

Sosstrikahs obeyed. Light flowed out of the orb until it surrounded Isa.

“What are you doing?” Harro demanded.

“Greetings,” said Chaas. “Frighten yourselves not, citizens. We are here on personal business, and so long as this local wench of yours cooperates, there will be nothing to worry about.”

Asmir whispered something to Harro and ran out of the tavern.

“Where is he going?” Chaas asked.

“He is getting reinforcements,” said the prophet.

Reinforcements? thought Isa. *What reinforcements? Without the other stable hands here, these are the only men in the town...* She would let the prophet think that if he wanted to, though. Right now, anyway, she was much more concerned with the blue glow around her body. She could not tell what it was, but so far as she could tell, it did no harm. She could still move, and whatever she did, it would still surround her. It caused no pain. Beyond the translucent field, she could see Sosstrikahs visibly amused at her attempts to examine the field. She could almost see the taunt in his expression, which dared her to figure out what the trick was here. She knew it had to be a magic trick, after all; real magic just did not exist.

“Let him go, then,” said Chaas. “No one may come near this girl anyway until we are done with her. If anyone moves, we will give her a bit of the old army interrogation treatment.”

A band of white that looked like lightning flashed across the surface of the blue light. Isa felt a tiny shock throughout her, but it was not nearly enough to hurt. It must have surprised her sufficiently that the others in the tavern may have believe she flinched in pain. *Again, let them,* she thought. *But there is no way this is real.*

She looked straight into the bright blue orb in Sosstrikahs’s hands, and then she saw it: in the middle of the light, two tiny flapping wings on a miniature body... It was all she could do not to yell the word “fairy” at the top of her lungs. So that was the trick: take a fairy’s light and use extra charge to create the effects of “black magic.” On the one hand, it was so cheap she wanted to slap Sosstrikahs simply for trying it. On the other hand, she wondered exactly how much charge that fairy had in it. If it had enough to hurt her, would it? Or would Sosstrikahs sooner resort to a dagger up the sleeve, as her father had suggested? There was no way to tell.

“Now summon the dragon!” Chaas said. “Whatever method you use... Use it now!”

By this time, Chaas had almost completely lost his sanity. Isa could imagine he was already tasting victory in his mind. Clearly he so anticipated the battle that he was forgetting the consequences of any of his actions.

“Alright,” said Isa calmly. She smiled, which confused both Chaas and the prophet considerably; Sosstrikahs still appeared smug. “I’ll get him. But we do not want battle in this town, so you will have to fight east of here.”

“...On the same battlegrounds where the dragon killed the armies earlier...” Chaas considered this for a minute. “Brilliant! That is the perfect spot to get my revenge. Do it! Now!”

Asmir reentered the room. This time, he had his battle sword with him.

“Stop this at once!” he yelled. “You. The scum from Desdon. How dare you hold a lady prisoner when a man challenges you?”

“Hmph. When I hear a man challenge me, then I’ll see the point of your—oh.” Chaas turned around again and saw Asmir’s sword. “Very well then,” said the Desdon major. “We shall take this outside.”

Everyone except Sosstrikahs and Isa left the tavern. Harro, Dauvit, and

Roth stepped to the far side of the road, while Chaas's prophet stayed by the tavern. In the middle, Asmir raised his sword and beckoned Chaas to strike. Within seconds, their weapons clashed.

This fight went on for a long time, primarily because both combatants had particularly good defensive skills and endurance. Chaas possessed chain mail, which Asmir did not wear. This worked somewhat in the former's favor, because he could attack for the most part with more impunity than could Asmir. For his part, though, Asmir could move more quickly on his feet.

Three minutes in, their swords locked. Then Chaas started with the taunts. "So how did you get that pretty wound? Forget to guard your face?"

"I was on the front lines," Asmir answered, clenching his teeth. "And I fought in the middle of a fray. Bad things happen in frays."

Asmir pushed Chaas's sword off and struck the chain mail at Chaas's midsection. Chaas fell back but got up again immediately.

"You win the first round," said Chaas. "But if I do that same thing to you, you'll die."

"Guess I'll just have to make sure that doesn't happen."

This time, Asmir attacked first. Chaas moved to one side, but not quickly. Asmir adjusted in time, and blade met blade again. It immediately became apparent that Chaas had not been using all of his skill up to this point. For the next two minutes—which, in the heat of the fight, seemed like hours—Asmir only defended, and somewhat desperately, at that. The two were evenly matched for physical strength and stature, and neither showed any signs of wearing down, though their blows became increasingly wild.

Chaas got his first hit in on Asmir's left arm. It was only a scratch, but it stung badly. Chaas backed off for a moment and sized Asmir up before attacking again: the man seemed to have a weakness in going across the face to the body. If this could only be exploited once for a more solid blow...

Chaas charged. Asmir, sweat pouring down his face, set himself up to make a final stand. Chaas tried to make two strikes when he reached Asmir: one fake blow to the face, and one fatal blow to the other side of his body. Asmir, however, only swung his sword once: a last attempt, a manic, sweeping blow aimed in the general direction of Chaas's face...

Inside the tavern, Isa tried to drown out the sounds of the fight. She sat on the bar and took long but silent breaths. She tried also not to show any fear in her expression. Sosstrikahs had given up on the fairy for now and was letting the creature rest to regain its strength in one of the inner pockets of the mage's long overcoat. The mage, meanwhile, kept his smirk and leaned an elbow against the table where he now sat.

"Neat trick," said Isa. "Does the fairy work for you, or do you hold it prisoner?"

"He works for me."

"Ah." She sighed. "And yet you call it magic?"

"Oh, anything can be magic if you look at it a certain way. I take it you're not one to believe in the power of this art?"

“I’m not.”

“That’s a shame, it really is... You know, you would make such a fine mage... Maybe a healing type.”

“Sorry, I could never see myself being that much of a fraud.”

“Ouch. Angry, are we? It’s not nearly as fake as you think it is, I assure you.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, I surround you in a blue glow, and you say it’s not magic; it’s just a ‘trick.’ And you’re right, to a point. But you forget that I really did have you surrounded in a very real electric glow. Does it matter whether magic or a fairy is to blame?”

He stood up and held his right arm out to his side so as to point his hand in the direction of the fireplace. Then he opened his hand, and a flame shot out of it and lighted the wood in the fireplace.

“See that?” he said. “Care to guess how I did it?”

Isa stared at the flames for a few seconds and tried to convince herself that her eyes were playing tricks—but they were not. “Do fairies contain fire?” she asked. “Or do you have a dragon up your sleeve?”

Sosstrikahs laughed. “You’re close,” he said. Then he reached with his left hand into his overcoat and pulled out a small metal tank with what looked to be a hose made out of rubber—a rare material, but not unheard of. “This is an invention I obtained while in the South. The dragons have quite the civilization there, you know. Yes, I’ve been down the ‘Road of No Return,’ and lo and behold, I’ve come back alive and unharmed. No self-righteous dragon would ever be caught hurting an unarmed man, and so far as I would let them know, I always went into the South unarmed. But I digress. The dragons have a substance they call propane, and when it is shot out of a nozzle like this one here and then exposed to a flame, it can shoot that flame anywhere you aim it, over a certain range.

“So you see, it really is not magic; it’s only technology. But look at the fire over there. Is that not a very real fire? And if I were to use that against an enemy, would it not really set that person or beast on fire? Isn’t there a grim reality that this ‘magic’ does indeed work... albeit not by magic at all?”

“I see your point,” said Isa.

“The reason we mages tend to be so secretive about our methods is so to protect our line of work. Could you imagine if everyone in the East knew how to perform these acts? Think of what the war would have been like!

“Besides,” he said, “I currently get paid an annual salary of thirty alligons for my work, plus a full alligon for every successful kill that I’m assigned to do. And it doesn’t matter *how* I do them... although, I have to admit, flashier jobs tend to build my employer’s confidence in me, so I usually have fun with it and put on a show whenever he’s there to watch.”

He grinned as a predator would after having eaten a defenseless baby animal. *So that’s how you see me*, Isa thought. *I’m prey. I’m just another alligon waiting to happen... I always wondered what the price of life was to people like you. Now I know.*

“Why are you telling me all this?” she asked. “If you’re so secretive about it, why share your secrets?”

“Good question,” said Sosstrikahs, his smile constant and by now more than just a little annoying to Isa. “Like I said, you’d make a good mage. And as I’ve always been a betting man, I’d bet anything that you get sick of staying in this tavern all the time. Sure you have your family here, but haven’t you deep down always wondered what the rest of the world was like?”

Isa wanted to respond to this, but she was too angry to find the right words.

“From the way that one man is fighting to defend you, I would guess he’s your significant other... for now. But what happens when he ends up outmatched by one of the best swordsmen in the entire Aren Country? What happens when he dies in what could only be a matter of minutes now? Then your entire life will change! Will you still have every reason to stay here, or will you want to see the rest of the country and all that life as a mage has to offer?”

