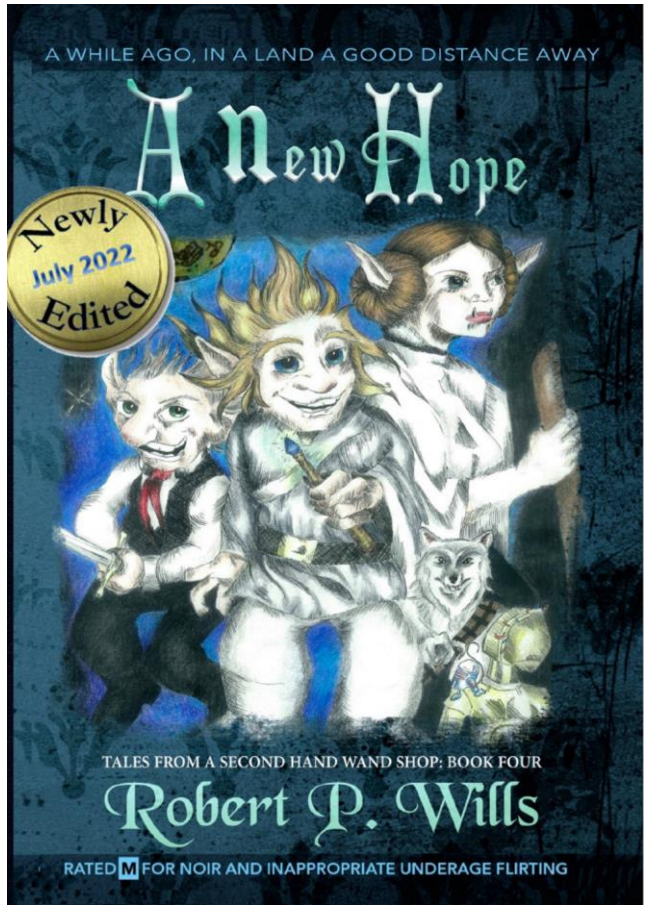
A WHILE AGO, IN A LAND A GOOD DISTANCE AWAY
A New Hope
Newly
July 2022
Edited
TALES FROM A SECOND HAND WAND SHOP: BOOK FOUR
Robert P. Wills
RATED M FOR NOIR AND INAPPROPRIATE UNDERAGE FLIRTING

A New Hope

Tales From a Second-Hand Wand Shop: Book 4

Absolutely no animals were harmed in the writing of this story. There was a certain kitten that seems to like to pounce on bare feet that was scolded. But only once because he was so cute.

Any similarity between the characters in this book and persons living or dead is purely coincidental. The author has made an effort to avoid using the names of real places or businesses in this tale. Again, similarities with like-named businesses or places is purely coincidental. And the songs. Especially the songs.

Written By Robert P. Wills

Illustrations by Daniel Young and Rio Burton and (regrettably) the Author

Cover Art by Sara Allen

Also I would like to thanks the talented Chance for his excellent cover work.
Find his music at **www.mynameischance.com**

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Drimblerod and Grimbledung- Having Minor Problems

"It all ends in one of two ways: either someone gets eaten or something blows up."

- J. Henson

"It all ends in one of two ways; either someone gets blown up or Grimbledung dies."

- R.P. Wills

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Chapter 1
A Spoonful of Arsenic and Old Lace
To help the GrimbleWolf Stay Down

Maca leaned forward on her workbench, peering closely into the large stone mortar- streams of blue smoke wafted from it. Once again, she applied the pestle to it, crushing the components further. There was a delicate balance that one had to achieve when mixing potions; if the ingredients were not combined enough the concoction would not work at all. Too much and it became unstable. Often with explosive (either before or after imbibing) results. "Arsenic" she said without looking up. She reached out her hand in the general direction of that particular vial as it lifted from its nook and moved smoothly to her hand. She unstopped it and allowed several drops of the poison to fall into the creamy mixture that was now emitting more purple smoke than blue. She put the vial down. Sooner or later, it would find its way back to its customary place. Along with its stopper.

She looked up and smiled. Akita was awake in the Constabulary. It wasn't that she had put a hex on him to control him; it was just that she found him as interesting as he found her. Knowing his whereabouts was just another way of showing her care for him. It wasn't as if she controlled his actions. Not more than any female controlled an interested male's actions, in any case[1]... "See you in a little bit, Akita," she said as she looked back down at the potion. She had been working on it the better part of two days. If it went well, it might cure Grimbledung of his Lycanthropy without killing him. Or not do anything at all. Lycanthropy was one of those infections that bound itself to its host, resisting most every effort to remove it -much like Vampirism. Still, the potion had a fair chance of ridding him of the disease. That was her hope.

"Lace." She said, holding her hand out. A ribbon of lace- from the collar of a royal garment of a particularly powerful Djinn- floated to her like a snake, twisting and writhing as it came. When it reached her, she let go of the mortar and broke a small piece of the lace off. As she crushed it into the mixture, the smoke from the pestle returned to a bluish tint. "Thanks for the lace, Aunt Pressa." She said as she let go of it. The lace slithered its way back to the shelf.

It wasn't until she was in her early teens that Maca learned of her unusual pedigree. Thinking herself just another Elf (not royal lineage, but prestigious nonetheless) she assumed that other Elves also possessed her innate abilities with magic. In fact, some did. But not to her extent. At the tender age of fifteen (in Elven years- closer to four hundred as humans counted) she had what would later be called 'The Episode'. While out wandering the countryside, she and several of her friends encountered a band of Orcs. Had there been an male in the group, the Orcs would have gone about their business. As it was, the Orcs had come across four young female Elves, far from any sort of reinforcements. After a few minutes of conversation, the Orcs decided the young females were no threat whatsoever. So they attacked. One of Maca's friends, Els'beth was her name, lost an arm almost immediately. The last thing Maca remembered was seeing her friend's cleaved arm drop to the ground as she clutched her gushing stump just above the elbow. When she regained her senses, the Orcs, and unfortunately Els'beth were dead, and they were back in the safety of their village. She would find out later that not only had she killed the four Orcs they had encountered, but their entire family line to the youngest Orcling. Wiped out of existence. It was then, while lying in her bed, that she learned the truth from her mother.

"I'm a Djinn, Maca." She had said simply.

Maca had stared with disbelief at her mother. True, she was powerful when it came to magic, and well respected by the practically-immortal Council of Elders, but still... "Does Dad know?"

Jeannie, whose name at that very moment struck Maca as absurdly un-secretive, and when she considered it, not very Elf-like, smiled at her daughter. "Yes, he does. So does the council."

Maca lay in bed, looking up at her mother, bewildered. "So what is Dad?"

"He's an Elf." The same warm smile that she had been given for centuries glowed down at her. "Of course."

Then the question she suddenly dreaded asking, but one she had to ask: "What's that make me?"

"Our daughter," Jeannie had said. The smile continued. "Just our daughter."

"But... The Orcs."

"Well, let's just say you have the best of both worlds in you." She put her hand on her daughter's shoulder. "And we'll work on making sure you know what to expect from now on. Once you've rested."

For the next half-millennia, Maca had learned and experimented. And grew powerful. Not quite as powerful as a full-fledged Djinn of course, but she was also not bound to serve any one person. And hadn't. She smiled again. Akita was sneaking up on Drimblerod. *At least he can sneak up on Gnomes.* She chuckled as she continued to grind the lace into the potion. The wisps coming from it were more green now than anything else; they were moving in the right direction on the color wheel. "Almost there, you crazy Gnome."

A thought came to her.

More a flash of a thought. A glimpse, really. "Akita?" She said as she straightened up. The potion would have to wait; Akita was going to be involved in... something. Something unpleasant. "Straighten up in here,"

she commanded as she turned to exit her backroom. Her eyes flashed red as she moved to the front door of her shop. She was sure he had been moving toward Second Hand Sorcery along with Drimblerod. Her glimpses of the future weren't always long, or telling. But they were, more often than not, moderately accurate. This one told her she had somewhere she needed to be; at Akita's side. And quickly. Frustrated, she looked left and right along the street. Unsure which way Akita and Drimblerod would be going toward the shop, she left as quickly as her Elfin form would take her- there was no need to cause widespread panic.

Yet.

Chapter 2
All's Not Quiet on the Second-Hand Sorcery Shop Front

Grimbledung sat at the counter drinking. His head was pounding and an early customer had suggested that drinking the 'hair of the dog' would cure him. When he flatly refused to do any such thing, Colossus - who was at his first day on the job in the shop mopping floors in the back- suggested some ale instead. "That I can do," Grimbledung assured him, then promptly ordered a small keg of ale from the brewery two blocks down- The Fat Blue Mooned Tyre. He'd been drinking it since breakfast. *It's made with wheat- that's a breakfast food, right?* "Bored." He said aloud. He cringed at how loud his voice sounded. "Mayhap I will try some dog hair next time." In the meanwhile, he poured himself another drink.

"Hey, Grimbledung," said Colossus, as he peeked out from the curtain.

"Yeah?" Grimbledung turned to look. "You know you can come out here, you know."

"Well, I don't want to..." *Have to talk to you, you annoyingly unstable Gnome.* Colossus opted to frown instead.

Grimbledung motioned at the Halfling. "No hard feelings, and all that. What's cooking?"

Colossus had learned very quickly that the strange Gnome often spoke literally. "Nothing. Nothing's cooking. I was thinking of taking a break."

"To cook something?"

"Didn't you just eat?"

"Well, sure a couple of times. But that was almost an hour ago."

"I'm not cooking."

"Do you want to?"

Rat opened his mouth, then decided against entering the conversation. His plan involved getting something to eat in town. In the very near future. Any sort of discussion with Grimbledung would delay the plan. Considerably. Rat also enjoyed how annoyed Grimbledung made the poor Halfling and didn't want to interfere with the current line of questioning.

"No, I don't."

"Well you know, it's not like I am ordering you to cook anything because if you didn't want to cook something that would be fine by me but if you were going to cook something I was going to suggest having meat in it because I could sure use some meat in something if you were going to cook something here in the very near future so it would be fine by me if you wanted to cook something."

Colossus let out a long sigh. Working for the Gnomes seemed like a better alternative to just being stuck in a jail cell, and if the *other* Gnome were around, would have been. "Not really. No. I just want to take a break."

"Well, I mean if you're going to take a break that means you're going to want something to eat and you really can't get something to eat unless you're cooking something and if you're going to cook something you might as well cook for two because cooking for two is just as easy as cooking for one if that's what you're going to do while you're taking a break."

Rat smiled; Grimbledung was in rare form this morning.

"No. I'm just going to take a break from mopping. Just sit for a moment."

"You sure?"

Colossus shook his head. "I'll be back in a little bit. I'm just going out back. To sit."

Grimbledung shrugged. "Suit yourself." He waved. "See you in a bit." He returned to his drink. *Wheat's a food, right?* "Sure it is. A good and proper one, at that."

Colossus had also learned that oftentimes, Grimbledung's conversations didn't necessarily involve those around him. With another headshake, he moved through the back room toward the outhouse.

Grimbledung put down his drink as Door opened and a typically large Orc entered the shop.

"You again?"

The Orc considered that. "I think so?"

"Well, if you're sure you're you then..." began Grimbledung.

"Got wand," interrupted the Orc.

"Did you find it?"

"Sure?"

"Was someone holding it while you found it?" Grimbledung was not worried about buying a stolen wand unless there were witnesses to the theft. Seeing as how Orcs were not know for any sort of sneakery, the odds were that any attempt at theft by the Orc had been loud and included a number of witnesses.

"Holding what?"

"The wand."

"Wand? No."

"You know, I'm not too sure we're going to be able to do business...."

"Have wand!" The Orc rushed the counter and leaned over it. He pointed a thick finger at Grimbledung. "You say you buy wand. And I go find wand. So now I say have wand. So you say you buy wand. So I say you buy wand!" His finger curled in, completing his fist. "SO BUY WAND ALREADY!"

Grimbledung clutched his head. "All right,. Not so loud. That's some hard to argue with reasoning, I suppose." He shrugged. A thought occurred to him. "So... We have a new rule. We can only pay a copper to repeat

customers. So here's a copper!" Grimbledung put a copper coin on the counter. "So that's the rule."

"Rule like no more eat Elves?" The Orc made a sour face- which was saying a lot for a face that looked like an Orc's face.

Grimbledung blinked. "Uhm. It's easier to follow than that."

"Hope so." Elves were not only tasty, but didn't require any cleaning at all before consuming. It was a pleasant bonus. "What rule?"

"We only buy one wand a month from a customer."

"Why?"

"Because..." Grimbledung's mind went blank.

Rat sat up next to his friend, "Because if we buy more than one wand from a customer a month, we get taxed double. You understand taxes, right? A government needs money to operate so they levy taxes on various hapless citizens who then..."

"Don't want civics lesson from Rat!"

"Shhhh!" He cringed again. "Well, that's the rule. So you aren't allowed to come back for an entire month. We don't make the rules, we just follow them," Grimbledung lied (softly). The Orc was *not* helping his pounding head.

The Orc let out a snort. "Fine. Follow that rule." The Orc turned and started to walk away.

"Hey you." Grimbledung called after him. "Where's the wand?"

The Orc stopped and turned. Door latched shut behind him. "Wot?"

"So we paid for the wand but you don't leave it," said Grimbledung testily. "We pay wand. You still have wand. We get wand. So you leave wand!" He mimicked the Orc, albeit quieter.

The Orc walked back to the counter. "Forgot." He looked down at Rat. "Got distracted by professor, here." His eyes brightened up. "There rule on eating rodents?"

"Only within city limits," said Rat.

"Just like Elves, then."

"Ahhhh," tried Grimbledung.

The Orc nodded and made his way towards Door. Door obliged by unlatching and opening for the creature.

"I think we've created a monster."

Rat shook his head, "He was always a monster. Now he's a capitalist."

"Gads!"

Rat saw his opportunity and took it. "My sentiments exactly." He licked his lips for good measure. "Well, I think I may go get a snack, now that that's over with. You all right up here by yourself?" He twitched his whiskers. "Alone with just you and that Halfling?"

"Sure. I'll just doodle until someone else comes in. Bring me back something since I really don't think he's planning on cooking."

Rat hopped off the counter. "Sure thing. I'm popping over to Nulu's. Just give a howl if you run into any trouble."

"What?"

"Or, you know, whatever bays out of your throat." Rat twitched his ragged whiskers. He was having untold fun with the double entendres even though Grimbledung didn't get most of them.

Grimbledung nodded. "Seems quiet. I got it. Don't forget to bring me something back." He tossed a silver coin to Rat. He caught it in his mouth after the first bounce. "Yeah?"

Rat nodded as he scampered out of the shop, Door obliging him by opening and closing.

"Interesting looking wand," remarked Grimbledung as he put it under the counter. He would figure out what it was later- when his head stopped hurting.

Chapter 3
Rat's Race To A Hot Tin Roof

Rat looked left and right as he stopped to sit in front of the shop. The town was growing by leaps and bounds and while Akita was happy about the increased tax base, some of the added citizens also brought a bit of lawlessness with them. Once, maybe twice possibly, Rat had been robbed by having a copper coin he was carrying in his mouth, taken from him. Now he was wary of running around with an entire silver coin in his jaws. He twitched his ragged whiskers as he decided on the best route to Big Julies. Or, if he should go to one of the closer establishments- the Braziered Bear was still up and running, and doing a brisk business in fact. The Ensorcelled Monkey had lasted all of a month before it closed with no fanfare whatsoever. In its place the Ensorcelled Ape had opened. Again with little fanfare. Truth be told, it *was* the closest establishment that served food. *But still.* Rat thought back to the evenings after the Gnomes ate there, and the number of times they had each frantically ran to the POOPA. Even he experienced some discomfort- which for a rat, that was saying a lot. After the fourth such incident, Drimblerod had declared that the establishment was never to be visited again. Even when Grimbledung suggested that 'every meal can't be bad!' Drimblerod wasn't willing to test the theory that 'five's a charm'.

Rat stood and scampered across the street, deciding to go to the Braziered Bear to get a meal for himself and something for Grimbledung. Since the Gnome had tossed him a silver coin, he was going to have to leave a hefty tip since there was no way he could carry the meal (in a handy parchment baggie) and the change. Rat had also lost a bag of food at one point. He wasn't sure how, however. He had

been walking back to the wand shop with the bag in his mouth when he had blacked out. When he came to, he was inside a box and the bag of food was missing, Even so, not only was The Bear, as the Gnomes called it, good at rapidly preparing food, they had devised a convenient way to transport it between their parchment baggies and similarly wrapped meals. He wouldn't have that luxury at Nulu's. It was also an added bonus that he could make his way almost the entire way without having to travel on any large streets- he only had to cross two.

Rat kept to the side of the alley as he scampered, keeping behind boxes, barrels, and other items as much as possible. The individual who had taken his last coin had seemed helpful and sociable. Right up to the point where he snatched the coin from Rat's mouth and tossed him into a nearby burn barrel. That was ablaze at the time. He desperately hoped he would run into that particular Human just to let him know what he thought of him. Unfortunately, being just a rat, the male's features had begun to fade from his memory so much that he probably wouldn't recognize him if he did encounter him. Or maybe it was more than one? At this point, he wasn't sure of even that detail. He was sure that the fire was blazing in the barrel.

As Rat scampered across the first of the two main roads, he zigged and zagged between wagon wheels and various beasts' hooves. As he made it to the other side of the street, he turned to look at the traffic. There was quite a bit of it lately. Julesville was well on its way of becoming a proper city. "Julesville is well on its way to becoming a proper city," he remarked.

Rightfully so.

"Hey lookit what we have here," said a strangely familiar voice from behind him.

"What's with these things?" Said another voice.

Rat turned to face the voices and saw that there were four youths lounging in the alleyway. "Morning, gents," said Rat around the coin.

"Yeah," said the first youth- a lanky Dwarf. Or as lanky as a Dwarf could be. "That's what it is."

Rat moved the coin to his front paws as he sat on his haunches. "I suppose," he offered.

The three other youths - two Dwarfs and a Human - stared at Rat. So did the Dwarf who spoke.

After a long moment, Rat twitched his whiskers. "I can see this is really turning into a full and colorful conversation, but I've got things to do."

"With that coin?" Asked the Dwarf.

Again, the voice sounded very familiar to Rat. "Yes. I'm taking it for a walk you see. Airing it out. Makes it go further when you spend it -taking it farther." Rat noticed that the youths had slowly spread out across the alleyway. "That was a play on words." The situation suddenly seemed vaguely familiar. "Shouldn't you lads be in school?"

"Don't need it." Offered the Human.

"Well, kids need schooling." Rat moved the coin to one claw and put his other on the ground, preparing to make a run for it. "From the looks of it, you especially."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, if you went to school, you'd know." Rat shook his empty claw at the youth. "Or maybe some good old-fashioned manual labor. Why don't you all run along and go to the Co-Op to do some day-jobs, or maybe the lumberyard. Tote a log. Livery to lift a bale." He smirked, "Or even give Big Julie's a shot and get some of that schooling I mentioned earlier".

"I'll show you some schooling!" Said the Dwarf on the left as he lunged at Rat.

Expecting the attack, Rat put the coin in his mouth and sprang forward into the gap that the Dwarf left as he moved forward. He

skirted around the first, then double backed around the other Dwarf, moving to an all-out run as he passed them.

"Get him!" Commanded the first Dwarf. The gang turned and gave chase to the coin-carrying rat. "Keep him in sight!"

"What's with the rats in this town?" Asked the Human boy.

Rat looked left and right as he ran, hoping to see a drainpipe that he could scamper up. Once he was on the roofs, he was home free. As the town had grown, it seemed as if a swarm of door-to-door sales folk had descended on the town, selling gutters, drainpipes, lightning rods, and several other 'home improvement' items. Rat was particularly fond of the gutters because they not only gave him free access to roofs throughout the town, it also helped keep the mud down during rainstorms. It seemed that that particular entrepreneur hadn't made it to this part of town yet.

As Rat darted down the alley, he saw three more individuals ahead of him - a female and two males. They also looked familiar. *Reinforcements? How many of these delinquents are there?* Rat recognized the female. An adult. An adult Gnomess. An adult Gnomess Master Assassin! And two Humans. Two human Magician Guild Enforcers! *That's not good!* Thought Rat as he approached the trio. *I need to tell the Gnomes!* As he closed the distance between them, the trio moved to the side of the alley, allowing Rat -and the quartet of youths- full passage. Rat took advantage of it by running straight past them, not losing any speed at all. 'That rat looks familiar' he heard the female say as he went.

A rock skidded on the ground beside Rat as he scampered in a straight line down the alley. He added some back and forth movements to his run. Another rock landed just past his head. Even though they weren't lethal to him, the rocks would hurt, and would incapacitate him so that he would lose his precious coin to the ruffians. Out of the corner of his eye, Rat saw that the Human had caught up to him. He darted through the youth's legs as he reached down to pick him up. The youth tried to grab Rat as he ran between his legs, causing him to lean over too far and fall. Rat looked back

to see him roll to a stop, get up and rejoin the chase. Since he was looking back, he saw another rock fly at him. He scampered in the opposite direction as the rock hit where he had been a fraction of a second earlier.

As Rat came to the second intersection, he moved to a straight line, looking left and right quickly to avoid any wagons, beasts, or pedestrians. As he neared the far side of the street, a pleasant looking Human female caught his eye. "Hey, lady!" he shouted. "Go to Second-Hand Sorcery and tell them Rat's in the Bear!" He finished over his shoulder as he moved past her. The youths pealed around her, causing her to spin in a circle.

The female looked at the strange group moving away from her. *Kids!* She was sure one of them said something about some sort of shop. *Second-Hand Sorcery*? That wasn't where she was going, she didn't think. Now she wasn't too sure. Maybe the wand shop was on her list of places to go. At times, her memory was kind of foggy. On top of that she was also experiencing strange periods when she didn't remember how she got someplace or what she had been doing. If those episodes kept up, she decided to speak to a physician about them. If she remembered. *Rats in the bear? What does that even mean?* With a shrug, Lisa went off in search of the Second-Hand Sorcery, not really knowing why.

"Shoot him, Lance!" The Human said.

Lance was running as fast as he could so he only nodded in reply as he pulled a slingshot from his back pocket. Even at a full sprint, the youth was very accurate with his weapon of choice- much better than his compatriot who had just been picking up and throwing rocks as he saw them. He fished one of a dozen round stones from his pouch without breaking stride and readied the weapon to fire. He tracked the rodent back and forth as it ran down the alley, deciding that when it double-backed again to the left, he should shoot it in the back. As the

best shot of the four, he knew he wouldn't miss. Just like the last time when they stole another rat's bag of food. He wasn't sure why the rats in this town not only carried around coins, but bags of food, and surprisingly enough, spoke. Since they seemed to be easy pickings, he didn't dwell on the thought long; he was too busy aiming...

Rat was breathing hard as he tried to maintain his pace. He wasn't used to running long distances; being a rat, a scamper under some boxes or a cabinet was usually enough to escape whatever issue presented itself. As he rounded a bend in the alleyway, he could see the restaurant ahead and to the left. A large bear holding a torch hung from an iron bar above the door at the large intersection. Thanks to having been in there several times, he was sure if he could make it to the door, he would be able to get the employees to get rid of his attackers. Then ahead on his right, he spied a drain spout.

Rat moved to the middle of the alley, torn between continuing farther down the alley to the restaurant or taking the closer escape route to the rooftop. *There's food at one of those locations* He thought as he darted to the left towards the restaurant, then back to the right as he waffled between the two escapes. A round rock hit beside him, brushing the fur on his shoulder as it did. *You'll never make it there! Get something to eat later!* He cut hard to the right, straight into the hammered tin downspout. As he clambered up the inside of it, he heard several more rocks strike it, trying to knock him back down to the opening.

He popped out the top of the spout into the gutter and skidded to a halt. He peered over the edge of the gutter at the four youths. They were standing in the middle of the alley, breathing hard and looking up at him. "There!" Rat called down. "You got your schooling for the day!" He snickered as he held up the coin and waved it around. "Now go do an honest day's work!" A movement from the far left youth caught his eye. Rat looked at him as a grey object filled his field of vision. Blackness enveloped him as the stone crushed the side of his head. He flipped back, head over

tail, lifeless as the coin in his claw. As he rolled into the gutter, he dropped the coin.

The youths listened attentively as the coin clattered down the tin tube, finally dropping to the dirt.

"Class dismissed," said Lance as he tucked his trusty slingshot in his back pocket.

Chapter 4
Maca's Vision - The Author's Cut

Grimbledung shook his head as the Human who called herself 'Lisa' left the store. "I'm glad *that's* over with." He returned to his doodles, unaware of the danger that he was in, or who had sent it his way.

Fate smiled.

"Two silvers. Very nice." He took another drink of ale. He considered how he felt. He did think he was feeling better. Or perhaps more drunk. Either seemed acceptable. He downed his drink.

And refilled it.

And stared out the window.

Five minutes later, Grimbledung exhaled loudly. "Bored," he said just as the door of the shop opened. He looked to see who was coming in.

Entering the shop was what had to have been the oldest looking human he had ever seen. He was bent over, and hunch-backed, and seemed to have only one arm.

Here we go. A nice quiet sale from this last shred of a human; this should be a piece of pie compared to that unstable woman. Grimbledung thought.

"You sure?"

Sure. Have I ever steered you wrong?

"Not since breakfast, I suppose."

Well, then, what have you to worry about?

Grimbledung nodded. "Greetings old timer," he offered the ancient looking man.

Drimblerod exited the carpenter's shop, across town from the wand shop. He shuffled out the door with a bar stool in each hand. "Such a nice

quiet morning," he said to no one in particular. As a female Dwarf approached, he smiled and offered: "Good morning to you".

She kept her head facing straight ahead and ignored him completely.

"Some folk." Drimblerod hefted the two stools then began to walk back to the shop.

Akita snuck silently behind the Gnome. Finally when he was right on him, he pinched Drimblerod's side "Hey! Whatcha doing?" He snarled to add to the effect.

Drimblerod dropped one of the stools as he jumped. He turned to face the Werewolf. "You trying to scare me to death or something?"

"Scare you from what? Everything's back to normal 'round here."

"Normal? This town?"

Akita grinned, "Rrrright. What I meant was everythin's nice and calm 'round here. 'Xcept of course the robbery I just broke up down the way," he pointed over his shoulder.

"Oh? Any arrests?"

Akita shook his head. "Was a youngster. Trying t'dodger a pocket."

"You softie." Drimblerod picked up the dropped stool and started walking towards the shop. Akita fell in step with him.

"Sometimes. I gave him a good scare and sent him on his way."

"Local kid?"

"Maybe. Lots of people moving to town here lately. That's why I just gave him a scare."

"Hoping that's the last you see of the little artful dodger?"

"Here's hoping. Then we can get back to that 'nice and calm 'round here' that I mentioned earlier."

Drimblerod nodded. "It's about time too. After dealing with those Halflings, their stupid booby-trapped wands, assassins of various

sizes and shapes, chasing Grimbledung over half the map, and repelling an invasion, some quiet time will be worthwhile," he said. "Fate, willing of course," he added quickly.

Akita let his tongue hang out. "Speaking of which, where's our often at the center of attention Gnome? Staying outta trouble?"

"I left him tending the shop while I went looking for some stools."

"More or new?"

Drimblerod shook his head, "The ones we have are holding up well. It's just that with the bigger floor plan, people seem to come by just to visit, and we sometimes don't have enough places for all of them to sit."

"Good problem to have."

"True. You know, I was telling Grimbledung just this morning..."

Akita turned to look up the road, his ears perked up.

Drimblerod looked as well. He didn't see anything out of the ordinary. "What?"

"Ya hear that?"

"Gads, no. What now?"

"Glass breaking someplace up the way." He quickened his pace. "And some hammering or mayhap a door slammin'."

"In the direction of the shop?" Drimblerod moved to a jog to catch up.

Akita looked back at the Gnome. "Strrrange. Someone's slamming a door over and over."

"Rolton Chips." He looked up at the heavens as he moved beside the Constable. "Come on Fate. Just a week is all I ask." He raised his hands plaintively, stools held high. "Was that too much to ask for?"

Fate shrugged.

The two started down the street quickly and at the intersection, turned left. Drimblerod could see glass and bits of wood in front of Second-Hand

Sorcery, halfway down the block. “Someone broke our window?” He could now hear Door opening and shutting loudly. Several pedestrians had stopped to watch the commotion.

“I hope that's all that's broke.” Akita moved to a trot, Drimblerod began to lose ground to him then moved to an all-out run, arms pumping back and forth, stools almost hitting his head several times just trying to keep up.

The two made it to the shop quickly, and in a tribute to Drimblerod, at almost the same time.

Akita turned to address the group that had gathered. “Go about your business. There's nothing to see, folks.”

“Are you kidding?” Said a Human. “This is the best show in town, I'd imagine.”

Several nodded in agreement. They all stayed put. In fact, more seemed to be joining what was now becoming a large crowd. At the back of the group, unnoticed by all, two Humans and a Gnomess also stopped to watch.

“We're here Door,” said Drimblerod as he stepped onto the wood planking in front of the shop. He patted the door's frame. “Relax.”

Door shuddered in response.

“Grimbledung?” Drimblerod set the barstools on the porch and entered the store through the broken window. Colossus was standing by the door to the back room. “You!”

“I was out back in the outhouse when I heard the commotion,” said Colossus. “I just got here!”

Akita bent down and sniffed the broken glass and framework. “Was a human.”

“See?” Said Colossus.

“Yeah,” said the man on the street. “Older guy, I think.”

Akita turned around. “Yeah?”

"Didn't get a good look at him though." He shrugged. "None of my business, you know."

"Then you should go elsewhere!" Growled Akita.

"Akita, get in here!"

With a headshake, Akita turned back to the shop. Door clattered at him as he entered. "Where's Grimble..." He stopped when he saw the Gnome lying on the floor. Or at least his feet because his partner was blocking the rest of him from view.

Drimblerod looked at his partner. He didn't seem to be breathing. There was a smallish (hopefully) metal rod sticking about two inches out of his chest. "I think he's dead."

"Nuts."

Drimblerod bent over to look at the metal rod. "It looks like a miniature crossbow bolt, if I had to guess."

Akita narrowed his eyes. "Hate them things; little crossbows. Only thieves and assassins use 'em."

Drimblerod stood and moved to the back of the counter. He pulled open a drawer. It was empty. "Thieves." He slammed the door shut. He looked at Colossus. "And you didn't hear anything?"

"Just the window breaking. Then when I came out here, you were coming in." He looked around the store. "I'm going back to mopping, I think."

"You do that."

Colossus obliged Drimblerod. Truth be told, he *had* sworn an oath to obey the laws of the town but if the townsfolk disregarded their own laws and killed each other, he was fine with that.

Akita's ears perked up. "That thing silver?" He moved closer to examine the miniature crossbow bolt sticking out of his chest. It looked like almost four inches of it was sticking out of the Gnome. "Wonder how long that thing is."

"I don't know. Why?"

"Just curious." Akita sniffed deeply. "There's been a few people in here today. But one of them is the same one as outside." He glanced around the store. "Plenty of smells in here." He glanced at the corner, then down at Grimbledung. "Can't tell if it's a repeat customer or just someone passing through." He smirked. "I heard that lots of people come in here on a daily basis."

Drimblerod moved back to his partner. "Poor Grimbledung." He looked down. Something didn't look right. "That's odd."

Akita poked around the showroom of the store. "What's that?"

"I could have sworn that thing was sticking further into him just a moment ago."

"Prolly was," Akita muttered. He picked up a piece of window frame and licked it.

"What?" Drimblerod looked at the Constable.

"It's not silver."

"So?"

Akita ran his tongue from one side of his mouth to the other. "It's gonna take silver to keep that crazy Gnome down from now on. And only while it's in him unless it hits him in the heart."

"Then what?"

Akita stared at him. "Then that's it; end of the story titled Grimbledung. That's what it'll take." He licked his lips "Or maybe a bunch of angry villagers that won't listen to reason who have also built a really big fire."

Drimblerod looked down just as the bolt pushed out the last little bit and clattered to the ground- all six inches of it. "What is going on?"

Grimbledung sat up suddenly. There was a neat round hole in his jerkin with a ring of blood around it. The skin peeking out from the hole was perfectly smooth. "Gah!"

Drimblerod hopped backwards. "What in the lands?!"

"See? Told ya."

“Akita!” Grimbledung looked at the Constable. “I'm glad you're here! We've been robbed.” He looked down and felt his chest. “And I've been shot!” He looked at Drimblerod. “And we've been robbed!”

“Ya get a good look at him?”

“It was a one-armed man!”

Akita grinned. “A one-armed man got the drop on you?”

“I don't think he's fully recovered yet,” offered Drimblerod.

Grimbledung's eyes got large. “Wah.... wah... wah!” he said as he pointed at the window.

“Yes, Grim; we'll have to get the window fixed,” Drimblerod reassured him. He moved beside his partner. “It's not that big a deal.”

“Bah... bah... bah!” Said Grimbledung.

“I don't think he's fully recovered yet,” said Drimblerod again. “Mayhap he needs to lay down for a little bit. Someone should send for the doc just to make sure he’s OK.”

“He’s fine,” assured Akita. “Just lie down...”

“Bah.. bah... BACK!” Interrupted Grimbledung.

“On your back is fine, I suppose.” Drimblerod patted his shoulder.

“Gah!” Grimbledung scooted backward.

Akita looked to his right and raised an eyebrow. Edward was standing there, rock still. He had a Pipe of Unobtrusiveness in his mouth. He looked at Akita, eyes wide. “Relax, Grim. I’m sure there’re witnesses that can...”

“Grimbledung, you're fine. You just need to relax.” Drimblerod interrupted as he stood up. “I'll get the stools I just bought so we can all sit down and talk this through nice and calm like.” He turned towards the door. His eyes flew wide and he stumbled back to sit on his butt beside his partner.

Semfeld was standing there holding a stool. He was also holding a wand.

Liverioso had the other stool. He seemed to have a wand as well..

Neither looked particularly happy about the whole situation- whether it was because they were having to deal with the Gnomes, or that Akita was there, was anyone's guess.

"Bah... bah... back! They're baaaack!" Said Grimbledung.

Akita gestured toward the door with his snout at Edward. "Talk to ya later, Ed" He said under his breath.

Edward nodded as he quickly moved to the door.

"Pick up a nervous twitch, *Constable*?" Chéri seemed to be smiling. And holding two miniature crossbows. Loaded miniature crossbows. Their polished silver bolts gleamed in the light pouring in through the space that once held a window. "Constable Akita Finnish. How not nice to see you again…" Began Chéri.

Maca stepped into the open space where the window had been earlier that day. No one noticed her.

"Akita?" Asked Liverioso as he looked at the Constable. "Akita *Finnish*? By any chance was Spit…"

Chéri pointed one of her crossbows at Liverioso to quiet him. "Shut UP!" She didn't even look at the Magician; her eyes were trained on the Werewolf. She was well aware of his abilities and speed. That awareness had guided her in her very specific weapon purchase. "We'll go with Drimblerod's idea. Let's all sit down and talk this through." She aimed the other miniature crossbow at Akita. "Brought you something," she said as she pulled the trigger, sending the miniature silver bolt directly at Akita's heart.

Liverioso gaped. "Stop!" The one flicker of hope he had to find his beloved was being snuffed out right before his eyes.

Akita lurched backward as the small bow straightened, hurling the silver bolt at him. He had no time for any other reaction.

"No." Said Maca. The walls shuddered at the command as it thundered through the shop.

The bolt stopped mere inches from Akita's heart, hovering in mid-air.

Everyone turned to look.

Chapter 5
If Maca Ain't Happy, Ain't *Nobody* Happy

The crossbow bolt clattered to the floor. "No," said Maca again. This time quieter.

Chéri spun around, training her other miniature crossbow at her. "Stay out of this," she warned the interloper. "You have no idea who you're dealing with."

Colossus stepped around the curtain that was still in the same place it had been earlier that day. No one noticed him.

Maca grew three feet in height and her body burst into flames. The heat emanating from her seemed to rival a volcano. Even so, her eyes glowed brighter and hotter than the rest of her. The paint on Door started to blister. It opened in a vain attempt to get some distance between it and the conflagration that was Maca. "No, *you* have no idea." She thundered. Maca raised her hand toward the foolish female that had dared to try and take Akita - *her Akita* - from her. "Not that you'll ever have another one." Her voice rumbled out of her like thunder on the Great Shambler Plains. Her eyes narrowed into slits that were as bright as the sun before it dipped below the horizon. Alarmingly, she developed fiery wings. And horns. She was, for all intents and purposes, an eight foot tall, aflame dragon. Minus the tail. "It will be as if you never..."

"Chéri!"

Chéri spun from the apparent Demon (or whatever it was) when she heard her name come from a familiar voice. "Colossus?" *It was!*

Ignoring all else, she bolted to Colossus - *her Colossus* - who was moving towards her, arms outstretched.

Maca, unsure of how to deal with the recent actions of the female that she was just about to remove from existence, watched as she and the Halfling embraced.

In fact, everyone did.

Colossus picked Chéri - *his Chéri* - off the ground and spun her around before lowering her. Their lips met and between kisses, each uttered the other's name breathlessly.

"Uhm..." said Akita. He looked at Semfeld and Liverioso for help.

"Long lost love," offered Semfeld.

Liverioso nodded. Because it was. He wiped a tear from his eye.

Akita looked down at the bolt at his feet then to Maca, who still looked like the interior of the Great Volcano of Cristal, on the Halfling Steppes. Except with wings. "Uhm..." he tried again.

"Get a room you two!" Said Grimbledung as he got to his feet. "I mean, honestly. This here is a respectable..."

He was interrupted as Drimblerod slapped his ear. "Hush!" He too wiped away a tear.

Chéri stopped kissing the Halfling and looked at the group before her. "This is Colossus."

"We heard"

Grimbledung nodded at Semfeld. "Several times, in fact."

Akita was still looking at the ~~female~~ flaming maelstrom he was very interested in as a dinner (and possibly for a good while after dinner) companion. "Maca?" He said. "Are you... all right?"

Maca lowered her hand as the flames subsided and she returned to her normal height. Even with the heat she had given off, her clothes seemed none the worse for wear. "Sorry, I was." She smiled sheepishly. "Worried for you."

"Is that what that was?" Akita let his tongue hang out one side of his mouth. "No one's ever looked that worried for me."

"Hey, wait a grain of sand," interrupted Grimbledung. "What is going on here?"

Colossus exhaled loudly. "This is Chéri. She's the one I've been waiting to come back."

"Right, right. I got *that,"* said Grimbledung, "I was there when she accidentally fell..."

"Accidentally?"

Grimbledung ignored the Gnomess, "... fell into the Abysmal Box right before we found out she was tryin' to kill Drimblerod and me." He blinked. "But mainly me..."

"Well, that was business..." Tried Chéri.

"...and now she was trying to kill Akita just a moment ago," Grimbledung pressed on. "And that, I have to tell you, isn't very neighborly. And..." He stopped and gaped at Maca, "And, what in the lands are *you*?"

Maca didn't make eye contact with Grimbledung. It wasn't something she wanted to discuss publicly. At least not until Akita was informed properly.

"I think we should all sit down and talk this over," offered Chéri. She put her arm around Colossus. "Nice and peaceful like."

Maca nodded. "I agree." She looked at the Gnomess, "So I suggest you keep your weapons stowed..." She trailed off, leaving the threat to be conveyed by her appearance just moments before.

Chéri nodded. "Agreed." She looked at Colossus. "Colossus?"

Colossus nodded at her. "I have already made that agreement and abide by it still." He pointed to the two magicians, "Bring those two stools over."

As the pair moved to the counter, Nulu ran through the broken window of the shop, please-stick in hand. She skidded to a stop behind the two men. "What is going on here?"

Akita raised a paw at her, "It's under control Nulu." He looked at the now-crowded shop, "Really it is."

Nulu looked at the group. "Who are all these folks?"

Grimbledung pointed at the two humans "They're Semfeld and Liverioso. They're Magician Guild enforcers who came back to kill me for sending them to the Great Sandy Desert. Twice."

The pair nodded. It was an accurate summary.

"And that there is Chéri. She's an assassin the Great Halfling Empire hired to kill me."

Chéri gave a meek shrug. It was also fairly accurate.

"That there is Colossus. He wants me dead as well, I think." He pointed at the Halfling.

Colossus nodded almost too quickly. When he realized it, he gave a shrug.

"That there is Akita. He's the constable."

Everyone stared at Grimbledung.

"He's doing a fine job. Except for the part where we just got robbed," he tut-tutted. "Bad form, that." He pointed at his partner. "Let's see. This is Drimblerod Axebreath. Co-owner of Second-Hand Sorcery and a good natured Gnome when all is said and done."

"Grim..." Began Nulu.

"Maca over there, well I'm not really sure *what* she is, but I think she's on our side so that's a good thing. Considering recent events."

Maca nodded, because she was. Or at the very least, she was on Akita's side.

"And I'm Grimbledung. Grimbledung Sixtoes esquire, that is. I'm an average Gnome. Of no eccentric whim, who likes to live his life, free of strife, doing whatever he thinks is best for *him*." Grimbledung put his hands

behind his back and rocked on his heels. “Oh yes, I'm a quiet living Gnome, who prefers to spend the evenings in the silence of his room; who likes an atmosphere as restful as an undiscovered tomb.”

Nulu cleared her throat.

“Oh, sorry!” Grimbledung continued: “And you’re Nulu Bentknees, of course. The delectable owner of the Duck Inn and Dine.” He smiled broadly. “How’d I do?”

Chéri shook her head. “You’re weird even for a Gnome.”

Everyone nodded.

“Delectable?”

Grimbledung hopped. “Say! Why don’t we discuss this over lunch? I’m famished you know.”

“Grim...” Nulu let the end of her please stick fall to the floor. “I don’t see...” She began. Fruitlessly.

Grimbledung nodded at Nulu, “I agree! I don’t see how we’re going to have a discussion without a meal and you know if you’re going to have a discussion, you shouldn’t do it on an empty stomach because it’s hard to make decisions when you’re thinking about your belly instead of what you’re talking about and that could happen if you’re hungry when you’re talking which I kind of am at the moment because all I’ve had is a bunch of beer today and I’d hate...”

“GRIMBLEDUNG!”

Grimbledung ducked. “What, Colossus?”

“I say we move to the Duck Inn and Dine to discuss the matters at hand.”

“And eat?”

“Yes, Grim. We can get a bite,” assured Drimblerod. “As long as everyone is on their best behavior while we’re there.”

Nods all around ensured that at least while they were eating, there wouldn’t be any issues.

"Well, I'll throw an enchantment to block up this hole until we get some carpenters over here to repair it. Maybe Pinky can send over a couple..." Drimblerod continued as he appraised the damage.

"Starving..."

Chéri shoved Grimbledung towards the door. "Honestly. I mean, honestly." She eyed Drimblerod, "Is he always like this?"

Drimblerod drew his wand. "Well, I have to say that lately..." He shrugged. "Yes. Yes he is."

With Grimbledung in the lead, they all left the shop to make their way to the Duck Inn and Dine to discuss the matters at hand.

"And eat." Reminded Grimbledung.

And eat.

Chapter 6
A Walk and a Hire

As the group made their way down the street, Grimbledung moved back and forth in front of them, extolling the virtues of a healthy diet of seven meals a day. He was walking backward when he turned a corner and ran into a trio of Halflings coming the other way. The middle one shoved him forward and he stumbled into Drimblerod. "Watch where you're going, you stupid Gnome."