As civilly as she could manage it, she asked, “Would I have a choice?”

Sosstrikahs looked at his fire and said, “Not really. If Chaas is still in a mood to see this dragon, not much of anything will stop him from commanding me to interrogate and torture you, even to the point of death. And I’ll be the richer for it, too. But it does not have to be that way... I can let you live if you agree to come with us as a mage in training.”

“And what happens if Chaas gets killed right now?”

“Then I guess I’d have to search for a new employer, now, wouldn’t I? Ah, but Chaas will not lose. It is true that one prophet once told him he would be an utter failure, but this curse broke when he faced the Incria army at the Fethel Plains and singlehandedly changed the tide of the battle to win. Now the prophets have agreed with each other that a man who has this type over power to overcome fate surely can never be defeated. That is now the prophecy.”

Isa smiled. If she had any doubt Asmir would win the fight before now, she laid it to one side and said, “You don’t seriously believe in prophecies, do you? You’re smart enough to know that magic is not real... So why would fate be so much better?”

“How else do you explain the world?” he asked as he sat back down. “There has to be a higher power manipulating everything.”

“Higher power, maybe. But fate? Fate’s just an excuse for not paying attention to the real cause of things.”

Sosstrikahs breathed hard and said, “Ten prophets all agreed that Chaas cannot be defeated in battle. How can that many all be wrong?”

At that moment, Harro ran into the tavern and said, “Isa! Asmir won! Chaas is dead! Quick! Get some water and bandages and—hey, what happened to the blue thing around you?”

Isa gave Sosstrikahs a taste of his own smirk and said, “Nevermind that, Dad. I’ll get the water and some cloth for bandages. Meanwhile, I think our mage friend was just about to leave for another part of the world, where he will seek adventure while contemplating thoroughly the meaning of life and what determines the way things are. He was also planning, I think, to thank me for

agreeing to keep his secrets safe so long as he gets out of here now and never comes back.”

Sosstrikahs was not one to be threatened without having a chance to give a threat of his own. “I was,” he said as he stood again. “But I also wanted to thank our lovely waitress here for keeping in mind what trouble can—ahem—ignite from breaking one’s promises.”

He looked back at the fireplace once, then stormed past Harro and left the building.

Once they had placed Chaas’s body on his horse and tied it there so the horse could be led out of town, Sosstrikahs and the prophet peacefully left on their own horses and went east. The prophet held the reins for Chaas’s horse as they walked slowly along the Windmill Road.

When they were a long ways off, out of both sight and hearing range of the village, Sosstrikahs broke the silence and said, “As soon as we find a place to bury this man or a river to dump him in, we part ways and never speak of this again.”

“Indeed,” said the prophet. “I foresee that this will be a new beginning for us, and—”

Sosstrikahs surrounded the prophet in a blue field and gave him a few electric shocks just for fun. “Don’t talk to me about prophecies right now,” he said.

The prophet sighed. “Look, I don’t question your line of work, mage. Don’t you question mine.”

“Or what?” said Sosstrikahs. “If I question your line of work, the worst you can do is get angry and tell me I’ll meet some horrible end you just made up. But if you question *my* line of work, I’ll kill you.”

A brief pause passed between them.

“So do yourself a huge favor and shut up.”

“Fair enough,” said the prophet.

--Chapter Twenty-two: Gimble’s Adventure, Part One

Five years and three seasons later in the northern woodlands...

Gimble the gnome yawned and sat up in his moss bed. From the look of the sun above him, he was already running late for his last day of sixth grade. He would have to act quickly if he did not want his mother to yell at him...

“Gimble!”

Too late.

“Have you taken your shower yet? You’re going to miss the boat unless you hurry!”

Gimble went through his normal steps when he did not have much time in the morning: he threw on his gray tunic and trousers from yesterday, grabbed his shoes and tied them haphazardly, and then he put his lucky green hat on to cover his hair without having to comb or shake off the dew on the leaves above him to give himself what was the gnome definition of the word “shower.” Lastly, he

grabbed some pencils and put them in his trouser pocket.

“Coming, Mom,” he yelled to a branch below. He started to climb down the tree trunk, and he felt his back spasm a little as he did so. This could almost definitely be attributed to a lack of sleep lately, but Gimble also thought it had something to do with his bed. He would have to remember to collect more moss for it and bring that up to his sleeping branch, since clearly he had outgrown what little moss made up his bed at that time.

At the lowest branch on the maple tree, Gimble’s mother had prepared his breakfast: a bowl of nuts, the same thing he had nearly every morning. He looked through the tree’s leaves and saw in the distance that his school boat was about to arrive on the riverbank. There would be no time for a leisurely breakfast this morning. Mom knew it, too. She handed him the bowl so that he could grab a few of the nuts and eat them on the way to school. Then the two gnomes rubbed noses in the traditional greeting and parting gesture of their species, and Gimble left to climb the rest of the way down the tree. To free up his hands for the descent, he took all of the nuts he had grabbed and stuffed them in his mouth. He would worry about chewing them without choking once he reached the ground.

He took care of the descent and the nuts in short order. Then he had to run to catch up with the boat, but he managed to make it on time. The school boat, constructed exclusively from sticks, leaves, and twigs, came every morning of the year except during winter vacation. So except for when he had been too young to remember anything happening around him, for all intents and purposes, he had spent three quarters of his life going to school. This was not so bad, he supposed, because he had enough friends to ensure, more often than not, that the experience was a good one. Still, he enjoyed vacation time whenever he could get it, and with the winter break only one day away, he—and every other gnome child with him—could hardly wait for the last hours of the school year to pass.

Gimble hopped into the boat and sat in the third row of seats, where his two best friends, Pelidial and Elgin, saved him his usual spot.

“Hey, Pel. Hey, El.”

“Hey Gimble.”

“You guys nervous about the history final?”

El laughed. “Let’s just get it over with... That’s what I say. Why we have to learn about this stuff anyway is beyond me.”

Pel added, “You said it, man. As soon as that test is over, I think I’ll run home and skip the boat.”

El asked, “Say, you guys wanna do something tonight?”

“Can’t,” said Gimble. “I gotta pack for tomorrow.”

“Oh, that’s right,” said El. “You’re going with your family... Wait. You’re not packed yet?”

“No...”

“Aw, man... But you’re going cross-country! You have to get so much stuff ready for that—”

“I know. I’ll start it right after I get home after school.”

The school boat sailed down the river for another fifteen minutes, during which time the children on it had fun talking and making plans for the rest of the

day. Since Pel and El were busy planning exactly that, Gimble passed the time by looking out over the woodland stream.

On this particular day, the water was very calm. Trees and the occasional rock slipped by on the far bank. Gimble saw his own reflection clearly today: the classic, rounded features and short, wavy chestnut brown hair (which, in Gimble's case, his hat mostly covered), bright blue eyes, and, because of his age, the beginnings of what would soon become a true gnome beard.

Gimble did not look at the water just so he could see his reflection, though; rather, he hoped to see a fish or two before school.

It was not long before he got his wish. Two trouts, each one the size of Gimble's entire body, leaped out of the water only a meter away. The gnome watched with a certain fascination. He would have loved to be able to live his life that way, swimming and frolicking freely in the wild from sunup to sundown. Odd, he thought, that some of the least intelligent animals in the forest would be so lucky—and yet, because of their inferior brain power, they would never know how good they had it.

When the boat arrived at school (a bunch of trees interlinked by gnome-sized rope bridges), Gimble took his mind off the fishes and readied himself for the day's final exams: history, science, and mathematics. The first exam, and the hardest, would be history. Gimble made his way through the leaves and branches and bridges until he reached the oak tree where his class took place. He and El had seats next to each other on the fourth branch up. Their teacher, a plump old gnome woman by the name of Fewgs handed out the exam sheets one branch at a time. Gimble took one of the pencils from his pocket and started immediately...

Although the test was excruciating, this only added to the gnome's relief when it finished. The other exams were very easy when compared to this first one. Gimble finished his last exam, the one for mathematics, half an hour early. He left school with a generally positive feeling about how he had done... But the moment he got off the boat and climbed up his home tree, he would not even think about the tests anymore; now he had a vacation to pack for!

A gnome's method of packing for vacation worked much like a recipe from a cookbook. Instructions could have read, "Take three burlap bags, as many belongings as you can fit in them, and all necessary ropes for tying the bags shut. Mix ingredients and throw into the cart for the donkey to carry later." Gimble did all of this and managed to fit all of his clothes and a little bit of moss into his bags. The only thing missing, he knew, was food; he would need provisions of some sort for the trip, but there was no more room left in his bags. He adjusted for this by taking one day's outfit from one of the bags and making a mental note to place some nuts, berries, and bread there later on.