"Hey now! I can't watch where I'm going walking backwards, you know."

The Halfling drew his sword. "How about I make a hole all the way through your head so then you can see out the back?"

Colossus stepped forward. "Stow that weapon, soldier," he ordered.



"Who are you?" The Halfling on the left said. He put his hand on his sword.

The rest of the group made its way around the corner, crowding the Halflings. The third Halfling drew his weapon.

"I'm Corporal Colossus. Clan of the Black Hand." He pulled his sleeve up to show the brand on his right forearm. "And the war is over." He put his hand on his sword hilt. "*Over*."

The Halflings sheathed their weapons. The absurdly overwhelming exploits of the Clan of the

The Black Hand Clan was legendary. "Over?"

"Did we win?" Asked the one on the left.

Colossus looked at the group behind him. "Let's just say it was a draw in this area."

All three Halflings frowned.

"Well that stinks; a draw is like kissing you sister," said Grimbledung.

The Halflings nodded. Because it was.

"So what are we doing now?" Asked center Halfling. "Pillaging?"

"Taking prisoners?" Offered the first.

"Razing?" Tried the third.

All three were considered viable options after a war.

Colossus shook his head. "We're getting along with each other is what we're doing." He gestured at the group accompanying him. "Everyone's just getting along."

"Huh. Never tried that before," offered the center Halfling. "What's that like?"

"It works out real well if you put some effort into it," said Nulu.

"Give it a try," said Colossus. It really didn't sound like a suggestion.

"Yes, Corporal," said the center Halfling. They all saluted smartly and continued on their way.

Akita kept quiet through the entire exchange. From past experiences with Halfling, he was prepared to knock the center one on the ground as he broke the left one's neck. His plans for the one of the right involved crushing his windpipe as he stomped on the center one's head. Colossus seemed to have found a more peaceful solution. "Nicely done," he remarked as they all continued towards the Duck Inn and Dine.

"Right? You're a natural at that, Col!" Grimbledung put his arm around Colossus' shoulder. "Mind if I call you Col?"

Colossus opened his mouth to say that in no uncertain terms, it was NOT all right for the Gnome –or anyone for that matter- to shorten his majestic name to merely 'Col'.

"Natural, I say," continued Grimbledung before Colossus could speak. "Why, you should hit up old Akita for a job as deputy. I imagine he would have just killed those three right there in the street..."

Akita didn't make eye contact with Grimbledung. "Well, in my defense..."

"... and you ended it nice and peaceful like. Having you around to deal with them Halflings for the near future is something to consider. Right Col?" Grimbledung grinned at the Halfling as he squeezed his shoulder.

Colossus shrugged. "I wasn't planning on staying around town that long." He looked at Chéri. "I've got other plans."

Grimbledung dragged him closer to Chéri then put his other arm around her. He hugged them both tightly as they walked. "Oh pushaw! Hang around for a while. It'll be fun. It'll be fun." He began to singsong it: "It'll be fun. It'll be fun! It'll be fun. Fun, fun fun!" He sing-songed as they walked. Continuously.

Colossus had just decided to go back on his word and cut the obnoxious Gnome down right then and there when they arrived at the Trolless' tavern.

Grimbledung smiled as he opened the door for everyone to enter. "If you please..." He gave a short bow.

Nulu rolled her eyes at him as she went in. "You daft Gnome. You really want that Halfling hanging around town?"

"I dunno. You'd think with other Halflings out causing trouble, we could use one on *our* payroll, right?"

Nulu considered that. "I suppose *temporarily* that would be worthwhile." She looked as the group made their way through the curtain and towards the bar. "Temporarily."

"Right, right. He can work half days or something."

Nulu shook her head; she didn't want to explain the difference between temporary and part time in the street. She wasn't sure she wanted to do it once they were inside either. "Let's go." She raised an eyebrow at the Gnome. "And get something to eat."

"Woo!" Grimbledung hopped back and forth. "Great idea! Go, go!" He pointed into the establishment. "Thataway!"

As the group sat down at a table, Nulu moved to the kitchen to have two platters of meats and cheeses put together for them. She pulled her bartender to the side. "Wil, drinks on that table need to be watered down. I don't want any of them getting tipsy and losing control." She considered that for a moment. "In fact, just bring them mead."

Wil nodded as he moved behind the bar and placed several mugs on a large tray. He filled three carafes with mead from one of the barrels behind the bar and made his way to the table.

The group ate and drank (only mead) as they talked.

Nulu hovered at the bar in order to keep a close eye on the group that had pulled two large tables together to eat and have what would hopefully be a productive, non-violent, discussion. *So far so good*, she thought as she re-wiped the mugs in front of her for the third time. She fought furiously trying to restrain herself from just moving to the table and sitting down.

"Mead? Really?" Said Grimbledung. At Nulu.

Nulu ignored him.

Chapter 7
Makuna Hah-Tatá?

"All right," said Drimblerod as the group nibbled on the meat and cheese (and of course, fresh baked crusty bread). "I think there have been a few misunderstandings and actions by all parties that I think have escalated this entire affair more than it should have."

Grimbledung nodded. "You people are out of control, says I." He waved a piece of cheese at the group. "I mean, I'm just trying to get along in life, minding my own business, not doing anything to anyone, when all of a sudden..." Grimbledung paused. Everyone was looking at him. With a smile, he continued, "And some magician guild enforcers show up and are upset with stuff I had no hand in whatsoever. I mean all that stuff was in place *before* I got here. All I brought was a plain and simple rat. Then I'm ordered by the Constable to send them away. Twice, even. Then Buttons here, shows up and she's trying to..."

"Grim," interjected Drimblerod.

"... and I mean, I don't care if the Halflings want to invade; it wasn't *me* that caused a ruckus over that. I was just happy to be waking up every morning. Happy to see the new sun show up."

"Uhm, Grimbledung," tried Drimblerod again.

"... I'm a live and let live kind of Gnome." He pointed at his partner. "He can vouch for me, I imagine. After all, all those mechanimated items are *his*. And I'm sure the Constable would be glad to tell you it was *him* who told me to teleport those two far away. Glad, I tell you..."

"Grim," tried Akita.

"... if you're going to blame anyone, I'd suggest anyone but me." He waggled his ears.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the least helpful monologue of the meal." Drimblerod gestured at his partner who had returned to eating.

Chéri shook her head. "Listen, I was given a job to do. It wasn't personal. And now that the job has been called off." She looked at Colossus, "And I've found Colossus, I don't have any issues with any of you folks".

Grimbledung nodded as he drank.

Mead.

Colossus put his arm around Chéri. "And as we agreed, I'd wait here and follow your town ordinances until my Chéri returned. I've done that, so I feel that our agreement is complete." He looked at the Gnomess. "I think we should be on our way."

Drimblerod put his hands on the table. "Well, I have to tell you that that's good to hear. I'm glad we can work through this without any displays of violence." He glanced at Maca. "And we've had some displays, I can tell you."

Maca waved her hand dismissively and picked up her mug. "You think *that* was a display? Just you wait." Grimbledung clinked his mug against hers and they both drank deeply.

"Well, I'm glad we were able to resolve that," said Chéri. She looked down at her plate. "But, there's one thing still."

Colossus leaned in to her, "What's that, dearest?"

"I hate to even mention it, considering the source of the suggestion." She eyed Grimbledung. He was rolling a piece of meat around a sliver of cheese.

Colossus nodded, understanding what his beloved was suggesting. "Well, with how everything has gone with the invasion and such, it may be best if we do remain in town for a while. Until we get settled." He looked at Akita. "And if you would like me to help keep the peace until the Halflings

in the area get the word, I think that would be fine by me." He looked at Chéri. "By us."

"After that incident with the three Halflings, I suppose I could use someone with authority that those wayward raiding parties working with old orders would recognize." Akita thought for a moment. "And since I don't have to have a vote on who I hire as deputies, I can make that happen today."

"Now we just need a place to stay until we get some money forwarded from my guild," said Chéri. "That might take a month or two with how things are."

Semfeld cleared his throat. "Now that you mention it, we are also in need of a place to stay while we try to get back in good standing with the Magician's Guild."

Liverioso nodded.

"So you're all interested in staying in town?" Drimblerod repeated loud enough for Nulu to hear easily. He motioned with his head for her to come over.

She looked in their direction as she put down a highly polished mug. With a nod, she moved to the table and stood behind Drimblerod.

"Well, then I suggest we do what the Giants do when they have a situation like this..." Interjected Grimbledung.

"Squash everyone smaller than them?" Said Drimblerod. From his experience, that was their go-to solution to most every problem.

"No, they have this phrase..."

"A phrase?" Nulu raised an eyebrow; she knew a few Giants and had never heard of such a thing.

"Well, it's more like their trouble-free philosophy."

"I'm afraid to ask," said Nulu.

"Unter der Shutz der Dunkleheit doesn't really apply, Grim." Drimblerod frowned. "I don't think it really applies any time you try to use it."

"That's Dwarves," corrected Grimbledung. "Giants use this one to be happy all their days."

"Here we go," Nulu looked at Grimbledung. "What's this so-called phrase?"

"It's really a wonderful phrase" He nodded knowingly at his partner.

Everyone looked at Grimbledung. With a smile he continued: "It's Makuna Hah- tatá, of course."

"Somehow I knew there'd be a ta-ta in there someplace," said Nulu.

"And it's no passing craze, I tell you."

"Do tell," said Semfeld.

"It means to put your behinds in your past."

"And a butt in it just for good measure..." Drimblerod looked up at Nulu for help. "Thanks Grim."

Grimbledung waggled his ears as he popped the rolled up morsel into his mouth.

"Well, moving on to something more helpful," said Nulu as she leaned forward on Drimblerod's chair. "So you folks are really interested in hanging about?" She glanced at Akita to get his opinion.

"It's a free town and all," said Akita, "and if I have your assurances that you're just in town to act like townsfolk, you'll not get any pushback from me".

"Really?" Chéri said with surprise. She was expecting some pushback from the authorities in town since until recently the group was, each in their own way, trying to destroy the place or kill certain citizens. Especially since they also happened to be sitting around the table.

Akita let his tongue hang from the side of his mouth. "The more folks in town payin' taxes, the higher my salary can go." He picked up his mug and toasted everyone around the table. "I'm all for that."

Nulu moved around a chair and sat. "Well, if you're staying in town and need a place to stay until you get settled, I'll rent you a room on the cheap." She raised an eyebrow. "As long as you behave yourselves."

Semfeld and Liverioso nodded.

"And you can pay for the room at some point in the near future."

Semfeld and Liverioso frowned.

Chéri nodded at the Trolless. "If you have a room for the two of us, I..." She hesitated. "That is... if you'll let us..."

"If you have the money, I have a room." She smiled. "As you can tell by the group of folk I associate with, racial boundaries aren't a concern."

Chéri smiled as she looked down at the table. *The strangers that I was planning on killing are more accommodating and understanding than my own family*, she thought. "That's awfully nice."

Colossus put his arm back around her. He knew what she was thinking; he was thinking the same thing.

Nulu raised an eyebrow at the two Humans. "I have a feeling you have no money."

"Well, we're out of the guild so as far as income is concerned, we're kind of out of luck."

"There's other things you can do, right?" Nulu frowned. "I mean, what do Magicians do besides extort people for money?"

"Thaay now, I'll have you know..." Began Liverioso. He stopped because that was, after all was said and done, their primary means of making money.

"We can provide other services as well," offered Semfeld. "There's pest control, minor weather issues, and the sales of novelties."

"Novelties? What's a novelty?" Asked Grimbledung.

"All thorts of things. Magic Marbles for example..."

"Magic Marbles!" Grimbledung slammed his mug onto the table. "I'm all out!"

Chéri shook her head. "Oh I really don't think that's a good idea."

More interested in making money than anything else, Liverioso ignored her, "Thure. We can magic up a bunch of those. And Swizzle Sticks even."

"Swizzle whaaaat?"

"We'll show you," said Semfeld. "Plus we can always put on a magic show."

"You'll need to talk to Big Julie about that," warned Nulu.

The pair nodded

"But, that will take time to generate some income."

Chéri nodded toward the pair. "I will cover their expenses until they get on their feet, Nulu."

Liverioso's eyes got large.

So did Semfeld's. "Well, I don't know what to say."

"Say you accept. Friends help friends when they're in trouble. Whether they're tied up by Pics, Orcs, or even a little short of coinage."

Nulu nodded. "Well, if you can't trust an assassin's word, we've got bigger troubles. That works for me."

"Uh oh," said Maca as she looked at the ceiling.

"What now?" Nulu asked worried.

Maca stood. "Sorry, folks; I've got a potion brewing and my pestle says I need to tend it." She gave a quick bow then hurried out.

"Well that was odd." Nulu glanced at Akita. "What've you gotten yourself into?"

Akita shrugged. "It's for..." He gestured his head at Grimbledung. "You know what for you know who..."

"Back on task!" Grimbledung clapped his hands together once. "So it's settled. Those two get to hang out until something comes up," he

pointed at Chéri and Colossus. "And those two will make me Magic Marbles." He pointed at the two Magicians. "And..."

"We'll see, Grim," said Drimblerod. "Let's let everyone get settled first."

"Right. And we should see about trying to get the word out to any bands of Halflings that are out and about, that the hostilities are over," said Colossus.

"We could hold a big gathering," said Chéri, "invite folks from all around and let them all know. That way we could get the word out all at once."

"That's going to bring everyone here? We could just put up signs," suggested Drimblerod.

"Make it an end of hostilities celebration. Have food and drinks and maybe some musicians," began Chéri. "I'm sure that if you pitched it like..."

Grimbledung bolted to his feet. He grabbed Chéri's face and kissed her loudly on the lips on his way up. When he was standing, he thrust his hands in the air. "A jamboree!" He did a little jig. "Oooooh, I've got some ideas that will make it the bestest jamboree Julesville has ever seen!"

"Grimbledung..." began Nulu.

"Oh, it'll be great. We'll have a band and a bunch of food. And a nice fire to roast..."

Nulu threw a roll at Grimbledung. Hard. "Akita?"

"I hereby order you to not be involved in any of the planning of any event that is to take place within township limits." He pointed his finger at Grimbledung. "Not. Involved. At. All." He narrowed his glowing eyes. "Under penalty of incarceration *with hard labor*."

"But I was thinking that if we perchance had, maybe, a bonfire to roast Marsh Mall..."

Drimblerod slapped his partner's ear. "Not another word out of you."

Grimbledung sat down. "Rolton chips."

Chéri glanced at Grimbledung. "You kiss me again you crazy Gnome and..."

Rat ran up to the table, making it in a single bound. He skidded across the table, knocking over two mugs as he went. He stopped as he hit a plate. "There's trouble!" He began as he looked around the table. "Those Enforcers and that Assass..." He sat down. "So I missed it all?"

"Where've you been Rat?"

Rat twitched his whiskers at Grimbledung. "Well, I think I might have taken a nap earlier today while up on a rooftop." He thought hard. Something else had happened but those events escaped him. "I'm pretty sure that was it." He looked around the table. "So I missed it all?"

"You missed it, all right. But everything is going to work out just fine. I mean, how could this not work out?" Said Grimbledung. "All these folk who wanted us dead are all in town at the same time, claiming they're going to behave," he continued. "I mean, there's no way this won't work out! Right?"

"I suppose not," said Rat. "Well, I guess I'll get back. Door seems pretty shook up." Rat looked around the table at the food. "You know there's a big hole where that window in the shop used to be, right?"

"Sure, sure," assured Grimbledung. "How would we not know?"

Rat shrugged. "Fine then." He grabbed a large hunk of cheese in his mouth, hopped off the table, and scrambled for the door.

"Ooooh! I can't wait to tell Big Julie the good news and about the jambor... I mean about these folks making amends!" Grimbledung hopped up from his chair, and took a handful of meat and his mug from the table.

"Don't forget our breakfast date tomorrow," reminded Nulu.

Grimbledung waved over his shoulder as he trotted out of the establishment. "Got it!"

"I really worry about that Gnome." Chéri offered.

"Breakfast date?" asked Drimblerod.

"Tell you later," said Nulu. "It's an unusual, *long* story. First let's deal with matters at hand."

"Maybe later then," suggested Drimblerod.

With nods all around, everyone returned to eating with only occasional small talk to keep them all company.

During one of the larger breaks in the conversation, a new chapter started.

Chapter 8
Settling In

"Well I'm going to head back to the shop," said Drimblerod. "I'm glad we were able to work this out amicably." He shook his head. "A little peace and quiet would be nice for a change."

"I agrrrree," said Akita. "At my current salary, I am definitely overworked." He let his tongue hang out. "I'm bushed. Wonder if I get any paid vacation."

Nulu gave Constable Akita a double take. "Vacation?"

"Sure. Now I got someone who can watch the town while I'm away." He pointed at Colossus. "Havin' a deputy's gonna work out real nice."

"You're going to run off right before the celebration?"

"Mayhap." Akita shrugged at Nulu. "What could go wrrrrong?"

"I suppose. All we have to do is keep Grimbledung's grubby little mitts out of any planning for the jamboree, and I think we'll be fine."

"How could he cause problems with a simple thing like a jamboree?" asked Liverioso.

"Remember Aution?"

Liverioso nodded at Nulu.

"It's not around anymore thanks to Grimbledung's First Annual Gatherer's Division Jamboree. That became, as Rat calls it 'The Great Aution Conflagration.'"

Semfeld sat back. "Gads." He glanced at the door the Gnome had left through. "And you still keep him around?"

"He's not nearly as unstable now."

Nulu glanced at Drimblerod. "Well, there's nowhere to go but up."

Drimblerod snapped his fingers. "Oh, except he's a WereGnome now, so if he gets too agitated, he may …change."

"OK, so back to Liv's question," began Chéri.

"He's fine," assured Drimblerod. He too looked at the door. "Really."

Akita stood. "Well, I'm going to go have a chat with someone about rrrrecent events."

"From what I've heard of it, I'd love to hear an explanation for *that* display," said Nulu. "The crowd's comments were that it was most impressive." She prodded the Werewolf in the side. "You sure know how to pick them, Akita."

Akita shook his head. "I'm not being paid enough for the events in this town," he said as he too stood. "Come by the constabulary in a couple of hours Colossus and I'll make you official." He looked between Chéri and Colossus then smirked. "Ahhh, or how about first thing in the morning?"

Colossus nodded at the constable. "That sounds better, Constable. I appreciate it."

With a wave, Akita left the diminishing number of people at the table.

"Well, I think I'm going to head back to the shop and see about making some sales before the day ends," said Drimblerod as he stood. "Rat tends to sleep more than actually assist customers. I'll see you folks later." He smiled at Chéri and the two Magician Guild Enforcers. "Welcome to Julesville. May fate smile on you, all."

Fate looked over and shrugged. A smile was hard to come by from Fate. Shrugs? She would give those out all day long.

"Am I invited to breakfast?" Drimblerod said to Nulu.

"Yes, that would be a good idea, Drim." Nulu stood. "Well, I've got a business to tend to, so if you'll excuse me," said Nulu. "Tell the clerk at the desk that you need two rooms and I've forwarded you credit for them," she said to Chéri. "How does half board sound?"

"That's very kind of you, Nulu," said Chéri. "And I'm good for it. Later this evening I will send word to the guild that I need money from my accounts there transferred here. I can't imagine it will take more than a month, two tops to arrive." She glanced mischievously at Colossus. "That is if the delivery isn't interfered with by any rogue soldiers."

"What?" Colossus' eyes got large. "Are you saying that Halfling soldiers would resort… to… well…" He frowned.

"I'm teasing, love." She leaned on him. "Besides, I'm sure the wagon trains are well armed and can manage some rabble."

Colossus' eyes got even larger. "Rabble? Are you saying that a group of trained Halfling soldiers would have a hard time taking a simple wagon train? They would be assured overwhelming success, I am sure." After he realized what he said, he looked down at the table. "What I mean is..."

"Yes?"

"You're on the right road to a smart bottom, lady."

"Here's hoping," said Chéri.

Liverioso shook his head. "Well, I apprethiate you loaning us some money to get tharted up, Chéri. We'll make sure it happens thooner instead of later."

"Oh?" Chéri smiled at him. "You have a plan already? Do tell."

Liverioso nodded. "It theems to me that with Aution destroyed, there's plenty of wood there that's free for the taking. All we need is a couple of wagons and we can go get enough to put together a shop of our own with maybe living space as well." He shrugged. "It couldn't take more than a couple of trips and then we hire…."

"Liverioso, that's a brilliant idea." Semfeld patted his partner on the shoulder. "I say we head out first thing in the morning and get the lay of Aution and bring back the first load. A place for the cost of a wagon rental and some cases of nails." He smirked. "And a couple of hammers, augers, and saws, if course."

"You know, that's not a bad idea," said Colossus.

"What?" asked Liverioso. "No, what I…"

Colossus put his hands on the table. "I'm of a mind to follow you two out there and see about getting some wood to build a little cottage of my own." He glanced at Chéri. "How's a cottage sound, Buttons?"

"But…" said Liverioso.

"Splendid." Chéri beamed. "Absolutely splendid. But remember you've a meeting with Constable Akita in the morning. I'll go with Sem and Liv and see what we can see."

Colossus frowned.

"We'll be fine, Col," assured Chéri. "After what *we've* been through, a wagon ride to Aution will be a pleasant day out."

Colossus looked at the pair of Humans. They had, after all, gotten Chéri to him safe and sound from thousands of leagues away, and from just the little he had heard, remained honorable in their actions, even rescuing her from certain death three times.[2] "That sounds good with me."

"Whath I meant wath…" Liverioso pursed his lips.

"Well, if you want," said Semfeld. "We can see what the livery has as far as wagons and what it will take to rent one for the day and let you know tonight."

"I'm going to be busy tonight," said Chéri. Almost too quickly.

There was a long pause around the table.

"Oh. Well. How about the morning then?"

Chéri nodded. "That will work better, I think." She stole a glance at Colossus. "Not too early though."

"Okay," said Liverioso.

"About nine then?" Chéri asked as she stood. She looked down at Colossus. "You coming along?"

"Abso-Lord-High-Priest-lutely."

Semfeld nodded. "Well then, Liverioso and I will go by the livery and arrange for another wagon for the morning." He patted his

partner's shoulder. "Let the clerk know we'll get our accommodations later."

"See you at breakfast then," said Chéri.

Semfeld stood. "Great. See you two at breakfast." He grabbed his partner by the shoulder and the pair left the table as quickly as was polite.

"I thought they'd never leave," said Colossus. As he stood, he swept Chéri into his arms and kissed her. "You, my dearest, I have missed." He hesitated. "Dearly."

"Ever the poet." Chéri giggled at the Halfling. "If you get our bags off the wagon, I'll get the rooms arranged and meet you upstairs. I'll leave the door open so you know which one is ours."

"Oh, I'll be right there," said Colossus as he practically jogged for the side-door. "Right there," he called over his shoulder. He banged into the door, pushing it open as he hit it. He spun in a circle and was off like a shot.

Chéri moved through the tavern and through the curtain. Ducking under it, she went to the counter. There was an ancient looking Dwarf at it. "Hello, good Dwarf. Miss Nulu has arranged for a couple of rooms for me and my friends." It was still strange to hear herself saying out loud the humans were her friends. Friends just weren't things she had. Or used to have. "If we can get a room with two beds, and one with one big bed, that would be great."

The Dwarf turned and looked at the keys hanging behind him. "Got a couple of those. You want them side by side with your companions?"

Chéri smirked. "Actually, no. How about one on one end of the hall and one on the other? I want to be able to look them in the eye in the morning."

"What?"

"Nothing. If you can put a little space between them, please."

The Dwarf nodded and took two keys off pegs. "One oh one and one oh six. Opposite ends of the hallway." He raised an eyebrow on her. "That good enough?"

"Hopefully."

"That'll be a silver a day for the two."

Chéri held up her hands. "Oh, we're on half-board as well. Nulu said."

"Then you're looking at three silver a day for the pair then." The Dwarf narrowed his eyes at the Gnomess. "Nulu said?"

"She's extended me credit until my funds arrive," she said matter-of-factly.

"Funds that are gon'ta arrive?"

Now Chéri narrowed her eyes. "Yes, from the Assassin's Guild. I have funds arriving shortly."

The Dwarf's eyes un-narrowed. "No offence meant, Miss. It's just it's not often the boss extends credit." Now his face scrunched up. "Except for those two Gnomes. I don't think they've paid full price for a meal since we set up here. Course they do tip well, so..."

"Well, my credit is good for the two rooms and meals, I assure you."

The Dwarf waved a hand at her. "Fine by me. Just fill in the register for the rooms and that will…" he was cut off as Colossus barged under the curtain holding three backpacks. He was out of breath.

"You stayin' here too, I take it?"

"I am," said Colossus as he breathed deeply.

"Ya run here, or something?"

"Had to get wagon to the livery. Run back with bags," he said breathlessly.

"In a hurry?"

Colossus eyed Chéri hungrily. "Yeah."

The Dwarf looked from the Halfling to the Gnomess and back. "Youth." He shook his head. "It's wasted on the young. So you two'll be in one oh six with the one bed. Who's in the other room, then?"

"Couple of Magician Guild Enforcers. Two human males."

The Dwarf looked at Colossus. "An assassin, two enforcers, and what're you, sonny?"

"The town's new deputy."

"Well, we could use one of those in town," said the Dwarf. "Definitely use one of them. Maybe two even."

"The two enforcers will pick up their key later, if that's all right." Colossus put two of the packs on the counter. "This is theirs."

"Ya don't have time to take the key, run the bags up to their room, then bring the key back, do ya?"

Colossus shook his head. "No. No, Sir, I do not." He eyed Chéri again. "I've got... other things on my mind."

"Off with you two youngsters then," said the Dwarf. "Want a snack sent up in an hour or so?" He handed the key to Chéri. "I don't imagine you're coming down till the morning from the looks of *this* lad."

Colossus shrugged the backpack on. "Not very likely, good Dwarf." He moved forward and tossed Chéri over his shoulder. "Some snacks and wine would be excellent." He grinned. "In an hour" he patted at Chéri's bottom. "Maybe an hour and a half." With that he bounded up the stairs.

"Youth," tut-tutted the Dwarf as he slid the two packs behind the counter. He thought back to his own younger days, centuries ago. "I'll give 'em two hours, I think."

Semfeld and Liverioso moved down the street towards the livery Stable. "Uhm, Sem?"

"Yes?"

"Do you know anything about building… anything?"

Semfeld shrugged. "What's to know? You put boards together in the shape of what you want. Then nail them together. If anything is sticking out, you cut that part off."

"I don't think it's as easy as that."

"Well, if we get in over our heads, we can see about hiring a few day-laborers. Right?"

"Right. Thath sounths good." Liverioso put his arm on his partner. "We'll be back in buthiness in no time."

As they walked, Colossus barreled by in the wagon.

"He'th in a hurry."

"We could'a taken care of the wagon if he'd have asked," said Liverioso. "I think his judgment is clouded."

"Most likely."

The pair rounded a corner onto the street the livery stable was situated.

Just as they reached the stables, Colossus barged out of it, running full tilt towards the Duck Inn and Dine.

"Hey, we can take our…" Said Semfeld to the running Halfling, but it was too late; he rounded a corner and was out of sight. "I hope he doesn't drop our bags."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, I don't think he'd stop to pick them back up again." Semfeld opened the door to the livery stable. "After you."

Liverioso gave a short bow and the two entered the stable.

Chapter 9
Breakfast, First. Aution Second

Semfeld and Liverioso sat at the table eating their breakfast. "You know, this is good, but it's not the R and E or E and R."

Liverioso nodded at his partner. He had an entire egg in his mouth.

"Slow down. Chew your food," warned Semfeld. He picked up his cup of coffee and slurped it noisily. "You gotta show you have manners, you know."

Chéri pushed around the curtain. "Morning all," she said to the room. Several patrons replied in kind, others nodded. She stretched as she walked to the table, dancing on her toes as she got there.

"Good night's sleep?" Liverioso asked.

She dropped down to the flats of her feet. "Eventually, yes."

"Fine, fine. Let's not have any more of that, if you please," said Semfeld. "It's going to get uncomfortable."

Chéri laughed. "All right. All right, I'll tone it down." She sat at the table. "So what've we got to eat?"

"Some hard boiled eggs, some toast, jam, and coffee."

"No pancakes?"

Semfeld shook his head.

Chéri put out her lower lip. "It's no R and E or E and R."

Semfeld nodded. "True."

"Maybe we can suggest pancakes and syrup."

"Well, it's hard to complain when the meal's free."

Chéri stared at Liverioso.

"What?"

Chéri spread her hands out across the table. "This isn't free. It's on *my* tab. Did you even ask for pancakes?"

Liverioso looked down at the table. "Well, no. Thith is what they brought out."

Chéri huffed and raised a hand over her head. She waved it around. After a few moments, a server approached the table.

"What'cha need?" Asked the young Human.

"Pancakes and syrup if you have them?"

The server nodded. "Sure, sure. Want some bacon to go…"

"Yes!" Interrupted Semfeld.

The server glanced at him. "Anything else?"

Semfeld blushed. "Some juice?" He added meekly.

"You're getting a 'no' on the juice; the juicer hasn't been by today. The rest is coming right up, though." With that, the waiter left to fetch the additional items.

"You never know what you'll get unless you ask for it."

Semfeld nodded at Chéri. "That's a good life lesson."[3]

"So," Chéri rubbed her hands together, "what's the story with the wagons?"

Liverioso had another egg in his mouth, so Semfeld spoke up: "Well, we talked to the livery owner and she was willing to let us have two wagons to go with the one we already have." He took a sip of his coffee. "And we worked out a deal where we'd give her nieces a birthday celebration in payment so we're not out any coins up front."

"Not her own kids?"

"She didn't mention them; just nieces."

"So just one birthday celebration for the use of two wagons?" Chéri poured herself some coffee. "Nice."

Liverioso shook his head. "No, one per kid. For the year. She has five nieces, so five celebrations and we can use the wagons three days."

"In a row?"

Semfeld opened his mouth and then closed it. "We just agreed to three days. I don't think they need to be in a row."

Liverioso nodded.

"Well, that sounds like you got a good deal then."

"She got the good deal."

"Oh?"

"Well, typically a party hosted by the Magician's Guild costs you two silver, one to the magician, one to the guild. So she's gotten five of those for using wagons that probably sit most of the time anyway."

Chéri nodded as she drank her coffee.

"Of course, it's really good advertisement. All those kids who come to the festivities will want one of their own and they'll have to pay full price." Semfeld smiled around his coffee cup.

"Nicely done, Sem."

The waiter returned to the table and put a plate with a dozen pancakes on it as well as a carafe of syrup. He removed a smaller plate from the crook of his arm. This one was heaped with strips of bacon.

"Uh oh. Nulu is giving Runion and Earl a run for their money." Semfeld paused. "Or maybe his money."

"You said it, Sem." Chéri jabbed a fork into the stack of pancakes, pulling two over to her plate. With one hand she poured syrup on them, with the other she pushed the plate towards the two men. "That's more like it."

"Where's Colossus?" Asked Semfeld.

"He's working up the strength to come down here."

"Creepily uncomfortable…"

Chéri laughed. "Sorry, Sem. He left earlier. He wanted to be early on his first day. Make a good impression and all that."

Liverioso nodded. "Well, we'll be back in time for dinner if we get moving soon."

With nods all around, the trio ate heartily. And quickly.

Chapter 10

A (Breakfast) Date With Destiny

Grimbledung hopped out of bed. "Today's the day!" He said to the empty room. He frowned. "Then maybe Nulu will leave us to our carousing. You think?" He asked his reflection in the mirror.

"Not a chance," he said to himself. "You know womenfolk. Once they get an idea in their head, it's stuck there for good." He smiled. "And you know why?"

Grimbledung shook his head- who was he to steal his own punch line? "No, why?"

"Because there's not anything in there to stop it from rattling around," he guffawed.

"That's a good one!" Grimbledung laughed back at his reflection.

"Grimbledung! Stop talking to yourself and get ready!" Drimblerod called from the other side of the door. "And don't listen to your reflection because I want you on your best behavior!"

Grimbledung's reflection waggled his ears.

So did Grimbledung.[4] "What're you thinking?"

"Drimblerod's right."

"Really?"

"Sure; I figure if nothing else, you get yourself a couple of free meals under your belt, and if you play your cards right." He winked at himself. "You might get a little free carousing. *Under your belt*!"

Grimbledung laughed at his own double entendre. "I crack me up!"

"GRIMBLEDUNG! I'm going to leave without you!"

"Coming, Drim." With one last wink, Grimbledung went to the door and opened it. "Ready when you are."

Drimblerod stared at his partner. "Mayhap you should put on some clothes before we go out in public." He raised a scornful eyebrow. "Unlike last time."

"I am telling you, I started that day *invisible*!"

"Well you're not today, so get dressed." Drimblerod turned and walked to the stairs. "Downstairs as quick as possible, Grim." He smiled mischievously as he started down, "I'd hate to be late and miss breakfast and just sit and talk on empty stomachs."

A shriek of terror from his partner let him know that they wouldn't be late. No matter what.

Less than ten minutes later, Grimbledung came hopping down the stairs as he struggled to put on a shoe. "Ready when you are!" He said as he reached the bottom. He bent down and tied the two dangling leather straps on his shoe. He straightened quickly. "Time!" He said to no one in particular, hands in the air. He put his hands on his hips and breathed deeply as he paced back and forth. He tipped a nonexistent hat at a nonexistent crowd. As usual.

Drimblerod ignored the request as he had learned that actually telling his partner the time really wasn't what he was wanting. He had never pressed the issue to figure out the strange behavior that accompanied the tying, binding, or strapping of anything. "Let's go Grim. We should be there before the womenfolk arrive." He moved to through the workroom to the front of the shop, Grimbledung close behind.

"Why's that?"

"Mon says womenfolk like it when you're there before them. It shows that you're interested and thoughtful."

"What's being on time have to do with anything?" Grimbledung tried hard to remember when he had been on-time for a good reason - besides blind luck - and none came to mind.

Drimblerod worked the catch on the door and opened it. He turned to face his partner. "Well, it shows that you're interested in them instead of anything else going on, because you stopped doing everything else to be there either on time to pick them up, or already waiting when they show up if you meet them someplace." He turned and walked out of the shop.

"You sure you can trust a Mime for advice on female kind?" Grimbledung, as he often did, peeked out of the shop and looked left and right before exiting.

"Why do you do that?"

"You never know."

"Never know what?" Drimblerod pulled Door shut. "Stay locked until we get back unless it's someone we know."

Door rattled its latch.

Drimblerod snapped his fingers. "Oh, except for the carpenters. I've got some coming over to install a window. It'll probably be a couple of them."

Door rattled its latch.

"Never know what?" Drimblerod asked again.

"Exactly! The unknown is pretty mysterious and when you don't know what the unknown is planning on doing to you, you try to keep a wary eye out for anything it might try to spring on you unknowingly."

"That's absurd. You're being paranoid."

"Ask me how many times I've been killed." Grimbledung gestured down the street towards the Duck Inn and Dine. He looked over his shoulder as they started to walk.

"Fine. How many times have you been killed?" Drimblerod asked accommodatingly.

"More than I can count."

"You can barely count; that's not really a fair question."

"*Fine*. How many times have I died just since you've met me?"

Drimblerod considered that for a moment as they walked along the side of the main road through town. He turned and looked over his shoulder then moved two paces away from this partner. "I'm not saying you're right or anything, but I think I'll walk over here."

"Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean people aren't out to get you, you know," explained Grimbledung. "Personally, I think Fate has it in for me. She's jealous or something."

Fate looked over and squinted at the annoying Gnome.

The duo walked in silence for a moment. "So what does this female look like? And don't tell me she smells like lilacs."

"She looks like a Dwarfess."

"Well, that's a pretty general term." He thought for a moment. "I mean physically what does she look like."

Grimbledung nodded. "Oh, I got you." He winked. "Well, let's see... Her withers went up to here". He gestured across his chest.

"I don't see how that's helpful."

"Well, that particular piece of information tells you a lot about a gal, let me tell you. Lots."

"Well, if you need any help getting out of the situation, I'm here to help."

"Oh?"

"Sure. I'll be your Flank Man."

"What's that?"

"It seems that that's a friend who helps another friend get the attentions of a female that he otherwise would have no chance at all with. From what I understand of it."

"So you whack them on the head when they're not looking?"

"No."

Grimbledung nodded as they reached Nulu's establishment. "That would be helpful, I'd think."

Drimblerod put his hand on the door latch and turned to face his partner. "All right, Grim. Just try to be on your best behavior while we're in here."

Grimbledung nodded. "Got it."

"Don't do anything absurd to embarrass us or especially Nulu."

Grimbledung grinned. "Got it."

"Or the female we're eating with. Because, well..."

"Yeah, I know. I can get a couple of free meals under my belt if I play my cards right." Grimbledung leered. "Wanna hear the great double entendre I made to myself?"

"No."

Grimbledung frowned. "Got it." He stuck out his lower lip.

Drimblerod opened the door and motioned for his partner to enter first. "If you please," he said with a smile.

"Now you're talking!" Grimbledung entered the foyer and immediately turned left, ducking under the curtain in one fluid, well-practiced- motion. "Morning all!" He called to the room.

Chapter 11
Drimblerod Buh!-dazzled

Several patrons nodded in response.

"I SAID MORNING ALL!"

"Good morning," said two patrons begrudgingly. Hoping the strange Gnome wouldn't engage them in conversation. Again.

"Morning, Grimbledung." said one patron in particular. He began to pray reverently that the Gnome wouldn't engage him in conversation. For a while. 'Ever again' was too much to pray for; he was just hoping for a quiet breakfast.

"Lebesch Villa! My favoritest Human in the lands!" Exclaimed Grimbledung, "How're things at the Fat Blue Moon Tyre?"

"Just fine," said Lebesch. Admittedly, since discovering his small brewery, Grimbledung had become a loyal customer, buying several mini-kegs of various ales a week, offering drinks to his hapless customers and even pointing them to his brewery. He had experienced a definite up-tick in sales thanks to the Gnome and his drinking habits. If only the practice didn't also require Grimbledung to discuss the brewing process at length each and every time he came in the brewery. Even if it was twice in one day.

"What'cha got brewing this week?"

"Well, we're working on a Fall Brunette for the festival that I think will really be worth it."

"Woo! Put me down for a mini."

"Already got one on reserve just for you." Lebesch picked up his coffee and took a long sip. Hoping Grimbledung would get the hint.

Grimbledung didn't. "You know, speaking of lautering, when you've got the wort good and hot..."

Drimblerod did; he took his partner by the shoulder and led him toward a table on the far side of the eating area.

"I've an idea for trub cones!" Grimbledung called over his shoulder as his partner pulled out a chair and guided him into it. He now had his back to the brew master. Lebesch toasted Drimblerod with his coffee cup.

"Leave poor Lebesch alone. You can talk to him later. Right now we've got other things to worry about."

Grimbledung slouched back in his chair. "We're getting a free breakfast with a female folk. What've we got to worry about?"

Drimblerod sat down across from his partner. "Well, you need to make a good impression on her. Nulu said you weren't all there when you met her last time. What's her name?"

"Mantodea Hesperus."

Drimblerod furrowed his brow. "That sounds familiar for some reason."

"Because I've probably told you that once or twice already." Grimbledung raised his hand over his head and waved it around. "Most likely."

"I suppose so." A tickling in the back of Drimblerod's brain made him think otherwise. A waitress approaching the table took the thought away from him.

"What can I get you two?" Asked the Gnomess.

Grimbledung rubbed his hands together. "Oh boy..."

"Just two coffees for now." He stared at his partner. "We're waiting for a lady guest," he reminded him sternly.

"A carafe?" Tried Grimbledung.

"A carafe of coffee and three cups sounds great," agreed Drimblerod.

The young girl frowned and walked off. Drimblerod watched her go. After a long pause he looked at his partner. "Say Grim." The first time he didn't get any sort of answer- maybe this time? "What does this lady look like?"

"She's a Dwarf."

"Yes, you've established that. And where her withers come up to. What I mean is - is she a good looking one?"

"She smelled like lilacs."

Drimblerod sat back in his chair. "My grandmother smelled like lilacs. What has Nulu gotten you into?"

"Gotten who into what?" Nulu asked as she approached the table. "What's wrong now?"

"This Dwarf you've set Grim up with. I mean, *what's she look like*?" He gestured at his partner. "Honestly, if she's interested in him..."

"I'm right here you know."

"She's a good looking Dwarfess," assured Nulu.

"That smells like lilacs?"

Nulu put a tray on the table and placed four saucers on the table. She placed matching cups on them. Grimbledung retrieved the carafe before she could and was pouring it as she placed a creamer and container of honey on the table. "That's not a bad thing."

"My *grandmother* smelled like lilacs."

"What are you saying?" Nulu slipped onto the bench beside the two Gnomes. "Exactly?"

"Well, does she look like my grandmother?"

Nulu smiled. "Well, that's hard to say. I never met your grandmother."

Drimblerod raised his hands plaintively.

"And was she a Dwarf?"

"Nulu," he said pleading. Drimblerod noticed the four saucers and cups. "Why are there four cups?"

"I told her you were coming so she said she'd bring a friend."

"Oh, Nulu," began Drimblerod as he leaned back. "You didn't. Honestly, what kind of friend is a gal interested in *him* going to have?"

"Still here..."

"She's a very good looking Dwarfess," said Nulu. "I can guarantee that at least."

"At least?" Drimblerod put his hand on the table. "*At least?*"

"Well, I've never seen her friend, so..."

Grimbledung looked up as he poured cream in his coffee. "They're here."

Drimblerod slouched down in his seat and turned to look. A good-looking Dwarfess was holding the curtain open as she stepped through it. A very good-looking Dwarfess. Her auburn hair framed her tanned skin. She was wearing linen trousers and a wide leather belt that accented her hips. A leather jerkin seemed to be trying to contain her- it only had three buttons and the middle one seemed to be straining to stay fastened. The topmost one wasn't even buttoned- it hadn't a chance in the lands to span the gap. The one over her slim waist was comfortably in place. A low-cut lace chemise worn under the jerkin provided a modicum of coverage where the jerkin failed. A single lilac was tucked behind her ear. It matched her eyes. He turned and winked at Nulu. "That one mine?"

Grimbledung added honey to his coffee and stirred it.

Nulu frowned as she stood, pulling Drimblerod up with her. Once they were standing, she shoved him. "She's not *yours* like some wagon." She turned to look at the Dwarfess. "Mantodea, how nice to see you again," she called.

Grimbledung took a tentative sip of his coffee. "Hot!" he said to no one in particular.

"She is a good looking Dwarfess, Grim. Now if only her friend is," said Drimblerod hopefully.

Then.

She.

Came.

In.

Drimblerod staggered back and used the table as support as the most beautiful Dwarfess he had ever seen ducked past the curtain. She wore a tan sundress that had blue asters embroidered on it as if they were growing up from the hem; she was perpetually standing in a bed of flowers. Her shoulder length, raven-black hair had light blue ribbons woven into it that accented her sapphire eyes. Hanging from a simple leather strap was a shard of lapis lazuli that rested in the flat space between her small, *perfect* breasts. The stone was the same color as the ribbons in her beard. She looked around the room then smiled at Drimblerod, dimples exploding into existence on her pale, perfect cheeks. Drimblerod's brain dropped to his feet. Both of them. "Buh, buh, buh," he managed to say.

Nulu looked down at Drimblerod. "You OK, down there?"

"Buh," tried Drimblerod again. He pointed in hopes that would help. "Buh?"

"I'm pretty sure that's not her name," said Nulu. "Males. Honestly. Why do we put up with you?" She asked as she moved to greet the two females.

Drimblerod couldn't answer since his brain currently occupied both of his shoes.

Chapter 12
Nets? Cast. Gnomes? Caught

"Welcome to the Duck Inn and Dine," said Nulu as she extended her hand to Mantodea.

"Thanks for inviting us for breakfast." She smiled. "This is my friend, Bextra."

Bextra took Nulu's hand. "It's nice to meet you." She looked past the Trolless, "Is that..."

Nulu looked over her shoulder. Grimbledung was sipping his coffee, ignoring everyone and everything. Drimblerod was still propped against the table, mouth agape. "Oh, yes. I'm afraid so. Let me introduce you," she gestured for the two to follow her. 'FOCUS' she mouthed at Drimblerod as she approached. He met her eyes, smiled, and closed his mouth. *Well, that's an improvement, anyway.* "Ladies, may I present Drimblerod," she said when she reached the Gnome.

Drimblerod smiled at Mantodea, furiously trying to maintain eye contact. With her eyes. "Hello. I'm Drimblerod. Drimblerod Axebreath. Co-owner of Second-Hand Sorcery."

"It's nice to meet you Drimblerod." Holding his hand, she leaned in and kissed his cheek.

She smells like lilacs! "Buh?"

"This is my friend Bextra," said Mantodea.

Drimblerod smiled and extended his hand.

Bextra smiled at the Gnome as she took his (suddenly sweaty) hand. "How do you do?" Her dimples drew him in like the great Northern Maelstrom.

Keep it simple! Don't bore her with details. Unable to follow his own instructions, he heard himself say: "Pretty well, actually. We've the best used

wand shop this side of EternCity, with if I don't mind saying so, the best customer service around anywhere. In fact…."

"Really?" Bextra looked down at their hands. She was well aware of the Gnome's business; she had done her homework.

"Yes, yes," continued Drimblerod, not knowing why, and incapable of stopping himself. "We offer all manner of wands, custom imbuing, repairs, and even testing at our cutting edge facility. You'd be hard pressed to..."

As Drimblerod spoke, Nulu casually moved beside the table and leaned over Grimbledung. She pretended to lean over and rearrange the cups and saucers as she hissed at the Gnome: "If you do not get up right now and be sociable, I'm going to reach down your throat, grab your tallywacker and pull it out your mouth turning you inside out."

Grimbledung swallowed the coffee in his mouth. Hard. He had never heard that particular threat, and wasn't even sure if it was physically possible. Even so, he didn't want to risk it. Especially when it came from a full-grown Trolless. He stood quickly and moved beside his partner. Who was still talking.

"… so overall, it's a pretty successful venture we two have." Drimblerod smiled at the Dwarfess.

She smiled back, dimples burning cute little .. well... dimples into Drimblerod's soul. She looked down at her hand still in Drimblerod's. He didn't seem to be in a hurry to let go. *Excellent*.

Nulu cleared her throat. "Why don't you folks have a seat?"

Drimblerod seemed to startle as he realized they were all standing. "Good idea, Nulu!" Still holding Bextra's hand, he half-led, half-dragged her to the table. "You can sit here," he said as he pointed with his free hand, then pushed her down into the seat. He still hadn't let go of her hand. "Grim, sit there." He gestured at the empty chair beside her.

"But I wanna..."

"SIT! THERE!" He (finally) let go of Bextra's hand. And used it to pull his partner around the table, then he half-led, half-shoved him towards the chair beside Bextra. "Sit!" He turned to Mantodea. She smiled at him and took in a deep breath. And she arched her back slightly. Her middle button seemed ready to launch itself all the way through the ring of fire and birthing dragons straight to the moon.

Drimblerod's eyes shifted down. *BUH!!* His brain began packing its bags.

Mantodea quickly scooted by the incapacitated Gnome and slid onto the bench.

Drimblerod blinked when he realized the Gnomess wasn't in front of him anymore. He turned and sat beside her, across from Bextra. "There, isn't that cozy? Boy, girl. Girl, boy."

"I suppose so," said Nulu. "So, a standard breakfast coming right up." She turned to leave then stopped herself. "Oh, everyone at the table meat eaters?"

Bextra leveled her eyes at Drimblerod. "I am," she said in a suddenly husky voice.

Drimblerod's brain finished packing and headed towards Cool Springs.

"Well that's good. It should all be ready; I'll just get your waitress out here with it all."

"Could I get a tea?" Mantodea asked.

Nulu nodded, "Sure. Any preference?"

"Do you have Elfjeeling?"

"That I do. Coming right up."

"Have some coffee, ladies," said Grimbledung as he pushed the cups and saucers to each person roughly. He figured Nulu already knew he ate anything and everything. "Coffee?" He offered the carafe to Mantodea.

She stared at him. "I just ordered tea."

"Want coffee until it gets here?" He sloshed the contents of the carafe around. "Get it while it's hot!"

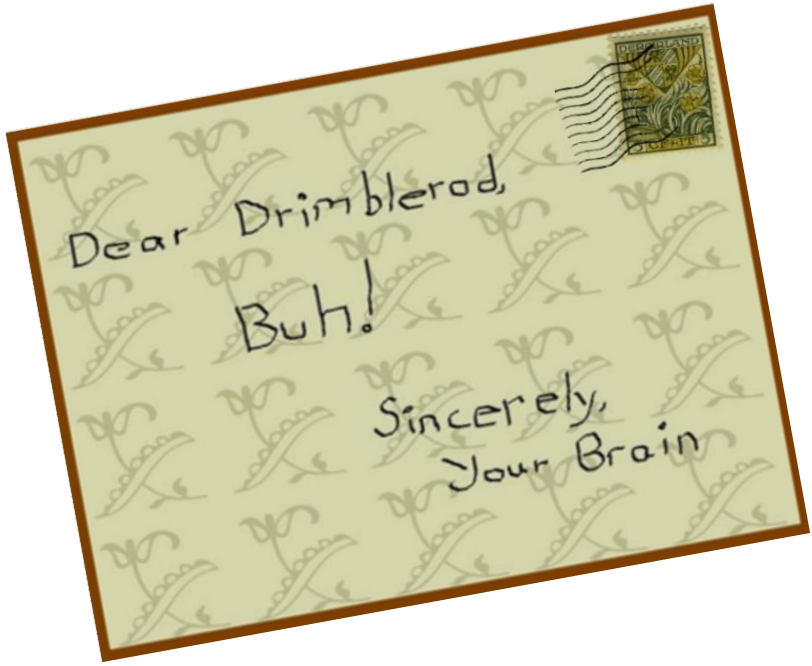
Drimblerod snatched the carafe from his partner's hand. "Will you give me that! Land sakes." He held it towards Bextra. "Coffee?"

"Please" she giggled. "Breakfast and a show?"

"More often than not," admitted Drimblerod. He poured her coffee. "Leave room for cream? Honey?"

"No thank you, dear." She smiled hungrily at him.

Drimblerod received a mental postcard from the Rolling Foothills:



"So a tea drinker, huh?" Grimbledung said as he picked up his cup. "Where'd you pick that strange habit up?"

"I think I started drinking tea while living in Australis about a century ago."

"Australis you say?"

"You've heard of it?"

"Sure!" Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Drimblerod is always pestering me about going out there! He says they speak Common and all."

Mantodea looked at Drimblerod, "Really?"

Drimblerod gulped his coffee, scalding his throat. "Sure? I've always enjoyed the ocean." He offered blindly.

"Well, that would be a fun trip" Mantodea glanced at her friend, "A really fun trip".

Bextra nodded. "Sailing always makes me happy. Out there on the trackless seas." *Far away from witnesses.*

"Well, that's a long way out. There and back," said Drimblerod. "It'd take a two weeks just to get there. And then back, not counting the time on the island." He put his coffee down. "That's a lot of time away from the shop."

"Don't you have employees?" Her inquiries indicated the shop had several.

"Well, sure we do," said Grimbledung defensively, "what kind of operation you think we're running? But we just can't leave a rodent in charge."

"Or the dummy," offered Drimblerod.

"What?" Said both of the females at the same time.

"You've got rats?" Asked Mantodea.

"In the shop?" added Bextra.

"No, of course not," said Grimbledung. "What kind of operation you think we're running?"

"But you said..."

"We have just one rat, Mantodea. And he's more family than anything else," explained Drimblerod.

"I see," she said, unconvinced.

"You two should come by the shop and get a tour," suggested Grimbledung. "Right?"

"Sure." Drimblerod leaned back as the waitress slipped the leading edge of her large tray onto the table. She carefully began to take items off it.

"Let me give you a hand," said Grimbledung as he started to slide plates off the tray. The waitress pulled her hand back as Grimbledung practically scraped all the plates onto the table. "How's that?"

"Brutishly effective?" The waitress tried.

"Thanks!"

"Need more coffee?"

"Sure!" He winked at Mantodea. "And a carafe of hot water and some tea for the lady in yon chair, if you please."

"Elfjeeling?" Confirmed the waitress.

Mantodea nodded then quickly leaned back as Grimbledung slid a plate at her. It was only the fact that it hit her in the stomach that kept it from falling to the floor. "And the player gets an ace. Since it's a Moonsday, it's worth double."

Grimbledung did a double take. "You play Trufflidge?"

"Sure," she said. "Pretty good at bluffing too."

"Really?"

She shook her head at Grimbledung with a serious look, "No, not at all, really."

"Well, that's a shame," tut-tutted Grimbledung. "You really need to be able to bluff to make any headway in Trufflidge."

She shook her head and opened her mouth to speak when Drimblerod cut her off: "No, just leave it at that. It'll make it that much more entertaining later."

"Eggs? Pancakes?" Grimbledung flourished a fork.

"How about we all serve ourselves?" Suggested Bextra. "This is a new dress and all."

Grimbledung jabbed his fork into the stack of pancakes. He pulled two of them to his plate. "Sounds good. It's an every wee-folk-for-themselves breakfast."

"No, we are *not* having one of those," warned Drimblerod. "No, no, and no."

Mantodea raised an eyebrow at him.

"If you don't trust me on anything else at this table, you need to on this."

Mantodea nodded. "I'll help myself then". She took a pancake and some of the sausage links.

Bextra followed suit, adding some scrambled eggs to her plate as well. She then poured syrup over her entire plate.

"Like syrup?" Drimblerod chuckled.

"Everything else is just a means to get syrup in me." She leveled a stare at him that would broil the heart of a Red Dragon. "Everything."

Drimblerod's brain bought a nice corner lot in Cool Springs and planted a garden. "Buh?"

Bextra smiled as she ate some of the pancakes. "Just how I like them."

"The pancakes?" Grimbledung asked.

"Sure."

"Hey, wanna see something I learned in school?"

"You went to school?" Drimblerod raised an eyebrow at his partner. "When?"

"I went. I went." He assured his partner. "Wanna see?"

"Sure?" Tried Mantodea.

Grimbledung stuck his knife into a pancake and forced the entire thing into his mouth, using the knife to push an uncooperative portion. "Pancakfmmm!" He waggled his ears.

Mantodea laughed out loud. "They didn't teach that in my school. Most impressive."

"Do *not* encourage him," warned Drimblerod. "It only gets worse if you encourage him."

"I see." She peered at Drimblerod since Grimbledung's mouth was completely full. "So what school teaches those eating techniques?"

"Well, it was more like Grim and I were eating at Big Julies School of Magic, and that's how he ended up eating." He thought back. "At least until that Halfling Corporal showed up and was upset because Grim pushed around his kid."

"Oh?"

"And he thought Grim had killed his friend's true love."

"Oh?"

"Then we were running for our lives." He cut a piece of pancake. "As usual."

"So you two lead exciting lives? Lots of risks? Potential death around every corner?"

"Much more than I'm happy with," admitted Drimblerod.

"Interesting," Mantodea said. Ominously.

"Say, you know why they call pancakes the musical fruit?"

"They do *not* call them the musical fruit. They. Do. Not."

Grimbledung frowned at his partner. "Well, that's just what I heard." He smiled. An actual point of conversation came to mind. "So what is it that you gals do, do?" *Nice!*

The two exchanged glances. "We are traders of sorts," said Bextra, "we acquire and then sell commodities."

"Like fruits and grains? Gold or gems? Elf Toes or Pickled Pixies? Dried Orc…"

"No, Grimbledung, more like businesses." Bextra interrupted as before the Gnome's choices got even more unappetizing.

"Why would someone sell a perfectly good business?"

"Well it all depends. Some folks are looking for a change of pace. Some need money right away."

"So there's a living in that?" Grimbledung put down his fork. *I could do that!*

"Sure, somewhat," said Mantodea with a warning glance at her very new partner. "But let's not talk about work over breakfast." She smiled and leaned forward so that her breasts rested on the table. "How's the wand shop endeavor working?"

Grimbledung fought to bring his eyes back to hers. "Great!" he said. "Once we combined our two shops, things have really picked up for us."

"So double the inventory of a regular shop?"

Double! Thought Grimbledung. He was no longer looking at Mantodea's eyes.

Drimblerod nodded. "Well, to start with, but we're always in the market for new wands, so we're always adding to our inventory as we sell things."

Grimbledung nodded as he put half a pancake in his mouth.

Bextra used her last remaining piece of sausage to sop up the syrup on her plate. "So when do you think we could get a tour of this wonderfully stocked shop of yours?"

Everyone else was done eating. Except Grimbledung.

"How does later on this week sound?" Drimblerod was hoping to use the extra time to tidy up the place. Having customers see the mess was one thing; a busy-looking business gave the feel of success- some place you should also spend your coins or trust your wand to be repaired properly. But, according to Mon, females preferred a tidy atmosphere.

Bextra and Mantodea exchanged glances. Mantodea nodded. "That works for us. So what time of the..."

"Evening time!" Interjected Grimbledung. "Right before dinner so we can all discuss what we all saw over food. I'm looking forward to a tour myself." *And evening time is canoodling time, you sneaky Gnome!* "Exactly my thinking!"

"That works for us then." Mantodea smiled and took a deep breath. To ensure the invitation would be sooner instead of later. "When?"

"Two!" Said Drimblerod. "T...two days from now?"

Mantodea leaned back in her chair. "That sounds fun. So we'll come by the shop. How about six."

"WHAT?!"

"She said *six*, Grim," said Drimblerod.

"Rolton Chips, you sure?"

"Yes," assured Drimblerod.

"In the evening, right?" Grimbledung said worriedly. "I'd rather not be up that early in the morning because that early, the sun isn't up yet and it's never a good thing to wake up before the sunrise because I think it annoys the sun and you end up having a bad day and you're tired a lot but when you try and take a nap later on, it never seems to work out so you..."

"Evening," assured Drimblerod. "Before dinner."

Bextra smiled at Drimblerod. "Well, that sounds like a date then."

"Yes," agreed Mantodea.

There was a short pause until Drimblerod remembered another piece of advice he had received from the Mimes. He stood up. "Well then, we will see you in two days' time at six in the evening." He shot a glance at Grimbledung. He had the other half of his pancake in his mouth.

"Sixhuffm?" He said around it.

The females stood as well. Only Grimbledung remained seated. "Then it's settled then," said Mantodea. She moved to the head of the table, followed by her partner. While they had their backs to the Gnomes, Drimblerod threw his napkin at his partner.

Grimbledung stood up and moved around the table as well. "Great, great," he mumbled. He looked back at the food still on the table. "So we're leaving then?"

"Well, we've got some business to tend to, Grimbledung. But rest assured, we'll be by in a couple of days," Mantodea smiled as she extended her hand to Grimbledung.

Grimbledung took Mantodea's hand and shook it. "It's a deal. Say, you know what also might work..."

Mantodea pulled the Gnome closer, purposely pressing her chest against his, and kissed him on the cheek. "See you then," she said.

While Mantodea was sealing the deal with Grimbledung, Bextra also extended her hand.

Taking yet another pointer from the Mimes, Drimblerod kissed it. "That was a nice breakfast." *I really need to do something for those Mimes!*

Bextra smiled at Drimblerod as she stepped close to him and gave him a hug. "Maybe we can have a more private meal later on. Just the two of us" She whispered in his ear. Then, just for fun, she added: "I'll bring the syrup."

Butterflies burst into existence in Drimblerod's stomach. Among other places. "Sure thing!"

Bextra pulled back just enough so they were face to face. "Just the two of us would be nice, I think."

At that point, Drimblerod was prepared to pitch Grimbledung into the Nearly Green Bog with a wagon tied to his neck if need-be, to get some private time with the Dwarfess. "Ab-so-lutely."

As if rehearsed, the two females extricated themselves from the Gnomes' grasp and sashayed toward the curtain. When they got there, Bextra flashed a smile, showing off her dimples yet again, and Mantodea took another deep breath. Just showing off. Without any more female-antics, the two ducked under the curtain and left.

Drimblerod staggered back and sat roughly on the closest chair at the table. Grimbledung returned to his own chair.

"Wow," said Drimblerod, finally. "You know how to pick them, Grim."

Grimbledung nodded. He already had two sausage links in his mouth.

As soon as the curtain stopped swaying, Nulu moved to the table. She flopped down into one of the chairs. It squeaked in protest. "Well?"

"That was a mighty fine breakfast, Nulu," Grimbledung offered.

Nulu slapped Grimbledung's ear. "No! Not 'well how was breakfast' you daft Gnome; 'well how did the breakfast with those two Dwarfesses go?'"

"Well, they left of their own accord, *after* the meal was done, so that's a success," offered Drimblerod.

"I showed them how I could fit an entire pancake in my mouth. So that's a success, right?"

Nulu glowered at Grimbledung. He ducked his head down and returned to finishing the food on this plate.

"I think overall it was a great first meeting."

"Just a first meeting?" Nulu raised an eyebrow at Drimblerod. "So that means there's a second, yes?"

Drimblerod nodded. "They're coming by the shop in a couple of days to get a tour."

"Oh," Nulu said, let down.

"Well, it's around dinner time, so we'll get a bite after that."

"Oh!" Nulu smiled. "That's good to hear."

Drimblerod looked conspiratorially around, "And Bextra said she wanted to get together for a private meal," he said in a hushed voice, "just the two of us".

"Oh!" Said Nulu as her eyebrows got a workout. "You sly Gnome, you."

Grimbledung looked up from his plate. "Mantodea said she wanted some alone time as well." He pointed where Mantodea had sat earlier and then at himself. "I'm not sure if she meant just her... or wait; the two of us?" He then waggled his finger at Nulu. "What've you gotten us into, Nulu?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, steady girls take work." Grimbledung exhaled. "They expect you to pay attention to them, show up for things, meet family members." He gaped. "You end up spending all your time with them."

"Yeah. That's pretty much the definition of a relationship, Grim."

"It's a lot of work, let me tell you." He took the last pancake from the serving plate, rolled it up and used it to sop up the considerable amount of syrup left on Bextra's plate. "Lots of work."

Nulu picked up a sausage link. "Well they're most likely worth it." She popped it into her mouth. "Trust me on that."

Grimbledung exhaled loudly. Again. "Well, I was on my bestest behavior so I want you to know that I was on my bestest behavior because Drim said it was important to you, for me to be on my bestest behavior."

"And I appreciate it," Nulu assured him.

Grimbledung's eyebrows did a little dance. "Yeah?"

Nulu stood. "Not that much." She started to leave, then grabbed the last sausage from the table and popped it into her mouth. "Stick with Mantodea. She's good for you, I think."

Grimbledung signed. "We'll, she's got some curves, I'll give her that."

"I'll Say!" Said Drimblerod. Almost a little too excited.

Only Nulu noticed. "So what are you saying about that other gal. Bextra?"

Drimblerod shook his head solemnly. "No, no. Now don't get me wrong. Mantodea is built like a ton of Orcs, but Bextra..." He sat back in his chair. "That Bextra."

Nulu nodded. "That's what I want to hear. You two with nice, respectable females." She pointed at Grimbledung. "So don't muck it up, mister!"

Grimbledung nodded as he put the last of the pancake in his mouth. He surveyed the table. "Welp, that's it for the food." He smiled at Nulu. "It was a great breakfast, Nulu." He reached into his pocket and pulled out two copper coins. He let them clatter to the table. "Say. Isn't it time for brunch?" He looked around the restaurant. "Brunchtime?"

"No, Grim. It's time to get the shop opened so we can make some money. We've got a window to pay for." He glanced at Nulu, "And for me to do a little tidying up for when the ladies stop by".

"That sounds like a plan." Nulu waved as she moved off to tend to her other duties.

The two Gnomes stood and stretched. "That breakfast is almost worth a nap, Drim."

"Grim..." began his partner.

"I said 'almost'. Let's go get the shop open."

Chapter 13
She's The Coal Miner's Daughter

Semfeld, Liverioso, and Chéri walked down the street towards the livery stables. "So we're getting a wagon each with a Shambler to pull it?"

"Not exactly, Chéri. We've got our one shambler. He's going to let us use another and one horse."

"I've ridden a pony once. Can a horse pull as much as a shambler?"

Semfeld shook his head. "More actually. Stronger shoulders on them. But we don't have to get it all on one trip."

After only a few minutes walking, they rounded the corner and faced the livery stable. Once inside, pleasantries were exchanged, animals were hitched to wagons, and they moved off.

Exiting the livery stable, they turned right and headed for the eastern edge of town and the road that headed north to the remains of Aution, less than two hours away.

Less than two hours later

"Thith place is a meth."

The three wagons moved down the road, riding side by side. When they encountered the occasional wagon or beast of burden, they moved to single-file. "You said it Sem," said Chéri as she looked at the large piles of charred wood. "There isn't even enough here to make a shack, much less a cottage or shop."

Semfeld pointed off to their left. "Well, let's head over to those big black piles. Maybe beyond those. I can't imagine that every piece of wood in this town burned."

"I don't know…" said Chéri. "The destruction looks complete to me. Still, it was a big town."

Semfeld nodded as he coaxed his animal - the shambler – into a trot to move ahead of the other two. "Follow well " he called over his shoulder as he approached the large piles. They appeared to be black stones. When he got next to the largest of piles, he stopped.

Liverioso and Chéri moved to either side of him. "What is thith stuff?"

"Looks like charcoal to me," said Chéri.

"Charcoal? What's that?"

"You burn down wood with a controlled fire without a lot of air and it gets all charred like. Then you can break it into easily handled chunks that you can burn later on."

"How can you burn wood and then be able to burn it later?" Semfeld leaned forward in his seat and gazed at the large pile of charcoal. "That doesn't make sense."

"It works I tell you," assured Chéri. "The Halflings've been using it for a long time."

"Well I don't know how it works but..." Began Semfeld when Chéri shushed him.

The trio watched as two Humans gingerly made their way towards what seemed to be a recently-dug hole. When the first one reached it, he unceremoniously dropped his armload of wood into it. He seemed to look straight through Chéri, Semfeld, and Liverioso. "First in," he said as he turned to return to the large pile of wood.

In actuality, his stomach dropped to his knees when he spotted the three wagons. He hoped the interlopers just moved on when they were ignored.

"Right behind you," said the other as he too dropped his load into the hole. He looked down into the hole, "One more each you think Hubert?"

"Probably, Louis," replied Hubert as he began to fill his arms with another load of wood.

Hubert moved beside his partner and also began to pick up another load of wood. He leaned in close to the other and whispered something. The other nodded as he picked up wood.

Semfeld turned back to look at Chéri, "What is going on here? These guys blind?"

Chéri watched as the two Humans filled their arms with wood then returned to the hole. "But they aren't tripping over the rubbish, and know where the hole is."

"You say something Hubert?" asked Louis. He dropped his load of wood into the hole.

"Nope," Hubert replied as he did as well. Once again, they both looked right past the trio. "Get the flint and I'll get the shovel. You filled the last one."

Louis nodded as he turned, ostensibly to get a flint.

"Uhm, hello?" Offered Chéri.

Hubert staggered back and sat down wide-eyed. "We got company!" he said, as he looked all around. "Poachers! We got charpoachers!"

Louis whirled around and drew his sword "Where? Where!" he said as he spun around, completely overlooking the two Humans and the Gnomess. "Where they at?" He pointed the sword menacingly in all directions. "Where they at?"

The seated Human crab-walked backward as the other continued to spin.

"We're not charpoachers. I'm not even sure what that is," explained Semfeld, "We're just getting some wood to do some construction is all."

"We're not looking for any trouble," offered Liverioso.

"We've found crazy, I think," said Chéri. "Blind or crazy."

"Three of them Louis!" said Hubert as he stood. He too drew a sword. His was broken halfway down but he still gestured with it menacingly.

"Listen you two, we're just passing by. Just calm down," Chéri said to the two men's backs. They were facing the wrong way. "What's the matter with you two?"

Hubert turned to face Chéri. He was a little off-center, but for the most part was looking in the correct direction. "Nothing's wrong with us. What's wrong with *you*?"

"Yeah!" offered Louis.

"Well for starters, we can see you but you can't seem to see us," said Semfeld, "I don't think that problem is on our end."

Louis moved forward, sword at the ready, "What's that got to do with anything?"

Semfeld turned to look at Chéri. Chéri shrugged back at him then got wide-eyed. She held up three fingers and pointed to the woodpile again.

"Another one?"

Chéri nodded.

"Listen, gentlemen," began Chéri as a third figure came into view around the woodpile. She glanced at Semfeld who winked back at her. He stealthily moved around the wagon, drawing his long knife as he went. He began to creep towards the hole. "We are just passing by your piles while looking for some useable wood. We didn't even realize anyone was out here," continued Chéri.

A third Human rounded the large woodpile. He had a bow drawn. He aimed it directly at Chéri. "Gnome." He said flatly. "Got us a Gnome."

"Gnomess, if you please," said Chéri. "There's no sense in being impolite." Then she realized, "Hey, you can see me!"

"Course I can see you. You're a Gnome."

"Gnomess," corrected Chéri again.

The man nodded as he scanned around, "Fine. Gnomess. Now take your hand off that weapon." He pulled the bow back fully.

Semfeld moved beside the Human wielding the half sword. He stood upright and looked back at Chéri. He shrugged. She shrugged back.

"What's the Gnome doing Leviticus ?" asked Hubert.

Leviticus narrowed his eyes, "Seems she's signaling someone".

"Heard three voices," offered Louis.

"Listen gentlemen," Chéri began. She kept her eye on the one with the weapon trained on her, "We're just passing by and we noticed the smoke. We're heading to the other side of town to look for useable wood".

"Not any of that around," said Hubert. "You all should just leave..."

"Really?" asked Semfeld, surprised. "It's a pretty big town. I can't imagine it's all gone."

"...Not even a useable stick around."

Semfeld slipped past the front two Humans and made his way beside the one with the bow. He snuck beside the bow-wielding Human then stood upright. He looked at Chéri appraisingly.

"We don't want anyone to get hurt," she said.

Semfeld nodded at her. He leaned in close and grabbed the bow in one smooth move. The arrow shot harmlessly into the air as Semfeld yanked it from surprised hands.

Leviticus jumped back. "Hey!"

"OK, I'm just going to ask because this is absolutely absurd," said Liverioso. "Why in the Lands can you see Chéri but not me or Semfeld? And why can only *you* see her and not the other two of you? And why can't you even hear us?"

"I'd like to know that too," said Semfeld into Leviticus' ear. Leviticus didn't react at all. With a frown, he poked the man in the side, who then obliged him with another jump.

"Really, we're on our way to the far side of town," assured Chéri. "And we have no quarrel with you gentlemen."

The three moved close to each other and had a heated, quiet discussion. Semfeld leaned over the top of them and listened in.[5]

"Thee? You can thee each other *and* the woodpiles!" complained Liverioso. "Abthurdness!"

After a few moments, the three turned to face Chéri. Leviticus exhaled loudly. He was the only one looking directly at her. "We've been cursed by a witch. Hubert here can only see Dwarfs. Louis can only see Centaurs. And, as you've guessed, I can only see Gnomes." He smiled genuinely, "Or Gnomesses".

"What an annoyingly unusual combination." Chéri nodded at the Human. "Thanks Dewy. And since you can't see them, I have two." She turned and smiled at Liverioso, "Friends with me. One is here and the other beside you."

"Hey there Dewy," Semfeld whispered into the Human's ear. Then he smooched it loudly.

Dewy jumped back. "Stop that!"

"That's a pretty desthpicable curse," said Liverioso, "You should get that witch to reverse it".

No one seemed to notice he said anything.

Chéri smiled. "That's a pretty despicable curse," she said, "You should get that witch to reverse it."

Dewy shrugged, "If we could find her we would. The last we heard, she's moved out near EternCity to the cliffs of Effigy. Right Louie?"

Louis nodded. Because it was true. Mostly.

"And since none of us can see Halflings, we don't stand a chance of making it out there on our own," said Hubert.

Louis smiled broadly, "But after this winter, we'll be able to hire a guide to get us out there and back with no trouble at all".

"How's that?" asked Liverioso.

"How's that?" repeated Chéri.

"Annoying..."

"Charcoal." Louis spread his arms out wide, "it's the way of the future".

"Charcoal?"

Louis nodded at Chéri, "That's right. We've started our own business. We're turning all this already charred wood into charcoal, then this winter we'll sell it and make a fortune!"

"What's so..." Liverioso just turned and looked at Chéri. "Never mind, I know. Just to be sociable, ask anyway, Chéri."

"What's so good about charcoal, Louie?"

"It burns hotter and longer than just plain wood, it's easier to carry around, and it's clean burning and you don't have to split it, and we deliver it right to your home."

"Wow, that sounds too good to be true," agreed Liverioso. "Clean burning?"

The three nodded in agreement. "Just wait until this winter," said Hubert as he stepped forward and pointed into the hole. "All your neighbors will be shivering and trying to get their fires restarted in the morning. All you'd need to do is just put a few more pieces of easy-to-carry charcoal on your fire. In minutes you'll be toasty warm."

Chéri squinted at Leviticus, "Nice sales pitch, Lewey". She considered it for a moment, "I tell you what; we're on a little trip right now but when we get back to town, I'll pitch that to a couple of businesses. If they go for it, I'll come back and be your middleman for the transaction." She smiled. "For a modest fee of five percent." *Colossus isn't the only one who can bring in money respectably.* "In fact, I'll take you to the town tavern and inn and you can give the owner a demonstration and if it works as well as you say, they'll be buying a winter's load from you." She leaned forward, "And if people see it in the Tavern, you might just have more people coming your way".

Levi grinned ear to ear. "That's a deal Miss Gnomess." His two brothers nodded in agreement. "Just wait until that stinking witch sees *us* showing up at her doorstep."

"And we'll have plenty to sell you too with all this wood." As Hubert spread his arms out wide to gesture at the wood, he back-handed Semfeld.

"Hey!" complained Semfeld as he backed away.

Hubert looked in Semfeld's direction. "Serves you right!"

"So how long till you're coming back this way?" asked Leviticus.

Chéri looked around. "It's hard to say. We're looking for some useable wood to build a couple of houses. How about in four days?"

Leviticus nodded. "We'll be here."

Semfeld bumped Hubert playfully as he moved past him, "See ya in a while Hewey."

"We'll be here" he replied.

Semfeld bounded onto his wagon. "Sounds good. Maybe you can show me how that charcoal works at cooking something."

"It works pretty well for that too," assured Leviticus.

Chéri smiled at the three as she sat back down. "Until then." She looked forward, "Let's go around to the north side of town".

The trio and their wagons skated around the piles of charcoal and out of sight.

"Why'd you mention that stupid witch?" Snarled Hubert as he slapped his brother's shoulder.

Louis shrugged in response, "I was just being sociable to see if I could get some sales. It never hurts to put it out there." He looked down into the hole, "Besides, they might just end up buying a bunch of charcoal."

"Just keep it light on information about that witch," warned Leviticus. "The less that anyone knows the better."

Hubert nodded, "Right. That stinking witch is going to reverse the curse she put on all four of us and we're going to get those wands. No stupid witch is going to stand between *us* and the fortunes of the Lost Picman's Mine."

With that, the three returned to making charcoal. One way or another they were going to confront a witch about their annoying curse, and the one affecting their sister. And come out of it not only restored to normal, but a whole lot richer. "Just don't tell sis. She'll get upset," suggested Hubert

"You mean more upset than normal, that is. The last thing we need is her deciding someone else needs to die. If she kills any more people, there's going to be a posse out here to collect her."

The other two brothers nodded. Thanks to the witch's curse, each of the brothers had selective blindness, which was bad enough- their sister however, was filled with hatred of random people she met with the belief that they had killed her parents and two other brothers. She had already murdered four in cold blood because of it. The truth of the matter was that their parents had been dead for almost a decade. Her mother of natural causes. Her father had died in a tunnel collapse in a coalmine less than five years ago. And she only had three brothers total.

The brothers didn't know it but Grimbledung currently occupied the top position on her 'needs to die' list. She just hadn't found the opportunity to put a checkmark there. Ultimately, that opportunity wouldn't present itself until a chance meeting- past the Rolling Foothills, on the way to EternCity. Over a breakfast campfire. It wouldn't happen thanks to a tarp. Really.

Chapter 14
How Much Wood Could Semfeld's Woodchuck Chuck

If Semfeld's Woodchuck Could Chuck Wood
And Weren't a Beaver

"Well that's an unusual family," said Semfeld. "Most unusual."

The trio rode in silence for a several minutes. Finally, Semfeld broke it: "Do you believe their story?"

Chéri looked at the man, "Well, even a lie can have a bit of truth woven through it. In fact, it makes it easier to keep lies straight if there are threads of truth in them. So some of that is probably true."

"Which part?"

"They may very well be cursed by a witch, Liv. I do know the part about charcoal was accurate. Like I said; I've seen Halflings use both coal and charcoal."

"I'm not thure I want to deal with them. Cursed folks usually bring trouble with them."

Semfeld nodded at his partner. "You're probably right." He smiled. "We'll send Chéri to deal with them next time."

Liverioso chuckled at his partner. "Those poor cursed folk."

Chéri glanced over from her wagon. "You two should be jesters."

"Ith there money in that?"

"No."

Liverioso pursed his lips.

"Let's see what we can get so we're back in plenty of time before dark," suggested Semfeld. He pointed into the center of Aution. "It's probably a mess in the middle, so why don't we skirt around the edges and see what we can find there?"

Liverioso nodded. “Good idea. Lead the way.”

After several minutes, the trio had ridden around the edge of the burned out town to a section that seemed to have been spared the ravages of the inferno.

“This section seems to have been spared the ravages of the inferno,” commented Chéri. “This might work out nicely.” She moved her wagon alongside a one-story building.

“Hey! That looks promithing!” Liverioso pointed at the section that seemed to have been spared the ravages of the inferno.

“Right; this section seems to have been spared the ravages of the inferno,” said Chéri. Again. “This might work out nicely.” She glanced at Semfeld. “You know, *you* haven’t been cursed, so I know you can hear me...”

“Hey!” Interrupted Semfeld.

“What now?”

Semfeld looked at Chéri. “Those guys answered my questions back there.” He frowned. “I think they can hear fine.”

“Well, we’ll just keep an eye on them and if they try anything underhanded, I’ll deal with them.” She looked back at the buildings. “As I was saying...” There were several buildings that looked more or less intact. “Yes, should work out nicely,” said Chéri, “as long as they’re unoccupied”.

“Who’d live in thith town?”

“There’s at least three we’ve met.” Chéri stopped her wagon. “We should stop back here until we’re sure what we’re dealing with.”

Semfeld and Liverioso followed suit.

“Let’s go knock first. If we need to make a run for it, the wagons are here out of the clutter and we can just head straight to get away from anything.”

“Always have an exit plan, huh?”

“It’s the first rule of an assassin,” said Chéri.

Semfeld laughed. “There’s that first rule again.” He and his partner hopped of their wagons to join Chéri in front of them.

Chéri made her way to the closest of the structures, the two humans close behind. “All the important rules are at the beginning of the list.” She knocked hard on the door. It fell in. “Well, that’s a good sign, I suppose.”

“Well, we could uthe a door, so...” He stepped forward and picked up the door. “I’ll put it on the wagon.”

“Good idea, Liv.” Semfeld moved along the wall of the structure. “I’m going to see how the sides and back look.”

“I’ll check inside, just in case.” Chéri stepped into the two-story building.

Within a few minutes, the three met back at the entrance.

“The inside’s empty.”

“No people, that’s good.”

“No furniture either; it’s been emptied out.” She put her hand on the doorframe. “So no free furniture to be had this time around.”

Semfeld nodded. “Well, maybe next time. So let’s... get...” He looked up at the building. “...to...”

“Thith looks pretty solid still. Maybe we should...” Liverioso pursed his lips.

Chéri stepped back and looked at the building as well. “It sure does. I’m surprised it fared so well.” She developed a frown as the same thought occurred to her. “Well that’s about the stupidest thing.”

The trio looked in silence at the still solid building. That they had no way of dismantling.

“Wait,” Chéri said finally. “Those two Gnomes, Drimblerod and Grimbledung have this spell that makes things smaller. Do you know that spell?”

“Minisculate?”

Chéri snapped her fingers. “Yeah! That’s the one!”

Semfeld shook his head. "No. That's not a magician's spell."

"Not a magician's spell? What's that mean? It's magic right? What's the difference?"

"Well it's magic, but it's not a magician's spell. That means that magicians don't know that spell. It's not one of the ones taught to magicians. If it hasn't been embedded into a wand, they can't just conjure it up."

"But you're not Magician Guild Enforcers anymore. Can't you learn it?"

"What, you mean right now?" Semfeld gestured around. "Here?"

Chéri nodded. "Yes."

"Well of course I can."

Chéri smiled. "Good..." She began.

"Attention any Sorcerers in the area!" Semfeld bellowed at the top of his lungs.

Chéri frowned.

"Can you please come over and spend a couple of days working on teaching me one of your spells?"

Chéri pursed her lips.

"Even though I'm not in your guild!"

Chéri shoved Semfeld. "You know you're asking for it."

"Hey! Thath would work. Why don't we just *asthk* to have the place torn down?"

"You're asking for it too," Chéri warned Liverioso.

Semfeld patted his partner's shoulder. "No, no. I think he's right." A smile came to his face. "Oh yes. We *can* do that." He took three quick steps away from the pair and then turned quickly to face them. "Ladies and Gentlemen, we sure can."

"Oh boy. I know where this is going." Chéri rolled her eyes. She moved back to the wagon and leaned on the edge. "Pray, tell me how you might do that?" She deadpanned. "I would so love to see that trick."

"Oohh! Me too! Me too!" said Liverioso. Even though it was his idea. He moved beside Chéri and leaned on the wagon. He bumped her shoulder with his. "Oh boy; front row seats to a show!"

Chéri rolled her eyes. Secretly however, she was curious what spell the magician had in his repertoire to accomplish the embarrassing task they had brought upon themselves.

"Ladies and Gentlemen. I am glad you are here," began Semfeld, "to witness this event. It is not one that happens every day, you know. Not every day."

"You know there are only two of us here, right?" Offered Chéri.

Liverioso clapped.

Chéri bumped his shoulder with hers. Hard.

Liverioso stopped clapping.

"Who among you needs a building torn down, post haste?" He pointed at Chéri? "You my dear lady? You, fine gentleman in the front row?"

Chéri sighed loudly. "I suppose I do," she admitted.

"Me too!" Exclaimed Liverioso, happy that he had been picked out of the crowd. It was a rare occurrence.

"Well then I ask for your attention please." Semfeld pulled his wand from his belt sheath inside his cloak. "Attention please! I can fix your problem with the wave of my wand. This very wand." A smile came to his face. "Oh, you've got trouble, my friends, trouble. And that starts with 'T', and that rhymes with 'B', and that stands for... Beaver!"

"And here I was expecting a turtle."

"Shhh!" Liverioso shushed Chéri. He bumped her shoulder with his- not hard however; that would have been rude.

Semfeld waved his wand over a small pile of planks.

Chéri rolled her eyes.

"Oh yes, a treat for your eyes," continued Semfeld, nonplussed. "Oh yes, your very eyes." He gestured at planks before him. "Prepare to be astounded!"

Liverioso clapped and hooted. He was always on the verge of being astounded; all he needed was a nudge in the right direction.

"Silence please. Silence," said Semfeld. He gestured at Chéri, "And please keep your children by your side..."

"What?"

Semfeld waved his wand over the planks.

The wood we have sought after
is here before us but too long to handle!
But the planks'll assist us, it's their pleasure.

Castoridae Castor!
To do the task.
Just remember; I'm your master!

He intoned.

"That's the most absurd…" began Chéri as the planks developed a furry covering. As they elongated, flat leathery looking tails grew from one end. As the boards puffed out, becoming more like fur-covered cylinders, the ends opposite the flat leathery part developed round, furry heads with short ears and two large teeth protruding from the mouths. The six furry creatures were just over two feet long each.

Liverioso clapped and hooted. Again.

Semfeld took a bow. Then another.

"I don't see how those little rodent looking things are going to help us, Liv," said Chéri.

Semfeld winked at her. "Oh, you'll see, my fair lady in the front row."

"Fair?"

Semfeld slipped his wand back into the folds of his cloak, then clapped his hands once. The creatures stood on hind legs and looked at him. "Cut this thing down into manageable sized planks." He pointed at the building beside them.

The creatures continued to look at Semfeld. He stared back for a moment. "Oh, sorry." He smiled. "Make the pieces twice my height."

Again the creatures stared at him. Semfeld shrugged then he stretched himself out on the ground. He picked up his head to look at the creatures. "Better?"

The half-dozen creatures walked from one end of the Magician to the other several times. Once they were sure they had his length, they scurried into the building.

Semfeld sat up. "Well, while they're doing that, we might as well have a snack."

Chéri shook her head. "I really hate doing this. I really do." Both of the men looked at her. Begrudgingly, she clapped several times. "Very nice, Sem."

Semfeld scrambled to his feet and executed several bows.

"Still, I just hope no one we know comes by," said Chéri.

The trio watched as the beavers scampered into the building. They could hear gnawing and the occasional clattering of a piece of wood. After not even five minutes, the building began to sway back and forth. As it leaned far to one side, all the beavers scampered out of it before it toppled over. When it landed on its side, the sides of the building gave way, spitting like a box dropped from a great height. As the sides spread outward, dozens of boards, all about twice Semfeld's length, scattered around.

"Woo hoo, Semfeld!" Liverioso clapped. "That was faster than us even getting a snack."

Chéri pushed herself off the wagon. “It sure was. Tell you what; you get the rest of that wood cut and stacked and I’ll get the sandwiches put together.”

Semfeld winked at Liverioso. “Deal.”

While Chéri busied herself with the basket of food they had gotten from the Duck Inn and Dine, Semfeld and Liverioso began to load the wood. And chat with the beavers because that was the polite thing to do.

Chapter 15

Exactly How Much Wood Semfeld's Beaver Will Chuck

(Not a lot)

"So, good beavers," said Semfeld, "you have done some really fine wood working there". Sometimes even magically created creatures needed buttering up. "You really have."

The beavers looked from the Magician to the pile that was until recently, a building. One nodded.

"Now, if you would be so kind as to cut these remaining boards into about the same length, I would appreciate it."

"Really wonderful work you've done," added Liverioso. Hopefully.