Gimble's mother and father had already packed their belongings, and by the time Gimble had finished getting everything together, all that remained was for the family to get some much needed sleep before setting out early the next day. This happened soon enough.

In the morning, Gimble took his shower and dressed at his own pace. He could do this now, since the donkey waiting at the ground would not leave without him like the school boat would have done. His parents, too, took their

time, thus almost defeating the whole purpose of waking up early to get a fresh head start on the journey.

“This is Ihgom, our fairy,” said Gimble’s father at the branch designated for kitchen purposes. He pointed at a small yellow orb floating next to the tree, and then he resumed eating his nuts. In between bites, he said, “He’s done plenty of picture trips before, so he should be alright.”

Gnomes and elves would hire fairies, much in the same way mages did, but instead of using the tiny electric beings for trickery, traveling woodlanders would use them for taking what was known as a “fairygraph.” If a fairy lined up its electricity so that it surrounded an object or person, the fairy could then remember with perfect accuracy the appearance of that being and later engrave the image on any wooden surface. The reason fairies could do this owed not to any supernatural magic, as some less educated people thought, but to a scientific fact known as the Second Law of Fairydynamics. Gnomes and elves would learn this law in a university-level physics course—not to be confused with physiology, the study of the fairy anatomy.

The donkey Gimble’s family used for the trip was loaned from a human’s farm just south of the woods. For a price of one alligon, they could rent it all the way to Desdon and back.

Gimble’s father used a rope ladder to mount the donkey. Then he set up another rope so that it could be used as a pulley for getting the cart of their belongings up and secured. Gimble then climbed the ladder, and once everything else was ready to go, Gimble’s mother climbed up and took her seat on the last of three simple chairs attached one in front of the others on the saddle. Gimble’s father gave the reins a tug, and the donkey started at a fast walk. The journey had begun.

They spent the first few hours riding through the woodland. Most of the leaves by now had fallen, though a few still clung, and while the scenery may not have been the lush green of spring or the brilliant veritable rainbow of earlier autumn, it still had its charm. For Gimble, it was hard to appreciate that charm, though since he had grown up surrounded by it and as a result had accepted it all as just another part of his life. The fish in the brook might have scolded him for not appreciating how lucky he was to live in such a beautiful forest instead of cold, ordinary water... but Gimble never even considered this irony in his relationship with the wilderness.

Every now and then a squirrel would hop by or another gnome would wave and wish them a safe expedition. They saw no elves; elves tended to live east of this part of the forest. A few birds flew overhead. These avians, mostly geese and blue jays, represented the last of the flocks headed southward for the coming winter.

The serene nature Gimble saw in every direction, plus the rhythmic plodding of the donkey’s feet, eventually put him to sleep, which he needed to catch up on anyway, given the morning had been such an early start.

When he woke up, he no longer saw any woods around him. They were now out on the plains. To his left, he could see a farmhouse and several fields, all of which by now had been harvested and would not see new crops until spring. To

his right, Gimble saw nothing but open grassland, hills stretching all the way to the western horizon. The sun was low but not quite ready to set yet, and the air, though not cold, contained within it a wind that made the atmosphere seem almost frigid at times.

Gimble yawned and asked out loud, "Where are we?"

His father answered, "We're an hour or so out of the woods, and in a moment, we will be on the Windmill Road."

Gimble tried to remember his geography lessons from the previous year. When he more or less had his bearings on their location, he asked his father, "Where are we going to stop for the night?"

"That's a good question... The first town is called Ableridge, but we'll be lucky if we reach it by nightfall. It's easier for elves and their horses to get there in one day's travel, but I don't really think we should be going faster if we want to keep the stuff in the cart from falling out."

Within the hour, they were riding down a very wide and heavily traveled Windmill Road. The name fit, too; on both sides of him, for several kilometers into the distance, Gimble saw farmhouses, silos, and windmills turning in the breeze. To such a small gnome, these great mechanical creations no less than filled his imagination and made him wonder, if humans were capable of such great things as creating the windmill, then why did their species resort to destructive war in all the history textbooks? Maybe these conflicts were not meant for simple gnomes to understand. On the other hand, maybe humans were just characteristically inconsistent.

Whichever way, though, Gimble decided he liked windmills a lot. He would have to learn more about them someday.

Ableridge was a fairly large township, the only civilization, outside of the northern woodlands, that could truly be said to be run by elves. Elves maintained the inns, the shops, the stables, and the restaurants. Many humans went through the town on a regular basis, but few of them actually lived there, since they were farmers from the outlying fields. All the inns had special large rooms designed for humans and elves, as well as small rooms designed for gnomes, so once Gimble and his family got there, which was a few hours after sunset, they had no trouble finding a place to spend the night.

The inn where they stayed stood across the street from a restaurant. There an elf waitress greeted them and told them to take a seat at any of the gnome-sized tables to the left side of the dining room. Gimble had not known what to expect when he first went into the tavern, but amazingly enough, the setting seemed very familiar, in large part because woodlanders had built it. Everything in the entire building was made of oakwood. On every wall hung several fairygraphs of various places in the northern forest. And, of course, the people in the restaurant were all woodlanders, with only a couple of exceptions.

Because the woodland holiday season took place in the winter, Ableridge and other outskirts of the north would be crowded this time of year. Traditionally, few gnomes and elves went farther south, but lately, because the humans' war had ended (and not started up again for more than half a decade), more were taking the journey to explore the rest of Aren Country. So Gimble and

his family would not be alone this year.

They ordered their meals (Gimble decided on his favorite: trout), and while they ate, they made plans for the road ahead. Gimble's father did most of the talking.

"Tomorrow, we must be very fast. Our donkey will have to travel a full day's distance by human horse standards. The good news is, once we get past the next hill here, we'll be traveling downhill. Gimble, I want you to sit in back and make sure nothing falls out of the cart while we ride. The town we hope to reach is called The Windmill Road."

"Wait..." said Gimble. "Isn't that the—"

"Yes, it is the name of both the road and the town. Don't ask me why; I don't know. I hear they have a good tavern there, and they finally put in gnome seating this year."

"Do they have gnome hotel rooms?"

"Now that I'm not sure of... We'll find out when we get there. Anyway, from The Windmill Road, we head east and then southeast. Eventually the road will fork at the Yearling river. There are no more towns along the way from The Windmill Road all the way until we pass that river and travel an extra day at least after that. We'll have to make camp about five to eight days before we get there."

That's stupid, thought Gimble. *Why couldn't they just make a town for every day's travel? Why do we have to camp out in the cold all the time?*

"Give or take a few days for the weather, with any luck, we'll be in Desdon in a fortnight. We'll stay there then for two fortnights, and then we'll go home."

"Sounds like a plan!" said Gimble's mother enthusiastically. "So what time should we wake up tomorrow morning?"

"Same time as we did today, but this time without as slow a breakfast. I'll see if we can get some sort of room service."

The hotel did not offer room service, but luckily the restaurant was open all day and all night, so they simply went back across the street in the morning, picked up a few rolls they could eat on the road, and from there went to the stables to get their donkey and cart.

Today it was Gimble's mother's turn to hold the reins while father rested and Gimble did his best to hold the cart steady. As he sat with his seat turned to face the road behind them, Gimble saw more of the same countryside pass by. The windmills became fewer after a while, and the stench of cattle filled the air for the next hours. What exactly caused this odor, Gimble could not say; he saw very few animals around. At one point, there were a few cows grazing in the distance, and later, a nearer herd of sheep seemed to watch the travelers from behind a fence rail.

To a gnome, even a sheep could be huge, and seeing a whole herd of them this close made Gimble ask, "Can I take a fairygraph, Dad?"

"Sure thing. Just get Ihgom out of the cart there."

Gimble looked into the cart and called for the fairy. It flew up immediately and startled the gnome. Gimble pointed to the sheep and said, "Could you make a picture, please?"

For two full seconds, forty very confused sheep found themselves

surrounded in a yellow glow. Then it stopped, and the fairy flew back into the cart. It came back out again holding a wooden plank the size of Gimble's head. Some electric charges shot out of Ihgom's cloud, and a minute later, the fairygraph was finished. Ihgom politely handed Gimble the final result. Gimble eagerly looked over it. He could hardly believe the detail and wondered how a fairy could take such large creatures and fit them all onto such a small piece of wood.

He thanked Ihgom and put the fairygraph in the cart for safekeeping. Ihgom too went again into the cart and probably fell asleep.

Gimble did not see any other animals for the rest of the day. Most of them, he concluded, would by this time of the year be inside the barns.

They kept on riding all the way through a light lunch of nuts and bread, a small sample of what provisions they packed for the trip. Eventually the sun lowered in the western sky, and just before it was about to set, The Windmill Road came into view.

At that moment, an elf on horseback passed them—as had a couple other elves along the way. The gnomes waved to each elf they saw and thanked them for not letting the horses kick up too much dust in the donkey's face as the larger creature passed.