The beavers looked from the large pile, to Semfeld and back. Twice. With a shrug, they moved to the wood and began to gnaw on the boards that were sticking out at random angles. As the boards were cut, Semfeld or Liverioso would toss it to one side. Once they had a small pile, they would stop tossing the wood and would load the wagons instead. They repeated the process several times.

After almost an hour's worth of work, the two sweaty Magicians looked at their wagons. Chéri was sitting on one, eating a sandwich, watching the labor.

"Hey! I thought we were all going to eat!" Complained Liverioso.

"I thought so too." Semfeld narrowed his eyes at the Gnomess. "What gives?"

Chéri hopped off the wagon. "Well, things were going so well, I didn't want to interrupt. Then, I got hungry while watching, so I started eating my sandwich. Then you were still working so splendidly, I ended up eating all three sandwiches."

"What?" Gaped Liverioso.

Chéri laughed. "Just kidding; see? It's not as bad as you thought." She pointed at the basket. "You have two each." She smiled. "When I saw how hard you were working, I thought I'd make you up an extra one each."

"Well, that's nice." Semfeld dusted his hands off and walked to the wagon. He sat roughly. "Manual labor is definitely not something that I want to do on a regular basis."

"Me neither," agreed Liverioso as he moved to the basket. He reached in and took a large sandwich and immediately began to eat. Using his free hand, he clambered onto the wagon. "Nice, Chéri. Real nice." As he sat cross-legged, his partner moved beside him.

The beavers stopped gnawing on the planks to watch. The trio didn't notice.

Chéri grabbed a jug of mead as she too joined the pair, sitting across from them. "That's going to be a lot of wood." She looked at the pile. "How much do you figure it takes to make a house?"

Semfeld shrugged. "I don't know. We can load up the wagons and bring it all back. Then if we need another load or two, we can always come get them."

Chéri nodded as she worked on the last of her sandwich.

The beavers all sat down. Two frowned as much as a beaver was able to frown. The others narrowed their eyes.

"So do you think we should look for furniture the next time?" Liverioso asked. "We need stuff on the inside too. Some beds and stuff to put clothes in."

"Commode," offered Chéri.

"That's going to be out back."

"No, a thing that holds clothes is called a commode."

"I thought that was called a wardrobe and a commode went out back."

Chéri shrugged. "That's another name for them as well. Depends where you're from, I suppose."

The three returned to eating. Two beaver lay down. They were all still watching the humans.

Liverioso finished his sandwich. "I think I'll thave the second one for the way back." He stood on the wagon. "Want to get back to work now that we're refreshed?"

Semfeld rolled off the wagon- his sandwich was done too. "Sure thing. I feel brand new."

"I'll help too," offered Chéri. "So we can get back in time for dinner."

The three approached the group of beaver. "Why'd you stop?" Semfeld asked testily. "There's still wood to be cut."

The beavers looked at each other. Finally, one stood on its hind legs to face the Magician. It looked back at its compatriots. They nodded at him. He nodded back then turned to face Semfeld again.

"Well? Get to cutting."

The beaver snorted at him.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Chapter 16
Return of the One Armed Man!

Grimbledung sat at the counter drinking. On his way back to the shop, he had stopped at the Fat Blue Moon Tyre and purchased a small keg of ale. Again. He had been sipping it since returning to the shop and relieving Drimblerod. "Bored." He said aloud. "I'm a bored Gnome."

Door opened quickly as an Orc barreled into the shop. "It new month! Got wand."

"Here we go again." Grimbledung sighed. "Do I even need to ask if you found it?"

"Sure?"

The pair stared at each other for a long moment. Grimbledung blinked first. "Fine. Did you find it?"

"Sure."

"Was someone holding it while you found it?"

"Holding what?"

"The wand."

"Troll Lawyers say I no have to answer questions."

"You know, I'm not too sure we're going to be able to do business...."

"Have wand! It new month!" The Orc leaned over the counter and pointed a thick finger at Grimbledung. "You say you buy wand if new month. I find wand and it new month. So I say have wand and it new month. You say you buy wand if it new month. So I say you buy wand because it new month!" His finger curled in, completing his fist. Again. "SO BUY WAND!"

"BECAUSE IT NEW MONTH," Grimbledung shouted, helpfully.

"Now you get it." The Orc put the wand on the counter. "Good."

"Well that's some hard to argue with reasoning." He shrugged. "Fine, fine. Here's..." Grimbledung noticed that the Orc narrowed his eyes menacingly. "Two copper!" Grimbledung put the coins on the counter. He looked down at the wand. It was a sleek black affair that seemed to have a glow all its own. Grimbledung put his ear close to it. It had a slight hum. "Where'd you find this?"

"Troll Lawyers say..."

"Right, right. Listen Mister... ahh..." He raised his eyebrows expectedly.

The Orc stared at him.

"What's your name, Mister Orc?"

"Oh! I S'Am"

"Sam?"

"No. There pause there. PAUSE!" He frowned. "S'Am. You hear pause now?"

"Is that short for something?" Now he was curious.

The Orc nodded. But didn't respond.

"You're doing this on purpose aren't you?"

"What?"

"What's it short for, S'Am?"

"Sukla'ag Amtaore"

"That can't be right. My Orcish is kinda rusty; what's that mean in Gnomish?"

The Orc thought for a moment; his Gnomish was rusty as well. "Tongrai kan amtore suk"

"Amtore suk?"[6] Grimbledung stuck out his tongue. "That's disturbing. I think I'll stick with S'Am." Grimbledung shuddered. "So where did you find this wand?" He peered close at it again

"Found it on dead Human."

"You sure you're not amtore tan suk?"

The Orc shook his head "That gross. Was past the dead walkers going to the Salty Ocean. Near that loud lake. Found Human dead at mouth of small cave hidden by bushes. Human had bag of wands. Look like one go off. This only one in sack in one piece."

"A whole sack of wands?"

"Only this in one piece." S'Am pointed at the wand. "Guy say it from a mine full of wands. Was afraid to carry more. Got in sunlight, then BOOM!" He raised his hands towards the ceiling. "End of story."

"Well, here's two copper for it. Thanks," Grimbledung remarked, already ignoring the no-longer-a-customer Orc.

With a curt nod, the Orc stomped out of the shop.

Grimbledung picked up the wand. It felt heavier than it should have been for its size. Much heavier. "Bag full of wands," he mumbled. "Hidden entrance." He shrugged. "I'll have to tell Drim about that. Might be worth checking out." He put the wand under the counter. "Definitely worth checking out. Investigating even." Within moments, Grimbledung sighed. "Bored." He began to doodle a human walking with a bag full of wands. "This won't turn out well." He sketched a dragon in hot pursuit. "Not at all."

A gnarled looking, weather beaten husk of a human entered the store. He walked with a slight limp and his left sleeve was tied in a knot just above where his elbow should have been. "Need a wand."

"GRRR!" Said Grimbledung as the dragon gained on the hapless adventurer. He looked up at the man. "That and more, I should think."

The man wobbled his way to the counter. Grimbledung wasn't sure what was keeping the man moving, or even living at that point. He was sure he had never seen a more ancient looking human. Or one who was so battered and still moving under their own power.

"What sort of wand?" Asked Grimbledung. *Do NOT mention the missing arm or hand!!* "Are you looking to get your hands on?" *Gah!*

"Something that'll cook small critters that I snare. Nothing too lethal."

"Sure, we can take care of that and it won't cost you an arm and a leg." *Stop it!*

"Good to hear."

"You can still hear?"

"Pretty well. My eyes are sharp as they ever were too."

"Well, that's a relief. It's the best news I've had all day. Hand's down." *Stop doing that!*

The ancient man looked around the store. "Nice place here. Lots of room."

"Yep. When we rebuilt, I wanted to make sure there was plenty of elbow room for customers." *Yaaaa! Don't mention elbows; he's not got one of those either!*

"So you're gonna do that until I'm pissed off then?"

"No! No, sir!" Grimbledung crossed his arms. "I'm through, really I am." He held up his left hand. "Promise!"

The antique man stared at him. "Get me a cookin' wand."

"Right away, Sir. Got them here within arm's reach." *That was an honest mistake, really!* Grimbledung nodded as he pulled a wand from the glass counter in front of him. "This is a nice quality Incinerator wand. It'll do the trick." He held it out for the olden man to take.

"Just put her on the counter. I need to get out my coins."

"Sure, sure. I understand completely." Grimbledung put the wand on the counter. "It's a mere two copper, this high quality Incinerator." He said amicably. "Senior Citizen's special, that is."

The man eyed Grimbledung again. "Huh," he said. Finally, after digging in his money pouch, he produced a gold coin. He tossed it on the counter.

Rolton Chips! I gotta make change. Making change, while not impossible for Grimbledung, was always a challenge. "From a gold coin then." He took a deep breath and pulled open the drawer beside him. It had a random sampling of coins in it. He concentrated and

searched for copper coins. He would need several of those. "So from two copper to a gold coin then."

"I'd prefer that."

Grimbledung nodded at the man. "Right." He reached into the drawer pulling copper coins one at a time. "So two copper for the wand. Then this makes three, four five, six…" He smiled at the old man as he dug for more copper coins. "and we finish off with six, seven, eight, nine" he said as he dropped each coin onto the counter, "and this makes ten which is a silver." He smiled at the hoary man.

The man stared back.

"So that's one silver." He looked back in the drawer. There were a few silver in the drawer, and one gold coin. He made sure he stayed away from picking that one. "So one silver, then this makes two, three, four, five." He smiled. *Drimblerod will be so proud!* He continued to drop coins on the counter "Five, six, seven, and eight, and nine, and this one makes ten. Which means that this is one gold coin." *Whoo hoo!* "How's that?"

"That's about as close to right as I'd expect."

"Thanks!"

Grimbledung slid the pile of coins across the counter with one hand and pulled the gold coin into the drawer with the other. He used his belly to push the drawer shut as he stacked the coins he had just placed on the counter. As was his custom, he would stack and restack the coins to make sure they were nice and neat, then drag them all into the drawer with the rest.

"Them are my coins, sonny."

Grimbledung's hands flinched. "Oh right! Sorry. It's habit. I like stacking coins." He pushed the pile toward the decrepit man.

The primeval man took the coins one at a time and put them in an equally-aged belt pouch.

Grimbledung waited patiently.

As the man slid the last coin to the edge of the counter, he fumbled it with his fingers and it fell to the floor. Before Grimbledung could say anything, the man smiled -his first since entering the store- at him. "Be right back."

"I'll wait here."

The man took a deep breath and ducked down slowly. Grimbledung could hear his bones creak and joints pop.

"You OK down there?"

"Yep. Got my coin. Coming back up."

"Thanks for the warning."

Old man slowly appeared above the counter, all bent and stooped. And holding a mini-crossbow. A loaded mini-crossbow.

"That seems familiar."

"What?"

"Never mind. Find that down there did ya?"

"Something like that."

"Nice little weapon ya got there."

"Works good too."

"Thanks for the warning."

There was a long *uncomfortable* pause as the man pointed it at Grimbledung.

"Well. I suppose I'll see you around if you need another wand then?"

"Find a sack."

"Well, I suppose I could help you find a sack. We're a full service wand shop, you know. Try the Haberdashery down the street. It's called Everything In Between." He pointed to be helpful. "They're full of service too."

"Sonny. If you don't find a sack right now. You're going to need a full service mortician."

"Someone who builds walls?" Grimbledung stalled.

"Your life is just about over. I just thought I'd let you know. This conversation weren't any more enjoyable the first time." He raised the miniature crossbow to point at Grimbledung's chest.

"I got a sack right here!" Grimbledung pulled a sack from under the counter. "On the house."

"On the counter."

"On the counter" corrected Grimbledung. "Whatever you say. Doesn't seem as grand that way, though."

"Put it on the counter."

Grimbledung put the sack on the counter. "Well, you have a nice day, Sir. Enjoy your sack."

"Put the coins in the sack."

"But you put the coins in your own sack. Do you want me to take off your little coin sack and put it in this sack?" He asked, still stalling. *Where was Drimblerod? Or Rat?* "Or do you want me to take them out of your little sack and put them in the big sack?" *Or Nulu? Or any other principle?? Most annoying! Even a minor character would do now.* "Stupid Edward."

"That's not my name."

"Someone else I know."

The man pointed the crossbow at Grimbledung's chest. "Just about out of time, you are."

"So want me to come around and put your coin sack into this larger sack then? Doubled sacked as it were?"

"I want you to empty the drawer beside you into that sack. And I want it to be the next sound I hear. Or the next sound you hear is going to be you getting this bolt stuck in your chest. Again. And this time I won't miss your heart."

Grimbledung gulped. He opened his mouth then looked at the man's eyes. Something told him that the best course of action - the only course of action - that had any chance of keeping him attached to his life, was to put the coins in the sack. He pulled open the drawer.

Something itched at the back of his neck. He dared not scratch it...

Luckily Drimblerod had made a deposit at the bank just yesterday so there wasn't more than around three gold worth of coins in the drawer. He began to scoop the coins out and dropped them into the sack.

"GRRRRR!" He said for no reason he could think of. His fingers began to feel numb. The coins became difficult to grab.

"Hurry it up."

"GRRRRR!!"

"Stop doin' that."

Grimbledung took his time to pull out the edges of the sack, hoping that someone anyone would come in. *No such luck*. Finally, when the drawer was empty, he shrugged at the man. "Well, that's all there is to say about that." He said. Because that was.

The man nodded. "Those were good."

The itching seemed to have made its way all the way down his back, past his butt and down both legs. His feet felt as if they were on fire. He tried wiggling his toes. It didn't help. "Whaaaat? Grrrrr!"

"Last words." The man pulled the trigger on the mini-crossbow. The string thrummed as the sharp, six-inch steel bolt sprang forward almost too fast to see. At such a close range and wearing only a tunic, the bolt stuck almost the entire way into Grimbledung's chest. The man hung the weapon on his belt, took the sack and turned towards the door. "That about does it."

Door latched shut.

"Ya sure about that, are ya?"

Door clattered its latch. It was sure.

Grimbledung looked down at the very last little bit of the bolt sticking out of the very center of the chest. *I don't think that hit anything vital. That's amazing!* He thought. *Again!* Suddenly the world became

fuzzy on the edges. "Drimblerod?" he said to no one in particular. The fuzziness took on a red tint.

"Rrrrrrat?" Grimbledung growled.

Something in the way he said it made the old man turn around.

"GRRRRR!! RRRRRat!" he said again. "YAAAAA!" he screamed. It felt as if the fire in his feet had suddenly covered his entire body.

The old man's eyes got large.

Grimbledung's eyes swirled from their normal green to a dark brown, then black, as if someone had stepped into a puddle and kicked up the sediment at the bottom. Hair sprung from every inch of his body as claws snaked from the ends of his fingers. He tilted his head back and let out a high-pitched howl. GrimbledungWolf looked down at his clawed hands and panted.

"Delberger's Hand!" said someone in the room.

GrimbledungWolf looked up. He had no idea who the man was or why he was in the store. He didn't really care, either. All he knew was that he really didn't want the man inside anymore. He took a step forward, clawed feet clicking on the wood flooring. A tendril of drool started to form on the side of his mouth. He let it.

Frantically, the old man tried to reload the crossbow. Having only one hand, he was unable to. He dropped the sack and put the small loading stirrup of the weapon between his knees, pulling back the string to cock it. It made a 'Ka' sound as it dropped into the catch. He grabbed a bolt from a loop on his belt and looked up to see how much time he had.

None, apparently.

GrimbledungWolf stood right in front of the old man, panting, watching him try to load the weapon with an interested look. A growl started in the back of his throat and worked its way forward, through sharp fangs. He let it out with no impediment. "RRROOWWWRRRrrrrrr!" he growled.

Just as the old man took a step back, GrimbledungWolf reached out and grabbed the man by the shoulders, bunching up his shirt. He easily picked him up off the floor. He opened his mouth wide and leaned in.

The old man tried in vain to get his one hand up to try and protect himself, but the beast seemed to have him in an iron grip.

Door clattered open.

"Grimbledung! Let go of that old man!"

GrimbledungWolf looked at the new figure that was now in the store. He seemed vaguely familiar. Or maybe not. Just in case, he snarled at him. The tendril of drool dropped from his mouth and joined the puddle made by the old man on the floor. "GRRRRRR!" he said. Nothing else seemed to come out.

"Grimbledung?"

"RRROOWWWRRR?" That also seemed to work. He raised the old man up high off the floor. As he leaned back, he repositioned his feet in a wider stance. Preparing to...

"No! Do NOT throw him through that window! We just got it replaced. Put that old man down, Grim."

"Yeah, put me down you..."

GrimbledungWolf turned to look at the decrepit man. Grimbledung's eyes seemed to have a red glow to them now. A red glow of anger. He opened his mouth wide. He was sure the man deserved something to happen to him but for the moment, tossing him out the window or biting his head off seemed to be the only two options available. Another tendril of drool started to form. "GRRRR!" he snarled.

The door to the shop opened and Akita walked in. "I thought I heard a howl come outta..." Akita stopped to assess the situation. Drimblerod seemed safe. For the moment at least. Grimbledung seemed to be a WereGnome. For the moment, anyway. And the

ancient man he was holding seemed to be alive. For only a moment longer, unfortunately. "Grrrrimbledung!" Akita growled at the WereGnome. "Put that man down and let's rrrresolve this." He hunched over and bared his fangs.

"RRROOWWWRRRR!" said GrimbledungWolf. That didn't seem like a viable option. He looked back at the window, wondering if he could actually throw the old man all the way across the street. He leaned back to make the attempt.

"I don't think that's going to work, Akita. Grim seems pretty upset with this fellow." Drimblerod looked at the man. "What'd you do?"

"Nuthin..."

Grimbledung let go of the man with one hand and pulled the bolt from his chest. He let it clatter to the floor then resumed his two-handed grip. The man had stayed in the same position the entire time.

"Nothing, huh?"

"Well, I mighta shot him in the chest with a crossbow."

"And?" Coaxed Akita.

"Maybe tried robbing the place."

"GRRRR!" Agreed Grimbledung as he opened his mouth wide. Biting the man's head off was now the best option around.

"Hey! You're the guy who robbed us once before!" Drimblerod clenched his fists. "Why you..."

Akita's ears perked up. "Wanna go for a run?"

"What?" Drimblerod looked at the Constable. "Who me?"

"Wanna run? Huh? Wanna go for a rrrrrrun?" Akita ran in place. "Rrrrruun!"

GrimbledungWolf looked from the rickety man to the large hairy beast that seemed to be trying to get his attention. He concentrated on what it was saying because it seemed interesting in an odd way.

"Let's go for a rrrrrun. Rrrrrunnin's grrrrreat! We'll chase rrrrabbits!"

GrimbledungWolf panted. "Rrrrabbits?" He licked his lips.

"Let's go! Rrrrunnin!" Akita turned and moved toward the door. "Gonna go without ya." He put his hand on the catch. "Gonna go without ya!" He opened the door.

"Naaaaaa!" GrimbledungWolf dropped the man and moved beside the strange, yet familiar looking creature by the door. "Rrrruun!!" He hopped up and down as well. He waggled his butt back and forth. "Rrrrrun!"

"We'll be back, Drim. Take care of that guy." He pointed at the old man who was slowly getting up.

"Yeah, I got him." Drimblerod glowered at the old man. "You two go and..."

Akita bolted out of the door with GrimbledungWolf close behind. The two made it to the center of the street together. "Thataway!" Akita pointed as he took off again. GrimbledungWolf caught up almost immediately. Two ran upright in long strides. "Wanna go faster? Rrrrrun faster?"

"Yaaaaa!"

Akita dropped to all-fours and immediately went into an energy-conserving, yet terrain gobbling, lope.

"Yaaaaa?" GrimbledungWolf also dropped to all fours. Not being accustomed to running in this manner, he lost his balance and staggered to the side. After a mere fifty yards, it seemed to be the most natural thing he had ever done. "Rrrruunnn!" He said as he moved ahead of Akita.

"Well, it beats constabulary responsibilities," Akita said to no one in particular as he caught up to GrimbledungWolf. Since he was twice the size of the Gnome, he was able to keep up easily.

The pair ran straight down the middle of the street as wagons and pedestrians moved quickly to give them a very wide berth.

Big Julie and Pinky walked down the sidewalk, hand in hand. Content with each other's company. "Love these quiet days."

Julie nodded at the man. "Me too, Pinky. Me too."

A commotion made them look into the street. Just as Akita and GrimbledungWolf bounded past.

"And that, my good lady," said Pinky without missing a beat, "is something you do not see in any other town. You must be such a proud Mayoress."

Big Julie let go of Pinky's hand and punched him in the shoulder. Really, really hard.

Pinkie winced, but only for a moment; he was laughing too much for anything else.

Chapter 17
No More Wood Chucked By Semfeld's Beaver

Because It Don't Chuck, Won't Chuck, Wood

The beaver snorted again. Then sat on its hind, leather tail slapping the ground hard. The other beavers slapped their tails on the ground as well.

"Well, I don't like the sound of that," said Liverioso. "Not at all."

"What's gotten into you?" Semfeld asked. "You want to go back to being boards?" He threatened them, "Is that what you want?"

The lead beaver slapped his tail again. Angrily.

"Well, that's not very helpful," said Chéri. "Can't you ask it why it's upset?"

"Who cares why it's upset?" Semfeld turned to look at the Gnomess. "They were conjured to cut wood, not be upset." He gestured to where the beaver were all sitting. "That's what they're here to do."

"Well, it seems that they're upset and if you asked them, then maybe you can figure out how to get them back to work."

"Fine, Chéri. Fine." Semfeld drew his wand. "I'll ask them." He turned to face the beaver. He thought for a moment then raised his wand.

Beaver to the left of me
Beaver to the right.
And here I am, stuck in the middle;
with boards too few.

So we'll get you conversing,

To see why none of you are working.

Castoridae Castor!

Cantante la Lingua Common.

Por favor?

He intoned.

He waved the wand over the half-dozen of them.

"Nice, Semfeld. Except..." Began Liverioso.

Semfeld waved his hand at Liverioso to quiet him and stowed his wand with the other. "All right you wood chewing rodents. What gives?"

The beaver all huddled in a circle as they had a quick discussion.

"Sem?"

Liverioso waved his hand at his partner to silence him again.

After a short moment, the beaver all turned to face the magician.

"Well?" Liverioso asked.

"We quit," said the lead beaver. They all turned and walked into the debris that was Aution.

"What?"

"That's what I wath trying to tell you, Sem. You forgot to remind them that you were their math-ter when you redid the enchantment."

"Beaver chips," cursed Semfeld. "If they even make chips."

"I think they do," said Chéri, trying to be helpful.

"Good," said Semfeld. "In that case: steaming piles of beaver chips."

Chapter 18
Home Again, Home Again In a Stinkedy Rig

"Well, I think we should load what we have and go back to town," Liverioso pointed at the pile. "There's a pretty good amount of it and maybe we can grab some other stuff too. This is a good haul for the first day."

Chéri nodded. "I agree. We should take what we have and when we come back, bring some tools."

"I say we not tell anyone we forgot the tools."

"I'm with Themfeld," said Liverioso.

"No arguments from me." Chéri moved to a board. "Want to get the other end, Sem?"

Semfeld jogged over. "Sure thing."

"I'll see if there's anything that I can drag over that's worth taking," said Liverioso, "while you two load the wood".

Liverioso moved behind the now-destroyed building and looked around. It seemed as if the fire was diverted around a half-block area in this part of Aution, creating an eerie island of intact buildings surrounded by charred destruction. As he moved around the edge of the building, an outhouse caught his eye. *We'll need one of them, I suppose.* He moved to it and tested how well it was anchored to the ground. After a couple of pushes, he was able to rock it significantly. Putting his back into it, he rocked it further and further until it finally reached the tipping point. He was pleased to see it landed on its side and remained intact. Carefully avoiding the seat and accompanying hole, he dragged the entire structure to an open area. "Nicely done, Astounding Liverioso." [7]

He returned to the spot where the outhouse was and surveyed the area. He spotted another outhouse. "Well, they're easy to move, I guess." With a shrug, he moved to it and shoved it over in the same way as the first. He dragged it beside the other one. "Ours and theirs." He dusted his hands off on his breeches.

With nothing else looking small enough for him to handle on his own, he dragged the first outhouse back to the wagons. When he got there, Semfeld and Chéri had two wagons completely loaded and the third about half way. There were only a few boards left. "Thath's a pretty good amount of wood," he remarked as he looked over his shoulder, dragging the outhouse as he walked backward.

"What've you got there, Liv?" Chéri asked as she dropped her end of the board. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Well, if you think ith's one outhouse, you're wrong," he said.

"I don't see how I could be wrong."

Liverioso stopped dragging the structure and turned around. "I've got two!"

Chéri scrunched up her nose. "You are at the end of this wagon train on the way back to town."

Liverioso looked from the outhouse to the Assassin and back. "Okay I thuppose." He turned and dragged the outhouse the last few feet to the wagon. "If you load that one, I'll drag the other back." He rubbed his hands together. "What a great haul for one day."

"I get the top end," Chéri said quickly.

Semfeld frowned. He was getting ready to say the same thing. "Fine." He smiled. "On this one!"

"Sure," agreed Chéri, "since Liverioso is helping load the other".

"What?"

"That's called a female's prerogative."

"I don't think that's what it's for."

Chéri shook her head. "Oh, it works for all manner of things."

Semfeld frowned. He was pretty sure it didn't, but since he hadn't been in a relationship in quite a while, the rules may have actually changed. "Fine."

By the time they had the outhouse loaded, Liverioso was back with the other.

"I'll get the top," Semfeld said quickly.

"Whath?"

"I got the bottom on the last one. Fair is fair."

Liverioso shrugged. "All right then, I guess."

Chéri moved to the front of her wagon to make sure she wasn't involved in loading. Truth be told, the outhouses didn't really stink. Not really. Sort of. Well... She breathed in through her nose and gagged. "Maybe we should water wand those things before setting them up someplace," she suggested.

Liverioso was holding his breath so he only nodded.

After positioning the outhouse on the wagon, Semfeld frowned. "Rope. Rope as well as tools."

Liverioso nodded. "Maybe we should make a list."

"I think that's a good idea. I'll make one up this evening. Rope and tools will be at the top of the list."

"And maybe a crossbow in case we run into other people," asked Semfeld.

"That couldn't hurt." Chéri said. "We'll have to go slow since nothing is tied down."

"Think those brothers'd loan us some rope?" Asked Semfeld as he too mounted his wagon.

"I thay we avoid them as much as possible," offered Liverioso as he clambered on his wagon. "Lead the way." He gestured towards Julesville. "And I'll follow behind."

A long three and a half hours later

The trio reached Julesville and headed towards the livery stable.

"Finally. I think I'm through picking up and restacking boards for the day," said an exhausted Chéri. "Rope. Rope. ROPE."

"I agree completely." Semfeld looked at the blisters on his hands. "And I think gloves should be added to that list of yours, Chéri."

Chéri nodded. "Gloves; got it."

After another few minutes, they rode into the fenced area of the livery stable. "We'll take care of the wagons, Chéri," offered Semfeld. "I'm sure we can find a place to pile up our wood until we're ready to build."

"Great. I think I'm going to get into a hot bath." Chéri hopped off the wagon, exhausted. "What a day." She smiled. "Killing people is so much less tiring, you know?"

"No," admitted Semfeld as he got down from his wagon. "I didn't know that."

"Me either." Liverioso hopped down from his wagon.

"Well, it's nothing a good bath can't fix, I don't think."

"That sounds like a good idea." Semfeld put his hand on his back. "A nice hot bath."

"Maybe I'll get Colossus to get me a drink or two and join me while I soak," Chéri said with a wave.

Semfeld and Liverioso looked at each other, a little let down that they had no one to get cleaned up for. Or with.

"Well, let's see what we can do about getting this wood stored so we can add to it later."

"And get a place of our own thooner instead of later." With a nod to his partner, Liverioso joined him as they went into the livery stable to secure some storage space.

It took another hour of hard work to stack the wood, making two roughly equal piles against the back of the barn- one for them and one for Chéri.

Afterwards, they cleaned up and decided to go to the Mora Tau for dinner. And company. Thanks to an extension of credit from an understanding PalmerLee.

Chapter 19
Thievery 101

Big Julie sat at her desk grading papers. She often helped at the end of semesters with the grading of the longer term papers the students were required to write, leaving the instructors with more time to conduct the practical exercises of magic and oral presentations. A knock on the door made her look up from the current paper she was reading '*Peak* What's This? *Reached! How to make magic using the sun and wind*' She was glad for the knock. "Yes?"

The door opened and Garibaldis peeked into the room. "Have a moment?"

"Always." She smiled at the magician. "Come on in." She gestured at the stacks of papers on her desk. "The break would be nice."

Garibaldis moved to one of the two chairs and sat. "So… which is the done pile?"

Julie pointed at the smallest stack. "Unfortunately it's this one."

Garibaldis laughed.

"So no sympathy then?"

"Well, maybe a little, Julie." Garibaldis continued to smile.

"So to what do I owe the pleasure?" Truth be told, if a certain strapping carpenter had not entered her life, Julie was seriously thinking of making a move on the magician at one of the many dances or sporting events the school held. He was tall enough that she didn't have to look down to speak with him, and being well spoken and quite good-looking (once he had put on a little weight and had trimmed his hair and beard) had him on a very short list of eligible bachelors in town.

Garibaldis' smile straightened and then dropped into a frown. "It's happened again."

Julie also developed a frown. "Stinking, lousy. How many this time?"

"Four that showed up for the levitation seminar I was holding up in the attic," he pointed at the ceiling. "I just have no idea how they're disappearing. I mean, there's one way in and one way out from up there and I know all my students."

Julie scowled. Over the course of the past four months, the school had been experiencing a crime-wave of epic proportions. But only of wands. "What's that make it for the week, Gary?"

Garibaldis shook his head. Since the incident had been identified by teachers as more than just careless students, he had been unofficially put in charge of finding the culprit. With no success. "That makes ten this week. And twenty eight on the month. It's getting worse."

Julie stood up and paced behind her desk.

"We need to do something, Julie. Call in some professional help. *Something*. We can't just afford to keep replacing these wands on our own and at some point, a student is going to tell their parents they're on their third wand, and then all Niflheim will break loose."

Julie stopped and placed her hands on the back of her chair. She leaned forward. "I know Gary, *I know*. I was just hoping the problem would solve itself."

Garibaldis fought furiously to maintain eye contact with Julie as she leaned forward. Truth be told, had a certain massive carpenter not shown up in town, he was planning on asking her to join him at the next dance. With maybe a nice dinner afterwards. "Well it hasn't and I don't think another assembly is going to solve it." He thought back to the last school-wide assembly in the fighting hall. He had spoken for almost thirty minutes, with Julie following him up with another thirty, both extolling the virtues of honesty and thinking of the school as a family that looked out for each other. It was discovered that after the

meeting, another six wands had been stolen from the students in attendance. "We need to bring in some outside help, I think."

Julie came around her chair and flopped back into it. "I know. I should have done that two months ago." She frowned again. "I just hate airing dirty laundry." She smiled at the man. "To outsiders, anyway."

Garibaldis nodded. "I agree, but these are dire circumstances. I suggest we see if Akita has a way of handling the problem discretely."

Big Julie raised an eyebrow.

"Well, as discretely as a Werewolf can be, I suppose."

Julie leaned forward and put her head in her hands.

Garibaldis stole a quick glance. "There really isn't any other alter…" He was interrupted by a loud knocking on the door.

They both turned to look at the door. The knocking continued.

Julie shook her head. "Come in Grimbledung". Of all the people who came to visit her, everyone knocked several times then waited patiently. Grimbledung just started knocking and continued knocking until she invited him in. Once she had let him do it while she counted slowly to a hundred and he still didn't change the tempo or hardness of his knocking. About two a second was what it seemed to be.

Grimbledung opened the door and peeked around it. "Ya busy, Julie?"

Julie shrugged. From past experience she knew that even if her answer was 'extremely', he would still come in. "Not more than usual, I suppose. Come on in."

Grimbledung smiled as he entered the office. As he always did, he didn't shut the door behind him. "Garibaldis, how are you? I haven't seen you around lately." He extended his hand to the man. "Where've you been?"

Garibaldis shook the Gnome's hand. "I've been around. Usually in the background without much to say with regards to recent events," he said in an accusatory manner. "Tending to the school behind the scenes, I suppose."[8]

"Sounds great, Garibaldis." Grimbledung smiled as he hopped onto the seat. He looked at Julie then Garibaldis. Then smiled again.

After a long moment, Julie broke the silence: "What brings you around, Grim?"

Grimbledung snapped his fingers. "Right! I was coming by because…" He frowned. He knew there was something that brought him to Big Julie, but for the moment he had no idea. "Hmm…" He looked around the office.

After another long moment, Garibaldis tried: "Is there another attack that we should know about?"

Grimbledung snapped his fingers. "No, that's not it, but now I remember." He smiled broadly. "I remember now."

"And it was…" Coaxed Julie.

"That assassin that the Halflings sent to kill me and Drim."

Julie had had plenty of experience with this sort of conversation with Grimbledung. "She is…"

"She is back in town and is joined up with Colossus the Halfling. They're shacking up at The Duck Inn and Dine."

"Nulu is letting them stay together at her place?" Garibaldis leaned back in his chair. "Really?"

"Well, who are we to decide who should be together?" Said Grimbledung, "Honestly, if those two want to be together, I don't see where it's any business of *ours* if that's what they want to do." He shook his head. "That's some narrow-minded thinking from someone who's supposed to be all educated and stuff." He squinted his eyes at the magician. "Honestly."

"Grim, I think he meant that having an assassin who is trying to kill two of her friends, and a Halfling who would be fine with helping out any way he could, together in one place, doesn't sound like a good idea."

"Yes, that's what I meant," Garibaldis said defensively.

"Well, then that's fine." Grimbledung smiled at the magician. "Fine to hear."

Garibaldis exhaled loudly. Taking a cue from Julie, he offered, "So they're staying at the inn…"

"Right!" Grimbledung leaned forward in the chair. "They're staying at the inn and they've made amends with us all and are really just trying to start over since the war is over."

"Well, that's a good thing, I suppose. What are they pla…" Began Garibaldis.

"Oh, speaking of wands," said Grimbledung.

Both Julie and Garibaldis stared at each other, wide-eyed. "Who said anything about wands?" Offered Julie.

"Yes, who said anything about wands?"

"Well, I did of course. Just now. Aren't you two listening?" Grimbledung leaned back in his chair. "Honestly."

"Wands…"

Grimbledung nodded at the magician. "Them two magician guild enforcers that I transported to that hidey-hole you were in, in the desert came back with her. The one without the lisp has your wand still."

"Really?" Now Garibaldis leaned forward in his chair. "That *is* interesting news."

"Oh! Speaking of wands…"

Neither Garibaldis nor Julie took the bait.

Grimbledung pursed his lips. "I had this really interesting wand come into the shop and if you're interested you can have it, Garibaldis. Since I know you enjoy the unusual wand or two."

"Really? Where'd it come from?"

"I have no idea."

"Not at all?"

"What, do you mean originally?"

"Yes."

"I have no idea."

"So how is that interesting?"

"Well, this Orc came into the shop to sell me a wand and he's been in before so I really didn't want to pay him for the wand but it was kind of interesting and he seemed threatening so I figured I'd go ahead and give him a couple copper for it then this one-armed man came into the shop to buy a wand and he paid me a silver for it but then he tried to rob me and then he killed me but then I came back as a WereGnome and then I grabbed him and when Drimblerod came in I let him go and went rabbit hunting with Akita and when I got back later that day, Drim had gotten all the coins off that guy and Akita took him to jail so we got all the coins back plus the silver he paid me so it didn't cost me anything and I knew you've been in the market for a wand and it is a really interesting one which is the kind you like so I thought you might like it because you've been in the market for a wand."

"And yet you have no idea." Garibaldis glanced at Julie. She shrugged in return.

"Nope. It's black and it hums. And an Orc found it in a bag with a bunch of other wands that had exploded out by EternCity."

"That's a lot of details for not having any idea." Garibaldis glanced at Julie.

"Completely normal," she reassured.

He looked back at Grimbledung. "Wait, someone killed you?"

"It happens."

Grimbledung nodded at Big Julie. "Right? I mean, I'm usually minding my own business, not doing anything to anybody when out of the clear blue skies I get walloped with a big, lethal helping of current events. Fortunately now that I'm a WereGnome, it's not permanent."

"That's not how I remember most of the times," said Julie.

"And you're a Were what?"

"A WereGnome. Akita killed me…"

"You died again?"

"Like she said; *it happens*. But you see, Akita is a Werewolf, so when he broke my neck…"

"Broke your neck?"

"You really need to get caught up with current events," tut-tutted Grimbledung. "Honestly."

"*Anyway*" said Julie. "You came here to tell us the assassin and the enforcers are back, but they're friendly now." She stopped to consider that. "The enforcers are friendly too, right?"

"Sure, sure." Grimbledung waved his hand dismissively. "Of course they are."

"Well, that's good news, I suppose," Julie said. "We've got enough troubles as it is."

"There's troubles?"

"No!" said Julie and Garibaldis at the same time.

Grimbledung startled in his chair. "All right, all right. There's no need to snap, you know." He hopped out of the chair. "So anyway, that's what I wanted to tell you."

"Thanks Grimbledung. That was good new…"

"Oh!" Interrupted Grimbledung. "And we're holding a jamboree for the end of the war." Grimbledung hesitated for the briefest of moments. "AndNulusaidIshouldhelpwiththeplans." He finished quickly.

"I don't know if that's a good idea, Grim"

Grimbledung waved at Julie as he turned toward the door, "That's what she said." He grabbed the latch of the door. "But I'm sure she's come around by now."

"Still…" tried Julie. "With everything that happened before…" Her voice trailed off.

"It'll be fine, trust me," said Grimbledung. "So any time you want to come by and take a look at that interesting wand, we'll be around."

"Well, I really appreciate it Grimbledung. So you have no idea where it's from?"

"No idea."

"Well, all right then; I guess I'll stop by."

Grimbledung nodded at the man. "Better sooner rather than later, I imagine." He waved at the pair and left the office. As usual, he didn't close the door behind him.

Garibaldis stood. "Well, I need to get back to my classroom. I have students coming by this afternoon for some tutoring." He frowned. "Hopefully they still have their wands."

Julie stood. "I'll head over to Akita's now and see what he thinks."

Garibaldis put his hand on the door latch, pulling it open wider, he gestured for Julie to exit first. "I'll walk you out."

Julie moved around the desk and out the door.

Out of Julie's line of sight, Garibaldis watched her hips as she moved out the door. *Where's a tragic construction accident when you need one?* [9] He thought as he pulled the door shut behind them. *And how could one cause such an accident without becoming a suspect?*

Chapter 20
The Old Man and the Sea
(of Sand)

Akita sat at his desk, eyeing the old man sitting on the cot. "Ya gonna behave yerself from now on?"

The man had been staring at the floor since he had been put in the cell. He looked up at Akita. "Nope."

He had already been moved from the cell closest to Akita to the one in the far corner. The jail only had three cells, which Akita felt was plenty for the size of the town, but with the actions of the old man, Akita wished he had a fifth or even sixth cell. From very recent experience, he was sure the middle cell was not useable because it still put him "in range" of the old man. "I'm tellin' ya. You need to behave yerself."

"Or what?" The old man stood and shuffled to the bars. "What can you possibly do to me, *Constable Akita*?" Every time he said Akita's title, it sounded like an insult.

Akita stood and moved to the side of his desk. A spot he believed was 'out of range'. "You're asking a Werewolf Constable what he can do to you?"

The man snorted in deeply. "Come over here and explain it to me," he said out of the corner of his mouth.

Akita stayed beside his desk. Once was enough. "You know that Gnome you tried to rob?"

The man tilted his head to the side inquisitively.

"Want to know why he's how he is?"

Now a shrug.

"A few days ago, I bit him through the throat and broke his neck because he was trying to hurt someone I am… interested in. And he's a pal of mine."

The old man smiled. "You're interested in your pal?"

Akita shook his shoulders. The shake made its way down his back, ending at the tip of his tail. "The Gnome is a pal of mine. The *gal* I was interested was the one he was trying to hurt."

"That's the story; your pal was trying to hurt your missus? Were you out of town or something?"

Akita stared at the old man.

Another shrug. "Fine. Get on with your threat then."

Akita shook his head as he continued. "So I gave that Gnome a little bit of the condition I carry around with me. Know what he's given me here recently?"

The old man snorted deeply.

"He's given me the appreciation of sometimes acting first, and thinking later." He smirked. "Begging forgiveness is easier than asking permission."

The old man closed one eye as he tilted his head back, judging the distance between them.

"So now I got me a target." Akita drew his wand.

"Got one of them too," mumbled the man.

"I'd save all the fluids you got," he said as he aimed at the man. "You're gonna need every drop." He barked what could have been an incantation just as the old man snapped his head forward and spat.

The old man and the globule disappeared at the same moment. It landed at a distance that would have put it directly on the Constable's feet. As it was, it just hit white sand. Hot, trackless sand. The old man looked up at the sun that was beating down on him. He looked around- the view was the same in all directions. "Hell." He said simply. "Wonder how this'll work itself out."[10]

Akita took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "That felt good."

The door to the constabulary opened slowly. "Anyone home?" Asked Julie.

"Ahh, Julie, nice t'see ya." Akita quickly dropped his hand to his side.

Julie spied the wand. "What're you up to?"

"Nothing at all. Just stretching my legs." Akita did a couple of deep knee bends. "Like this."

Julie looked at the cells. "Grimbledung said an old man tried to rob him and you had him in a cell."

"That is true."

"It was the same Human that robbed him earlier, he said."

"That is true."

Julie stared at Akita. "Why does it feel like I'm talking to Grimbledung all of a sudden?"

"Coincidence, most likely." He didn't make eye contact with her.

"So you had this robber detained then?"

Akita smiled. "I did, but I let him go."

"Let him go?"

"It just wasn't working out between us." Akita slipped his wand into his belt sheath.

"I see. So you just let him go?" She raised an eyebrow. "Alive?"

"Sure, sure. He was definitely alive when I let him go. All legal like. Free as a bird, he was." Akita pointed at the door. "He's out there doing whatever he…" Akita looked around, then turned and pointed at the wall. "He's more in that direction, now that I think about it." He let his tongue hang out the side of his mouth. "So what calls for the visit?" He pointed at a chair beside his desk as he moved around to his own.

"Well," began Julie, as she sat, "it's a personal... delicate matter." She sat and put her hands on her lap.

Akita leaned toward her, his yellow glowing eyes narrowing. "Someone hurt you?"

Julie smiled and put a hand on Akita's arm. "No, nothing like that." She thought for a moment, "Well, maybe a little".

"What, what?" Akita took Julie's hand in his. "Ya got me all jittery now!"

"We've had some thievery problems at the school and I'm worried it's going to cause enrollment problems once word gets out."

Akita let go of her hand and put his back on the desk. "Youthful mischief." He smiled at her. "Ya had old Akita worried for nothing. What's come up missing?"

"Some wands."

Akita sat back. "Well, that's bound to happen with all the kids havin' them. Someone wants to upgrade, or play a trick. A kid drops theirs in the well and then says it's stolen. That sort of thing. I can't imagine that'll cause problems. Just samfoolery is all..."

"We've had just over a hundred disappear in four months."

Akita stared at the woman. "What?"

"From what Garibaldis told me today, we are up to one hundred seven wands missing." She frowned. "Not counting what disappeared while I was walking here or have been sitting at your desk. With how things are going, I imagine another two or three will be gone by the time I get back."

"Well that's just absurd. How many students you keeping out there?"

"We have two hundred fifty eight students enrolled right now." She looked at the constable. "We are *way* past mischief here. We're talking a lot of money that I've had to pay to replace wands, and if parents find out that the school has become a den of thieves, they'll pull their kids and I'm out even more money."

Akita thought for a long moment.

Julie sat in quiet anticipation, knuckles white as she clasped her hands.

"There's another possibility you might not have considered."

"What's that?"

"You may not have a large thief problem."

"I think over a hundred wands is a large thief problem."

Akita chuckled. "Yerrr half right. Yes, that's a lot of wands to come up missing. But it may be just a small group of thieves making that happen, so it's a small number of thieves causing a large problem."

"I hadn't considered that. You think I've got a band of thieves that's enrolled in the school?"

"When'd this start?"

Julie shrugged. "Well, I first heard about it four months ago."

"So we're looking at about six months ago."

"No," corrected Julie, "it was four months ago".

Akita laughed again. "Yeah, it was *four* months before the boss was told, but I'd like to think the students kept it under wraps for a month, and then the teachers tried to keep it under wraps for a month. Then finally, when they had no other option, they had'ta tell the hard-nosed boss lady the bad news."

Julie frowned. "Well, that's not a very nice way of putting it."

Akita grinned. "So about six months ago, what was goin' on?"

"Well, closer to seven months ago, we had the start of the school year."

"That's that time when new students start showing up from all sorts of different places, if I recall correctly. Let's just call it suspects arriving at the scene of the crime to keep things simple."

"You know, you can be a good lawman without being so…"

Akita put a claw on Julie's hand. "How about I come down and look through your records, see if any family names sound familiar, and maybe talk to a couple of students to see what kinda feel I get from them?"

Julie smiled at the Constable. "Really?"

"It's all part of the service, Miss." Akita winked. "Regular constabulary duties."

"Like letting yea olde wand shop robbers go?" Now Julie winked.

"Well…" Akita stood, "that was under special circumstances that I gave that vile old man a pardon for the rest of his days."

Julie stood. "Rest of his days? That sounds kind of final."

"Well at his age, he's liable to pop his clogs at any time. Turn his toes up. Count worms."

"You should write poetry."

"Ya?"

Julie laughed. "No." She snaked her arm through Akita's as they moved to the door. "Not at all. Stick to enforcing the law."

Akita used his free hand to open the door. "And roustin' youngsters."

The two walked arm in arm from the constabulary to Big Julie's school, chatting casually as they went. As they passed *Herbs and More. Lots More*, Maca, standing on the porch, leaning against a pole, called out to them: "Good day, you two"

Julie startled. *Was she there just a moment ago?* She pulled her arm out from Akita's. "Hello Maca," she said amicably. "We... We were just going up to the school… for Akita to help me work something out." She stammered. "What I mean is Akita was coming over… to give me a hand with something." She blushed.

Maca smiled at the woman. "I'm sure that whatever you need help with, Akita is more than capable. All part of the service, if I remember correctly." She narrowed her eyes at Akita, "Like remembering that he's accompanying me to dinner tonight?"

"It won't take long, Maca." Akita grinned at her. "I'm a professional, ya know."

"Sure. But a professional what?" Maca asked as she turned towards the door of her shop, her hair catching up just a moment behind.

Julie watched her enter the shop. "She's… something special."

"Yeah." Akita let his tongue hang out. "Isn't she though?"

"You know what I mean," Julie poked the Constable in the side as they started to walk again.

"Yeah. We're gonna discuss that tonight."

"Well, I'm sure everything will work out just fine."

Akita winked at Julie. "That's what I'm hopin' for, which is why I'm bringin' a heap of flowers."

"Flowers?"

"Roses. A heap of roses."

"So," Julie raised an eyebrow, "overcome by flowers, the innocent girl is supposed to offer her throat to the wolf with the red roses?"

"Well, it's our first actual date, so maybe I'll keep my hopes in check." Akita grinned. "But here's hoping."

"You're a professional all right." She snaked her arm back through the Constable's. "Now you just need to make short work of my pilfering dilemma."

"No worries, Miss Julie." Said Akita as they approached the school. "I gots it all under control."

Two hours later

"I swear I came this close," said Akita has he held up two claws close together, "this close to actually eating two of your students." He flopped into the chair, exhausted. "They're demons. Every last one."

"So you didn't get any sort of feeling about them?"

"Sure, I just told you; I feel they're all little demons in disguise." He let his arms hang on the outside of the chair's armrests as he slouched down. "Just horrrrible."

"So how did you…"

Akita ran his tongue around one side his mouth, across his nose and to the other side. "Well, I went through your enrollment records to see how many brand new students enrolled this past semester." He glanced up at Julie. "You know?"

"Not without looking," admitted Julie.

"Fifty seven. You had a new class of youths…"

"Well, yes, we get a new first year each year," interrupted Julie.

"Right. And that was thirty eight kids. The remaining nineteen were spread around the other five grades as new enrollees."

"You talked to almost sixty kids in two hours?"

Akita shook his head. "I talked to ten of them little dollops of annoying." He let his chin drop to his chest.

"Just ten?"

"That's all the abuse I could take," admitted Akita.

"But you're the Constable. And a *Werewolf*."

"Those kids don't care. I was a fluffy bunny they had tied to a pole and were whacking me with sticks."

"Gads!"

"You need more specialized help, I think."

"Specialized help?"

Akita lifted his chin off his chest. "A dragon to eat the entire lot." Akita grinned. "Course it'd get a sour stomach, I think."

"Akita. I'm desperate."

The Constable sat up. "Seriously then. You need someone who can come in here and look like one of the kids. Blend in and get their trust. Me? I'm the outsider, an adult authority that they'll never talk to. Never trust for anything."

"Undercover?"

"Ya got anyone that you can trust that's like a youth?"

"Well, there's Guthrie. He's a fourth-year."

"Well, if yer willing to make his life a nightmare afterwards, you could use him."

"What?"

"Once word got out he was a snitch." He pointed his finger at Julie. "And believe me, word *would* get out. He'd be through for the rest of the time he was here."

"Then that's not an option."

"That's why you need someone who's *like* a youth. But not a student here."

"You're talking in riddles, Akita."

"Hire someone who can go undercover as a student and find out from the inside. Then since they're not a student, it won't matter if he's… found out."

Julie thought for a moment. Akita returned to his slouched position while she did. Finally she shrugged. "I haven't a clue who could do that."

Akita didn't raise his head. "Oh, you know someone who acts like a kid but isn't one." He pointed at her again. "You know. You just don't want to say it."

Julie's eyes got large. "You want me to set *him* loose on the student body?"

Akita pushed himself to a standing position. "That's my professional opinion, if you want it." He looked to the door. "Now, if you don't mind, I need to get ready for my evening."

"And pick up some flowers," reminded Julie.

"And pick up a heap of flowers," agreed Akita. He smiled at the woman. "I know you can do it. Be brave, Headmistress Julie no last name, former crime syndicate boss of bosses."

Julie's eyes got large. "Who me?"

Akita jerked his thumb at himself. "Those kids might have me beat, but that doesn't mean I'm a complete slouch."

"Well, I never," tried Big Julie.

"Yeah. Yeah, ya did," said Akita as he opened the door and started to slip out it.

"Well, Rolton chips."

"Yep; that's the one," said Akita as he closed the door behind him.

"Steaming Rolton Chips" said Julie. She looked back down at the term papers on her desk. She was torn between continuing to grade them and talking to Grimbledung. With a sigh she picked up the topmost one again. "So, magic from sunlight and wind, huh?" Grimbledung could wait until the morning. "I'll ask after breakfast." She promised her empty office. "Tomorrow's breakfast."

Chapter 21
Beans Spilled, Pot Stirred

Grimbledung ambled back towards the wand shop. Out of habit, in the direction of Nulu's establishment. "Good late morning early afternoon to you, missus Human," he said to a middle-aged Human female. She stared straight ahead as she passed. "Really most sincerely annoying, that is!" he called at her back. With a shrug, he continued on his way. *I'm thirsty. You thirsty?* "Well, maybe a little," he admitted to himself. *We should get something to drink. Just in case we don't have a chance later on.* Unable to argue with his own logic, Grimbledung turned left at the next intersection and made for the Duck Inn and Dine. "I'll just pop in for a sip, then be on my way," he said to another pedestrian. He ignored Grimbledung as well.

Grimbledung pulled the door of the inn open and stepped inside. Thanks to a series of pulleys and a weight installed by Pinky, the door slowly shut behind him as he pushed around the heavy curtain that led to the tavern. He looked around the establishment. Even though it was early in the afternoon (or perhaps late in the morning), there were a goodly amount of patrons scattered around the room. He spied Colossus sitting at a booth alone. *Drinking alone is bad luck*, he reminded himself. *This way you'll both be lucky*. With a nod, he moved to the Halfling's table. "Hey there, Col. How are things this late morning early afternoon?"

Colossus looked at Grimbledung. "Aren't you supposed to be running your shop?"

"Drimblerod's got the shop this late morning early afternoon. I am out and about running official work-related errands." He smiled. "What're you up to? Find a place to settle down yet?" He waved his hand frantically over his head, calling for a drink as he eased into the booth.

Colossus put his drink down. "Well, Chéri has gone out to Aution to get an idea of what kind of wood she can get with Semfeld and Liverioso. If things work out they're going to bring back a first load." He slowly turned his mug in the puddle of condensation that formed under it. "They're not back yet."

A serving wench slipped a frosted mug of ale in front of Grimbledung. "So how's things looking over at the constabulary?" He winked as he took a sip of his ale. "Promising?"

Colossus shrugged. "Good. I went over this morning and Akita had this cantankerous old man in a cell and he asked me to come back later in the day."

"One armed fellow?"

"That's the one."

"I don't care for him too much. Killed me, you know."

"Well, you seem to have pulled through." Colossus picked up his own mug and toasted the Gnome before taking a drink. "Congratulations, I suppose."

"Thanks." Grimbledung took another drink. "So are you going to stick with the deputy career, or what?"

"I think it's temporary. Not sure I want to be a lawman."

"Not sure if you could. Well, you could be a law-Halfling, I suppose."

"I don't think so."

"So what sort of work you going to do in town, Col?"

Colossus ignored the shortening of his name, deciding that trying to convince the unstable Gnome to not call him that would take most of the afternoon. He sat back and considered the question. "Well, I was thinking of maybe setting up a security and investigative company."

"What's that? You mean like Edward at the bank?" Grimbledung downed the last of his drink and immediately raised his hand over his head. He gestured at himself and the Halfling wildly.

Colossus shook his head. "No, more like security for businesses moving their money at the end of the day to the bank. Personal security kind of work. And maybe private investigations."

"You're going to investigate Privates?"

"What?"

"I mean, as a Corporal, I suppose you could do that, but…"

The serving wench slid two frosted mugs on the table as she moved past.

Is this stupid Gnome going to stiff me for these drinks? "No, not Privates in the military, I mean doing investigations for private citizens."

"There much call for that?"

Colossus picked up his mug. "Well, spouses running around, missing wagons or beasts wandering off happen and when they do, private citizens oftentimes want to deal with the matter themselves instead of involving the law. As the town grows and more people move here, there's more opportunity."

"So it's like being a constable without being a constable. What happens if you don't solve the crime or whatever it is?"

Colossus smiled, "Well, you always insist for a small fee upfront and then expenses as they occur so even if you can't solve the mystery, you still make a little bit."

"So you can just not solve anything and be set!" Now Grimbledung toasted the Halfling with his mug. "Brilliant!"

"No, if you never solve anything, word gets out and no one comes to you for help. Word of mouth- bad or good- will make or break a private investigator." He looked to the curtain. *Save me Chéri!*

"I see. So detective work." He thought it over as he sipped his ale. "Sounds exciting."

"It's not all sneaking into buildings and excitement. Most of it is deductive reasoning, attention to detail, and being able to ask the right questions."

Grimbledung slammed his mug onto the table. "Ohh! I can do that! Wann'a partner?"

Colossus leaned back in his chair. "You're already a partner."

"I'm already your partner?" Grimbledung thrust his hands in the air. "Whoo hoo!"

"No, you daft Gnome; of Second-Hand Sorcery."

"But that's *wand sales*. This is *detective* work. I wanna do detective work!" He whined.

Colossus looked at the curtain again. Longingly. "I don't think so…" A thought occurred to him. "I'm not even set up you know. You can't very well run a business out of an inn. We've got to get a place to live in and work out of before anything else."

Grimbledung frowned. "Rolton chips." He took a sip of his drink. "That makes sense, I suppose." Much to Colossus' relief, he didn't wave his hand over his head. "Well, once you get set up let me know, all right?"

"Sure thing," lied Colossus. "You'll be the first I tell." Colossus took a sip of his drink. "Well, I think I should get upstairs."

"Sure, sure. Great idea, Colossus." Grimbledung stood and pulled a silver coin from his belt pouch. "I need to get back to the shop." He dropped the coin on the table, "I'll talk to you later about this investigating of privates." With a wave, he shuffled off.

Colossus looked at the silver coin on the table. Considering they only drank four drinks, it was a pretty good tip. He shook his head. "What an oddball." Colossus nursed his drink for the better part of a half an hour, hoping Chéri would return. When he finally finished his drink - one tiny sip at a time- he waved to the serving wench.

"Paying or adding to the tab?"

"That oddball left this." He pointed at the silver coin.

The serving wench sidled up in front of him. "Hey, he tips good," said the Gnomess. She slid the coin off the table and into a hidden pocket in her apron. "You leave that crazy Gnome alone. He really doesn't mean any harm, you know. And he's really…"

"Crazy?"

"A good tipper." She said again.

Colossus looked at the server. "Well, Gnomess, that's got to count for something. I suppose."

"It does when you work for tips. And in case you didn't notice, he just bought drinks for one of the soldiers who was trying to burn this entire town to the ground and probably stick a bunch of its citizens on poles." She pointed a finger at him threateningly. "So *you* leave my crazy, great tipping Grimbledung alone." She deftly moved the empty mugs to her tray with one hand as she wiped off the table with a cloth in the other. "Or that'll be the last drink you ever have in this place that's safe to drink." She leveled her eyes at the Halfling. "And, if my name isn't Flora O. Willowfeet, you'll find *yourself on a pole*. You got me?"

"Sure?" Said Colossus, caught off guard by the unexpected threat from what until just a moment ago seemed to be a meek and dainty-looking Gnomess.

"Some folk," she muttered as she turned to leave.

Colossus considered that as he walked back to his room. Grimbledung definitely treated him better than Colossus would have if the tables had been turned. *Still; him as a partner? Not likely. Chéri? Definitely.*

Grimbledung pushed the door to the Duck Inn and Dine open and stepped into the sunlight just as Akita reached for the handle of the door. "Akita! You just missed drinks."

"They outta drinks?"

"No, drinks with me. Best thing ever, you know."

Akita nodded. "I'll take yer word for it. So, Julie talk to you?"

"Sure!"

"So what'd you say?"

"About what?"

"When Julie talked to you," said Akita. He scowled at the Gnome. "Yer doing this on purpose, aren't ya?"

"Well, Julie talks to me all the time. Which time?"

"This last time."

"I said 'got it' of course."

"What kind of answer is that?"

"You doing this on purpose?" Grimbledung hopped back and forth. "She said 'make sure you're on your best behavior' and I said 'got it' because I remembered that's what I'm supposed to do when that Dwarfess who smells like lilacs come to the shop for a visit."

Akita did a double take. "Lilacs?"

"I swear. Lilacs."

Akita shook his shoulders, letting it run down his back to the end of his tail. "I mean earlier today. She's looking for someone to help her with a problem at the school." Akita looked around suspiciously.

So did Grimbledung.

"She's got a thievery problem and she needs someone to go undercover and figure out who's doing it."

"Well, it's not me doing the burgling." Grimbledung put his hands on his hips. "I'm sure of it."

Akita growled. "No, you crazy Gnome; she's gonna ask you to go undercover."

Grimbledung did a little hop. "What? Undercover work? You mean like investigating privately?"

Akita narrowed his eyes. "I suppose."

"Wooo!" Grimbledung thrust his hands in the air and did a little jig. "My first job as a privates investigator." He rubbed his hands together. "Oh, this will be great."

"I'm sorry I mentioned it…"

"No, no," Grimbledung shook Akita's hand, "I'm just the Gnome for the job. So when's Julie hiring me?"

Akita shrugged his shoulders. "No idea. Prolly soon though. She's going through wands like no one's business."

"Well, I can't imagine thievery is anyone's business." He waggled his ears. "Except thieves, that is."

Akita shook his head. "Now I really need a drink." He took the door latch in his hand. "Talk to Julie," he said as he opened the door.

"Thanks Akita!" Grimbledung hugged the Constable. "You won't be sorry!"

"It's too late for that." Akita stepped into the doorway, "Let me know when you catch the little fiend or fiends."

"Oh, you'll be the first to know after me and Big Julie, and the little thief, of course. And any witnesses that are around, and probably Drimblerod!" Still rubbing his hands together, Grimbledung moved off.

"Maybe two drinks," said Akita as the door slowly closed behind him.

Chapter 22
How I Gave Up Worrying About GrimbledungWolf

(And Learned to Love Gnome Lycan)

Nulu watched the interaction between Grimbledung and Akita as she walked toward her business. Seeing poor Akita's body language, she was sure that Grimbledung was in top form today. Not wanting to get a dose of his antics so early in the day, she detoured to Maca's shop. She had learned the hard way that just because Grimbledung left her tavern, it didn't mean he couldn't convince himself to return after a few minutes and drink more. Once she had even caught him arguing with himself in the middle of the street over the subject. He ended up accompanying her back to her establishment and spend the remainder of the day there helping wait tables. Nulu was sure that Flora was actually going to kill the unstable Gnome at one point.

As Nulu got to the door, it opened for her. "Thanks," she said out of habit. She was used to the door at Second-Hand Sorcery being friendly in its duties- Maca's just opened silently and when she was in the shop, shut. The front of the shop was empty. "Anyone home?"

Maca peeked over the top of the swinging half-doors that separated the sales area from her work area. "Back here, Nulu," she said.

"You busy?"

Maca frowned. "Not anymore, it seems." She smiled, "So come on back."

Nulu pushed past the swinging doors. Maca was already sitting on one of the stools next to her work table. She was back to frowning. "What's wrong?"

Maca pulled two glasses from a shelf that ran along the bottom of the table, "Well, you know I have been working on a potion to try and cure Grimbledung of his lycanthropy, right?"

Nulu moved to a stool and sat in it. "Yep. How's that going?"

Maca pulled a bottle from under the table and poured the bright orange liquid into the two glasses.

"Wow, if you're drinking Melonchello this early in the day, it can't be good." Nulu picked up the glass. She smelled the drink- melons with just a hint of alcohol. "Is it that tricky of a potion?"

Maca picked up her glass as well. "It is, actually. Lycanthropy binds to his host much like Vampirism does." She took a sip of the drink. "Oftentimes, trying to cure someone of the disease ends up killing them. Or the potion ends up not working at all." She took another sip. "Or the potion doesn't even come together right."

Nulu downed her drink in one gulp. In her defense, glasses were practically the size of shot glasses to her. "So you can't make it?" She poured herself another drink.

Maca shook her head. "Oh no; I have it made." She gestured toward a decanter filled with a purple liquid. There was smoke rising from the fluid. "It's just airing out."

"So what's wrong?"

"If I give it to him, Grimbledung would be cured." She downed the rest of her drink. "But Drimblerod would die."

Nulu leaned close and peered at the liquid. "So it would work?" She looked back at Maca- she was pouring herself another drink as well. "Wait, how would that potion kill Drimblerod?"

"As I was finishing the potion, I got this vision of it working." She picked up her glass.

"That's helpful to know, right?."

Maca nodded. “Well sure. Especially with a tricky potion. I oftentimes get a flash of the future showing the effects a potion would have if I gave it to the subject.”

Nulu looked down at her once again empty glass. She wasn’t sure if she should pour another. For a Trolless, bottles of anything were a single-serving. She used glasses just to be sociable. “So how would that harm Drimblerod?”

Maca poured the Trolless another drink. “Well, what I saw was Grimbledung and Drimblerod in some sort of trouble...”

“Trouble where?” Interrupted Nulu.

Maca shrugged. “It looked like someplace underground. It was just a flash of a vision. But I saw that they were in trouble and Grimbledung wasn’t able to change into a WereGnome and because of that, Drimblerod got killed. He fell off a bridge and was lost.”

Nulu leaned back. “Gads. When is this going to happen?”

Maca picked up her drink. “In the future.” She took a sip. “Sometime.”

Nulu looked at the decanter again. “So you can cure Grimbledung but it would end up killing Drimblerod.” Nulu smiled. “Well, do you know when that will happen? You can just give him the potion after he saves Drimblerod!”

Maca shook her head. “It was just a quick flash of the future and I was looking from a distance because they were on a long bridge so I couldn’t tell how old they were.” She laughed. “Honestly, with Gnomes, they look the same until they hit five hundred, then they go grey practically overnight.” She looked at the potion she had labored on for the better part of a week. “So there’s really no telling beside waiting until they’re old and grey.”

Nulu downed her drink again. She looked down at the glass. “Sorry.”

Maca downed hers as well. “Well, it’s pretty tasty stuff. The Gnolls got me hooked on it.”

“Me too.” Nulu nodded. “I’m sorry to hear it. Of course, it’s nice to know that those two Gnomes will be all right.” She paused for a moment. “Whenever they’re caught underground and get into trouble, that is.”

“I suppose so.” Maca sighed. “That Gnome.”

Nulu laughed. “If I had a copper every time I said that!”

Maca stood. “Well, it looks like Grimbledung is actually back in his shop, so the coast is clear.”

Nulu startled. “Not much gets by you, does it?”

Maca pursed her lips. “I can’t seem to get a read on Akita.”

Nulu stood as well. “Males. They’re so...”

“Exactly.”

“Well, I’ll walk with you towards his office,” said Nulu. “Thanks for the drinks and the company.”

“Any time.”

The females left the shop and when Maca was near Akita’s office, she bid farewell to Nulu and made straight for it.

Nulu entered the Duck Inn and Dine as Flora was scolding Colossus. Not wanting to interrupt the strong-minded Gnomess, Nulu just pushed past the curtain into the kitchen.

Chapter 23
Pay No Attention to the Man Behind the Beard

Grimbledung walked into his shop. "Hey, Drim. How are things going?" Before waiting for an answer, he continued: "Say, isn't it time for brunch?" Grimbledung waggled his ears "You know besides breakfast, lunch, tea, dinner, supper, and midnight snack, brunch is one of the most important meals of the day."

"No. You've been gone half the morning as it is."

"Well, I'm just making sure because you know if you try working on an empty stomach you aren't thinking about work and what will happen is that you'll end up selling wands for less than they are worth because you can't concentrate when you're all rumbly in the tumbly and there's nothing to eat not even a pot of honey to tide you over until you get a good and proper meal in you."

"No."

"Aren't you a little black rain cloud all of a sudden."

Grimbledung closed Door.

"Grim, you realize that the only reason we have money to spend is because we sell wands, right?"

"No."

Drimblerod raised an eyebrow at his approaching partner.

"Sure, sure..." Grimbledung leaned on the counter, facing Drimblerod. "I just wanted to give you a taste of your own medicine."

"Well, with all the antics we've been dealing with, we haven't been open hardly at all these past few months. And that means these past few months we've been running on our savings. *My* savings. And my savings is getting low." He pointed to the sign in the window. "We need to pull some long hours and consistent days to rebuild our

savings and not flip the sign every chance we get. And it's not helping having to replace windows and rehang and repaint doors. I think..." He leaned towards his partner. "... we need to economize wherever and whenever possible."

Grimbledung straightened. "You mean not buy stuff just because I feel like buying stuff?" He gaped. "Extra stuff, right?" He gestured at the lately ever-present barrel of ale. "But absolute essentials, those are fine right?"

"A barrel of ale every two days is not an essential."

Grimbledung gaped again.

"A barrel of ale every two days is *not* an essential."

Grimbledung pouted since gaping wasn't working.

"How about a barrel of ale a week?"

"You know these are called ponies, right? They're not full sized barrels. Wee little ponies are they. In fact, there's even a song about them."

"I don't think..."

My Little Pony. My Little Pony!
Keg!
Ooh Ahh. Ooh Ahh.

Grimbledung sang as he hopped back and forth

My Little Pony! My Little Pony!
Keg!
I used to wonder what great beer-ness could be
My Little Pony!
Keg!
Until you shared all its foamy goodness with meee!

Big adventure? Tons of fun?
A beautiful head
Ooh Ahh. Ooh Ahh.

"Grimbledung..." Tried Drimblerod.

Wheaty and strong.
Sharing it is kindness in a mug
It's an easy feat!

My Little Pony! My Little Pony!
Keg!
And icy magic makes it all cold and complete.

Yeah my little ponies,
do you know you're my very best...

"A barrel of ale every two days is *not* an essential," repeated Drimblerod.

Grimbledung dropped to one knee and raised his arms over his head, his fingers were played out and waggling.

Friends!!

Grimbledung remained in that position as he looked at his partner.

"A barrel of ale every two days is *not an essential*."

Grimbledung gaped. "Don't listen to him, my little pony. Keg." He said as he waggled his fingers at the barrel.

"Seriously. We need to make some coinage over the next weeks..." The bell above Door jingling made him look. "Especially if we're going to be entertaining those gals," he finished quietly.

Grimbledung hopped to his feet. "Well, that's something I can wrap my arms around." He waggled his ears. "Wanna hear an entendre that just popped into my head about my legs?"

"No."

Grimbledung scowled at his partner then turned it into a broad smile as he swiveled around to the customer. "Greetings and salutations! Welcome to Second-Hand Sorcery. What can we help you with today, good sir?"

The elderly looking Human leaned on the counter. "Seems I missed the song and dance."

"If you hang around long enough, another will make its way through the shop," said Drimblerod. He jerked a thumb at his partner. "They just burble out of him when you least expect it."

"I think you mean bubble."

Drimblerod shook his head at the old man, "Not in his case".

"I see."

"You got this Grim? I'm going to do some sorting and restock the shelves."

Grimbledung nodded at his partner. "Sure thing." He turned to appraise the old man. "Offer you a drink?"

"Drink? It's not noon yet."

Drimblerod opened his mouth, decided against getting involved in the invariable discussion that was about to come out of his partner. He went to the back room instead.

"Well sure, it's not yet noon yet because the sun's still low in the sky but that's no reason not to have a drink since you..."

The old man 'harrumphed' at Grimbledung.

Grimbledung smiled at the old man. He seemed taller than average with a large grey beard along with a similarly overgrown moustache. His large floppy hat covered the remainder of his face not concealed by hair. Only his nose and part of his cheeks were visible. "Ya in there somewhere, old timer?"

"Miner."

"Old miner," corrected Grimbledung.

The old man grunted.

"What'cha mining? "

"My own business," the old man said flatly.

Nice! Grimbledung nodded. "That's what I do. Mind my own business, don't do nothing to no one."

The man switched to leaning on the counter with his other arm. He seemed to have a length of twisted wire in his free hand- it was the length of a wand, but was thick, rusted metal.

"Interesting wand."

"Does most of the jobs I need."

For a long moment the two stared at each other. Or at least Grimbledung assumed the man was staring at him- since he couldn't see his eyes he wasn't sure. "Ya in there somewhere?"

"I'm looking for a light wand."

"That metal one getting heavy?"



"Light as in the opposite of darkness."

"What'cha need one of them for?"

The old man stared at Grimbledung for a long moment. "Thought you said you minded your own business."

Grimbledung nodded. "Sure, sure. I'm just asking because that way I'll know what kind of wand you need."

"One that makes light."

Grimbledung nodded as he moved around the counter. "Sure, sure. But..." He moved to a shelf that held a row of dark brown wands. "These are our Conductor Wands. They'll make different types of light depending on what you're doing." He picked up a dark wood wand with a red spiral running down it. "If you're looking for a way to light a dark forest with really, really bright light, then I'd go with this." He waved the wand and a blinding white-blue light exploded through the shop. Piercing even his hair and hat, the old man flinched.

Grimbledung put the wand back on the shelf. "Or if you're looking for something more discrete if you're into sneakery, this may be more to your liking." He picked up another dark wood wand. This one had leather wrapping on the handle and a silver spiral running from the edge of the wrapping to the tip. As he waved it, the old man took a step back. Instead of an all-encompassing light, this one produced a tight beam of light from the tip. Grimbledung pointed it around the Shop's walls, ceiling and floor. "This is also great if you have a cat. They'll chase the light all day long."

"Don't got no cat."

"Well then." Grimbledung put the wand back on the shelf. "What sort of light you looking for then?" He gestured at the shelf and winked. "That will decide what sort of wand you should get."

"I'm working in a mine."

Grimbledung snapped his fingers. "Easy potatoesy." He reached for a lighter wand on a lower shelf. It still had leather wrapping on the hilt but the spiral was a light blue. "This is the one then." He waved the wand. A tight blue-white beam of light shone from the end. It wasn't nearly as tight at the silver etched wand. "You can keep this in front of you and not blind yourself. Plus..." He moved his hand further down the hilt and the beam of light got wider, "... the further down you hold it, the wider the beam." He turned the wand around and offered it hilt-first to the old man. "Handy wand, this."

The old man took the wand and grasped it at the very front edge of the leather wrapping. A tight blue-white light emanated from the wand, as he moved his hand back, the beam got wider to the point of almost acting like a bull's-eye lantern. "Nice."

"So what you mining, old miner?"

The old man put the wand in his trouser pocket with one hand and put his other hand in his other pocket. "What's it cost?" He asked.

Inside Grimbledung did a little flip. Since the man was already reaching for his coins, he knew that any price less than absurd would be accepted. "Three silver since it's a multi-use wand," he said with a straight face.

The old man fished around in his pocket and pulled out a handful of coins. He selected three silver with his other hand and dropped them into Grimbledung's. "There ya go."

"You know, I've always liked mines. What would be the odds of getting..."

The old man turned and walked out of the store.

"Well then," said Grimbledung as he moved back to the counter. "Guess that's it for him." When he got to the counter, the bell above Door chimed again. Grimbledung put a broad grin on his face as he turned. "Welcome to Second-Hand Sorcery. We endeavor to serve," he said to the tall Elf that was closing Door behind him. *Water wand sale, coming up...*

Drimblerod moved past the curtain as the Elf left the store. He had an arm-full of wands. "How many water wands that Elf buy?"

"Eight."

"Eight?"

Grimbledung shrugged. "Some sort of birthday celebration or something."

"Weren't you listening?"

"I heard he wanted eight water wands and I heard he didn't ask for a discount for buying that many wands. What more is there to hear?"

Drimblerod considered that for a moment. "I suppose not much else. That's a good start on the week." He raised an eyebrow. "And you charged that guy three silver for a Conductor's wand?"

"He reached into his pocket before he asked the price," explained Grimbledung.

Drimblerod nodded. "His own fault, then."

"Exactly. So what're you putting out?"

"Well, it seems I need to bring out some more water wands all of a sudden. We're down to less than ten of those in all now," Drimblerod looked down at the wands he had balanced in the crook of his arm, "but first I'll put out these Conductors, Levitation, and Pixie Sticks."

The bell chimed again. Both Gnomes turned to look. It was Chéri. The Gnomes both frowned.

"Well, and a good day to you too."

"Sorry, Chéri," said Drimblerod, "we were hoping for more customers".

"We're on a roll."

Chéri moved as Door closed. "Well, that's what I am. A customer."

"Welcome to Second-Hand Sorcery!" Exclaimed Grimbledung. "Peruse the merchandise!" He waggled his ears.

"Nice."

Grimbledung nodded at his partner. "Keep stocking, I'll get this female to buy half the store," he said with a wink.

"I'm in the market for a wand. A wand." Chéri held up a finger. "Singular wand."

"Sure, sure. You say that *now*". Grimbledung moved to Chéri then spread his arms out wide. "When you have all this to choose from, the sky's the limit."

"I have two silver left to my name and I need a decent levitation wand and enough change to get lunch the next three days."

"Well, that's a pretty low sky, but we can make that happen." Grimbledung walked backwards and extended his hand to his partner. "Oh yes, we can make that happen." He snapped his fingers several times. "Just about now, in fact... It's gonna happen."

Drimblerod shook his head as he put a levitation wand in Grimbledung's hand. "That wand's only worth a silver on a good day, you know. To a friend in need, it's a five copper wand."

Grimbledung ignored him. "All for a measly two silver. A pittance really, considering the wealth of knowledge and customer support that accompany your wand. A trifling." He held two fingers up to his lips and blew on them as he spread his hand out. "A wisp of an amount."

Chéri held out a silver coin. She tilted it back and forth. "The word on the street is that that thing's worth half a silver."

Grimbledung looked around suspiciously. "Well, if that's the word on the street, " he handed her the wand hilt first, "who am I to argue?"

"Well, you're always good for an argument," said Chéri.

"That is true."

Grimbledung glanced at Drimblerod. "Aren't you supposed to be stocking or something?" He turned to look at Chéri. "A measly half a silver you say? At that price, I might as well just give it away for nothing."

Chéri beamed. "Well, that's a deal I can agree with." She clapped her hands twice.

Grimbledung frowned.

Behind Grimbledung, Drimblerod gave the Assassin a nod and a wink.

She put the coin back into her purse. "You sure drive a hard bargain, Grim."

Grimbledung smiled broadly. "That I do!" He rubbed his hands together. "That's also the word on the street too, you know."

"Oh, I do. I do indeed." She smiled. "And I do appreciate it, really. And I'll make up for it when I'm all settled again."

Grimbledung waggled his ears. "So what do you need a Levitation wand for?"

Chéri tucked the wand into her purse. "Well, you know we're out at Aution gathering wood, right?"

Grimbledung nodded. "Heard that someplace."

"And I've decided that I'm through loading wood by hand." She patted her purse. "So that's why I need a way to levitate the wood onto that wagon."

"Sounds like a good plan." Grimbledung smiled at the Assassin. "So have you decided where you're going to put your humble abode?"

Chéri shook her head. "No, not yet. I thought we needed to talk to Big Julie or someone before we just started building in town. No?"

"Yes, actually," said Drimblerod as he moved beside his partner. "She's formed a council that's making sure people don't just throw up houses helter skelter."

"Uh oh. What's a permit cost?"

"A copper"

Chéri blinked. "That's nothing." She raised an eyebrow at Grimbledung. "A pittance, really. A mere trifling even."

"Right? That's what I said!" Grimbledung hopped up and down.

"Well, her plan is to make it inexpensive for people to get a permit so that people don't sneak around and just build where they want. If the permits are too high, people'll do their best to avoid paying. This way, folks just pay the copper and register for a permit." He smiled. "And then Missus Mayoress and the City Council knows exactly who lives where and what size place they have so they can levy the appropriate taxes later on."

"That's one smart gal," said Chéri.

"Right? That's what I said!" Grimbledung hopped up and down.

"No, what you said to Julie was 'if I told you that you had a great body for business, would you hold it against me?' and then you waggled your ears at her."

Grimbledung waggled his ears.

"That sound more like the Grimbledung I know."

Grimbledung waved his hand dismissively, "Well, I meant it in the best way possible." He moved back to the counter. "Say, it's getting near lunchtime, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is," said Chéri. She smiled. "And that means I need to go meet a certain deputy for lunch."

Grimbledung waved. "Tell Col I send my regards."

"Col?"

"Are you seeing a different deputy for lunch?" Grimbledung shook his head, "Not good form, that."

"No, you silly Gnome. That's who..."

"Get going, Chéri. Honestly, you'll just end up being late," interrupted Drimblerod. "Just wave and say goodbye."

Chéri laughed. Then she waved. "Goodbye."

As she turned to the door, Grimbledung waved as well. "Bye Chéri. Tell Col I'll be investigating some privates and if I need his help, I'll let him know."

Chéri turned back around. "What?"

"You'll be late. I'm just warning you now. You better be gone when I come back with the other wands," he warned as he moved to the back of the shop.

"So I'm investigating privates you see..." Began Grimbledung.

Chéri looked from the door to the Gnome. She seemed trapped by the current line of conversation. Hoping to end it quickly if she changed the subject, she took the wand out of her purse and hefted the wand several times. "And how much will this thing pick up?"

"Well, more than you could pick up on your own, definitely. But it does have its limits."

"Like what?"

"Well, you can't pick up a mountain with it." Grimbledung paused as he considered the question. "But a mountain ogre, sure."

Chéri moved closer to the door. "Well, I just want to be able to pick up boards and planks and such..."

"Whole buildings?" Grimbledung interjected.

Chéri shook her head. "The Magicians have the dismantling figured out; it's just the loading the wagon that's still hands-on."

Grimbledung stuck out his tongue. "Manual labor. Yech."

Chéri nodded. "My sentiments exactly. The only hands-on I do is for my work."

Grimbledung stuck out his tongue again. "I see." He smiled broadly. "SO you're setting up a little homestead for you and Col, then?"

Chéri nodded.

"Nice, nice." Grimbledung waggled his eyebrows at the Gnomess. "So you soon gonna be Chéri Belladonna Ossus?"

"That's not how it works. You know that, right?" She moved her hand to the latch.

"Nope." He waggled his eyebrows again.

Chéri sighed. She had hoped to get in and out of the shop without any long, drawn-out discussions. That hope seemed to be rapidly fading. *Next time listen to Drimblerod.* "If I did take his name, it would be his last name."

Grimbledung nodded. "Ossus."

"What?"

"Well, his name is Col Ossus, right?"

"No. His name is Colossus Basher." She hoped that would be enough.

It wasn't.

"Basher, huh? Never heard a Halfling's last name. Is that typical?"

Chéri thought for a moment. *Was it?*

(It was.)

"Well, now that you mention it, first names of Halflings tend to be expressions of size, and family names tend to express a heroic action of some sort, or a quest maybe from their lineage." She considered that. "Basher, Slayer, Marauder. And I even knew a Walker."

"Knew?"

"He was Colossus' close friend, Gigantus. His father went on a quest to the Great Northern Expanse to retrieve the Scythe of..." She paused for the briefest of moments. "Anyway, he didn't make it."

"Didn't make it? To the Great Northern Expanse? I'm not surprised; that's a really long walk."

"No, *he* made it, his son, Colossus' friend, Gigantus didn't make it."

"Oh?"

Chéri sighed. She was sure that at any moment, Drimblerod would return to the front of the shop and see her still entangled in conversation with his partner. "He died in the invasion."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that," lied Grimbledung, "really I am."

Chéri tucked the wand into her purse. "Well, it's a hard life Halflings live. It's just something you get used to."

"Really?"

"No."

"Well, now things have calmed down and you can work on that nice abode, and become Missus Chéri Belladonna Colossus Basher."

Chéri sighed. If nothing else, it seemed like that should end the conversation. "Sure."

It wouldn't.

"Nice, nice. Well, if you're going to have a big affair..." Grimbledung leaned over the counter, "And I really think you should, you know. You should let me plan it, you know. If there's one thing I'm good at, it's planning festivities of the large kind. They're the talk of the town." He waggled his ears. "You know."

"No, I didn't," Chéri confessed. "Wait, didn't you burn Aution to the ground with one of your festivities?"

"Yeah. And they're *still* talking about it." Grimbledung waggled his ears.

"Not in a good way, and not in Aution since it's not around anymore."

Drimblerod returned to the front of the shop. He had five wands in his hands. "Still at it?" He asked Chéri with a smirk. "Hard to stop once it gets going, isn't it?"

Chéri nodded. She pushed down on the latch and pulled Door open slightly. "Well, I really have to run..." She began in the hopes Grimbledung would wave a farewell to her.

He wouldn't.

"Well, most all of that wasn't my fault you know," said Grimbledung, "there's details that definitely point to the fire starting in two places. One there on the main street of course, and another..." He looked around conspiratorially. "Another started by a gassy gnoll," he said in hushed tones.

"I find that hard to believe..."

"You'll be here all day, Chéri. Trust me on this. Pull the door open, go through it, and let it shut behind you."

Chéri nodded at Drimblerod. "Fine, fine. But I'll want the full story later." She waved again and this time left the store.

"Oohh! Drimblerod!"

"What now?"

"I'm starving," moaned Grimbledung as he clutched his belly. "I didn't even get a brunch to tide me over. No brunch in my belly." He did a double take at the keg. "And I didn't even have a drink!" He whined.

"Well, that just means there's more for later." Drimblerod finished putting the last of the wands on the shelves. "Let's go to the

farmer's market and get some supplies." He raised an eyebrow. "Once again, the week's-worth of food lasted four days."

"I think *your* idea of a week of food and *my* idea of a week of food are different things." Grimbledung moved around the counter and towards Door.

"Economizing," reminded Drimblerod. "We're economizing because we're low on coinage." He moved to Door as well. "So we'll quickly get stuff we can prepare here at the Shop because that's less expensive than eating out all the time."

"Fine, fine." Grimbledung sulked. Door opened and let the pair out. "But can we get something that we can eat right away as well?"

"If there's a butcher set up, we'll see what sort of smoked meats they have out."

"What if there's no butcher? Last time I looked that shop was still empty!" Whined Grimbledung.

"One'll show up. The town's getting too big for it to not have a butcher set up. Word's gotten out to the Merchant's Guild and I'm sure they're working on getting one here."

"Why would they care?"

"More working butchers paying guild fees is better for the guild."

"You know, guilds sound like a racket to make money for the people running the guilds and they never seem to really do anything to help the regular members."

"Yep. Guilds and Unions both run by that same plan. It really works out well for them that are lining their pockets on the backs of them that actually work for a living."[11]

"Gads. I need to start a guild."

"Well, do it another day because we need to go to the market now."

"To buy a fat pig?"

"Grim..."

"Then we're home again? Home again? Jiggity Jig?"

"Don't do it."

"Or maybe we can buy a fat hog."

"No pigs of any kind."

Grimbledung frowned. "Well, then maybe I can buy a plum bun before the market's done."

"We'll get some meat of some kind."

Grimbledung thrust his hands in the air. "Whoo hoo! Smoked meats!"

"We'll be back in a little bit, Door. You know the drill."

Door rattled his latch at Drimblerod.

Chapter 24
Simply Supply Shopping

The two Gnomes left the shop and turned right, towards the twice-weekly farmer's market. "So what're we doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what're we doing?" Asked Grimbledung. "The thing we are doing presently- what is it?"

"Doing a simple supply run."

"Well sure; that part I know."

"Then why'd you ask?" Drimblerod was already exasperated and they had just left the shop.

Grimbledung looked over his shoulder, then back at his partner. "Well, I'm just curious about this supply run..."

"It's a simple one," interrupted Drimblerod.

"... so we're going to feed simple food to them gals?" He frowned. "Not sure if that's going to get me where I want to be."

"Well, we'll feed them something else then. To make sure you get to where you want to be. Which, I will say right now, I do not want details of that location. Now, later, or ever."

"So what're we going to feed those females when they come by?" Grimbledung considered that for a moment. He skipped a few steps. "Or are we doing something fun like taking them out on the town?"

"We're economizing so we can do a platter of meats, cheeses, and fruits from Nulu's place."

Grimbledung returned to walking. "That's almost all the food groups." He rubbed his belly. "Those are always yummy, yummy, yummy in my tummy."