Gimble and his family reached the village almost exactly at sunset. A man named Jhaddel greeted them at the stables and vowed to take good care of the donkey overnight. The gnomes went right across the street and booked a hotel room—no, they did not have gnome-sized rooms, but they had gnome-sized cots available. These would do nicely.

The tavern next door was full of elves and gnomes, but the servers were all human. A woman named Isa showed them to the new gnome seating next to the fireplace and asked if she could take their drink orders.

Although this village was much smaller than Ableridge, the tavern was even busier and livelier the one they had visited the night before. Elves who had not seen each other in seasons were getting reacquainted. Gimble did not see any other familiar faces, but there was one family of gnomes eating at the table next to them.

They ate their meals, but Gimble was still hungry afterward. He wanted another bowl of soup.

"But we have to get to bed here," said his father. "Tomorrow will be another early day if we want to keep up the pace."

"I know," said Gimble, "but I'm really hungry, and the soup here is pretty good. Please?"

"Tell you what," said his mother. "I'll stay here with Gimble. You go back to the room and get to sleep. You're going to handle the reins tomorrow, so you need it more than we do."

Gimble's father nodded. "Sounds good. I take it we pay for our dinner in the morning?"

"Yes," said Isa, who happened to be approaching their table then. "You can pay in the morning, if you wish. We will keep your tab."

"Don't run up a million alligons of soup, Gimble," said his father. Then the

elder gnome thanked the waitress and left.

“One more bowl of soup, please,” said Gimble.

“Coming right up,” said Isa with a smile.

By the time she returned with their soup, the bar was less crowded; most people left early because of the early darkness in the sky. Gimble figured that with all the other staff present, Isa would not have much other work right now... Maybe she could answer a few questions for him.

“Waitress?”

“Yes? Is the soup alright?”

“It’s fine. I wanted to know... Have you ever been to the East?”

“No I haven’t, but I’ve heard many stories about it.”

“Why aren’t there any towns between here and the Yearling River?”

Gimble’s mother almost broke in to keep her child from distracting the waitress from her job for too long, but Isa did not seem to mind.

“I think it was because of the war. Incria and Desdon could not develop westward while they kept fighting north and south. That was five years ago, though. Now they’re setting up towns all over the place. Are you headed that way?”

“We’re going to Desdon.”

“Oh! Well, you’ll see several towns before you get there. Basically wherever a little river or stream can be found, by the road, there’ll be some form of civilization.”

“Really?” said Gimble’s mother. “Well, I guess we should get a more recent map, then!”

Isa laughed. “You know, I hear that a lot lately. Wish I knew a good mapmaker, but they all tend to live in the big cities. Maybe you’ll find one in Desdon.”

“Yeah, and we’ll bring it home for the elves to correct their current ones,” said Gimble. A few of the elves in the tavern overheard this, but none took offense. No woodlander would ever get angry over a little innocent teasing.

After breakfast the next morning, the gnomes set out once more. They would reach nine more townships on their way to Desdon, and as it turned out, they never had to set up a camp outdoors. Gimble’s father was worried they would run out of funds for all the hotels, but eventually they compensated by eating only their packed rations and not stopping at restaurants.

Ihgom came in useful several times, increasingly so as the family went deeper and deeper into human territory. As the towns progressed, they contained fewer and fewer forest elements. Stone architecture and metal railings replaced the wooden framework of buildings in the heartland, and past the Yearling River, all the roads were paved in brick. This brick road, they learned, was the result of a massive building project ordered by the King of Incria; imprisoned criminals from across the land could serve their sentences by spending a year or two laying brick. The gnomes thought this a novel idea, but they never were able to figure out what the word “criminal” meant. It must be a type of person not indigenous to the woodland, that much was certain.

By the time they actually reached Desdon, they were weary of traveling but not so much so that they would think about returning home yet.

Desdon looked marvelous in the afternoon sunlight. The entire city was built of red stone. An enormous wall surrounded it at every part except where a river ran through it. This was the Great South River, which stretched all the way from the mountains to the Eastern Ocean. Some boats rode with the current into the city, and many humans traveled the road with them as their donkey faithfully plodded along.

The gnomes got their share of odd looks, since so few of their kind came by until recently. Also, the looks tended to get odder as Gimble took more and more fairygraphs. Eventually he decided to stop and give Ihgom some rest. He could not understand why Desdon residents would react this way to a fairy, unless of course it were local custom.

Although there were plenty of hotels in Desdon, not a single one contained rooms or cots for gnomes. They had expected this would be the case, so they simply chose a single room and climbed up on a human bed for the night.

They stayed in Desdon for three days before Gimble's father admitted he had not brought enough money for them to stay longer—the effect of the hotels along the way was indeed starting to kick in.

The first day, they toured the historic sites: the old fortress and city defenses during the war (as well as a history lesson on how the city lost), a museum of antique weapons and writings that nobody in the modern age could interpret, and the historic shipyards, which for centuries had served most of the city's trade with the rest of the nearby towns. Many fairygraphs were taken until Ihgom ran out of wooden planks. Gimble sighed and made it a note to bring more wood should he ever come here again.

The second day, they visited more with the people of Desdon. The locals turned out to be very friendly when they weren't surrounded in a yellow field, Gimble noticed. Very few people talked about the war; most were concerned with living their daily lives and getting a certain number of chores done before sunset.

Gimble thought the most interesting man he met that day was one Geppith, a blacksmith, and his uncle. The donkey the gnomes had ridden into town on needed new horseshoes, and this pair agreed to sell them for a very fair price.

"Just gonna take a wild guess," said Geppith's uncle while the blacksmith went to work on the iron. "I'd say from lookin' at you that you probably aren't from around here."

Gimble did all of the talking, since his parents were mostly distracted watching Geppith at work.

"That's right," the gnome said. "We're from the woodlands, up north and west of here."

"Oh, the woodlands, eh? You don't say." The old man chuckled. Gimble would have guessed him to be in his sixties or seventies, since humans and gnomes basically lived the same lifespan. His hair was white, but his skin looked very dark and wrinkled. He seemed happy and healthy, except for the obvious limitations of old age. He sat down on a giant anvil not currently in use and said,

“You know, I wasn’t originally from around here either. No, I was from a little city called Pril.”

“Pril...” Gimble recalled geography class once more. “Wow, that’s a long way.”

“It certainly was, boy. It certainly was.” He took a pipe out of his shirt pocket and in a minute had it lit. “I’ve sailed much greater distances, though. Back in my day, I was what you would call quite the adventurer. I’ve seen it all, just about: sea monsters, storms, people from every region of the Aren Country and even from continents afar... Six years ago, I even saw a land war—that was when I came here to retire and live with my nephew here.

“I’ve never been to the woodlands, though.” He smiled, and Gimble smiled back.

Gimble had a policy of knowing the names of people with whom he talked, so he asked politely.

The old man laughed and said, “In Pril, nobody ever asked for names; since I’ve moved here, though, everyone asks. I still haven’t gotten used to it, I don’t think. But if you must know, my name is Salt.”

“I’m Gimble.”

“Nice to meet you, lad.”

“So do you like it here in Desdon?”

“Oh, I should think it’s much better than Pril as far as the city goes. The people here are nicer, especially. I miss the sea, though. Desdon has this tiny harbor that only sends boats locally. You’ll never see a real *ship* here... I remember ones that were bigger than an entire city block and longer than even the highest spire is tall here... ships that took crews of fifty or more to sail them to the farthest reaches of the globe... Have you ever seen anything like that, Gimble?”

“Uh... I’m a gnome,” said Gimble bluntly. “Everything here seems humongous to me.”

“Aha, I guess it would...”

Geppith was about finished nailing in the horseshoes; since the donkey could use some of the pre-made ones from a back room and needed no custom fit, the blacksmith’s task was very simple. Gimble’s father paid five linnes for each shoe and thanked Geppith properly.

“Well, I see you’re about to go,” said Salt. “But you just remember this one thing, Gimble: wherever you go, and however many journeys you take, you just be grateful that you’ve got a home to return to. The best lesson of traveling is that in all the world over, nothing quite beats coming home.

“Now you stop by anytime you’re in Desdon; I’d like to hear more about this woodland up north sometime. Have a safe trip, okay?”

The gnomes simultaneously said, “Okay,” smiled, and left with their donkey.

The next day, the gnomes bought an updated map, but otherwise, they rested. They knew they would need all their stamina for the trip home.