"No singing." Drimblerod raised a finger. "Or dancing. Remember last time when they asked you to leave the market because of the song and dance routine you tried to do?"

"I swear, I thought everyone was going to join in once I started."

"And the dancing on the merchant's table?"

"I really thought..."

"No singing or dancing this time." Drimblerod absently pointed left at the intersection towards the market.

"I mean, if even a couple of people had joined in, it would have been good enough to keep the authorities at bay," said Grimbledung as the pair continued along. The market was in full force in the large intersection - the smaller of the two squares that had been established in town- just ahead.

Drimblerod laughed. "Well, I think that maybe your dancing just intimidated everyone so much they were afraid to join in".

"I suppose I can tone it down next time." Grimbledung shrugged. "So where do you see this going with these two females. I mean, a second meeting and tour of the shop with them seems like you're getting serious in females all of a sudden. Yes?"

"Well you know, starting a family is something I've considered on and off," admitted Drimblerod. "If the right gal came along."

"What, you mean with kids and everything?"

"Well, those are what makes a family." Drimblerod put his arm on his partner's shoulder. "Settling down is moving higher on my list of things to do as the decades roll by." The pair walked into the farmer's market. Several merchants waved at the Gnomes. Since they came to the market every time it was going on, they were quickly recognized. Grimbledung's dance routines didn't hurt either. Mostly.

Grimbledung stuck out his tongue. "Kids are gross, though. They leak out of both ends when they're infinks. Spill things as toddlers. Don't listen when they're youngsters. When they're older, they call you

names. Then as adults, they finally manage to move out, but then don't have time for you because they're making their own infinks because they didn't learn the lesson while *they* were one because they were too close to the problem so they thought it was everyone else instead of them."

"That's a pretty strong opinion you got there."

"The right ones usually are."

"Well you know, Grim; you get used to kids."

"Did I mention they were gross?"

"Yes. Twice so far."

As the pair passed a cartload of fruit, an ancient looking Dwarf was sitting on the front of the wagon, furiously gnawing on a nectarine. Since he had no teeth, it just slid around on his gums. Grimbledung nodded at the Dwarf. "Mornin' to you, Murphy. Nice to see you're still around."

The Dwarf nodded back. "Mornin' sonny. Say...Mind startin' this for me?" He held out the very damp piece of fruit.

"Sure thing." Grimbledung took the fruit and bit down on it, breaking the skin. He handed it back to the Dwarf as he licked his lips. "There ya go."

"And kids are gross."

"Yeah, that's what I said- kids are gross. Three times now," agreed Grimbledung. He pointed at a large tent. "There goes the baker with his tray like always; the same old bread and rolls to sell. Every time it's just the same, since the first morning that we came."

"Well, there's only so much you can do with bread," offered Drimblerod.

"Ooh! The Cheese Monger's beside him this time. We should go that way." He began to lead his partner in that direction since Drimblerod still had his arm around over his shoulder.

"Well, how about you get cheese and bread and I'll get fruits and vegetables." He pointed at the other end of the market. "And I'll meet you at Delberger in the middle. Then we'll get some meats together."

Grimbledung nodded. "That sounds good."

"Do *not* climb up on Delberger or play in the fountain this time."

The destruction of Aution had included almost all wooden structures, however several statues from town were salvaged and rededicated in Julesville. The one of Delberger pointing his Ruthless Hand at the heavens was among those saved. The fact that the statue was now blackened in places due to the fire just made it more appropriate. It had been placed in the center of a large stone reflecting pool. That now had a sign that read 'No wading, fishing, or drinking. Not a toilet or a bidet.'



Thanks to various incidents by Grimbledung, extra planks had been added to it over time.

"Fine. Meet you at Delberger's." Grimbledung shrugged from under his partner's arm and moved toward the Cheese Monger's tent- a large aquamarine affair. Within ten paces of it, the smell was

overwhelming to Grimbledung. Overwhelmingly delicious. He moved to one end of the long table that sat in front of the rectangular tent and began to pick up sample squares of cheese. He put them in his mouth as he moved down the long table, chewing as he went.

"Aren't you even going to stop and taste those?" A familiar voice asked him from behind.

Grimbledung turned. He had a little square of cheese in each hand; he was waiting to swallow what he had in his mouth before adding any more. With a gulp, he pushed the mass of mixed cheeses into his belly. "They taste like cheese," he said to Mantodea.

"But each cheese tastes different."

Grimbledung nodded. "Sure, but if you put them all together, they all combine to taste like cheese." He popped both squares of cheese in his mouth and began to chew. "Cheesfm?" He pointed at the plate with the sample squares of cheese.

Mantodea shook her head. "I think I'll pass." She interlaced her arm with his. "But I'll accompany you on your trek."

Grimbledung nodded, "If you want. Just keep in mind cheese makes me gassy." He turned and continued down the table, putting cheese in his mouth with his free hand.

"Then why do you..." started Mantodea. Then she decided to change the subject. To one she was much, much more interesting to her: "So how's business?"

"Wah avata dooah smome econmomonizing," he said around several chunks of chewed, half-chewed, and newly-introduced-to-his-mouth hunks of cheese.

"Why don't you swallow all that first." Mantodea waited patiently as the strange Gnome chewed furiously. He closed his eyes and swallowed hard.

"We have to do some economizing" Grimbledung reached for a piece of cheese from the last plate on the table. "Is what Drimblerod says."

"Economizing?" Mantodea was taken aback. From their research, Second-Hand Sorcery was the only wand shop in quite a large area- there was no way it couldn't be making money. "Why is that?"

Grimbledung picked up another piece of cheese. Mantodea raised an eyebrow at him. He put it in his pocket for later. "Well, Drim said that we've been spending a lot of time doing other things besides selling wands." He frowned. "Apparently Adventuring is bad for business."

"Well, if you're not running your business, that's usually bad for business."

"I'd have never guessed."

Mantodea raised the other eyebrow.

"In any case, the word from Drimblerod is that we need to economize because there's no money left in savings so we need to cut down on things that aren't that important which is kind of a pain because I think my ale is important but he says that it isn't important to running a wand shop so I can't have it but I really like my pony kegs." Grimbledung smiled. "Want to hear my pony keg song?" He cleared his throat.

"No." Mantodea said harshly. "You've no savings?" She said, even harsher.

"Well, not *no* savings," Grimbledung waved his free hand dismissively at her. "No savings, honestly." In all honesty he had no idea what was in their savings accounts. For him, anything over ten coins would have been practically uncountable. "That'd be absurd." He turned to the Cheese Monger - who was eyeing him suspiciously since he had eaten several coppers of cheese and not ordered anything yet. "Let's see. What will it be this time?" He considered the very long table of vastly different cheeses. "I think I'll try a block of Elfish Asiago and half a block of that Brie to see what that's like." He looked up and down the table again. "And a box of Epoisses de Ogre, if you

please." He leaned into Mantodea, "The toots from *that* stuff'll clear a room! But it goes great with ale," he added quickly, "so that makes up for it." He turned back to the Cheese Monger, "And I suppose a quarter wheel of Hooligan to finish it off". He turned back to Mantodea, "Mainly because I like the name," he said with a wink. He looked at the Cheese Monger. "To Second..."

"Yes," interrupted the woman. "I know; Second-Hand Sorcery," said the Cheese Monger, "I know". The Gnome's antics always annoyed her- he routinely ate one of each cheese she had out for sampling. It wasn't the fact that he ate the cheeses that bothered her; that's what they were there for. It was the fact that he ate them all at once, never appreciating their individual flavors. And then after supposedly thinking of what to order, he always ordered the exact same cheeses. Week after week. Or more precisely, bi-weekly after bi-weekly.

"That's a lot of cheese. You're just buying cheese?"

Grimbledung snapped his fingers. "Oh, that's right, thanks! I need bread too. It's the most importantest thing when you're eating cheese." He considered that for a moment. "Along with the wine, ale, and meat, that is."

"And that's economizing? Are you shopping for the month?"

Grimbledung moved towards the smell of baking bread, towing the Dwarfess along with her. "Well, it's supposed to be a week's worth of food, but it never seems to work out that way."

"How long does this usually last?"

"A half a week, so four days usually."

"And that's economizing?" Mantodea fumed. *Out of money? All this time and effort and they're out of money?* The Gnome was saying something, but in her anger she didn't hear. It didn't matter anyway- the Gnome seemed oblivious to pretty much anything and everything that didn't involve food. Mantodea shook her head as she muttered: "It only takes one crazy to cut the profits in half. I knew better from the stories I heard, but did I listen to them? No. Not at all."

Warning bells went off in Grimbledung's head. Something was definitely amiss. He shrugged out of the Dwarfess' arm. "Just hold on a grain of sand!"

Mantodea's insides clenched up as she realized her mistake.

"Now just hold on a grain of sand," said Grimbledung again. "What's going on here, I ask! What indeed?" He waggled his finger at the gaping Dwarfess. "I didn't order Drim's Cheddar." He turned towards the Cheese Monger. "And a quarter wheel of Cheddar!" He shouted at her.

The Cheese Monger stared at the Gnome. She was already preparing to cut the Cheddar; he always ordered a quarter wheel. After everything else. And always from afar. She gave him a thumb's up. He waggled his thumb back at her. As usual. She took her extended thumb and placed it on the scale as she weighed the Gnome's cheese. As usual.

"What?" Asked Mantodea, flummoxed.

"Forgot Drimblerod's Cheddar. Bad form, that." He snaked his arm back through hers. "Bread's now at the top of the list." He pulled the dumfounded female along as he made his way to the large (yet portable) brick ovens.

As Mantodea expected, the routine there mirrored the one for purchasing cheese.

"You sure you're economizing?" She asked after he had ordered what seemed to be an absurdly large amount of bread.

"That's what Drim said," assured Grimbledung. "So I'm not ordering anything real expensive, or any more ale."

"You're not ordering anymore ale." She said, relieved.

Grimbledung skidded to a halt. He squinted at Mantodea. "What kind of game you trying to play me for?"

"I'm not even sure how to answer that," she replied. Honestly.

"Of *course* I'm ordering ale." He began walking again. "One date, and another happening soon and you're already trying to tell how to live my drinking life?" He scowled at her.

Now Mantodea scowled at him. "Now hold on right there." Money or no, there were lines. And they were being crossed. "It wasn't *me* that said you weren't ordering anymore ale." She pulled her arm out of his. "*You* said that, you loon." She poked him in the chest. "YOU."

"No I didn't" He shook his finger at her.

"Yes you did!" She shook her finger at him.

"No, I didn't." Grimbledung poked her in the chest.

"Yes, you did!" She poked him in the chest. Hard.

Several people turned to watch the display.

"No. I didn't!" Grimbledung poked Mantodea in the chest again. "Grrrr!"

"You did *not* just growl at me!"

"Yes. I did!" Grimbledung waggled his butt. "GRRrrrRRR!" He snarled as he leapt at Mantodea. He caught her across the chest with his body perpendicular to hers. For the briefest of moments, they formed a Dwarfess-Gnome cross in the middle of the Farmer's Market. Then they crashed to the ground, Grimbledung on top. He tilted his head back, looking at the sky. "Ahhh Ooohhh!" He howled.

Mantodea thrashed under the Gnome. "Get off me you insane Gnome!" She grabbed him by the shoulder and tried to wrestle him off. *This Gnome is a complete animal!* She paused for the briefest of moments. *That's a nice change of pace from the normal, fat, boring business owner. I kind of like that. If nothing else, it's refresh...* Mantodea was brought out of her introspection as Grimbledung bit her on the shoulder. Technically he was more gnawing than biting, so there was no blood being drawn. But the amount of slobber was probably the same. "Hey!"

"GRRRR!" Said Grimbledung. For good measure he added: "Ahhh-OOOOohhhh!"

On the far side of the market, Drimblerod looked up as a howl wafted through the air. "Uh oh," he said as he put down a deep red pepper.

"What?" Asked Bextra. She had approached Drimblerod in much the same way her partner approached his partner. And with the same plan. She did not notice the howl.

"I need to find Grim."

"Now? But we're picking out peppers." Bextra pouted. "Together even."

Drimblerod was torn- the urge to stay with the gloriously attractive Dwarfess was overwhelming. Still, the last thing he needed was Grimbledung tearing up merchants' tables and Second-Hand Sorcery on the hook for the damages. He looked at Bextra. She pulled in her lip then smiled. Drimblerod gazed at her dimples. "Well, maybe he's all right on his own. He's a big Gnome and responsible for his..." He was interrupted by another howl. He shook his head. "No, I need to go see what's going on before it gets expensive." He took her hand and pulled her along with him as he moved in the direction of the howl.

Mantodea finally got a good enough grip on the Gnome to maneuver him around. There was plenty of space as the crowd had moved into a typical fight-watching ring around the thrashing pair. "Get off me!" She shouted as she got him parallel to her again. She wrapped her legs around him and pushed off with one elbow, flipping him sideways, then over on his back, putting her on top. Having three older brothers had caused her to become a fairly competent wrestler. "Hah!" She said as she leaned in close to look at the suddenly uncontrolled, *unexpectedly virile* Gnome. "What do you say to that?"

Grimbledung looked up at the Dwarfess. Her face seemed lost in a sea of red to him. "Grrr!" He said angrily - not really sure why he was angry. Then another feeling intermixed with the angry. Something quite the opposite. "Grrr-RRR?" He said again. He reached up and took her wrists in his hands in a vain attempt to try and get them off his shoulders. She had him pinned down quite well- her knees were pressed in tight against his hips, keeping him in place. Having had three older sisters had caused him to become a fairly useless wrestler -although he was a master when it came to throwing tea parties, sewing dresses, and applying makeup. On others, anyway.

Mantodea growled at Grimbledung as she moved her face closer to his. Now *his* face was lost in a sea of red to her, though not of anger. This was a different feeling. Completely different. "What do you say to that?" She said huskily, her nose almost touching his.

Grimbledung kissed Mantodea.

Mantodea kissed Grimbledung.

The thrashing continued, but the fight was *definitely* over. After a moment, the crowd realized what was happening. Most turned away out of embarrassment. Some more out of disgust. Two continued to watch.[12]

Drimblerod moved through the large group of people suddenly around him. *Did a street performer just finish an act?* He turned sideways clearing a path for Bextra- whom he was still pulling along. "Lots of people all of a sudden," he said over his shoulder. He turned to look ahead as the crowds suddenly disappeared and he was in a large open area. Movement on the ground caught his eye. He looked down. "Grimbledung Sixtoes! Stop wrestling that female!" Only a moment before, Grimbledung and Mantodea had rolled over, switching positions. "You can't just go attack..." He realized what he was seeing. "Whoa, whoa, *whoa*! What are you two doing in the middle of the market?!"

Grimbledung looked up at his partner. Then down at Mantodea. Then he looked back at his partner. Then back at Mantodea. He sat back. "She

started it," he said breathing hard. He pointed an accusatory finger at her, hoping that would help his case.

"You. Or actually both of you are going to get arrested!" Drimblerod looked around. "I mean, honestly."

Bextra moved beside Drimblerod. "Mant? What's going on here?"

Mantodea looked at her partner. Then to Grimbledung. Then she looked at her partner. Then back at Grimbledung. "He started it," she said. She crab-walked from under the Gnome. "I think."

Grimbledung hopped to his feet. "See? I was just minding my own business; ordering cheese and bread and so forth. When all of a sudden..."

"Yeah, we saw the 'and so forth', Grim." Drimblerod gestured around the market. "I think everyone did, in fact."

Grimbledung offered his hand to Mantodea. She took it and he yanked her to her feet. Since she was prepared this time, she tensed her neck, saving herself any whiplash. He continued to pull her forward until she was against him. "When all of a sudden," he said again, his voice taking on a gravely tone.

The two just looked at each other, noses almost touching.

Drimblerod cleared his throat.

Then Bextra did.

Mantodea finally stepped back and dusted herself off. "We were just discussing the tour," she said in a business-like voice. She eyed him up and down. "That's all."

"That's what that was?"

Mantodea looked at Bextra. "Yes. That was it," she said tersely. Then she looked at Drimblerod. "We'll see you this evening."

"I'll bet." Drimblerod remarked.

"Let's go, Bextra. We need to get prepared for this evening."

"I'll bet." This time it was Grimbledung. He eyed Mantodea up and down. Hungrily.

Drimblerod moved beside his partner as the two Dwarfesses walked off. "What came over you, Grim?"

"I'm not sure. One minute we were arguing and the next minute we were wrestling. Then the next minute..." His voice trailed off.

"Well, I have to tell you, I don't have a good feeling about Bextra." He shook his head as he looked at his friend. "Some of the things she said really didn't sit well with me."

"Mantodea sat well with me."

"*I'll bet*. Listen Grim, I'm not too sure about those two gals. Something doesn't fit. But I can't seem put to my finger on it."

"Maybe you can tonight." Grimbledung leered.

"Well, at least the entendres are back. That's a start." He patted Grimbledung's shoulder.

Grimbledung nodded. "So what'd she say that got you all heebie jeebie'd?" Grimbledung fell in step with his partner as he began to walk out of the market.

"Just a couple of comments about our cash flow," said Drimblerod. "They seemed out of place. A little too personal mayhap." He shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe I'm being paranoid."

"Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean there aren't folk out to get you," reminded Grimbledung.

"That's the word on the street, anyway."

"Oh. I ordered your Cheddar."

Drimblerod nodded. "Thanks. You didn't shout it at her again, did you?"

"Who me?" Grimbledung did a double take at his partner. "I haven't shouted at anyone all day."

"All day?"

"All day," assured Grimbledung.

"Well, fine then. You know we get charged extra when you shout at the merchants. I'm kind of tired of paying for thumbs that I don't get to take home." He smiled. "Or dance on their tables. We're economizing you know."

Grimbledung snapped his fingers. "That was it."

"What was it?"

"Mantodea."

"Mantodea is it?"

Grimbledung nodded. "Oh yeah..."

Drimblerod slapped his partner's shoulder. "Snap out of it! You said 'that was it' when I said we needed to economize. What 'it' was that?"

"Mantodea seemed upset we were economizing, is all."

"So was Bextra. It seems odd that those two women would be that worried about our income. Kind of personal, that."

Grimbledung stopped walking. Drimblerod took a couple more steps before stopping. He turned to look at Grimbledung. "It makes perfect sense, Drim."

"How?"

"Well, these two gals are interested in us. Obviously. And they're just curious about what kind of life we could give them if we ended up with them for an extended period of time."

"Extended period of time?"

"Well, probably for the night..." Grimbledung leered. "For starters."

"I suppose you're right, Grim." Drimblerod started walking towards the shop, the butcher long forgotten. "But we should be on our guard."

"On our guard? We getting robbed?"

"We should be cautious is all I'm suggesting."

"Cautious? There animals on the loose?"

"Take precautions."

"Oohhhh..." Grimbledung leered.

"That's not what I meant and you know it." Drimblerod blinked at his partner. "But that's important too, now that I think about it." He pointed off to his left. "Let's take a quick detour by the apothecary. Just in case."

Grimbledung leered.

Drimblerod shook his head. "Seriously. Now I wonder just how much of a chance meeting that was."

"It was more like chance meetings on purposes" replied Grimbledung. "But either way, it looks to me like we have at least a convivial evening in store for us."

"Convivial - really?"

Grimbledung grinned. "Been waiting to use it." His grin turned into a leer. "Though I'm hoping for something a little more up close and personal that just plain old convivial."

"I'll bet."

The pair detoured to the apothecary, chatting and joking as they went, once there, they went directly to the item they were wanting in silence, added some unnecessary item to fill the basket, then paid for the entire basket with straight faces, and left without more than a 'Thanks' to the shop owner. When they had left and were making their way to their shop, they both resumed talking and laughing.[13]

Chapter 25
Dating Gnomes For Sport and Leisure

Grimbledung closed Door after he entered the shop. "So how long till them female folk get here?"

Drimblerod moved to the stairs, package under his arm. "Probably a couple of hours. Enough for a bath and a haircut, I think."

"*And* a haircut?" Grimbledung ran his hands through his hair. "You think I need a haircut?"

"Several on each side, probably would be better." Drimblerod snickered.

"Fine, fine." Grimbledung ran his hands down his tunic. "I suppose that and a change of clothes is in order."

"I'll put the package upstairs and grab you a set of clothes. Get Rat to mind the shop."

Grimbledung nodded as he moved to the backroom. "Dummy! Do you know where Rat is?"

Dummy nodded.

"Great!"

Grimbledung stared at Dummy.

Dummy stared at Grimbledung.

After a long moment, Grimbledung put his hands on his hips.

Dummy put his hands on his hips.

"Are you doing that on purpose?"

Dummy nodded.

"Do you know where Rat is?"

Dummy nodded.

"You know, the longer you're around Rat, the more you act like him."

Dummy nodded. As his head nodded down the second time, he let it rest on his chest. His arms went slack to his side.

"I know you're not asleep, you know."

Dummy startled 'awake' then put his hands on his belly as he laughed.

"A real jokester you are. We're short on time you know. Where's Rat?"

Dummy put his hands together, palms facing each other, then held them to the side of his head.

"I know you're not asleep."

Dummy shook his head. He held his hands close together, indicating something about a foot tall. Then he put his hands back to the side of his head.

"Sleeping somewhere?"

Dummy nodded.

"Do you know where?"

Dummy shrugged then clapped.

"I don't see how your grand display of unhelpfulness is worthy of applause."

Dummy pointed at Grimbledung then clapped.

Grimbledung snapped his fingers. "Well sure, that would work. Thanks Dummy!" With a wave, he moved to the front of the shop. When he got to the counter, he clapped his hands, summoning Rat. Even though the spell enchanting Rat was well over a hundred years old, it still worked properly- not only was Rat tied to Grimbledung magically, he was required to come when summoned. However, throughout the decades, Rat had developed a tolerance to the summoning portion of the spell to the point where it could take up to an hour of clapping to get him to come. "Rat!" Grimbledung shouted. The shouting didn't help the spell, but it did make Grimbledung feel better. "Raaaat!" Grimbledung clapped furiously.

After a few minutes, Drimblerod came down the stairs holding a worn backpack. "I've got clothes for us both." He smiled. "Arms tired yet?"

"Completely. That stupid Rat." Grimbledung let his arms hang at his sides. "Raaaat!" He resumed clapping.

"Maybe you could change the enchantment to magically transport him from wherever he is to wherever you are. It wouldn't be as entertaining, but it would definitely save time."

Rat scooted under the curtain. "What? What?" He said as he hopped onto the counter. "I was busy you know."

"Sleeping, from what I hear, you know."

"If it takes you time to do it, that action can be considered as keeping you busy."

"I don't think it works that way."

"Now I'm busy listening to you." Rat twitched his haggard whiskers. "See?"

Grimbledung pursed his lips.

Rat sat down. "So what do you want?"

"We need you to watch the shop while we get cleaned up."

"Why can't you just close up the shop while you're out?"

"Because we're economizing," explained Grimbledung. "Apparently if the shop is closed, the amount of coins we have in the bank gets smaller."

"And the smaller the amount of money in the bank, the smaller the portions of food we'll be able to buy you," offered Drimblerod hoping to avoid a long conversation. He wanted to be cleaned up and back long before the females arrived.

"Well, as a key employee of the shop, I can definitely understand why having my portions of food reduced is a really bad thing. So I'll watch the shop. Sell a bunch of stuff..."

"No naps until we get back," interrupted Drimblerod.

"... with no naps until either of you get back," finished Rat dejectedly.

Satisfied, Drimblerod nodded. "Fine. Let's go then, Grim." He smiled. "We've got females to impress."

"Actual females?" Rat wasn't convinced. "Are they..." He twitched his whiskers again. "Hourlies?"

"Not at all, Rat. These are fine and proper gals," said Grimbledung. "Actual ladies of the female persuasion who want to

spend time with yours unruly," he poked his thumb at his chest. "And old baggy pants over there." He jerked his thumb at his partner. He waggled his ears for good measure.

Drimblerod ignored the baiting. "So watch the shop Rat. This conversation has gone on almost three minutes too long."[14] He moved to the door. "Let's go Grim. We need to make sure we're back early." He turned to look at Rat. "See you in a little bit. Thanks Rat."

Rat nodded as he sat down on the counter, legs splayed out to both sides. He watched as the two Gnomes walked past the window toward Todd Fox's Barber and Bathhouse. Rat rubbed his belly. *And mincemeat pies. That Todd always has those available as snacks; I hope they bring me back one.* He flopped down onto his belly, fairly sure that there wasn't a mincemeat pie in his future. "Waiting. Waiting," he said.

As he waited.

Chapter 26
All My Magic Marbles

Rat sat up as Door opened and allowed Liverioso to enter the wand shop.

Liverioso had given up on getting upset with the mechanimated items. Especially since the last time they tried to do something about it, things didn't turn out so well for him. And even more especially since they weren't under any sort of order to get upset with mechanimated items by the Magician's Guild. "Thanks Door." He looked around the business area of the shop. Rat seemed to be tending the counter. "Where is everyone, Rat?" Along with not lisping when talking to himself, he didn't seem to lisp when speaking to animals.

"Drim is out doing something. Or shopping for something. Or something else. I'm pretty sure he's not bringing me a mincemeat pie, if that helps."

"Don't you ever listen when people talk to you?"

"I suppose we are having a lot of weather," said Rat. "Now that it's the season for it."

"Now you're just doing that on purpose."

Rat twitched his whiskers, "Maybe a little. So what brings you here, Mister Liverioso? Do you really need the Gnomes? They've gone to Todd Fox's place and won't be back for an hour."

Liverioso held up a small, leather box. "I've got those magic marbles Grimbledung wanted."

"Am I supposed to pay for them or are they already paid for?"

"Well, he's supposed to pay eight copper. I guess you could pay me." He considered that. "If you're allowed to handle money, that is."

"Me? Sure! I'm a key employee you know," assured Rat. "Key."

"Well then it's eight copper."

"Eight? How many marbles does eight copper buy in today's wholesale magic marble market?"

"Three dozen."

Rat blinked his good eye. "You know he sells them two for a copper, right?"

Liverioso put the box on the counter. "That is the going rate."

"Wow. And you don't mind that markup?"

Liverioso pushed the box toward Rat. "We'll sell them for that too when we're up and running. Same for our Swizzle Sticks and Stink Eyes."

Rat nodded. "Fine then. Just leave them on the counter and I'll give them to Grim when he gets back."

"Where'd Grimbledung go?"

"Bath and a shave and a haircut. With Drimblerod." He winked. "Female guests in the shop tonight."

"You sure I don't need to come back later?"

Rat shook his head. "No need to wait; I'm a key employee, you know. I can make payments." He turned and leaned over the counter and pushed the drawer out. "More accurately than Grimbledung, if I don't mind saying." He looked over his shoulder. "I just need a 'silver' or 'copper' call from you; it's sometimes hard to see in the drawer." He jumped in as Liverioso leaned over the counter.

Liverioso could hear Rat rummaging around in the drawer. He leaned over even more. "Ready when you are." A coin flew out of the drawer and clattered onto the countertop. Liverioso slapped it so it wouldn't roll off.

"Copper?"

"Copper." Liverioso slid it to one side.

The next coin that came out was silver.

"Silver," said Liverioso as he slid it back into the drawer.

Rat stuck his head out of the drawer. "Don't do that or I'm liable to keep grabbing the same coin. Just move it to the side." He ducked back in.

"Sorry."

After only a minute, Rat had tossed out eight copper and three silver coins. Knowing that the former Magician Guild Enforcer was a man of character, he wasn't worried the man would pocket any extra coins.

"You're pretty good at spotting coppers," said Liverioso as he pushed the silver coins back into the drawer.

"The newer they are, the easier it is to tell them apart."

"Maybe you need a box of matches in there."

Rat shook his head. "We try to keep Grim away from open flames if at all possible."

Liverioso slid the copper coins off the counter and into his pocket, a few at a time. "Let us know if you need any more of those." He pointed at the box. "And save the box so we can refill it. It's magically insulated so it almost costs more than the marbles."

Rat peered into the box. "Do they come with instructions or anything?"

"Don't get them wet and don't feel them after midnight."

Rat did a double take between the marbles and the magician. "What? Midnight where? That's kind of vague."

"I'm kidding. That's for something completely different."

Rat peered into the box again. "Are these things safe?"

"Asked the shop that keeps hundreds of unstable wands and has a mechanimated jousting dummy and a rat as employees."

"Key employee," corrected Rat. "I'm a key employee."

"Key employee."

Rat nodded. "Better."

Liverioso waved as he made for the door. It opened for him as he neared it. "Thanks," he said to it. After all was said and done, it was a helpful item and added a nice flair of magic. If he ever got back in the

Magician's Guild, he would just have to ignore Door. He had all but decided however, that Dummy was doomed.

Rat pushed the box to one side of the counter as the magician left. He returned to his original position- splayed out on his belly. "Waiting... Waiting"

Chapter 27
General Hospitality

Door opened as Drimblerod entered the shop.

Seeing who it was, Rat didn't sit up.

"Just you, huh?"

"Who else would I be?" Asked Rat. "I'm a key employee, you know. *Key*."

"Not you, Rat." Drimblerod shook his head as he pointed at his partner. "I was just thinking out loud; I was hoping Grimbledung would be here with you. The ladies're going to be here any minute."

"Grimbledung's not with you?" Rat sat up.

"We got separated."

"What? How?"

"Well, I prefer to take a bath after I get my hair cut because all those little hairs make my back itch."

"That makes sense," said Rat even though he had no experience with haircuts. The loss of the tips of his whiskers was a one-time event, over a century ago. "How did that make you lose Grimbledung?"

"He said he liked to take a bath first so that his hair would be clean and easy to manage when he got it cut."

"Plus, I suppose that he doesn't have enough to even worry about little hairs on his back." Rat stuck out his tongue. "That don't grow there normally, that is."

"I suppose." Drimblerod looked at the door. "They're going to be here any minute, I'm sure of it." He looked back at Rat worriedly. "Watch the shop until I get back down."

Rat nodded. "That's what I've been doing." He flopped back on his belly. "Watching."

"So you're going out for the night then when Grimbledung and the girls get here?" Drimblerod asked Rat.

"Well, I didn't have anything planned," admitted Rat. "I'm tired from all this..."

"So you're going out for the night then." Drimblerod interrupted. This time there was no question in his voice.

"Well, I'm dashed." Rat sat up. "I guess I'll just go out and see what I can see."

"Want a copper to help you on your way?"

Rat shook his head. "No thanks. I'm too tired for a chase right now."

"What?"

"Never you mind, Drimblerod kicking out a key employee Axebreath," Rat said. "So you want me to leave now then?"

"Well, Grim's not here yet and I've got a delivery coming. Can you keep an eye out for both of them while I go change my clothes?"

"I suppose so. A delivery of what? I already accepted one delivery today."

"It's food. I've got a platter coming from Nulu's," explained Drimblerod. "And some wine." He turned and bounded up the stairs. "Don't let Grimbledung pester that wench if they get here at the same time!" He called down. "Those two'll go at it for half the night if you let them."

"They're like an old married couple," agreed Rat.

"And send the gals to the workroom if they get here before I do!"

"Right, right." Rat twitched his whiskers. "Lots of work I'm doing today." Rat sighed loudly. "Lots."

After only a few moments, Grimbledung burst into the shop. "Anybody here yet?"

"Well, just you and me," said Rat as he sat up. "And you, of course."

"So there's three of us. Nice." He eyed Rat. "Were you sleeping?"

"I was resting," corrected Rat as he sat up again. "It's been a busy day." He gestured with both claws around the shop. "I've sold eight wands, talked to several other customers who couldn't decide their way out of a canvas sack, and even accepted a delivery."

"We're expecting a delivery?"

"Not anymore." He thought for a moment. "Well, maybe one still."

Grimbledung moved to the counter as Door closed. "So what got delivered? Them female folk?"

"I seriously doubt they're going to have themselves delivered."

Grimbledung pursed his lips. "We're not having to go fetch them, are we? Send a wagon over or something? Couple of Orcs to roust them? Hire a flying carpet?"

"Now you're just getting silly."

Grimbledung considered several other options. None seemed better than the other did. "I got to get them?"

"They'll come over all on their own," assured Rat. "So you needn't worry; you can stay indoors." A smile came to his face. "I'd hate to have your hair messed up."

"Right?" The Gnome ran his hands along the sides of his head where his hair was slicked back. "This is a new look for me."

"Combed?"

Grimbledung narrowed his eyes. "Slicked back."

"Sure, sure. Well, I suppose that's one..."

"What got delivered?" Interrupted Grimbledung.

The bell over Door jingled as it opened.

Grimbledung turned to look. "We're closed already," he said to the Gnomess holding a very large platter. "We've got plans for this evening so you and your platter will have to go elsewhere."

"This is the platter that you ordered, Grimbledung," she said.

"I didn't order any such thing."

"Yes, you did."

"No, I didn't!"

"Yes. You did!"

Grimbledung waggled his butt. "Grrrr!"

"Did Drimblerod?"

Grimbledung stopped waggling his butt. "Yes. He did."

The Gnomess stared at Grimbledung.

Grimbledung stared at the Gnomess.

"This is the platter Drimblerod ordered." She moved to the counter without waiting for him to say anything else. Grimbledung was a very good tipper- what she had told Colossus was true- but he was, on the whole, quite unstable and prone to babbling. And she had to admit, damned cute. Tray was getting heavy. Not to mention the backpack with four bottles of wine were weighing down on her. "I'll just leave it here."

"Woo hoo! Food!" Grimbledung hopped back and forth. "Now all we're missing is actual females!"

The Gnomess raised an eyebrow at Grimbledung. Truth be told, she was in the market for a male, and Grimbledung was fairly close to her in age, but he was so annoyingly annoying that she wasn't sure if she was head-over-heels for him, or wanted to toss him head over heels into the Nearly Bottomless Pit. Sometimes she thought he came in just to start an argument with her. Or maybe she waited for him to come in to start an argument with him. Either way, the ball was in her court. And she had a wicked backhand. "What am I all of a sudden; chopped liver?" She said icily. If she had her tray, she would have gripped it tightly. Instead she just made a fist.

Grimbledung took a step back. "Gah! No, no. What I meant was some festal females who we plan on..." his voice trailed off. "Something." He returned meekly.

"Gross. But if that's what you want…" She shrugged out of her backpack. "Let's do this."

"Now hold on a grain of sand, Flora O. Willowfeet, you wily wench!" Grimbledung put his hands up. "I *forbid* you from removing any more clothing! We have females on their way and having a naked one already here would probably put a damper on our evening. Especially a sumptuous one like yourself. Bad form, that."

Sumptuous? The Gnomess raised an eyebrow at Grimbledung. It was becoming a habit. "Honestly." She held the backpack in one hand as she fished out a bottle of wine with the other. "I'm getting the wine."

Grimbledung let his hands drop to his sides. "That's a relief!"

The Gnomess raised the same eyebrow at Grimbledung. Yet again. "Nope. Try another."

"I'm relieved?" Tried Grimbledung. Again. "That the wine is here?"

"So the tip keeps going higher and higher."

Grimbledung pursed his lips. "You know we're economizing around here."

The Gnomess put the bottle of wine on the counter. Hard. "You want two or three bottles of wine?"

"Three! Three, three, threeee!" Grimbledung hopped back and forth. He was sure that three was more than two.

"Well then." She reached into the pack but didn't pull her hand out. "You'd better come up with a better tip than this bottle of wine I'm liable to just keep for my trouble."

Grimbledung scooted around the counter to the coin drawer. He pulled out a silver coin and dropped it on the glass beside the bottle of wine.

She raised an eyebrow. The other one, this time.

Grimbledung dropped another silver coin on the counter.

Before it rattled to a stop, she added a second bottle.

"One each and that's my final offer!"

"Deal." The Gnomess pulled another bottle of wine out of the backpack and placed it beside the two. Gently. She picked up the two coins and slid them into her pocket. She held out her hand for the third coin. Grimbledung begrudgingly placed it in her palm. "Thanks very much, Mister Grimbledung Sixtoes, *esquire*." She slung the backpack onto one shoulder. "See you tomorrow most likely."

"Sure! Sure thing!" Grimbledung took two bottles of wine. "See you then!" He held the bottles up, waving them back and forth. "Now I gotta go prep the playing field!"

"Sorry about that," offered Rat.

"Gross." The serving wench turned and walked out of the shop- Door obliging her. When she got onto the boardwalk, she reached into the backpack and pulled out a bottle. Using her teeth, she yanked the cork out and spat it onto the street. "Males," she muttered. She looked left and right. One way was the Mora Tau bar and potentially a lot of loud talking accompanied by groping. The other was the Fat Blue Moon Tyre brewery and potentially a lot of loud talking accompanied by groping. "Looks like it's you and me tonight, Signore Marzemino," she said to the bottle as she opted to go home instead.

"So what got delivered?" Grimbledung tried again.

"Grimbledung! Are you dressed?" Drimblerod called from upstairs.

"Well sure!" Grimbledung considered that. "You want me *undressed*?" He did a little hop. "Why pay for the cow when the chickens can come home to roost for free?"

"I thought you brought clothes for him," Rat called up the stairs.

Drimblerod came halfway down the stairs then bent over so he could see his partner. "That is an absurd story that I'd rather not discuss right now," he said to Rat. He jabbed his finger at his partner. "Get up here and

put on *fresh* clothes before I bonk you on the head so hard you'll think it's Grundsday."

"It's not?" Grimbledung waggled his ears. "The food's here you know." He pointed to make sure his partner saw. "I accepted the delivery in a most professional manner."

"I'll bet. I'm almost dressed so I'll carry it up when I'm done. You get up here. Now."

Grimbledung looked from his partner to the platter, then to the bottles of wine. "You know we ought to send out for some Melonchello because it's really good for your digestion after you've had something to eat and since you have food here already, the odds are really good that we're going to have something to eat so that means we should have a digestive afterwards especially since we are sure we're going to have something to eat because it would be rude to let those female folk eat while we watched them and if we ate something we might get the burps and it's hard to make a move on a female when you've got the burps, I think." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Or the toots."

"We're going to make due with some wine, cheese, meats, and bread, Grim. That and your good behavior." He waggled his finger to emphasize the point.

"Right, right." Grimbledung moved to the counter and leaned on it. "Without any Melonchello," he frowned.

"Just calm down, get dressed, and the evening will go just fine." He looked at the door. "And make it quick; they'll be here any time. Right?"

"Right." Grimbledung saluted then moved to the stairs. "Make way!" He charged up the stairs as his partner moved to one side.

"Good." He leaned back down. "Rat, I'll be down shortly." Drimblerod moved up the stairs out of sight. From the top of the

stairs he called down, "And if the gals arrive send them to the back room. We'll be entertaining there!"

"I don't think you Gnomes are entertaining *anywhere*."[15]

"Grim!" Drimblerod said to his partner's shut door. "I'm going to make sure the backroom is tidy for the gals. When you get out, carry the platter of food up here."

"We're not eating in yon work shop?" His partner called out.

There were grunts coming from the room that let Drimblerod know that his partner was actually getting dressed. It was a relief. "No, we'll chat down there, show them the operation then retire up here to eat." He waggled his ears. "And such."

"Whoo hoo!" Grimbledung cheered.

"So hurry up and get the rest of your clothes on." Drimblerod wanted to make sure that a full accompaniment of clothes would be on his partner- not just a cape. Or just socks. With a shrug he added, "Shoes are optional!"

"Whoo hoo!!"

Drimblerod went down the stairs to make sure Dummy hadn't made a mess since the last time he had been to the workshop.

It happened.

Often.

Chapter 28
The Days of Their Lives - Past?

"Waiting," said Rat as Drimblerod came down the stairs and made for the backroom. "Still waiting."

"Keep up the complete lack of any actual work," remarked Drimblerod. He braced himself as be pushed around the curtain. There was no telling what he could encounter at any given moment in the workshop. Dummy had taken to starting projects on his own, leaving a wake of destruction in his path. The Great Shelf Building Incident of Moonsday had gotten Dummy relegated to a closet for the rest of the day. When he had been let out, he solemnly promised to never use hand tools without permission. Or listen to suggestions from the Gremlins who had now started coming by on a fairly regular basis. Who, as it turned out, were also the cause of the Great Painting Incident of Thraksday. When threatened with another stint in the 'Closet of Shame' (as Grimbledung dubbed it), Dummy had rolled on the Gremlins faster than a Scalosian bug on a hot tin roof. Having a head stuffed with hay and cotton bunting had kept the Gremlins from depositing Dummy at the bottom of the Great Salty River. Just barely.

Drimblerod looked around the workshop. Dummy was sitting in a corner holding a large, several-paged parchment. "Who taught you to read?"

Dummy let go of the parchment with one hand and held it down to his waist.

"Gremlins, huh? Well, that definitely proves they aren't holding a grudge and aren't planning on doing any wet work with you."[16]

Dummy nodded.

"What are you reading, anyway?"

Dummy held up the magazine so that Drimblerod could read the front page.

"Captain Willy's Whiz Bang?"

Dummy nodded.

"That will rot your brain."

Dummy tapped his head.

"Well, it will rot your hay, then."

Dummy shrugged and returned to his parchment.

"We'll be entertaining a couple of ladies here in a little bit, Dummy." Drimblerod looked around the workshop. It was actually very tidy. Apparently, Dummy's attention had been focused on the parchment for the better part of the day. "Willy has you occupied, I see," he remarked.

Dummy nodded without looking up. He was reading the limericks page - with illustrations!

Drimblerod shook his head as he put away two files- the only tools left out on the workbench, "I have a jousting dummy reading tawdry periodicals, but I can't get my partner to read a menu".

Dummy shrugged. He had moved back to the ongoing adventures of Captain Willy- a Dwarf soldier wrongly convicted of killing his commanding officer in a battle against Halflings, who then escaped and joined the Halfling Army.[17]

"Well, enjoy your reading, Dummy," Drimblerod said as he pushed past the curtain to the front room of the shop.

Grimbledung hopped down the stairs two at a time. "I'm getting the tray up there now, Drim!"

He was, Drimblerod was pleased to see, completely dressed. He had opted for no shoes. "I'll get the tray if you get the bottles, Grim," he offered. Drimblerod hefted the tray to his shoulder and moved to the stairs. "We'll get this all upstairs before the gals arrive."

Grimbledung nodded and picked up a bottle of wine and tucked it into his pants.

"Well, that's a sight I wish I could un-see," said Rat.

"What?"

"You with a bottle of wine shoved down your trousers."

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, I'll make that my bottle."

Rat nodded. "That helps a little, I suppose."

"Be right back, Rat," said Grimbledung as he took the two remaining bottles and followed his partners up. When he got to the living area of the shop, Drimblerod was placing two glasses on the table to join the two that were already there.

"Glasses even. Nice, Drim."

"Well, we're not just going to drink out of the bottles, you know."

"Well, that's how you'd start a good evening off, I'd think."

Drimblerod looked at the setting. "I thought I ordered four bottles of wine."

"She only had these with her." He pointed at the two bottles with one hand and fished the third out of trousers with the other. "One per is what I figured?"

"One per would be four bottles, Grim."

Grimbledung winked. "Now we get more each, right?" He took a piece of cheese of the table. "Where are they? I'm starving. Starving, you know."

"Well, you're either eating or starving." Drimblerod also took a piece of cheese off the tray. "There's no in between from what I've seen."

"That sounds like the start of a song."

"Do not." Warned Drimblerod.

Downstairs, the bell above Door jingled several times.

"They're here!" Grimbledung hopped back and forth. "Whoo boy!"

"Just stay calm, Grim." Drimblerod put his hand on his partner's shoulder. Truth be told, he was just as excited since the most beautiful Dwarfess he had ever seen was presently in the front of his shop, waiting to have a meal with him. A meal and possibly more! "Let's go meet our guests and stay focused what we're trying to do here."

Grimbledung giggled. "Oooh! I know! I know!"

"No, Grim. We're trying to have a nice evening with those two females so that they'll want to have another evening with us afterwards. So just stay calm and..."

The bell jingled again.

"That's odd," remarked Drimblerod. Door usually let people in right away.

"Right, right. Let's go!" Grimbledung pointed at the stairs. "That-a-way!"

Giddily, the two went down the stairs.

The bell jingled again.

This time angrily.

Just a little bit earlier...

Chapter 29

They Have Dinner at Nulu's – and They Both Kind of Liked It

Not Really...

Akita pushed around the curtain that led to the restaurant portion of the Duck Inn and Dine. As he passed by it, he held it open for Maca. "Right this way." He had been anxiously waiting outside the Duck Inn and Dine for almost thirty minutes. Passersby gave the usually gruff Constable sideward glances as he stood -and fidgeted - with over a dozen roses in the crook of his elbow.

Maca glided around the curtain, hair moving in wisps in slow motion as she did. The roses were now in her possession.

Since pretty much everyone in town knew they were an item, Akita didn't get more second looks than the Constable normally got. The second looks Maca got were for her mysterious attractiveness. And, of course because word of her alarming transformation after the robbery at the wand shop.

"Evenin' all," said Akita to the room. He received several replies in kind. "Got a table reserved in the corner, Maca." He motioned to a table set for two. There was a wooden sign on it that proclaimed the reservation in raised letters. "Right over there."

"Lovely."

Akita fell in step behind Maca as she made her way to the table. By the time they got to their table, Akita scooted around her and had pulled out her chair, and sat himself, everyone in the establishment had gone back to their own conversations.

Akita leaned toward Maca. "This is nice. I should'a asked you days ago."

Maca smiled because she knew he had been tormented those days as he worked up the courage to ask her out. "It's very nice. I'm glad you finally asked."

Akita leaned back. "Finally?"

Maca winked. "Call it a female intuition."

"Sure, that's what we'll call it." He cleared his throat. "So about the incident."

"Well, there's not much to tell." Maca put the roses on the corner of the table. "I suppose it all started when I was young." She smiled. "Well, relatively speaking for Elves, that is..."

Nulu approached the table with a cloth over her arm and a notepad in her hand. "And what shall I start you two folks off with this evening?"

Inside Akita's stomach tightened. He was hoping for no interruptions in the story to get the night headed in the right direction. Still, it was Nulu. "We get the owner serving us?" Akita grinned. "You short staffed tonight or is there a special occasion?"

"You finally asked her to dinner and I just want to make sure the evening goes off without a hitch." She looked at Maca and rolled her eyes. "Males."

"Finally?" He looked at Maca. "More intuition, huh?"

Nulu gave him a warm smile. "We all got it." She brandished her notepad. "So what'll it be?"

"I think some red wine and some fruit and cheeses to get us going," Akita said. He knew that as with (most) Elves, Maca was a vegetarian.

Nulu nodded as she pocketed her notepad. There was no need writing down the simple order. "Coming right up." She moved off.

Maca reached across the table. "I'm really glad we did this."

"Finally, right?"

Maca shrugged as she took Akita's outstretched paw. "At all. I was worried I had scared you off."

"You scare me off? I figured it was the other way around. Not many female folk are all right with male folk who shed."

"Well, male folk tend to avoid female folk that burst into flames."

"So..." Akita cleared his throat again. "Relatively speaking you were a young Elf..."

Maca nodded. "Yes, and my friends and I had wandered out into the forest."

"Looking for mischief?"

"Just something to do. Young and looking for a little adventure."

"And you found it, I imagine."

Maca sat back. "Yes, while we were out..."

Nulu approached the table with a small tray. She placed it on the corner of the table opposite the roses. "Red wine," she said simply as she placed two long-stemmed glasses on the table. She picked up the bottle and twisted a corkscrew into the top of it. "A nice sweet Malavasia" She popped the cork out of the bottle and presented it to Akita.

Akita took the cork and inhaled deeply. His eyes got large. "Cherry, honeysuckle, spice box..." He paused and smelled the cork again. "... spring flowers even."

"Sounds delicious," said Maca.

Nulu nodded. "Oh, it is. Straight from the Villa of Sceriman, out by the Brimstone lava fields."

"Lava fields?"

Nulu nodded at Akita. "The rich lava soil makes for the best wine." She poured a little of it into Akita's glass.

Akita took a sip of the wine. It was cool and sweet in a deep way that was hard to explain. "Wow," he said simply. "Might need a second bottle of that."

Nulu poured Maca's glass then topped of Akita's. "Well, I'll get your food first. I'll be back."

Akita nodded at Maca after the Trolless had left. “So...” He looked around conspiratorially. “A little adventure,” he coaxed.

Maca put down her wineglass and took Akita’s hand again. “Yes. Me and two friends were out in the forest on an innocent adventure when all of a sudden...”

“Well, this is a nice sight, I must say.” Nulu nodded at the Constable as she placed a wood cutting board with several types of cheese on it. She smiled. “You two make a nice match,” she added as she put a basket of breads and another of cut fruits on the table as well.

“Nice, Nulu.” Akita said, almost testily.

“Very nice, indeed.” Agreed Maca.

“Well, we aim to please.” Nulu looked at the table. “Getting crowded,” she said to no one in particular.

“Now that you mention it...,” began Akita.

Maca smirked.

“I’ll tend to that,” said Nulu “Right, right. Sorry about that.” She turned quickly and left.

“Ahh” Akita put his other hand on Maca’s sandwiching it between his. “Alone at last.” He licked his lips. “So before any more interruptions, you and two friends were out...”

Maca nodded. “Yes, and we should have had an escort with us seeing as how the forest could be a dangerous place...”

“But when you’re on an adventure,” said Akita.

“Yes, it’s hard to have an adventure when you’re under guard. So you leave them behind.” Maca leaned forward. “So when we ran into a patrol of...”

Nulu, appearing from nowhere, reached across the table and picked up the roses. “Way too crowded on this table.” She slid them into a large vase. “I’ll just keep these in here for you so they’re out of your way while you eat.”

“Thanks!” Said Akita, almost too loudly.

"Sure thing. I'd hate to spoil your romantic dinner."

"That is a very nice platter you put together," said Maca as she picked up a piece of dark yellow cheese. It had blue-green mold growing along the rind. "Very nice." She said again as she nibbled around the rind.

"Thanks. I sent a similar platter over to Drimblerod and Grimbledung earlier to try and help them along."

"Help them along?"

Nulu nodded at Maca. "They're entertaining two ladies this evening. Finally, I must say."

"There's creatures of the female persuasion that're willingly interested in Grimbledung?"

Nulu playfully shoved Akita. "And a good looking one that that, Mister. A Dwarfess."

"And I thought they were more discerning."

"Dwarves?" Asked Maca, unknowingly feeding the straight line to the Werewolf.

"Females." Akita laughed.

"You're terrible. I'll have you know Constable Akita Finnish, that Mantodea seems perfectly balanced."

The joviality dropped from Akita. "What did you say?"

Taken aback, Nulu repeated: "I'll have you know that Mantodea seems completely balanced?"

"Mantodea Hesperus?"

"Well, yes. How did you…"

"Real top-heavy, if you know what I mean?" Akita gestured with his paws in case there was any confusion. "And a knockout?"

"How romantic," Maca remarked.

Akita ignored her. "Nulu?"

"That does actually describe her. How'd you know?"

"Is she alone?"

"She's with the Gnomes."

Akita shook his head as he stood. "Is there a second female?"

"Well, there is actually." Nulu looked worried.

So did Maca.

"Brigitte? Laurita?"

"Bextra."

"So there's a new one." He looked at Maca. "I have to go. Official duties."

"What?" Asked Maca. Worried her dinner plans were being ruined.

"She's a black widow. She's responsible for the disappearances of at least twelve males of various races. Then she takes over the businesses, sells off the inventory, then moves on. I heard she might be out in my territory couple'a weeks ago."

"At least?" Asked Maca. Worried the two Gnomes' lives were being ruined.

"Twelve that we know of," he added ominously. "I imagine those victims with no other family don't always get reported."

"How do you..." Began Nulu. But it was too late; Akita moved to the curtain. "But..." He ducked under it at almost a run. Nulu looked at Maca. "But..."

Maca smirked. "So for our second date, how about we get one of your hourlies?"

Nulu gaped.

Maca waved her hand dismissively. "Ah well. The hazards of being involved with a lawman, right?" She gestured to the now-empty seat. "Want to partake? I hear the wine is excellent."

"What's the point of being the boss if you don't get to slack off once and a while?" Nulu eased into the chair. "I think my shift is officially over."

Right before this...

Chapter 30
The Gnomes and the Restless (Dwarfesses)

Mantodea and Bextra stood across the street as the young Gnomess came out of the wand shop. They watched her as she pulled a bottle of wine out of her backpack, uncork it, take a swig, then leave.

"There's the wine we knew was coming."

Bextra nodded. "Wonder how much they're going to try and put in us."

"That's not what I'm concerned about them trying to put in us."

Bextra glanced at her partner in crime. "So what's the plan then?" She was a new partner of Mantodea and this was her first job with her. She was familiar with the overall plan, since she had been working a very similar scheme solo for the better part of ten years. Albeit without the murder; hers was an 'infiltrate, rob blind, extricate' kind of scheme. A chance meeting with Mantodea had made them partners. In the very near future Mantodea had promised, they would be very lucrative partners. "We going to avoid drinking anything?"

Mantodea shook her head. "Nope. We're going to put away as much alcohol as they'll give us." She reached into her purse, pulling out a small vial. She unstopped it and took a quick sip. She offered it to her partner. "This takes away all the effects of alcohol."

"Well, that's easier than pouring it out when no one's looking." She smelled the potion. It smelled like an old sewer. That was used by Ogres. After the Orcs had finally decided it smelled too bad for even them. "I think." She took a hesitant sip of the pungent potion. She gasped for air as it ran down her throat. "What's in it?"

"Don't ask." She put the potion back in her purse. "The most important thing to remember is..."

"This isn't my first gig, you know," said Bextra between breaths. Whatever was in the potion was attempting to make a sudden reappearance.

Mantodea turned to look at the Dwarfess. "Let's go meet our targets and stay focused on what we're trying to do here."

Bextra snickered. "Those fools think *we're* the targets." She was still uneasy about actually killing someone- even someone as annoying at Grimbledung. Or Drimblerod, for that matter. She hoped Mantodea would handle that part. "So what was that most..."

"Just keep Grimbledung under control." Mantodea interrupted her as she swapped her purse to her other arm. "And keep drinks going into them as much as they try to put into us."

"So we get rid of them tonight, then?"

"If I have to see that Gnome waggle his ears at me one more time..."

"Or grope me with his eyes."

With a nod at each other, the two determined females made for the shop. When they got to the door, it remained closed, forcing them to skid to a halt. "This thing will be the first to get sold off," remarked Mantodea as she knocked loudly.

Door, having heard the entire conversation the two females just had in the street, stayed latched.

Mantodea tried the door again. It remained locked. She shook the handle furiously. "Stupid door."

Grimbledung came bounding to Door. "Let them in, Door. They're here to see us, you know."

Door rattled its catch at the Gnome, but didn't unlock.

"What's gotten into you?"

Mantodea knocked again. Angrily.

"Door! Let them in!" Grimbledung wrestled with the latch but it stayed engaged. "Drim! Door's gone off its hinges!" Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Metaphorically speaking, that is," he said to no one in particular.

Drimblerod came down the stairs. "What's going on? Can't you even handle something as simple as letting in those two females without some sort of drama?" He shook his head. "Stupidity, I have seen thy face."

Grimbledung wheeled around, furious. "Now hold on right there! I can good and well open and close doors and have been able to for centuries. Windows too!"

Mantodea kicked Door. Repeatedly.

"Then why are they still outside?"
"Because YOUR stupid door won't open!"
"My door?"
"Well, YOU made it!"

Bextra peeked into the shop "Those two are going to go to blows". She glanced at her partner. "We might have to postpone this."

Mantodea looked out at the street. It was quiet. "We can give them a little time to figure out whatever they are trying to do." She glanced at the door. "Opening a latch, maybe. But if people start to take notice, we'll leave."

"Right." Bextra turned to face the street. "I'll keep an eye out. Try to see what those fools are doing and maybe help them along."

Mantodea kicked the door again. She cleared her throat and said sweetly. "I thought we were meeting tonight. Are we going to do it face to face?" Inside she could hear the two Gnomes shouting at each other at the tops of their lungs. She was surprised half the town hadn't shown up because of the ruckus. Unknown to the Dwarfess, the shouting matches

had become so commonplace, that no one gave them a second look anymore. In all actuality, the nearby residents were happy that it was happening behind the closed doors of Second-Hand Sorcery this time, instead of out in the street as was often the case. With Grimbledung naked.

"So why don't YOU get YOUR door to open mister smart trousers?" Countered Grimbledung. He pointed at the door. "Have at it." He waved his wand around menacingly. "Before I blast it out of existence!"

Drimblerod shoved his partner out of the way and stood in front of Door. "Door. Open up and let those females in," he ordered.

Door rattled its latch but didn't unlock.

"What's gotten into you? You let everyone in!" Grimbledung sheathed his wand, then pushed his hair back into place. "Honestly! Orcs, Trolls, vagabonds; anybody and everybody just traipses right through. You even let thieves in." He considered that for a moment. "Well, the first time anyway. But once you know who they are..."

Door rattled its latch.

"Wait a second," interrupted Drimblerod. "Are you saying they're thieves, Door?"

Door rattled its latch. Hard.

Drimblerod looked at his partner. "I told you there was something off about them two."

"Well, I didn't get my hair done for nothing," said Grimbledung. He slicked back his hair again. "Forewarned is an early riser who is healthy, wealthy and wise."

"That's not exactly that saying," said Drimblerod. "But you're right either way." He turned back to Door. "Okay Door. We got it. These two are dangerous..."

Door rattled its latch. It was quite upset at this point that it only had a latch to rattle. It decided then and there that it would let Dummy know it wanted a knocker installed so it would have a second means of communication. Door hoped that having arms, Dummy would be able to relay the message with no trouble at all. As it would work out, the entire event would end up being an on-again, off-again, daylong, heated game of charades between Dummy and Grimbledung that would end up with Door getting a new coat of paint. In red this time. But no knocker. Door would not be pleased by either event and would spend the remainder of the week sulking and forcing people to open it themselves.[18]

"... so we'll be on our guard..."

"We've already bought precautions." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Right?"

"... so let them in and we'll be careful." Drimblerod patted Door. "Thanks for looking out for us."

Door unlatched its latch.

"We're in," said Mantodea. She grabbed her partner on the shoulder to turn her around. "Get your game face on because we are going to finish this. Tonight."

Drimblerod took a deep breath. "Fine then. Let's get this show rolling." He pulled open Door. "Good evening ladies," he said. "Sorry about that. Door here decided he was going to have a little sport with you is all. He's playful that way." He patted the Door. "There's no hard feelings."

"Not yet anyway," remarked Grimbledung from inside the shop. "But there's stirrings."

Drimblerod tried in vain to kick his partner but he was out of reach. "Please come in, ladies." He gave a short bow and gestured into the shop.

Mantodea and Bextra entered the shop with smiles on their faces. "That's some fun game your door plays," said Mantodea.

"You should try it for a few rounds of 'open or shut'. You only need the edge of your seat for that game, I must say!"

Drimblerod glanced at his partner. "In any case. Welcome to Second-Hand Sorcery." He spread his hands out wide. "The most successful wand shop this side of Picistan."

Bextra sniffed. "Smells like there's some cheese and meats hiding out someplace." She still had the acrid taste of the anti-alcohol potion in her mouth. "That's not from previously in the day, is it?" She pouted.

"Not at all!" Grimbledung hopped up and down. "We've got a whole platter of cheese and meats that's brand new!" He pointed at the stairs. "Up yonder."

Bextra started toward the stairs.

"But first I thought we'd give a quick tour," suggested Drimblerod.

Mantodea smiled. "That sounds nice. A quick tour, then we go have an evening snack." She raised a perfect eyebrow at the Gnome. "And a drink perhaps?"

"That too! That too!" Grimbledung hopped again. He reached out and snatched Bextra by the hand and yanked her to him. "On with the tour, Drimblerod!" He smiled at Bextra, "I always like tours. You learn so much from them." He looked around the shop. "It'll be neat to see the workings of such a famous and successful wand shop, right?"

Bextra gaped at Grimbledung. "You work here too, though."

"Sure, but I've never been on a *tour*," Grimbledung shoved her. "Silly." He stuck out his tongue. "It'll probably end at the gift shop. Most tours do."

Mantodea shook her head. She was looking forward to killing this particular Gnome more than anyone else she had killed. She hooked her arm through Drimblerod's. "Let's get this over with then."

"Lead the way Drim!"

Drimblerod nodded at his partner. "Well, we have a nice open-shopping space here at the front of the shop." He gestured around. "Plenty of wall space for our varied and exotic inventory." He pointed at the counter. "The more dangerous wands go here under the glass at the counter where we can keep a closer eye on them."

"That's a lot of wands you have out," said Mantodea. "So you keep your entire inventory on display?"

Drimblerod shook his head. "No, not really. We have at least half again as many wands back in storage for the more common, and better selling wands." He pointed at the back room. "The ones under the counter are Ooks, so we try to keep them all out if there's space. Because you never know what someone'll be interested in."

"Ooks?" Asked Bextra.

"One of a kinds." Said Grimbledung with a wink.

Drimblerod nodded. "Yes. So unless we have several that have the same attributes, we try to keep them all out so people can choose from a wide variety of wands."

Bextra smacked her lips. The taste didn't seem to be dissipating. "So can we see the back room?" She asked, hoping to get the tour finished. "Or is that too secretive?"

Drimblerod smiled. "No, no. We'll go there next." He was let down because he had a good thirty minute spiel planned for the front of the shop. Anticipation for beautiful females notwithstanding, he was proud of his business. "Let's go there, then." He pointed at the curtain. "Follow me."

Drimblerod ducked under the curtain, followed closely by Mantodea. Grimbledung was looking up at the ceiling.

"Aren't we going?" Bextra asked, expecting the Gnome to make a pass at her since he had lagged behind.

"Mortise and joint construction up there." He gave the Dwarfess a wink. "High workmanship, that."

"Sure?" She answered, still expecting a groping of some sort.

Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Wait'll you see the bedroom upstairs..."

Here it comes, thought Bextra, *this stinking Gnome is going to make a pass at his partner's would-be girlfriend.* "Yes?"

"It's all tongue and groove, pegged together. Quality stuff."

"Sure?"

"Grimbledung!" Drimblerod yelled from the back room. "Get back here!"

Grimbledung let go of Bextra's arm and jogged through the curtain. "What's going on Drim?"

Drimblerod stared at his partner. "I'm giving a tour."

"I know."

"To the ladies."

"Yep."

Drimblerod stared at Grimbledung.

Grimbledung stared at Drimblerod.

"Where's Bextra, Grim?"

"Yaaa!" Grimbledung did a little hop. He turned and charged through the curtain as Mantodea was coming through from the other way. Since his head was down, he hit her with it in the middle of her chest, knocking her onto her back. He landed on top of her.

"I swear on the heads of all my ancestors," began Bextra as Grimbledung pushed himself up to look at her face. "If you don't get your hands off my breasts..."

"Yaaa!"

Bextra stared at Grimbledung.

Grimbledung grinned at Bextra. "Didn't see you coming?" He tried.

Bextra grabbed Grimbledung by the shoulders and rolled him off her. She got to her feet and stifled the urge to kick him in the head.

"Sorry about that, really," he said as he got to his feet. "I forgot you for a moment back there so I was coming back to get you because Drimblerod said he was giving a tour and you haven't been on this tour and even though I haven't been on this tour either I figured you wanted to see what was coming next so I came back to get you when I accidentally forgot you but by then you were coming here to get the second part of the tour."

Bextra now looked forward to killing Grimbledung.

Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Right?"

"Bextra, if you're all right, we'll get back on track," offered Drimblerod.

Bextra nodded at Drimblerod. "That'd be nice." She smacked her lips. Alarmingly, they now felt numb. "Then we can get that drink and something to eat."

"That sounds good to me," said Mantodea. "On with the tour Drimblerod." She gestured at him amicably.

Drimblerod cleared his throat. "So the backroom here is where we do our wand repairs and such."

"And such?"

"Well, we also make custom wands or adjust the enchantments of them if necessary," he said to Bextra. "Technical stuff, and sometimes dangerous."

"That's good to hear," said Mantodea.

Grimbledung pointed at Dummy. "And to help with testing and sorting of wands, we have this jousting dummy that Drim whipped up with an Mechanimation Spell."

Drimblerod pursed his lips. He was planning on a more elaborate description.

Dummy gave a salute as he appraised the two females. He made an hourglass shape with his hands, then gave a thumbs up.

"I see the turnip doesn't grow far from the stalk."

Grimbledung shoved Mantodea. "Right? That makes them easier to pick!"

Dummy nodded. Because that was true.

"That's not what I meant." Mantodea hooked her arm through Grimbledung's and led him to the worktable. Bextra now seemed to be discussing the soon-to-be-set-afire jousting dummy with Drimblerod, so she felt it was time to make her pitch. If she could keep Grimbledung's attention that long. "This is a really nice shop you have, Grimbledung." Mantodea gave her best smile. "There's only one thing you're missing."

Grimbledung rubbed his hand on the worktable. "Pegged together you know. Tongue and groove; it's a riot of fine craftsmanship, this." He looked at Mantodea. "What's that?"

"Female folk, of course."

"Well, I'm pretty sure Dummy's a male..." Grimbledung gave Dummy a wave. "Male, right?"

Dummy gave a thumbs up.

"...but Door seems to be unaffiliated, so it could fit that bill," suggested Grimbledung. "And there's a couple of pots that I think are kind of effeminate." He leaned in close and whispered conspiratorially, "That double-boiler especially."

Mantodea shook her head in what she hoped was a sultry manner. "That's not what I meant."

"No?"

"Well, it is a truth universally acknowledged that a single Gnome in possession of a successful business must be in want of a wife."

"Really?"

She batted her eyebrows. "Really."

"I don't think I can handle the truth."

"You can't handle the truth?"

"Well, present company excepted, of course." Grimbledung waggled his ears.

Mantodea frowned. Her plan involved a willing participant to give her full access to their business in writing before killing them. With Grimbledung, she was prepared to make an exception. "Seriously; you know what I mean, right?"

Grimbledung nodded. "Sure, sure. I was just teasing," he lied. He had no idea what she was talking about. "So, that sounds like a plan then?" He fished.

Mantodea nodded. "It does to me."

He frowned. The 'sounds like a plan' line usually provided him with enough of the details he missed from not paying attention to get him back on track. Since it hadn't, Grimbledung tried it again. "Well, that does sound like a plan, then."

Mantodea stared at the Gnome. She was looking forward to killing the obviously, painfully, annoyingly unaware dolt.

Grimbledung smiled at her. Then waggled his ears.

Sealing his doom.

The bell above Door jingled.

"Who could that be at such a late hour?" Drimblerod looked at his partner. "You invite someone else over?"

"I don't even recall inviting *these* two over!"

"Go see who it is while I finish up the tour down here so we can go get a bite to eat."

Grimbledung nodded and ducked under the curtain. Rat was sitting on the counter. "Are you supposed to be back already?"

"Can I get that copper after all? I'm getting hungry and I think those little street urchins are in bed or wherever they sleep so I should be safe carrying it." Rat waggled his whiskers. "So how are things going?"

"So far so good I suppose. Drim's giving a tour that's almost over so we can get a snack upstairs." A thought occurred to him as he pulled out the coin drawer. "Say- what got delivered?"

Chapter 31
Keep Calm...
and Black Widow On?

Rat looked from the Gnome to the backroom and back again. He knew that Drimblerod usually got furious with his partner's antics and Magic Marbles added to the mix would definitely cause those aforementioned antics. He was torn between ordering him to the back room to his guests or continuing the conversation. Both would provide entertainment in their own way. Providing one more answer wouldn't make any difference to him since he was leaving and would miss the show either way. So he gave it: "Semfeld's Magic Marbles, of course."

"Magic marbles!!"

Rat pointed at the box as Grimbledung handed him a copper coin. "I'd leave them there until the gals are gone," he said with the last shred of ethics he had left. Being a rat, he didn't have a lot to start with.

Grimbledung lifted the lid on the well-oiled leather box. It had a bunch of marbles in it. He thrust his hands in the air and did a little hop. "Whoo hoo! The Magic Marbles are here! The Magic Marbles are here!" He grabbed a handful of marbles.

"Do not bring a single one of those back here!" Drimblerod called out to his partner. "AND GET BACK HERE YOURSELF!" he bellowed.

Grimbledung put the handful of marbles he had in his hands back in the box. "I haven't even taken them out!" He picked up the entire box and made for the back of the shop, giggling as he went.

"Wanna see what I got? Wanna see what I got?" Grimbledung asked excitedly as he ducked past the curtain. He kept the box behind his back as he entered the room.

"Not a chance. Besides, I'm still giving the tour to the ladies," snapped Drimblerod. "As I was saying. Dummy helps us test wands using this box." He pointed at the Abyssmal Box. The lid was clamped shut.

"How does he test wands with that box?" Mantodea asked genuinely interested. It was a most unusual arrangement; something that might fetch a large profit if they could be sold as a set. "What's in the box?"

"Wanna see now?" asked Grimbledung. He moved beside Bextra, box still behind his back. "Wanna see?" He whispered in her ear.

"Not now!" Drimblerod frowned at his partner. "We can take a peek at them as we go upstairs. Let me just finish back here first." He took several breaths to regain his composure. "So Dummy here takes the wands that we either trade for, purchase outright, or find ourselves and he waves them at this." Drimblerod popped opened the lid of the Abyssmal Box then moved back beside Dummy.

Grimbledung leaned in close to Bextra. "Wanna take a peek?" He whispered.

Not sure how it worked. Or even what was worth, Mantodea moved closer to the box. "What is it then?"

"Want me to show you how it works?" Grimbledung moved forward hurriedly, passing the box to Bextra as he went.

"I'm giving the tour, Grim," snapped Drimblerod as he turned to fetch a wand from the bin beside Dummy. "Just stay back."

"Well, can I at least tell them what came?" he whined.

Drimblerod stopped and exhaled angrily. He turned to face his partner, "Fine, Grim. Tell the ladies what came so I can get on with the explanation."

"Marbles!"

"Marbles?" Asked Bextra as she opened the box. True enough- it seemed to hold a large amount of glass marbles.

"Magic Marbles!"

"These are magic?" Bextra peered into the box. The marbles did seem to have a strange luminescence.

"They sure are. Heaping full of it even!"

"What're you going to do with magic marbles?" Bextra peered closer into the box as she stepped forward.

"I have a bad feeling about this…" Offered Mantodea, "I've heard that those things are really unstable and tend to have unexpected misfires."

Drimblerod nodded at her. "That's usually the case with Grimbledung as well. Having them both together never seems to end well." He turned to face his partner, "Tell me you didn't bring them back here after I told you not to".

"You said not to bring a single one back, so I brought all of them instead."

"That's not what I meant. Why are you trying to put us all in danger?"

"Why would I do that?" Grimbledung winked slyly, "In my defense, I have to say it turned all out for the best last time, didn't it?"

"I can't imagine folk buying magic marbles," said Bextra. She took another step forward.

"I'd like a Magic Marble," said Mantodea as she turned directly in front of the Abyssmal Box. It would give her something to shove down Grimbledung's throat. It would be far easier to convince a doctor that he had choked on it. And it wouldn't leave bruises on his neck.

Dummy covered his eyes.

"Ooooh! See? Mantodea wants one!" Grimbledung walked forward excitedly, bumping Bextra as he moved to the other Dwarfess. "You need to take two because they're two for a copper. I can't rightly break a copper coin."

"Let me show them how the Abyssmal Box works first," said Drimblerod at the same time. He turned to fetch an unsorted wand from

the bin beside Dummy. He took a Traveler's Emberstick from the bin and turned. Time seemed to slow as he did so.

Dummy peeked through his mitt hands.

Drimblerod saw his partner bump Bextra. *His* Bextra as he made past her. She lost her grip on the box of marbles and it dropped from her hands. Mantodea kept her eyes on the box as it fell. Neither Dwarfess was looking at the other; they both had their eyes on the leather box as it fell.

The box hit the floor and marbles scattered noisily in all directions since the lid was open.

Mantodea took a step forward, away from the Abyssmal Box, directly onto a marble.

Drimblerod gaped as Mantodea lost her balance as she stepped on several of the now clattering (in slow motion) marbles, losing her balance. Mantodea stuck her arms out in an attempt to regain her footing.

The Magic Marbles were having no part in it.

Grimbledung stumbled on a marble and bumped Mantodea, sending her reeling backwards. "Wooopppssssss," he said in slow motion.

Mantodea turned to look at Grimbledung, "Wwwwhhhhaaaatt?" She was now looking at him instead of the rolling marbles as she fell backward.

Drimblerod gaped as Bextra stepped on several of the now clattering (still in slow motion) marbles, losing her balance as well. She stumbled forward just as Mantodea's head disappeared into the Abyssmal Box.

"Looook ooooooouuuuuttt!" said Grimbledung as he reached for Mantodea. With two marbles under his foot, he skidded in place and dropped onto his butt. Mantodea was now upended and falling into

the Abyssmal Box. She was currently up to her waist in the swirling colors.

"Noooooooo!" said Drimblerod, completely out of range to do anything as the world suddenly jumped to normal speed.

Grimbledung sat down hard, putting his hands down to break his fall. Directly under the Abyssmal Box

Bextra continued her forward motion forward and grabbed one of her partner's feet before it disappeared. "Gotcha!" she said.

"Don't let go, Bextra!" Grimbledung said. "Don't let go!" He put his hands under him to try to stand up. As he did so he pulled up his knees, pushing several more marbles under Bextra's feet. She slipped forward, hitting her legs on Grimbledung's knees, practically doing a forward dive into the box.

Grimbledung ineffectually grabbed for her feet as they went over his head.

"GRAB HER!" Drimblerod begged. He hurried forward to try to help.

It was too late.

Bextra's feet disappeared into the box.

Grimbledung looked up at the Abyssmal Box. There was no indication of anything having transpired; the colors swirled downward as they always did. "Woopsie," he offered.

"Not again!"

"Don't worry, partner," said Grimbledung as he finally got to his feet.

"WOOPSIE?" Drimblerod stumbled back and sat hard. "You toss *yet another* female that I'm interested in into that infernal box and all you can say is 'woopsie'?"

Grimbledung sat up. "Well, she's probably not dead. Here let me take a look see. Maybe she's stuck just inside the box. Or both are, even." He stood up and moved to the box.

"Sure. Because that's what happened last time."

"Well, there's always a chance." Grimbledung took a firm hold of both sides of the box and plunged his head into the swirling colors.

As his head moved through the swirling colors, he heard sounds of breaking glass, tearing fabric, erupting volcanoes. The usual cacophony of sounds. Abruptly, they all stopped and his head was in cool clear air. A brisk breeze pushed his ears back and forth. He looked around cautiously.

Mantodea and Bextra were nowhere in sight.

He looked down. Far, far below was, surprisingly enough a very large town. A large quaint looking town. With what seemed to be a large river running through it. There were crops growing and a large dark forest nearby as well. *It has been a while since I've stuck my head in here*, he thought. "CLEAN UP THIS MESS!" He bellowed down at the town. He would have waggled his ears, but Drimblerod seemed to be kicking him.

Grimbledung pulled his head past the breaking glass, tearing fabric, and volcano sounds. "Nope," he said flatly. "The good news is that there's now a really quaint looking town going on down there. They should be just fine there, I would imagine." He considered that for a moment. "If the gals survive the fall, that is."

Drimblerod kicked his partner again. "What in the lands is wrong with you?"

"Wow, I am really most sincerely sorry about that Drimblerod, really I am," said Grimbledung. "Really most sincerely."

"Really? You're sorry?" Said Drimblerod. He pulled his foot back to kick his partner again, but then decided against it. "Just like last time?"

"Sure!" He snapped his fingers. "You know, maybe we'll run into them if we ever take a trip out to the Great Salty Ocean. I really think that town's out near there. Chéri could confirm that, I imagine."[19]

"What are the odds of that?" Asked Drimblerod. "Realistically."[20]

"Well, you know with the right amount of motivation, anything is poss..."

Akita surged through the curtain. "Where're they at!"

Drimblerod started crying.

"Seems we had what they call an accident in the workplace, Akita," said Grimbledung. He looked around the shop. "You know what we need?"

Drimblerod put his head on the workbench and continued to sob.

"What?" Asked Akita, off balance all of a sudden. He was prepared for action with the likes of Mantodea in town. He wasn't prepared for a sobbing Gnome. And an empty crime scene.

"Guard rails."

Drimblerod looked up, kicked his partner, then returned to crying. Hard. (Both the kick and the crying).

"Where'd the Dwarf and her partner go?"

Drimblerod pointed at the box. "They fell in there of course. Any female I'm interested in, Grimbledung manages to toss into there."

"Well, in my defense, it turned out that Chéri was planning on killing the both of us," Grimbledung tut-tutted as he moved out of range of his partner. "So I should get some credit for saving our lives."

"Well, that's a small consolation." Drimblerod wiped his eyes. "But Bextra was no assassin; she was a businesswoman". He sniffed deeply. "And she was a most gorgeous Dwarfess who was interested in me."

"Well..." Began Akita.

Drimblerod looked at Akita. "What are you doing here, Akita?"

Akita shuffled his feet. "Well. I came here to rescue you." He looked around. "But it seems the gals aren't here. Anymore, that is."

"Rescue us from what?"

"Well, Mantodea is an infamous Black Widow."

"She's infamous? Is that more than famous?"

"Sure, I suppose," said Akita.

"Wait. And she's really a spider?" Grimbledung stuck out his tongue. "Good thing I never kissed her."

"What do you call that episode back at the farmer's market?" Drimblerod asked.

Grimbledung stuck out his tongue. "Eww! I kissed a spider woman!"

"A Black Widow," explained Drimblerod, "is a female who marries a male in order to kill them and take their..." Drimblerod gaped at Akita. "Wait a grain of sand!"

Akita nodded. "Bextra was her partner."

"Bextra too?"

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this, Drimblerod, but Mantodea is responsible for the deaths of over a dozen males. Bextra was more into petty theft, but the pair had recently teamed up. So I can only imagine that she had graduated to full blown murderer as well."

"You know what this means, Drimblerod?" Grimbledung asked.

"What?" Asked Akita.

Grimbledung did a dance. "That means I saved your life again! And..."

Because I saved you, I'm happy.
Clap along if you like a room full of Magic Marbles!
Clap along if you think that Akita told the truth.

Because I saved you, I'm happy.
Clap along if you don't care if the gals come back!
Because I'm haaaa peeeee!

Grimbledung, as usual, finished up on one knee, arms over his head, fingers waggling furiously.

"I kinda do care if they come back or not," remarked Drimblerod. "Maybe I could have reformed her."

I'm glad you're haaaa peeee
toooo!

Sang Grimbledung, still on his knee.

I'm not haaa peee at all,
you lame brained Gnome!

Sang Drimblerod. He waggled a finger at his partner. Just one.

"I can't believe I ditched Maca for this." Akita shook his head. He turned and walked out before Grimbledung could make up a second verse. Or Drimblerod, the rest of his. "Singin, sobbin' Gnomes instead of dinner with Maca. I need my head examined."

Drimblerod left soon after Grimbledung's second verse began because he didn't want to hear any more about Akita coming over with bad news, talking this and that about 'the gals'. And also he couldn't think of the rest of a verse for his song.

Chapter 32
It's a Very Loose End. With a Stool

Randy sat in the watchtower. Bored. He rocked back and forth on his stool[21]. He had been in it for the past five days and had three more to go. He wished he had brought a pillow as he looked up at the clear sky. There was nothing to see.

Nothing at all.

Even though he had accepted what he thought was a hefty three silver coins to take the duty from an acquaintance, he was no longer sure it was a deal in his favor 'Don't worry, Flag', his friend had said. 'It's easy money!'

'Thanks Stephen, I owe you', he had replied since he was in need of the coins.

Little did he know...

Boredom threatened him at every passing moment. That and the no longer comfortable stool. The comfort had left within the first hour of his tour. Boredom took until the end of that first day. Sleep was also something that he wasn't able to do for long periods of time. Records showed that when the Head appeared, it would remain in the sky for anything from about six hours to two weeks. The stool, therefore had been magicked to deliver a shock if the occupant fell asleep for more than four hours at any given time. Furthermore, if the occupant left the stool for more than an hour, the aforementioned

shock occurred via a small bolt of lightning. This ensured that whoever was on watch, stayed on watch with only short breaks.

"Nothing to see," he said to no one in particular. Particularly because he was alone in the fifty-foot tower in the center of town. "Not a single thing." He said to his only companion- the stool. "My butt is numb." He complained. Three silver coins seemed like less and less as the time crept along.

The large black tower had been built over a hundred years ago, back when -according to the legends- the strange and annoying Head would appear regularly to taunt the townsfolk. And throw things at them. As the drought that had gripped the area loosened, and things began to grow again, the town flourished. It was decided by unanimous vote soon after, that a tall tower would be built in the center of town from the first of this newfound wealth. The watchtower would be outfitted with a large ballista outfitted with an ensnaring bolt and aimed at the area of the sky that the Head appeared. Since the traveler Chéri had come through, the townsfolk learned that the Head was not some sort of ill-tempered god they had been unlucky enough to inherit; it was in fact, an ill-tempered Gnome. Grimbledung by name. It seemed he purposefully set out to annoy anyone and everyone. The plan was to snare this Gnome and give him a sound thrashing. Hence the large ballista and the constant watcher.

But nothing had been seen or heard from the Head in well over a century. Besides, of course the frequent flashes of light- that no one seemed to mind. In fact, it gave young lovers an excuse to go out into the dark and go 'flash gazing'. Or at least that's what they told their parents.

"Nothing," said Randy.

Then the head and soon after, the body of a female Dwarf appeared.

Unsure of what to do, Randy waited to see what would happen. He kept a suspicious eye on her through the powerful looking glass assigned to whoever was the watcher for the week plus one day. It wasn't a large Gnome head, which was nice, and truth be told, she was a striking Dwarf.

Boredom was on the run!

His butt was still numb, however.

Later that afternoon, the Dwarfess seemed to hang in midair. Randy sat up and put his hand on the ballista trigger mechanism just as the second Dwarfess (also very good looking in Randy's opinion) appeared from nowhere, holding onto the first's foot.

Randy stood up to get a better look.

Then the pair began to fall.[22]

So Randy sat back down.

Chapter 33
Trying to Plan the First Annual Julesville Jamboree

(Without Grimbledung's help)

"So what do we want to do as far as planning out the jamboree?" Big Julie asked the dozen business leaders that had gathered in her office. "We definitely need to advertise."

"That'a we should do," said Pozzuoli. "The more people that know, the more people that come."

"We're going to be setting up booths in the market square, right?" Asked a Human- he owned a confectionary. "Selling from a booth is the way to go with a jamboree."

The other shop owners nodded. They all had planned to set up a booth- and do it before anyone else to ensure they got a prime spot.

"No fires," said Pozzuoli. "No open fires."

"What about to cook Marsh Mallows?" Asked the confectioner.

Big Julie nodded. "I agree. After the events in Aution, there's no open fires."

"But..."

"You'll just have to pre-cook, or cook as you go for people, Sagem," she said to the confectioner.

Sagem nodded. "Won't be as good that way."

"What about placement of the booths in the square?" Asked a female Human. "Is someone going to set up the booths like in Aution?"

Julie sighed loudly. She was hoping the business owners could work out the details on their own. After all- they were all responsible business owners. "I'd like to think you could work that out among yourselves." She looked over the group. "Yes?"

They all looked at each other- each of them planning to set up before anyone else had a chance. “Sure thing, Julie,” said Sagem. “We can do that.”

“Well good then. I’ll have the minstrels that play at my events set up their stage so the music is taken care of.” She stood. She wanted nothing more than to have the meeting adjourned; she still had an expensive wand pilfering problem to solve. “So I’ll leave the details to you all.” She moved to the door and opened it. “If there’s anything else you need, please let me know.”

The business owners nodded as they left, forming schemes as they went.

When they were gone, Big Julie leaned against the door. “I mean, how hard can planning a simple jamboree be?” She asked her empty office. She steeled herself. She had to talk to Grimbledung- she was almost to a hundred fifty wands missing. Several parents had even sent angry letters about repeatedly stolen wands. The school was unraveling around her and she was helpless to do anything about it. She closed her eyes and exhaled. The words she was dreading to say came to her lips: “Help me Grimbledung Sixtoes; you’re my only hope.”[23]

Chapter 34
Perplexing Pilfering Persists

Grimbledung shuffled through the back door of the shop. He was covered in red paint. He gestured at Dummy with the paintbrush. "You were right; I should have let you help."

Dummy nodded at the Gnome.

"So the wagon's red now." He smiled. "That was a good idea. Every private investigator should have a sporty red wagon to ride around on. So should I paint Shambler too?"

Dummy shook his head. And waved his arms.

"It was just a thought."

Dummy gave a thumb's up then gestured at a poorly built chair.

"Yes. I got a chair too. Now I just need a desk to put it in front of and I'm ready for business."

Dummy nodded. He waved his hand as if he had a wand, then interlaced his thumbs and flapped his hands.

"Yes, wands are just flying out of Julie's place," agreed Grimbledung. "I think I'm starting there in the morning, I think."

Dummy nodded pointed at himself, then Grimbledung.

"No, I don't think you can go along."

Dummy shadowboxed.

"Well, I don't imagine there'll be trouble out of those little urchins."

Dummy raised his hands.

"Urchins."

Dummy shrugged. His hands were still raised.

"It's something that lives in the sea and has lots of spines on it. I think they call kids that because they're stinky like low tide and it's not comfortable to step on them. Just like Urchins."

Dummy gave a thumb's up. He pointed at the front of the shop.

"Drimblerod is going to handle the shop while I'm under cover." Grimbledung moved to the curtain. "If he needs you, I'm sure he'll bring you out front." With that, he ducked under the curtain to the front of the shop.

Dummy rubbed his hands together after Grimbledung had gone. He'd been hoping to deal with customers. The backroom was becoming boring.

"Hey, Drim." Grimbledung moved to the counter. "I was going to see if Colossus had some pointers to help me catch the wand pilferer. You want to come with?"

Drimblerod shook his head. "We can't keep closing all the time. Remember we're losing a lot of business doing that." He hopped off his stool. "So get to Colossus and get back with no dawdling so you can help run the place."

Grimbledung nodded. "Sure thing. The last thing I'd do is dawdle."

"The last?" Drimblerod raised an eyebrow. "What's at the top of the list?"

"Maybegohaveabunchofdrinksandnotcomebackuntiltlatetonight." Grimbledung mumbled quickly.

"What?"

Grimbledung waved a hand dismissively as he moved around the counter. "Nothing, nothing. Just making conversation is all."