Gimble spent much of the day just sitting at the windowsill (he used a curtain rope to climb up to it) and looking out upon the city street. As he watched

the crowds go by, he could not help but think about what the old man had said the previous day... Gimble knew that Salt was right, too: for all the vacation had shown him, he could think of nothing better than to go home again. And though this city may have been home to thousands, it would never be home to the gnomes. All the people who walked and rode their horses past the window that day looked as though they took their setting for granted. None of them stopped to admire the pavement, which contained some very fancy brickwork and stonework. How long had it taken Desdon's builders to pave every street in the city as ornately as this? And for what? So it all could be stepped on and ignored? Well, Gimble for one appreciated it, whoever had constructed it. There may not have been any bricks for construction projects in the woodland, but gnomes could recognize good craftsmanship when they saw it.

That afternoon in the hotel room, Gimble's father laid out the plan for the trip home.

"We're low on rations and money, but if we're careful, we should make it back just fine. We'll have to go on two meals a day, and when we get back, I promise we'll have a feast or something. Sound good?"

Gimble and his mother agreed to this strategy. The next day, they set out on the Windmill Road.

--Chapter Twenty-three: Random Happenings Down South

Deep within Mt. Bertrice, Crispo and Ferdy watched a videotape. It was the latest hit motion picture out of Burningwood, a high-action thriller called, *A Flame for the Ages: Based on the True Story of Crispo and the Human Armies*. It starred Shvorzenfire as Crispo; the humans were horribly CG'd, though.

"I don't see why they didn't let me do my own acting," said Crispo. "Hey, my flame was *ten times* the size of that wimp's."

"Eh, I wouldn't worry about it so much," said Ferdy. "They did get the number of humans right, at least."

"Yeah... I don't know about adding in all this plot jazz, though... Makes it all seem kinda hokey."

(On screen, Shvorzenfire strikes a regal pose atop what is supposed to be Mt. Bertrice. A swooning pink-scaled female lead dragon named Jheza stands just below him.)

Jheza: *(melodramatic)* But why? Why must you leave to fight those horrible, mean, and very dangerous dragon slayers?

Crispo: *(very deep voice)* Because... *(close-up of his profile, pause for suspense, since this is the money shot of the movie)* ...Whether I burn them, or whether I lose... I must face... my *destiny*...

(Diamo, played by himself, comes out from behind a rock.)

Diamo: *(stumbling on his lines)* Uh, Crispo... sir. It's time... to fight and leave—uh, leave and fight! *(looks at the camera and winks)*

“See?” said Crispo. “Diamo got to play his own role. Why not me?”

“Oh, elves have all the inside connections in Burningwood,” Ferdy said. “Asking an elf where the right people are is like asking an imp where the fire pills are. You always get the right answer.”

(Shvorzenfire, with Diamo riding on his back, flies off into the distance as orchestra music plays in the background. On Mt. Bertrice, Jheza sheds some tears and waves a handkerchief.)

Jheza: Bye! *(sniff)* I'll always love you, Crispo!

“No you won't,” Crispo interjected. “You'll meet me when mating season starts, tell me I have a nice flame, use me for a year, and then you'll dump me for some young punk with a big inheritance, you sleazy, two-timing...”

“Relax, dude,” said Ferdy. “It's just a movie.”

Crispo sighed, and a small amount of smoke escaped his nose. “Yeah. Just a movie. Right.”

The dragons had done very well for themselves after the end of the human war. Dragon slaying attempts were down to a third or less of what they used to be, the massive anti-fire pill campaign was finally showing some success among the imps, and thanks to new technology, doctors were saying they would have the cure for fire gland cancer within three years. All that really remained was for the dragons to make a real peace with the humans so as to make the number of slaying attempts go to zero. Various plans were in the works for this; some involved open diplomacy: flying straight into human territory and yelling, “We come in peace!” Other plans involved getting human or elven diplomats to do the job instead. The first attempt at contact, which would be made by a group favoring the former strategy, was to happen in a small Desdon-area town the next morning...

“Don't worry, Billums. I swear there are no monsters in our back yard.”

“But Mommy, I saw four of them, and they were practicing barbershop singing, and they were big and scary and had huge teeth and wings...”

“Hahaha, you mean you saw four dragons?”

“Yes, Mommy! They're right outside the window! I closed the shutters, but they're really there!”

“Hahaha, no they're not, dear. Here, I'll prove it to you.” Three seconds later. “See? There's absolutely nothing to—AAAH!”

“Hello...”

“Hello...”

“Hello...”

“Hello...”

“We are the beasts / We come in peace / To this great East / Oh yes indeed! (Two, three, four...)”

The shudders closed again.

“Billums, grab your coat and hat, and run to the horse outside. I’ll get your father. We’re leaving, and I don’t know if we’ll ever come back.”

“Yes, Mommy.”

--Chapter Twenty-four: Gimble’s Adventure, Part Two

Gimble and his family woke early as usual and started the second day of the journey home. They were just out of sight of the town where they had stayed the night, when suddenly four dragons in top hats came over the next hill and walked toward them. There was not much the gnomes could do in this situation except to move out of the way and hope the huge creatures would pass. They did this, but it took a large effort on the part of Gimble’s mother (who was at the reins) to keep the donkey from getting spooked.

The dragons were talking amongst themselves, so at first they did not notice the travelers at the side of the road.

“All in all, I think that was a pretty successful performance,” said the red dragon.

“Yeah,” said the white one, “and hopefully as we become better known, fewer people will run screaming from us.”

“At least none of them tried to kill us,” said the purple one. “Not even the young males!”

“That, honestly, surprised me a bit,” said the black one. “Maybe there’s a chance this’ll work out after all.”

Red nodded. “Wait’ll the folks back home hear about this... Oh hey, what’s this?” He had spotted the gnomes. “Well hello, there. You don’t look human.”

“We’re gnomes,” said Gimble’s father. “We’re just passing through on our way back home.”

Because gnomes had good relations with elves, and elves had good relations with dragons thanks to Diamo, the gnomes had been taught one very simple but very true rule of dealing with dragons: only people who attacked the dragons had anything to fear.

“Home?” said Purple. “You mean in the forest up northwest of here? That’s several days’ travel.”

“We know,” said Gimble’s mother. “We brought provisions.”

Red turned to his comrades and said, “At full speed, this would hardly be one day’s flight for us. What do you say we give these gnomes a wing, eh? We can chalk it up as an act of good-natured diplomacy afterward and get back to touring the East tomorrow.”

It was impossible to refuse kindness when it came from a dragon.

Gimble’s father rode on the red dragon, Gimble’s mother rode on the white one, Gimble rode on the purple one, and the donkey hid beneath the black one’s top hat (a tight fit, but it worked) and dared not lift it to look down.

Of the four riders, Gimble was the only one who genuinely enjoyed the

trip. He asked the purple dragon to do a few flips and loops midair just for fun, and the beast happily obliged.

“Hey, that looks like fun,” said Red. “You want to try that?”

“No, thanks,” said Gimble’s father. “I’m fine with the current level of excitement.”

“Oh, yeah, I know what ya mean,” said Red. “Ain’t it great? Look at all those towns down there... So tiny... I bet if someone dropped from this height, it’d take at least half a minute to hit the ground—not that that would be pretty, mind.”

“Uh... Could we please talk about something else?”

“Sure thing, gnome buddy...”

Gimble and the purple dragon flew by in a corkscrew, the former shouting at the top of his lungs,

“WHEEE...”

“Oh, say, I know what we can talk about,” said Red. “We haven’t been too many places out of the mountains since the end of the war, so we’re kinda curious as to what this East is like and all. And since you were there on vacation, would ya tell us what it was like? Were the people friendly, or did they run from you, or did they pick up swords and challenge you... or what?”

“They were nice enough,” Gimble’s father said. “The subject of dragons didn’t come up much, though.”

“Figures,” said White. “Well, we’ll take this one step at a time. The smallest towns will come first, and after that, we’ll take our show to the big cities.”

“Of course,” said Black. “But if today’s crowd was any indication, we could hit the big time pretty quickly.”

“Best to be cautiously optimistic,” said Red.

The purple dragon came out of a flip and panted steam. “Had...” huff... “enough...” huff... “li’l dude?”

Gimble’s head and eyes spun for a minute, and he said, “Yes... That’s enough...”

“Cool.”

“Can we take a break?” Gimble asked. “I have to use a latrine.”

“Ah, say no more.” Then Purple called to his friends, “Little gnome here has to take a break. Let’s land at the next human town.”

It so happened that the next town on the way was The Windmill Road.

--Chapter Twenty-five: The March of Time

In five years and three seasons, a lot had changed in The Windmill Road. Because of increased woodland travel to the East, there were no longer any off seasons; business boomed year-round. The gnome-sized tables were Isa’s idea, and though they had just been implemented last year, they were already a huge success. Because business was better now, people were talking about adding to the town: more houses, a chapel, some shops... but all of this, at least so far,

remained only talk.

Till and Essa had two children now, both boys. Essa gave up tavern work to raise them, but she still stopped by every once in a while. Till said that if ever The Windmill Road were to add more houses, he would certainly get one there; life on a farmhouse simply was not practical for someone who would never be a farmer. Roth offered to get the same carpenter who built Asmir's house, and as far as Isa knew, negotiations were now underway.

Asmir and Isa were now engaged—they had been for a year—and all they had to do was find some more staff to handle the tavern while they would be away on honeymoon. Isa's mother had grown sick the previous fortnight, and none of the healer monks who passed through the town could cure whatever was keeping her sick, though the general consensus said it was the flu, and it would supposedly wear off with enough rest and liquids. So Ewen remained in bed for most of the day, and while she seemed a little better as of late, she still looked far from her usual self. This left Harro, Isa, Till, and Jinn to do the work of what had once been a team of six people... and business showed no signs of letting up anytime soon. Asmir helped occasionally, but the stables needed the extra help just as much as did the tavern.

Isa still heard her share of interesting stories, but so many people told such similar accounts of their travels that by now she wondered if she had not heard them all... Familiar faces stopped by the tavern every now and then, Diamo not least among them. His accounts of what happened in the South were always worth listening to, since reality, Isa found, was often much more entertaining than what tall tales any of the local bards and minstrels would tell.

The imps had long since gone back home to their families in the mountains. Other imps took their place over the years, because somebody had to keep watch over the security cameras at all times. To Isa, though, it was as if the original pair never had left; imps had no naming system anyway, so she continued to address whichever ones were there at the time as One and Two.

Seasons come and gone reflected more of what was to be expected in the heartland. The last two winters were mild, but the current one, she was certain, would have more strength to it. This would mean more snow but also more wind. Isa would have to wait and see whether or not the trade-off were worth it.

Well, the first snow had come last night, so in her tradition, she spent the early morning hours at her and waited for the sunrise. This was a good coat of snow for a single night; she estimated it at three centimeters. The day was cold, and it would only get colder, but in a way, this made the tea and fire at the tavern all the more enjoyable. The weather system moved north by noon, revealing a sun too low in the sky and too far away to melt any of the white on the ground.

Isa and Jinn got through the morning rush and were alone in the tavern when the dragons arrived in the early afternoon...

Knock knock knock.

"Come in," said Jinn loudly enough to be heard through the door. "We're open."

"Uh... Can't," said a voice outside. "We won't fit."

Isa left her spot wiping off the bar to answer the door.

“Hello...”

“Hello...”

“Hello...”

“Hello...”

“Eee-haw...”

Out of all of the questions Isa could have asked in this situation, the first one that came to her mind was, “Why do you have a donkey under your top hat?”

After that, the others came in rapid succession.

“Wait... Why are three of you wearing top hats? And why are you here? Aren’t dragons supposed to keep to the South? And why are there gnomes on your backs? And what’s with the singing?”

She took a deep breath to stop herself before she would go insane.

The red dragon said, “We have some gnome passengers here who need to use a latrine. Would you be so kind as to show them to one?”

“Yeah,” said the white one. “We’re giving them a ride to the woodlands. It’s part of our good diplomacy initiative, designed at spreading the news across Aren Country that we’re not really mean monsters and that the humans can stop trying to slay us.”

“The singing is part of the plan,” said the purple one. “And the reason I’m the only one without a hat is because it flew off when I did some flips back about three or four towns ago.”

“And the donkey came with the gnomes,” said the black one.

“Eee-haw,” said the donkey.

With a blank expression, Isa said, “There’s a restroom in here, but it’s for customers only.”

Gimble bounded off the dragon and ran for the restaurant door. “I’ll get some soup, then,” he said as he rushed straight past her to the restroom.

Isa called after him, “The new gnome-sized one is in back...”

“I know,” said a voice from the tavern. “I found it.”

Gimble’s parents went as well. Isa called Asmir over from the stables to take care of the donkey. Isa then went back to the four dragons to hear more of their story.

“So you’ve taken up barbershop?” she asked.

“You bet,” said White. “It’s happy music that brings people together, and that’s the point of our mission. Wanna hear an example?”

“Uh...”

“Sure you do!” said Red. “Here’s one we call, ‘Looking About from Mt. Trestis.’”

The dragons rearranged themselves so that they stood next to each other in order from the lowest to highest voice: Purple, White, Black, Red.

“Oh one day I sat atop Mt. Trestis / And I looked about at what there was to see / And a fair maiden lady in the distance / Flew into my heart before she flew to me...”

“With eyes that glistened green and gold she saw me / With pearly scales and wings she stole my heart / She flew up to Mt. Trestis just to greet me / And from then on, I knew we’d never part...”

Purple added in his bass, “We’d never paaaaaart...”

Then the song ended.

Isa could not help but laugh. “Hey,” she said. “That actually wasn’t half bad! I didn’t know dragons could sing that well.”

By now, every single resident in town was out on the street to witness this spectacle.

“See?” said White. “It brings people together.”

Gimble walked out of the tavern just then and said, “Hey, did I miss anything?”

They stayed there all afternoon into the evening. The dragons performed several more songs, and when they needed a break, Isa was able to return the favor by telling the real story of Crispo and the human war. She soon found out that Crispo was a legend now in the South and that a motion picture (whatever that meant, Isa did not know) had just come out detailing the events with little accuracy but lots of drama. Isa’s version, though, seemed to the dragons to have both drama *and* a certain believability. It did not involve any destiny or prophecy... thus making for a little thing called suspense. Isa was worried for a second that the dragons might get so excited by the story that they would inadvertently shoot flames out when she got to the climax, but the dragons controlled themselves just fine.

When she finished, even the humans watching were spellbound. Isa would later explain her storytelling ability with a shrug and a wink to all those present.

“What can I say?” she asked. “I’ve heard enough stories to tell a good one from a bad one. I’m pretty sure my own won’t be all that bad...” She smiled.

--Chapter Twenty-six: A Friend Returning

A few fortnights later when spring arrived, on the day before The Windmill Road would expect the traders and merchants to hold their first meeting of the year, a middle-aged man stopped by for the dinner hour. This would not have been anything unusual in and of itself, so when Isa went to serve him at the bar, at first she did not think anything of it.

“Hello, and welcome to the Windmill Tavern. What can I get for you this evening?”

“Hi, Isa. Ale and some meat, whatever’s your best today.”

So the man knew her name. Well, that was not so uncommon; many of the more frequent travelers were much better at remembering names than was Isa... but usually, Isa could at least remember faces if they stopped by so often, and Isa could not tell if she had seen this man or served him before. He had dark hair and a neatly groomed beard, and he looked to be in his early thirties—Isa could use the exact same description for thirty percent of the tavern’s male customers, though, so still she could not place him. Oh well...

She went and gave the dinner order to Harro, who was working the kitchen. Then Isa poured the ale into a glass (if the man wanted a pint, he would have to ask for it) and said, “Here you go,” as she handed it to him.

“Ah, thank you,” said he. “I don’t suppose you remember me.”
And I don’t, Isa thought.

“I recognized you by your dress. I made that dress years ago.”

Isa was wearing her informal blue dress, the one she purchased almost six years ago from... Oh, she could but vaguely remember. It was on the tip of her tongue, though.

“My name is Garroner,” the man volunteered at last as he smiled. “Glad to see you’ve been able to get some use out of the clothes, by the way.”

“I’m sorry,” Isa said. “I’m trying to remember... You sold me the dresses because you were going away somewhere, right?”

He nodded. “I went west. There were four tailors on the trade route that year, and I was the unfortunate odd man out, so I set off for Pril.”

“That’s right,” said Isa. “Now I know who you are. So how did that go?”

“Pril?” Oh, better than I had hoped, that’s for sure.”

“Did you sell a lot of clothes?”

“Not of the ones I had originally brought, no. But when I got there, it was the weirdest thing: I found out that several of the ship crews out there needed a tailor, and in all of Pril, there was only one master of that trade—and he died of old age the previous winter! So for a full season, I used fabric from the clothes my family and I made, plus my stitching tools (which I never leave home without), and I fixed up all these seafarers’ uniforms. Made some very good money at it, too. I had to get back home before autumn so my family would not worry more than they had to, and as soon as I told them about the opportunity in Pril, they practically jumped at the news, and we moved to the great mysterious city of the West. Sure the people there were not the nicest in the world, but they paid well and kept to themselves, mostly. We’ve lived there ever since.

“This year, my eldest daughter is trying to run the trade route, just as I did in the old days. I think it will be a good experience for her, so long as she uses her common sense and caution on the trip. You will probably see her here tomorrow. I’m traveling ahead of her so I can make sure she stays safe; one never knows what could happen, what with the war going on and all.”

Isa’s eyes opened wider. “The war?”

“Yes, you know... Out in the East. I had to maneuver many times around towns facing siege and such. I don’t want my daughter to get caught up in any of that violence.”

Isa laughed and said, “Oh, you won’t have to worry about that.”

“Why not?”

“Have you seriously not heard?”

“Heard what?” Garroner looked very confused.

“The war ended five years ago. Inciria won.”

“Oh...” He took a sip of his drink and then said, “Well, I should still probably go with her. I mean, there could be robbers on the road or something. You never know.”

“That’s true, fair enough,” said she. “I can’t believe it, though. How do you not hear about the biggest event in Aren Country’s history for five full years after it happened?”

“Got me there,” said Garroner as he took a bigger gulp this time. “I’d have to say that Pril is really that isolated, though. Who would travel that far west and then, knowing they were in Pril, actually talk about world matters enough to mention the war ending?”

“Wow... I knew that city was something else, but... I had no idea, did I?”

“Out of curiosity, and on a different subject, I don’t suppose you would be able to tell me if my daughter is wasting her time with this trip to the traders’ meeting. Are there still four tailors, including her?”

“I couldn’t say,” Isa answered. “But I do know that two springs ago, there was a man whose name started with a... ‘B,’ I think? He was the only one then. My mom got a very warm sweater from him.”

“Bryar?”

“That’s likely it.”

“Oh yes. He’s a good friend. Glad to hear he’s still doing well. With any luck, I’ll be able to catch up on things with him, too.” After a pause, he added, “There must be so much I’ve missed out on, if even the end of the war has not gotten through to Pril.”

Again he changed the subject. “How have you been, by the way?”

“Oh, I can’t really complain.” She yawned. “Except for the long days lately, plus that I wanted to get married, but I can never find the time to get away for that, plus all the usual work... Overall, I’ve done fine, though. I just wish I could get a break—even a little one.”

Garroner nodded. “We all have those times. Don’t worry; I’m sure that day will come. Meantime, though, best wishes, if I may say so.

Isa smiled. “Thank you,” she said.

The tailor continued, “It’s funny what life throws at you sometimes, you know? The unexpected high points and low points... they happen for everyone, too. It’s so odd when it happens that some people think of it as fate. But then you look back on it years later, and you realize how much of it was not merely what happened to you, but also how you affected the lives of others as well as yourself..

“You may have had some trouble remembering me, Isa, but I remembered you right away. And how could I not? You singlehandedly kept me in business one day, and I’ll always be grateful for that. Thank you.”

Isa did her best not to blush; she was not altogether successful. “The dresses have been very nice,” she said.

Harro called from the kitchen to say that the requested meal was ready. Isa brought it out and handed the plate and some utensils to Garroner. More customers came in at that instant, so Isa went to serve them. She noted that Till was late for his shift tonight. This left her as the only server for the dinner crowd... She was still very busy by the time Garroner left for the night to go to his hotel room.

Till did arrive later and apologized for his tardiness. Isa warned him not to be late tomorrow when the traders came. The tavern would need its full staff for that event, and if even one person could not make it, that would put far too much strain on everyone else. Till knew this and promised not to be late again.

The next day, he proved he was a man of his word. Even Essa showed up after having left the children with her parents for the day. Ewen, who by now felt much better than she had a few fortnights ago, helped Harro in the kitchen, and for one day, the tavern worked with a staff of six, exactly as had happened in years gone by.

More traders arrived than Isa was sure had ever come before, and for the first time in the Windmill Tavern's history, the place ran out of seats midway through the evening. Some groups, like the wool traders, were content to take their meals back to the hotel and discuss matters there. Others stood outside and only ordered drinks. Others waited for later when seats inside would clear out.

For the staff, this meant constant work. Isa saw Garroner talking with Bryar, and she noticed there were not other traders—Garroner's daughter, a pretty young brunette, was the only other person at their table—but Isa had no time to talk with them before they left.

The next morning, the whole staff would be back for breakfast—as would the patrons, no doubt. Exhausted but confident she could get through this, Isa awoke early to set up the tavern before the opening at sunrise. Assuming Jinn had done her usual decent job of cleaning the place last night, there would not be too much for Isa to do except start pumping water into clean pots for later use in cooking, make sure the dishes were all ready, start a fire in the fireplace, light the torches on each wall, check the inventory for ingredients so she could determine if any items had to be crossed off the menu...

She was running through this list in her head when she stepped outside into the cold morning and saw a cart standing in the middle of the road. A man and woman stood beside it and waved for Isa to come over. In the light of the moon and stars, Isa saw that these people were none other than Garroner and his daughter.

"If I do remember correctly," Garroner said, "Isa here takes the same dress size as you do, dear."

"Well, that makes this easy," said his daughter. "I have just the thing, then."

She reached into the pile of clothes gathered in the cart and pulled out a white dress. Isa could not see its features perfectly given the current light, but the sash and length meant it would have to be a very formal dress, if not a gown...

And then Isa gasped as she figured it out.

"This is a wedding dress," said the tailor's daughter as she handed it to Isa. "I know they're not too common in country weddings, but in the cities, they're very popular. I made this one myself, except for the lace work; that was Dad's."

Isa could barely speak. "How much is it?" She would have to run back inside her house to get money, but whatever this thing cost, she would be willing to pay for it.

"Consider it a gift," said Garroner. "One act of kindness deserves another, after all."

"I... I don't know what to say... Thank you so much..." She hugged them both and said, "I'll be sure to wear it... Thank you..."

After some warm parting words, Garroner and his daughter left for the East. Isa might have had a hard time remembering Garroner before, but she knew she could not forget him now. Friends, it seemed, acted much like Garroner had described life: they came through in the strangest and most unexpected ways sometimes...

Asmir and the other villagers admired the dress when Isa displayed it for them later that day, after the traders had all left. It really was a beautiful gown; the only flaw was that the sleeves were a bit too long. Isa knew enough about stitching to shorten these herself, though, so it did not make any difference in the long run.

“We can’t possibly hold the wedding off any longer now,” said Ewen. “You’ve got to get married while that dress yet looks good on you!”

“But what about the tavern?” said Isa. “Things are going to get very busy soon.”

“Oh no you don’t,” her mother said. “All of us, you included, have waited far too long for this day to come, and we can’t delay it any more. We’re going to take a trip to Ableridge where they have the big elf cathedral, and you’re going to get married as soon as possible. And I don’t want to hear any of this ‘common sense’ nonsense about how we have to be working the tavern on your big day. All of us are going with, and that’s the end of it.”

Though Ewen’s words were commanding, her voice remained cheerful. Still, Ewen never had been the type of woman to be denied, and she clearly would not be denied now.

Asmir and Isa married two fortnights later. The only reason the wedding did not take place sooner was so that Asmir’s relatives in Peadston could make it for the event. Because the wedding took place in Ableridge, word got out among the elves and gnomes beforehand that a friend of Diamo (now famous throughout the woodland) was getting married. Because of this, the crowd was huge. This amazed Isa greatly; many faces, of all the different races of Aren Country, looked on with the same excited expression as did Isa’s own parents.

Isa did recognize a few faces here and there... Little Gimble the gnome, for example, she recognized immediately. Diamo was there, too. As were some traveling friars, whose faces looked so familiar, Isa could only assume they were the same healers as had been to her town six years ago when Crispo arrived.

All of these people and more bade the newlyweds a fond farewell on their honeymoon, which was to be in Quennebur. As Isa and Asmir sat in their cart, which rolled to the northern end of the Windmill Road, Isa leaned against her husband’s shoulder and sighed.

“Everything alright, dear?” said Asmir.

“I’ve never been this far from my home before.”

“Oh. Well, if it’s any comfort, I’ve never been as far as Quennebur. I wonder what it will be like?”

Isa smiled. “There’ll be a beach and low, rolling waves. There’ll be white buildings and golden sand. The sun won’t be warm this time of year, and the water will be very cold, but it should at least be peaceful.”

Asmir looked at his wife and asked, “If you’ve never been to this place before, then how come you know so much about it?”

“I’ve heard stories,” she said, “from Essa and Till and others who have been there. And everyone who describes the place says the same things... except for the prophets. So I’m pretty certain I know what it’ll be like.”

Asmir laughed, but that was all. Nothing more needed to be said.

--Chapter Twenty-seven: In a Lifetime (or, The Mage’s Soliloquy)

Years passed, as they always have had a tendency to do. Many things happened during this time, but few of these could be said to stray from the normal course of events so much as to be noteworthy. New lives came into the world, and old ones left. Friendships and bonds formed and broke. The once-coveted peace in the East came to an end when the King of Incria started abusing power to such an extent that the people took notice. The dragons earned and for the most part kept their peace with humanity, but so long as the occasional unfortunate accidental village burnings kept happening whenever some dragon had to sneeze, the job would not be done yet. Some in the South philosophized as to whether or not these interspecies problems would ever truly end.

For the people of The Windmill Road, happy and sad days came and went, as they did for every other place on the globe. Not all of these days need to be chronicled; time has its own way of rendering as insignificant the triumphs and tribulations of individuals, even though to those individuals, the everyday life certainly meant more than this triviality.

The township grew until it surpassed Ableridge in size and population, but it never quite increased to the point where it would be a real city. New tavern waiters and waitresses were hired, new houses went up, and new businesses formed, none of which, fortunately, stood to compete with the original tavern in the restaurant business.

The tavern added some outdoor seating, but otherwise it remained the same as it always had been...

One day, a weary man came by the town. He was old, though not quite elderly yet. He came from the East by foot—people rarely walked the Windmill Road by foot, but it did happen once in a while. His belongings he carried in a sack thrown carelessly over his right shoulder, and his eyes carried with them dark sacks of their own. He came to a door with a simple wooden sign that read, “Welcome to the Windmill Tavern. We are all of us travelers here.” He sighed, opened the door, and stepped inside.

Nobody greeted him at first, since it was noontime, and crowds were not to be expected until later in the day. Someone in the kitchen heard him enter, though; she called out, “Just a minute!”

He sat down at the bar and silently waited. The waitress came out to greet him in a matter of seconds. She was Cyres, a sixteen-year-old with red hair and a

plain but rather tidy blue outfit that suited her demeanor well.

“Welcome. Anything you’d like in particular?”

“Ale, a full pint,” said he.

She poured it for him.

“Thank you kindly.” He drank a little and asked, “Are you the daughter of the one they call Isa?”

“Hm?” She had not expected the question. “Oh... Yes. I’m Cyres.”

“Mm. It’s been so many years, and I still remember that woman.”

“Are you a friend of hers?”

“Hardly. When I left, I thought I would never come back. She probably thought so, too.”

Cyres found this a bit awkward, but he explained himself before she had time to get too confused.

“I used to be a mage,” he said. “That’s all you really need to know. I’ve retired, though, since there’s no real point now in continuing the trade.”

Cyres had heard of mages, and she used to wonder what those days must have been like, back when dragon technology and fairy electricity could pass as “magic” to uneducated people.

“At least this place hasn’t changed much,” he said. “I’m sick of all the places in the East giving up their torchlight and fireplaces for the latest electrical devices. There was a day when I could produce that kind of light and earn an average man’s yearly salary in a single hour for doing it.”

Cyres sat down a few stools down from him and said, “But wasn’t what you did dishonest, keeping your source of power secret all those years?”

“Of course it was, but that’s not the point... Here. Have you ever read a fiction book?”

“Yes, I’ve read several.”

“Those are lies, too.”

“But they’re fiction, so they’re supposed to be.”

“This is true,” said he. “But consider for a moment: have you ever read a book that was so good, you started imagining yourself in it? Have you ever just imagined what that would be like, living in your world of fantasy?”

“I suppose,” said she.

“Sometimes living a lie is that much better than living the truth. Oh, in truth I was a swindler and a fraud... But it didn’t seem to matter so long as I had ‘magic.’ You may have imagined living in fantasy, but I actually lived it. Your mother was the first person to call my bluff. In a way, I guess I should be grateful; we all have to come to terms with reality someday. So I decided I would retire here and spend the rest of my days in a village not yet completely gone to the modern era.”

Cyres thought about this. “I understand what you mean by living with magic, but why would the truth be any different here or in the East?”

“I don’t suppose you’ve ever been there?”

“East? No, I haven’t.”

The man nodded and then rested his elbows on the bar. He drank some of his ale and said, “Then you don’t know how many blessings you have. I

mentioned the torches and fireplace already. Then you have the dirt road, the old fashioned people with old fashioned clothes and manners... You don't see any of that in the East. Humans there thought they needed so many devices the dragons had, and now they find those very devices governing their lives. Twenty years ago, none of them had electricity. Now watch them try to live without it! Twenty years ago, they were content with one town clock, something your village doesn't even have. But now they need clocks attached to their own arms to make sure they get to places on time. I may have lied about my magic, but at least I knew how to control my power and use it instead of letting it use me. And even though it may not have been magic in the true sense of the word, I believe there is a real power in it. It's more than just a matter of giving people the power to do more in their daily lives; it's also a matter of forcing them to do more so they can keep up with the pace of the rest of the world.

"And now they have this war again. The one before cost thousands of lives over the course of hundreds of years. This one will cost as many by next spring, because the weapons are so much better at killing. Even some of the dragons are afraid of what a human with certain intuition and the power to make an even more powerful weapon could do. Now, I was a dark mage; I know there's a time for war. I've killed before, and frankly, I got a kick out of it sometimes. But even I have my limits. I would always give my opponent a chance to fight back. The newest weapons won't even allow for that.

"I wouldn't worry about the war spreading west this time; it'll be over before it gets that far. And given enough time, there will be more wars after this—some for good reason, some not. This war itself was for a very good reason, if you're the type who doesn't like tyranny, but the effects of it scare me, to tell the truth. How do those soldiers know what they're fighting for anymore? Is it that they are forced to fight, that they want to fight, or that they see no alternative and, as a result, do only as commanded, as told? Do they control the magic weapons, or are they themselves become the magic spell cast by other mages? Generals can be worse liars than I was, you know. Their power lies in controlling people instead of controlling technology.

"I learned a long time ago that there is no such thing as fate—the day your mother's suitor (who may or may not be your father; I don't know) proved a prophecy wrong. But just because people can control their own destiny does not mean that they always do. And that's a shame, it really is. I lived my life the way I did because I chose that path. It may have been a dirty one, but I'd choose it all over again if I could. Lots of people have that power; in fact, all of them do. There are so many things any one person can do with his or her life... Some never learn how, though, so it's not their fault. Others openly refuse, and that ends up becoming their path: a life of following orders and never choosing for themselves.

"People, in a way, need to know what power they wield. It is different from the brute strength and technology of the dragons. It is farther reaching than the influence of woodland elves and gnomes. When dragon or gnome or elf policy changes, this does not usually affect humans much. But when humans migrate or go to war or open trade routes, it affects everyone. Some humans know they have this power not only over themselves, but over the future of others. That's why

they're able to wield it over people who don't know how to use their own strengths and free will.

"For the humans who have control, there is an eternal paradox at work: on the one hand, they wish to have complete freedom in their own lives, but on the other hand, they wish to control and command everyone else so that nobody can contradict the commander's will.

"For the humans who do not have control, there is also a paradox at work: on the one hand, they have their own wishes and hopes and dreams, but on the other hand, they do not believe it is up to them to reach those goals, and so they give up or never even try in the first place.

"There are two extremes here, you see, and I've thought a lot about this: the first is where every single person in a society thinks selfishly and wants control. In that scenario, some win, some lose, and there is endless competition. The second extreme is where everyone agrees to be controlled by some fate and thus never exercise control over each other—but in turn, they give up their own aspirations.

"Each system has its obvious flaws, but the core of it is this: people can control their lives for good or for evil, or they can be controlled for good or for evil. I chose to live my life for a certain type of evil... but you know what? My end will not nearly be as pitiful as those who are controlled by someone else's idea of what is good.

"I don't know what the answer is. I don't know how humans can reach a lasting peace given the circumstances. And I don't know how any one person would have enough power to solve this once and for all... I only knew how to make my life all the more gratifying, and so I did. What more can anyone do?"

Cyres let the silence sink in for a minute. She had never in her life heard anyone go on that long on any subject. Mom had told her that the longest stories came from people who traveled too long without talking. Clearly this man had been wandering for a long, long time.

He drank the rest of his ale, but he spoke no more. Eventually, Cyres looked up and to the side. In a dark corner next to the fireplace, Isa worked calmly at knitting a scarf—a hobby she had picked up only recently.

The old man followed Cyres's gaze to look at the woman as she worked.

"You're half right, you know," said Isa. "There are those who control power, and there are those who end up controlled. But I don't think your conclusion is correct. Humans don't just have the power to control. They also have the power to teach. They can hurt, and they can help. I've lived off of the help of others, and I hope I've been able to help those I've met—in this tavern, in our town, over all the years, in the course of a lifetime. The question is not if you spent your life the way you wanted. The question is, did you help? And if not, then how long will it be before you start being part of the solution and not merely an observer of the problem?"

There was a pause, then, before the old man said, "How does a tavern waitress in such a small town learn philosophy like that? Have you seen the rest of the world and its problems? Have you gone anywhere but here in the last decade?"

“No,” said she. “But I don’t have to. The rest of the world comes here. I’ve seen the people from every place there is... I’ve heard their stories, too. Some of them are very interesting, if you listen.”

Isa winked at her daughter, who smiled back. The old man nodded and stood with his sack. He said, half in admiration and half in sarcasm, “To think I’ve traveled the world, and this one woman knows more about the meaning of life than I do. Heh.”

He was about to leave when Isa said, “It’s not really all that bad, you know. Read the sign on the front of the door. In our own way, we are all of us travelers here.”