"Well I want you back here as quickly as possible."

Grimbledung nodded as Door opened, "I promise you I'll get back here as quickly as I possibly can."

Drimblerod pointed a finger at his partner. "I have your word then. Get going."

Grimbledung waggled his ears and left the shop. "Quickly as possible, guaranteed!"

Drimblerod returned to rearranging the wands in the cabinet. He had discovered that rearranging the wands led returning customers to believe that wands sold more often than they actually did. This caused them to buy a wand instead of putting it off, since it might not be around when they came back.[24]

Grimbledung ambled down the street at a leisurely pace.

Finally after several conversations and detours, he arrived at the Duck Inn and Dine. The front door was propped open and the curtain was trussed in the middle, allowing the morning's breeze to blow through the tavern portion of the building. Colossus was sitting at a table, writing something.

"Morning all," Grimbledung said to the room.

He received several replies as he made his way to where Colossus seemed to be deep in thought. "Hey there, Col. What'cha doing?"

"I'm working out the plans for a house."

Grimbledung leaned over and looked at the sketches. They seemed to be front, back, side, and top views of a quaint cottage. There were a dozen windows spread around the house and what seemed to be two fireplaces. A covered porch that wrapped around the sides and front finished off the entire affair. "That's not very big. Who's going to live there? Pixies?"

Colossus put down his carpenter's pencil and stared at the Gnome. "It's a five-room cottage with a separate kitchen even, and a room that can be used as an office."

Grimbledung brought his hands to the front view sketch of the house then raised them. They were barely a foot apart. "That's barely a foot. Those must be tiny rooms!"

Colossus picked up his pencil. "It's to scale, you daft Gnome."

"To scale? You have to pay a certain, preapproved amount?"

"That's pay scale. This is drawn to scale. They're completely different."

"Does it make the place bigger?"

"Yes. Every inch is three feet, in fact."

"What do you need an office for? You have this place." Grimbledung gestured around. "Prime location. Lots of foot traffic. Folks at the bar that could be in need of your services." He gave a wink.

"I can't run a business out of the inn, you dolt."

"Why not? Some of the best Pee Eyes ran their businesses from their bar or hotel."

"This place isn't my business!" He said raising his voice angrily.

"Well, it's none of my business either, I suppose." He looked around. "But still..."

"Yeah, still." Colossus decided to draw shingles on the roof.

"So, when you get set up, when do you want me to come by?"

"Come by? Why would you come by?"

"To be your partner, of course."

"I don't think you're the.... right material for private investigative work."

Grimbledung sat at the table. "Well, I think you're being hasty in your judgment." He waved his hand over his head furiously then pointed at himself. "I'm excellent at getting folks to do what I want them to do."

The serving wench approached the table. "What'll it be, Grimbledung?" She was one of the very few that never shortened his name.

"Morning *Mistress* Flora O. Willowfeet. Well, it's early still. How about something with orange juice."

It was going to be one of *those* kinds of orders. "You want orange juice?" Flora put her tray on her hip.

"Well, something *with* orange juice. Not *just* orange juice."

Colossus started drawing in the individual bricks on the two fireplaces. One was in the kitchen of course and the other was in the

large living area. It backed up against two of the bedrooms so the heat from it warmed those rooms as well. The larger master bedroom had a small wood burning, iron stove. Winters would not be an issue in his home. And, with all the windows, summers would be breezy as well.

"What's the 'O' stand for?" Colossus asked, curiosity getting the best of him.

Grimbledung jumped to his feet and sang:

Oh what a beautiful Gnome-ess!
She's such a beautiful Gnome.

She's got such beautiful toe- oes!
Out at the ends of her feets.

Hey!
I hope she brings me a driii - iink!

And I hope she brings it today-aay.
I hope she brings it today.

Grimbledung sat back down.

Flora hit Grimbledung with her tray. "I told you to never again sing that song."

"Sorry, it kind of just tumbles out of me." Grimbledung rubbed his head.

Flora turned on her heel and headed to the bar. "I'll get your drink."

"But you didn't tell her what you wanted," said Colossus.

"She'll bring me what she wants and apparently, I'll like it."

"You know, you two..." Colossus gestured at the wench as she prepared a drink behind the counter.

"What?"

"Never mind." Colossus returned to drawing in bricks. "It's just seems odd that you're searching for a gal when you've got..."

Flora returned to the table. "Here's your drink."

"That quick? What is it?" Asked Colossus.

"It's my drink," said Grimbledung. "You're not too good with details, are you. That'll cause problems as a private eye, I would think."

Colossus looked up at the Gnomess.

"It's a half a glass of cold orange juice, with a shot of light and dark rums, a splash of peach liquor, and a dash of bitters." She gestured at Grimbledung. "I call it a Grim Delight."[25]

"Why's that?"

Grimbledung took a hesitant sip. "Ahh, nice work. This drink is deee-lightful!" Grimbledung smacked his lips. "Except..."

Flora reached into her apron and pulled out a small paper umbrella. She opened it and propped it on the side of the glass.

"Deee-lightful!" Grimbledung bounced in his chair.

"He gets it all the time."

Colossus looked at Grimbledung. "If you get that all the time, why don't you just order it from the start?"

"He never *orders* it," said Flora. "He just *gets* it."

"And I like it."

"I see."

Flora nodded at the Halfling. "Can I get you anything while you sit in my section doodling and not ordering anything to drink or eat so I have no chance whatsoever for some sort of tip even though you don't seem to understand the concept of tipping which is unusual since other Halflings I know tip fairly well yet you haven't seemed to have mastered that one simple part of eating out?"

Grimbledung nodded. "I couldn't have said that better myself."

"Uhm..." Said Colossus. *If these two ever got together, it would be pandemonium.* "I'll have what he's having."

Flora returned to the bar.

"So, as your future partner..."

"Grimbledung, I don't need a partner." A thought occurred to him. "Because I already have one."

Grimbledung sat back, shocked. "You went and got a partner right in front of my back?"

"What?"

"After all we've been through, you go out and double time me like that?"

Flora slid a drink in front of Colossus.

"I thought we had something between us," complained Grimbledung.

"There's something I never thought I'd hear come out of his mouth," said Flora. She smiled at Colossus. "Does Chéri know?"

"Don't you have tables to wipe down or something?"

Flora looked around the tavern. Everyone seemed to be doing okay. "Everyone seems to be doing okay. It seems this is the most entertaining table at the moment."

"Until Lebesch gets here, that is," offered Grimbledung.

"That is true. Mister 'I bring my own glass to drink from because yours aren't shaped right' Ale snob." She stuck out her tongue.

Grimbledung giggled then stuck out his tongue as well.

"You two."

"Us two what?" The pair said together.

"Nothing. Nothing at all." Colossus started to draw a weather vane attached to the kitchen chimney.

"So why can't I be your partner?" Grimbledung tried again.

"I told you; I already got one."

Grimbledung sat back, shocked. Again. "You went and got a partner right in front of my back?"

"Listen, Grimbledung, it's Chéri. She's my partner. And I knew her long before I knew you."

Grimbledung considered that. "Well, I suppose I'll give you that," he said begrudgingly.

Flora snapped her fingers. "I have a thought!"

Both males looked up at her. "How about you use Grimbledung as an on-the-side informant."

"A what?"

"What Colossus can do," Flora explained to Grimbledung, "is stop by the shop if he needs information. Since folks are always coming in and out of your place, you'd be able to give him the word on the street." She gave a wink. "All sly like."

"Woo! I could do that!" Grimbledung bounced in his seat. "I always know the word on the street. And when I don't, I make it up!"

Colossus sighed. "Well, I suppose that is as good an option as any."

Flora nodded. "I agree, Colossus. Say Grimbledung, how did that night with the Dwarfesses go?"

"That's so long ago, I don't remember." Grimbledung downed his drink in one gulp. "I need to get back to the shop..."

"I not sure..." Started Colossus.

Grimbledung hopped up. "I really need to go start listening in on the streets."

"Will I see you tonight?" Flora asked.

"I never make plans that far ahead," said Grimbledung as he ran out of the tavern.

"Now all I have to do is avoid going to Second-Hand Sorcery." Colossus smiled at Flora. "Well done."

"Because you honestly believe that he's not going to stop by your house." She shook her head. "So Chéri's the brains of the operation. *Got it*." She put her tray under her arm. "I'll be back to collect the tab

for both drinks." She fixed the Halfling with a smoldering gaze with her steel-grey eyes. "And the tip."

Colossus nodded. What Grimbledung had in unstableness, Flora seemed to have in determination. If the two ever got together, there would be fireworks. "Got it," he repeated.

"Enjoy your drink." She said simply as she left to do a circuit of the tables.

Colossus sipped his drink. It was fruity, light and quite refreshing. He added a stone path from the front door. "Now to find a builder," he muttered. He squiggled some berry bushes along the porch. "And a gardener."

Grimbledung ran back to the shop. Mostly. Several times he dropped to a slow jog. Twice to a quick walk. All in all, he made it back so quickly, Drimblerod was surprised. Drimblerod was even more surprised when his partner shooed him away. "I need to get the word on the street and you're in the way, Drim!" Was his only -cryptic- explanation.

Chapter 35
Grim Noir, Private Investigator

I'm sitting at my desk. Minding my own business. That's what I do until a case shows up. Mind my business and don't do nothing to no one. When a case shows up, then I mind someone else's business. Do things to other folks. That's my job. Minding other people's business. The pay is okay, and I get to meet interesting people. Sometimes I even kill those interesting people I just mentioned. Or they try to kill me. It all depended on what my current case is. And what mood I'm in. I'm Grim Noir. Private detective and problem solver. And I have a way with females, but that should go without saying.

But I say it a lot anyway.

Speaking of problems, I didn't have one at the moment. That's why I was sitting. Sitting in my shop, minding my own business. Then *she* walked in.

Door opened for her like it did for everyone else. She got my attention right away. She was tall. Tall as the day is long in summer. And just about as hot.

I leaned back in my chair. "Come on in." Normally for a lady, I'd stand up. But ladies didn't get into the kind of trouble that had them coming to *me* for help. This was a broad, plain and simple... Well, maybe not plain, but a broad nonetheless. I pointed at the chair. "Take a load off."

She raised an eyebrow. It made it almost to the ceiling. Like I said; she was tall. And large. Like the great expanses of the outdoors.

I'd love to take a day exploring those great outdoors. But that would have to wait. I smelled a job. The broad was still standing. "Sit down and take a load off your fifty four double Eff's." She raised the other eyebrow. It made it almost as high as the first. "So what's your name, doll?"

The doll brought her eyebrows down as she sat. It was a package deal. A large package with all the bulges in the right places.

"You know I'm Julie, right?"

Sure I did. Knowing was my business. *Dames.* "So tell me what's troubling you." I crossed my legs to keep things professional. I'm always a professional. "And I'll see what I can do about it."

"I worry about you sometimes, Grim," the broad said.

"I worry about me sometimes too. But that's part of the territory. So what's the trouble you need fixed, doll?"

"Julie."

First names? Things were moving along nicely. "So what's the trouble you need fixed, Julie?" I eyed her up one side, across the top, and down the other. It was so far, my eyes were tired when I got done.

The doll let out a long breath. A real long breath. I wasn't surprised with how much air it looked like that chest could hold. Pleased was more like it.

"Well, you see, we've been having an issue with thievery at the school..."

"School age antics. I remember when I was a youthful Gnome of..." I began.

The doll cut me off: "No, this is much more than the occasional pilfering. I have almost ten wands a week disappearing and with a student body of only two hundred fifty, that's significant."

She raised her eyebrows at me. Again. She was spouting off all sorts of numbers that I really didn't understand. A sword at my side and my trusty wand. Those I could understand. I used to have a really nice helmet, but I lost it. Long story. Maybe you've heard it. The dame was still talking. *Dames.*

Now it was my turn to interrupt. "What about the law. That's what he's paid for." I knew she wanted me to have the job and I knew I'd get it. I was just going to make her work for it.

"Yes. But I'm trying to keep this quiet. If parents hear that there are troubles at the school that could cause problems."

"Well, stopping problems is what I do best," I lied. Starting problems. That's what I was real good at. It was a gift really. And I embraced it. "And I'm sure I can get to the bottom of your..." Now it was my turn to give my eyebrows a workout. "Problem."

"So what is your plan for solving my problem?" The doll asked me.

'I have no idea' was probably not what she wanted to hear, so I didn't say that. It's not like I could wander the hallways and blend in with the little delinquents, now could I? Or could I? All I needed, I realized, was a hat. Kids wear hats, after all. "Well, I think I should go undercover and see firsthand what's going on." I smiled mischievously. On purpose. "The little cusses won't even know I'm there." A plan was coming together as I went along. As usual.

"But... You don't look like *any* of my students."

I nodded. "Right now I don't. But once I'm disguised, no one will be the wiser." *Not even me!* I gave a confident smile. That always helped raise my rates. "One nice hat and I'm invisible."

"A hat?" The dame let out a sigh. "Fine, Grimbledung. Just make sure that you don't cause a ruckus." She leaned forward onto the counter. "I don't want a panic with the parents."

I fought to maintain eye contact. It was tough, but I managed. Mostly. "Sure, sure. That goes without saying. Unlike my fees which I *like* to discuss." *There went those eyebrows again.* "So I charge two silver a day, plus expenses."

The doll put her hands on the counter. "How about I continue to *not* charge you every time you barge into my cafeteria and…?"

I stopped listening because I was looking down her shirt. Didn't hear a word the doll said. I figured she must have agreed to my rates with how she was smiling and nodding. "Sounds good to me," I tried. Once I padded my expenses, I'd be rolling in the coinage. From the looks of her, she was loaded.

"Yeah, I'll bet it does." The doll pushed up off the counter. It creaked at her in a most un-neighborly way.

In my counter's defense, I'd have grunted too if she'd have done that to me. "So I'll be down tomorrow for classes and get this all figured out quick and easy like. Then we'll settle up the accounts." I didn't want the doll forgetting my rates.

"Oh, I won't forget." She assured me. With a turn that got all my attention, she moved out of my shop. Door let her out without being asked. He was friendly like that.

"I'll bet you won't," I said. Dolls didn't forget things like money when it came time to pay it. Sort of. What usually happened was that they threw themselves at me, hoping that would clear their accounts. It usually did. That's what I was expecting from this broad.

Oh yeah.

"So what'da ya think, Door? Should I take the case?" Door rattled its latch at me. Mostly I figured that meant 'yes', so I agreed. "I agree." I slung my feet off the counter and stood. Now I needed to figure out a way to completely disguise myself so that none of those kids would recognize me. "I need a hat," I said to door. "So that those kids don't recognize me." Door rattled its latch real loud this time. It must really agree with the plan. "Yeah, a nice hat with a feather, I think."

Door stopped rattling. I guess there was nothing more to say.

"I'm going to lock up the shop and go over to that place beside Pozz's place. They have hats there." I moved to the stairs to go put on some shoes. "Be right back, Door."

Chapter 36
Grimbledung's Hope

Julie exited Second-Hand Sorcery. As Door closed behind her, she shook her head. "He hasn't a clue, does he, Door?"

Door rattled its latch at Big Julie. Inside Grimbledung was talking, but Door was ignoring him. As usual.

"Well, maybe in his off-balance way, he can still solve this problem." Big Julie frowned as she moved into the street. She spied Akita ambling towards Maca's shop. *Maca's shop?* A thought occurred to Julie. "Hey Akita," she called as she moved quickly to the Constable. "Got a second?"

"For you? Sure thing," Akita said as he smiled at the Human. "What's the trouble?" He pointed at Second-Hand Sorcery. "Grim not gonna help you out?"

Big Julie shook her head. "No, no. He's ready and willing to help out. I'm not sure how well this is going to work. I mean, he *acts* like a kid when he's not acting crazy, but he doesn't *look* like a kid. He looks like an adult. They'll never buy it."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I mean, he said he'd wear a hat as a disguise."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!"

"Knowing what I know about him, it's gonna be a nice flashy hat." Akita grinned. "I'd expect to see something with a long feather."

Big Julie raised her hands plaintively. "Akita, this is a disaster!"

Akita chuckled and put a hand on her shoulder. "Relax, Julie. I happen to know this gal who has a way with potions. I'm sure she's got something that will make him look younger."

"Really? You think she could do that?"

Akita nodded. "I don't think there's a lot she can't do between a potion and an incantation." He squinted his eyes. "You know she's part Djinn?"

"What?" Big Julie's eyes got large. "She's a Djinn?"

Akita shrugged. "Part. Well, from her mother's side anyway. Her father's just an Elf."

"What a combination."

Akita let his tongue hang out. "Yeah. That's what I said." He smiled again. "So I'm sure if I took that little bundle of crazy over there, she'd be able to come up with something that'd make him look like a kid." He chuckled. "More than any hat, at least."

Julie joined in the laugh. "You realize what you are suggesting? A young Grimbledung loose in my halls, running amok."

"It's better than that thieving problem you've got."

"I don't know..."

"He's the lesser of two evils, I think is the corrrrrect term."

Julie put her hand on Akita's shoulder. "Well, if you'd walk him over to make sure he stays on task, I'd appreciate it."

Akita smiled. "All part of the service, Miss. I was headin' to Maca's anyway. I'll just collect Grimbledung and bring him along."

Julie hugged Akita. "I really appreciate it. I'm losing a fortune on a weekly basis."

"We'll get this taken care of, Julie."

"Thanks, Akita. I sure owe you," said Big Julie

Akita grinned wide. "Sounds good!" He looked back and forth suspiciously. "I'm in need of a favor."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I need a nice quiet meal that's not gonna get interrupted for me and Maca and the Duck Inn is a little crowded and the Braziered Bear is kinda..." His voice trailed off.

"Unromantic?"

"That's the term. Think you could ask your Gnolls to work up a picnic we could take somewhere..." His voice trailed off again.

"Romantic?"

"Now yer talkin' ," said Akita.

"All you'll need to add is a wagon."

"Deal!"

"Just let me know when." Big Julie winked at the werewolf. "And I'll also keep the plan quiet for no extra charge."

Akita smiled at Big Julie. "Then let's get this show on the road." He looked over Julie's shoulder. "Speak of the little devil, there he is now."

Big Julie looked at the wand shop as Grimbledung peeked left and right out of the door before stepping onto the boardwalk. "I'll let you get to work."

Akita gave her a wave as he trotted towards the Gnome.

With a relieved sigh, Big Julie headed back to her school.

Chapter 37
Grimbledung - the Young and the Deceased

"Grimbledung," Akita called as he neared the Gnome. "Gots a moment?"

"I suppose so, Akita. I was just heading out to buy a hat."

"Yeah, that's what I hear." Akita moved close. "But I got a better idea."

"A mask?"

Akita shook his head. "How's about a potion to make yourself young?"

Grimbledung did a little hop. "Woo! That would be great!" He put out his hand. "Gimmie, gimmie!"

"I don't got a potion that does that."

Grimbledung frowned. "Now that there is false advertisement." He waggled his finger at the Constable. "Get you in trouble with the law, you know."

"No, you daft Gnome," Akita put his arm around Grimbledung and gestured down the street with his other paw. "What I mean is I know a gal who can make that happen."

"Who's that?" Grimbledung squinted down the Constable's arm. "Who, who?"

"Maca, 'course."

"So Maca has something that can make me look younger?" Grimbledung considered that for a moment. "Well, younger than I already look, that is."

Akita raised an eyebrow. "You realize Julie's school is for little kids right? Kids a couple-a-three centuries younger than you."

"Well, what's a century here and there." Grimbledung waved his hand dismissively. "Among friends and foes, that is."

The pair began to walk down the street towards *Herbs and More. Much More.*

"Heaps." Akita shook his head. He wasn't sure how Big Julie had managed to pass the task of getting Grimbledung the potion to him, but he was sure there must have been some magic involved. Or womanly wiles. Either way, he would keep his guard up if he ever found himself playing Trufflidge at the same table as her. He looked over, Grimbledung was still talking. *Still.* "Yeah?" He said, not sure if that would even fit into the conversation, but figuring that Grimbledung would accept it anyway.

"That's what I said!" Grimbledung nodded his head. "I mean, how was I to know that the crossbow was loaded?"

"By lookin' at the bent over bow and the bolt sitting in it?" Offered Akita as he was sucked into the conversation once again.

"I agree completely, but that only works if you can see the crossbow. I still had a sack on my head, remember?"

Akita did not. "Errr, ya?" He lied. As the pair rounded the corner, he spied *Herbs and More. Much More* across the street on the left. "Ahh, we're there," he said relieved.

"Yeah. Now we can get this show on the road!" Grimbledung rubbed his hands together. "I'll have this mystery solved by lunch."

"You know it's a theft, right?"

"Sure, sure," Grimbledung nodded at the Constable. "But it's a mysterious theft, right? I mean, no one knows *where* the wands are getting off to..."

"Thief's prolly got them," interjected Akita.

"... so that's what I'm going to solve," continued Grimbledung as they climbed the three stairs to the shop's door. As they got to it, it opened. "Thanks door."

The door remained silent.

Grimbledung looked at the door closely. "Kinda rude."

"It's a door, Grim. What're you expecting? Welcome trumpets?"

"Now that you mention it, I could use a snack," admitted Grimbledung.

Akita shook his head. He suspected that half of what the Gnome said was said just to raise the hackles of those around him. *How could he not know what a trumpet is? I'm not gonna bite* He thought. "Maca?" He called into the shop instead.

Maca stepped through two half-size swinging doors that led to the backroom. "And a good morning to you fine gentlemen."

Grimbledung did a little hop. "Woo! This place smells great, Maca. Any of this stuff edible?"

"Well, a lot of it is, yes," said Maca as she moved gracefully around the counter, "but only to achieve some sort of result; not to fill a belly".

"Well, that sounds like a result to me." Grimbledung waggled his ears.

Maca opened her mouth to respond when Akita cut her off: "Well, the result we need today is to make old Grimbledung look like young Grimbledung."

Maca nodded.

"Old Grimbledung?"

"Well... older, then." Maca laughed. "Is that better?"

Grimbledung nodded as he moved beside the Elf. "Definitely." He eyed the Constable. "It's nice to see someone has a good bedside manner."

"I'm not a doctor," said Akita. "Lawmen aren't supposed to be pleasant."

Maca laughed again. "Oh, I don't know. I find you quite pleasant."

Akita let his tongue hang out of his mouth. "Well, that's when I'm off duty."

Grimbledung sidled up to Akita. "So you off duty now?" He nudged him with his elbow.

Akita glowered down. "No. This here is official business."

Grimbledung scooted back to Maca's side. "Well, then I'll just spend my time on yon side of this conversation." He smiled up at her. "So what've you got to make me look like a strapping youngster?"

"Strappin'?"

Maca winked at the Constable. "How long do you want to stay like that? A few hours, a day, or maybe a week?"

"You can make me young for a week?"

Maca shook her head, hair whishing around in slow motion as she did. "Now don't get your hopes up, Grimbledung. Making youth. Good and true youth by turning back someone's age is a long and dangerous process that probably won't give you the results you're looking for." She looked at Akita. "And I don't think that's what we're doing today."

"But you said..."

"You have to understand, Grimbledung, if I were to make you young again..." She raised a finger. "*If*, I were to make you young again, it would cost you several hundred gold and you'd end up being exactly the person you were at that age."

Grimbledung did a little hop. "Great!"

Maca shook her head. "No, you'd *be* that age again. Everything you learned from that point forward would be lost to you because you'd have the exact mind of what you had at *that* age. It would take the rest of the week just to convince you that you knew us and should trust us. Not to mention getting you to go undercover at the school to find that thief or thieves."

Akita moved away from Grimbledung and began to peruse the shelves. He was under orders to not tell anyone of the details of the secretive undertaking. He hoped that Grimbledung wouldn't repeat that particular comment to anyone. Ever.

Maca saw Akita move and nodded at him, realizing her mistake, she pressed on hoping the comment would be lost forever in Grimbledung's mind. "So what we're going to do because we want you as crafty and wily as you are now, is to just *change* your physical appearance for a while."

Grimbledung did a little hop. "Great!" He flexed his arms. "I'll be unstoppable with a youthful body and my wise old brain!"

Maca giggled then shook her head again. "No. Keep in mind your *actual* age won't have changed, so you'll not be able to run like a youngster. You'll just *look* younger."

Grimbledung frowned. "Well, hopefully I won't be doing any running then. So I'm going to look young. That's great!"

Maca nodded at Grimbledung as she gestured to the half-doors. "Exactly. That's what I can do; give you the *appearance* of youth." As she moved to the swinging doors, Akita and Grimbledung fell in step behind her. "Oftentimes, that's even better than real youth, you know," she continued as she pushed the doors open and stepped into the workroom of her shop.

"How so?" Asked Grimbledung as he and the Constable joined Maca at the dark, gnarled table in the center of her workshop. "Seems to me that's not very helpful."

"You said it yourself; you would have your youthful looks but the cunning you've developed over the past three centuries." She smiled. "So you'll have the upper hand with whatever you're trying to do, I would think."

Akita gave Maca a nod.

"So what'll this take? An hour or so of laying on yon table while you crush vulture beaks and pour tears of elephants into a bowl?" Grimbledung stick out his tongue. "Maybe hock a loogie in it for good measure?"

Maca blinked at the Gnome. "What? That's gross." She looked at Akita for help. He just shrugged. "No. All you have to do is drink some of this potion here." She reached her hand to an old, battered wood shelf. The

carved skulls on the top corners seemed to glower down at everyone in the room. After only a moment, a slender bottle with a glass stopper rattled then lifted. As it rose over the lip on the shelf, Maca looked at Grimbledung. "I'd think you would want to be young looking for a week just in case. You really can't take another dose of this for a good month afterwards so you need to take it all at once."

"Well, I guess I'll go for a week just in case." Grimbledung stifled a giggle as he thought of the mischief he could get into if he solved the thievery problem within a day and then had the rest of the week to mess around town, unrecognizable to everyone. "That sounds good to me."

Maca turned as the bottle came into her hand. "Then for a week of youth, at your size, you need to drink about half of this." She turned to her worktable and placed the bottle on it. She reached under the table to a shelf and selected a small glass. She examined it in the light.

"Woo! Shots!" Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Now you're talking. Set 'em down and fill 'em up!" He hopped back and forth. As he made his way to the worktable, he sang:

Belly up to the bar Gnomes!
Belly up, belly up to the bar, Gnomes,
and don't leave your money at home!
Only drink by day or night
Or somewheres in between!

Akita laughed. "I know that one!" He moved beside the Gnome and joined in:

Belly up to the bar Wolves!
Belly up, belly up to the bar, Wolves.

Better loosen your belt

Only drink when you're all alone

Or with somebody else!

The pair finished together:

Belly up to the...

Baaaarrr!

"You know I try to run a respectable business here," said Maca. She put the glass on the worktable. "Honestly."

"Where's mine?"

"None for you; you're on duty," said Grimbledung. He stuck out his tongue.

"Yeah? Well soon you'll be too young lookin' for anyone in town to serve you anything stronger than milk or apple cider," chortled Akita. "For a whole week."

Grimbledung sucked his tongue back into his mouth. "Now hold on a minute. Let's think this through." He started to back away.

Akita put his hand on the Gnome's back. "Oh no ya' don't. You've already agreed to this."

"Will you sneak me a drink?" Grimbledung said in a loud whisper.

"Honestly," interjected Maca. "If it's that much of an issue- I'll buy you a drink."

"Contributing to the delinquency of a minor?" Tut-tutted Akita. "Honestly."

"Contributing?" She pointed at Grimbledung. "He's *full up* of delinquency. He's not taking any more donations."

Grimbledung frowned. "Hey, I thought bartenders were friendly folk!"

"That your experience?"

Grimbledung shrugged at the Constable. "Well not always. Neckless over at the Mora Tau isn't always friendly."

"Most people call him Maurice."

"Maurice? Really? I'd never have guessed," Grimbledung admitted to Maca.

"Maurice Tarbender," said Akita.

"Tarbender? Hey! I've been getting his last name right!"

"Not on purpose," said Akita.

"Well how was I to know?"

"Mayhap by asking?" Maca poured the potion carefully into the glass. "That should do it." She put the glass in front of the Gnome.

"So do I have to sip it, or take it with food, or what?"

"Just drink it, you silly Gnome."

Grimbledung picked up the glass and in one well-practiced motion, downed it. "That's it?"

"That should be it. Unless there's an adverse reaction. Which is *highly* unlikely since you're a Gnome."

"Adverse? That's bad right? Adverse reactions are bad!" Grimbledung hopped up and down. "I don't feel so good all of a sudden."

"Don't worry, you're fine."

"But they're bad reactions!" Grimbledung gripped his belly and moaned. "I've got a baaaad feeling about this all of a sudden."

"Well, sure." Maca shrugged as she picked up the bottle and re-stoppered it. She let go of it. Instead of falling to the floor, it moved smoothly back to its proper place on the shelf. "That's why they're adverse." She smiled at him. "You've nothing to worry about. Really."

"Well, that's the kind of thing you mention to a Gnome before giving them some strange potion to drink!"

Maca put her hand on Grimbledung's shoulder. "That's a *very* stable and safe potion for Gnomes, Grimbledung; you don't have to

worry a bit about it. Actually, it's only dangerous to people who are allergic to..."

Grimbledung fell over dead.

Maca and Akita stared at the heap that was, until very recently, Grimbledung. "Nuts," said Akita. "Drimblerod's not going to be happy."

Maca gaped at Grimbledung's corpse. "Wha... What?"

"Well, even if he's not younger, he's at least stopped aging, right?" Akita bent over to look at Grimbledung. "That's somethin' anyway."

"I don't understand. This potion is only poisonous to folks who are allergic to jointed charlock. Who ever heard of a *Gnome* allergic to jointed charlock? A Dwarf sure, but a Gnome?"

"Never seen him eat it, now that you mention it. Regular radishes by the handful, but not its wild cousin." Akita sniffed Grimbledung. "That there is one dead Gnome."

"I mean..."

Akita looked at Maca. "Can you fix him?"

Maca looked at a weathered hutch. "Well, I suppose I can..." She glanced back at the Gnome. "Unless he's also allergic to turnips. Then it'll really be a chore."

Akita shook his head. "Nope. Seen him eat *piles* of them."

Maca let out a sign. "Well, that's a relief. Get him on the table and I'll prepare the antidote."

Akita picked Grimbledung up and placed him on the table. "Say, will that counter the youthfulness potion?"

Maca looked from the hutch to the Gnome and back again. "Well, it may actually make it last longer, now that you mention it."

Akita let his tongue hang out. "Ahhh. There's a bright side then."

Maca shook her head as she moved to the hutch and opened one of the side cupboards. She pulled out several vials and put them on the workspace under the shelves that connected the two cupboards. She pulled a mortar and pestle from a corner of the workspace. "That Gnome's got

some Dwarf in his past," she muttered under her breath as she put ingredients in the mortar. She glanced over her shoulder. "Please don't mention this, Akita."

"He prolly knows that there's a Dwarf perched somewheres on his family tree. And I think he's gonna know what happened to him when he wakes up."

Maca shook her head. "Not that. This." She turned back to the mortar and spit in it, then used the pestle to mix the now moist concoction.

Akita laughed. "This gets better 'n better."

Maca brought the mortar to the table. She took the mixture from it and rolled it into a small ball. "This should do the trick."

"Should?"

She opened a drawer under the table and removed a dark jar. She pulled off the lid and dunked the ball into it. "Chocolate makes it go down better."

"Chocolate? Is this a professional type of antidote?"

Maca's eyes flashed red. "Just open his mouth, mister smarty tail," she added with a smile.

"Yes ma'am." Akita took Grimbledung's chin in one paw and put his other on the Gnome's forehead. He pushed his hands apart and Grimbledung's mouth opened wide. "He's not gonna choke on that thing, is he? It's kinda big."

"He's dead. He can't choke on anything right now." Maca dropped the ball in then replaced Akita's hands with her own. She pressed Grimbledung's mouth tightly shut.

"How long will that take?"

Grimbledung thrashed on the table then sat up, wrestling his head out of Maca's grip. "Gah!"

"My sentiments exactly," agreed Akita.

"What kind of operation you running here, *Mistress* Maca?"

"Just calm down, Grimbledung," said Maca as she offered her hand to help him off the table. "You're fine now."

"Sure, *now*. But just a little bit ago, I was stranded on the docks without a coin to my name! *Yet again*. That gondolier is getting pretty tired of me just sitting there you know. I don't know if you realize this or not, but it's not the most pleasant place to pass the time."[26]

"Well, you're back now... so you're allergic to jointed charlock? As a Gnome?"

"Well sure. My whole family is." With Maca's assistance, Grimbledung hopped off the table. "Regular radishes are fine, but them wild ones are lethal. Not sure why, really. It's kinda embarrassing as a Gnome."

"Well, I'm sorry about that," said Maca, "I never would have suspected or I would have..."

Akita cleared his throat. "So how long until the youthfulness potion starts working?"

"It should be any time now, really." Maca peered at Grimbledung. "Any time at all."

"That works. That means I can get to the school in the morning and get this mystery solved and have a week of young-looking fun."

"And I'll get your drinks," said Akita. He winked at Maca. "Unless *you* got a reason to buy him drinks."

Maca squinted her eyes at the Constable. Another flash of red accompanied the look.

Akita grinned wide at the female. "Now, now. I was going to do that anyhow."

"Wooo!"

Maca and Akita looked down at Grimbledung. Or at least where Grimbledung should have been. There was now a very large, wild-looking mass of black wavy hair obstructing their view of him. The mountain of hair tilted back and a small, wrinkle-free Grimbledung-ish face looked up at them. The sides of the hair wiggled as the ears buried deep inside did so.

"Wooo!" said the youth as his pants dropped to the floor. Then his tunic joined it as he passed through the neck-hole.



"Well, that's a fine how do you do."

Grimbledung grinned at Maca. "Right?" He flexed his arms and posed. "They used to call me muscles."

"I'd have thought they called you locks."

Grimbledung stuck out his tongue at the Constable. "And no one'll recognize me now. I'm going to show Drimblerod!" He ran right out of his shoes to the swinging doors, passing under them easily.

Akita looked at Maca wide-eyed. "I would have thought that you of all folks would have had a better handle on something simple like a youthfulness potion." He shook his head. "And you call yourself an Elf-Djinn." He clucked his tongue on the roof of his mouth.

"So you're *trying* to dig yourself into a hole?"

"Oh, I'll be back later to get my comeuppance." He winked at her, then quickly moved in and smooched her cheek loudly. " 'Course, if you can't handle a wee Gnome, what're your chances against a full-grown Werewolf?"

"Oh, my chances are really good." She raised her eyebrow at him. "Remember, above all else, I'm an all-powerful female."

Akita smiled as he leaned on the table. "Oh dear. Mayhap I need to..." A shriek from the street made him look to the front of the shop. "Or actually, mayhap I need to catch me a naked Grimbledung."

"That's not the first time you've said that, is it."

Akita grabbed Grimbledung's tunic from the floor and made for the door. "Nope. I think I'm in double digits even." He pushed through the swinging doors as another shriek wafted through the shop from the street out front.

Maca picked up Grimbledung's pants. She let out a long sign. "I guess I'll take Grimbledung's pants to Second-Hand Sorcery," she said to her empty workroom. She smiled. "So that makes three for me, if my count is right."

Chapter 38
Grim Point Oh

Someone's pounding on my head. At least I think someone's pounding on my head. Maybe they're pounding near my head. Either way, I don't like it. Then I remember where I am. "I'm up, I'm up," I call to the door. Hoping the pounding will stop.

'Well, you're going to be late for your first day if you don't get a move on', I hear Drimblerod say.

Now I remember- I'm supposed to be going undercover at Big Julie's school. But... But something needs to happen first. I can't remember what, but it's important. With a shrug, I hope out of bed. I stumble as I hit the ground. *Did someone raise my bed*? I look around my room. And my table's bigger too. *What gives?* I walk over to my mirror- it's bigger too- and stretch. *What?* I stumble back from the mirror; seems there's some kid in my room! "What're you doing in here, you little cretin?" I ask. The kid's mouth seems to move with mine.

'Grimbledung, stop mucking about in there and come get some breakfast. You're going to be late', Drimblerod yells into my room again.

Late? That's right! I'm on a mission. I narrow my eyes at the youth who's narrowing his eyes back at me. Good looking kid, there in my mirror. "Be right down, Drim!" I call at the door. Yesterday is kind of fuzzy to me, but some of it is coming back. *Undercover work*. I give myself a wink then turn to my wardrobe. *Uh oh; that's going to be a problem. I don't have any clothes my new size,* I think as I open the doors to my wardrobe. Inside I see a bunch of what look to me like doll clothes. "What's with the doll clothes?" I ask.

Oh.

I pull out a tiny shirt and some breeches. There's matching socks and underwear in the drawer. I slip them on as I start to go over my plan in my head. That's when I realize I don't really have a plan. Sometimes you can over plan these things.

'Grimbledung Sixtoes esquire junior! Get down here!' assaults my ears.

Junior? As I'm trussing my shoes, a thought occurs; Sixtoes? That's not going to work. Folk in town know about Grimbledung Sixtoes. I'm famous, after all. What I need is a pseudo name. Something that will keep anyone from realizing who I really am. But something I won't forget. I turn to pick up my satchel. "Hello. I'm Grim. Grim Noir," I say to the mirror. I smile and nod as I do it. "Grim Noir; that's me," I say again. "Good to meet you, Grim Noir," I say to myself. "The pleasure is all mine, meeting such a finely dressed, and well-spoken lad such as yourself," I say. "Why, I don't think I've met someone of your caliber in a month's..."

'Grimbledung! Get down here!'

I sigh at my reflection and with a knowing wink, go to the door. *What're these door latches doing so high up?* I lift the latch and tug the door open. My feet only slide once as I tug the door open. Being this size is going to be a pain. It's a good thing I don't remember being this size. I decide to just leave the door open- there's no sense in working up a sweat before breakfast.

"I made you some eggs and some bacon, Grim," says Drimblerod. "You need a full belly to keep a sharp mind about you."

"I'd think it would be better to keep a sharp mind inside me. Not sure if my mind outside my skull would do me any good."

Drimblerod slides a plate across the table.

I climb up into my chair and sit down. The table comes to my nose. "Well, this is going to get annoying before breakfast."

"Isn't that right now?"

I nod at my partner as I move to stand in my chair. "I've got a week of this?" I pick up a piece of bacon. On the bright side, the slice of bacon is bigger than my head. *Nice.*

"I'll find a high chair..."

I raise an eyebrow at my partner as I take a bite of bacon. It's too big for the entire piece to fit into my mouth. *Even nicer.*

"... I mean a barstool for you to sit on," finishes Drimblerod. "For meals and such."

I nod. My mouth's too full for anything else. I pick up my fork- it's practically a garden implement!

"And some appropriate eating utensils."

Another nod as I scoop some eggs up and into my mouth.

"So do you have a plan?"

I nod at my partner. "Of course I have a plan," I lie. "I've been working on one since yesterday. I want to get this solved as quickly as possible so I can get changed back." *This isn't permanent, is it?*

"Grim, you do remember you're like this because of that potion you drank, right? You're like this until it wears out."

Nope. No idea what he's talking about. "Sure, sure." I put more eggs into my mouth.

"Well, hopefully you can figure out who's the thief before Julie loses any more wands. Each day it takes you to solve this mystery costs her around ten wands."

So someone's stealing wands! I knew something was missing. I nod again. "Yep; I'm on the case."

"Well, finish up and get going. School starts in about an hour but you've got to stop by Big Julie's office to find out which classes you'll be going to."

Going to class? I was planning on just wandering around. "I've got to go to classes? I was planning on just wandering around," I say.

"Well, that's all part of the undercover work. You have to go to where the students are. If you just wandered the halls, they'd realize you didn't actually go to any classes pretty quick, and then you'd never get any of them to talk to you." My partner smiled at me. "And you just might learn something as well."

"What've I got to learn?"

"Well, you don't know that until you learn it, I'd imagine."

That didn't make a bit of sense. "Fine, fine. I'm on my way." I shoveled the last of the eggs into my mouth and picked up the last bacon strip. "I'll eat this on the way." I judge the distance then hop out of the chair. "This is most annoying."

"Well, I'll have some size-appropriate furniture for you when you get back from school."

I nodded at Drimblerod. "Good. I'm liable to break a leg otherwise."

"I'll walk you out." Drimblerod pointed at the stairs. "See you on your way even." He smiled at me. I think he was enjoying this a little too much. "My little Grimbledung, heading off to his first day of school."

I got to the top of the stairs and looked down. It was like the Steppes of Insanity. *What gives with the stairs?* The stairs seem to be almost half way to my waist. Each. *What a climb this will be getting back upstairs.* Down is easy though- I just hop down them one at a time. When I get to the bottom, I decide that tomorrow I'll take the POOPA. "Tomorrow I'm taking the POOPA".

"Awww, does Grimmie need to make a poopie?"

I stare at my partner. "Don't start with me, Drim," I warn him. He waggled his ears at me. *Oh yeah- he's starting.*

Door opens for me- at least I didn't have to muscle that big thing open. "Thanks Door." It rattles its catch at me. For what seems to be an extra-long time. I realize it's laughing. "Don't start with me, Door." I look up at my partner. "All right. Now that you two have had your fun, I'm going to solve Big Julie's problem."

Drimblerod nods at me and sticks out his hand. For a moment, I think he's going to shake my hand then I spot the coin. "Here's a copper in case you want a snack," he says.

I nod and take the coin. "Thanks." I turn and start towards Big Julie's school. I hear Drimblerod call my name so I turn around.

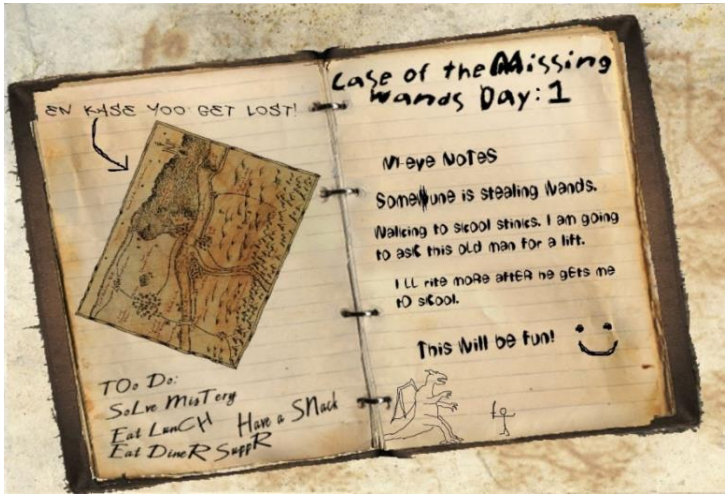
"Play well with others and make good decisions!" He says with a smile and a wave.

Yeah, like that's *going to happen.* I give him a special wave of my own. The frown from the lady walking along means she doesn't approve of my wave. I give her one too. With a gasp, she moves off. *Nice. Now to get in character so I can solve this mystery.*

I tuck the coin into my pocket and take a calming breath. *I'm Grim Noir, and I'm on the case. Now to find Julie...*

Chapter 39
Grim Noir – The Case of the Missing Wands!
(Day One) - The Sting

This is absolutely absurd! I wave my arms around. "Someone give me a lift!" I shout again. I feel like I've been walking for weeks. WEEKS! And leagues.



LEAGUES!

"Where you going to little fella?" An elderly voice says to me.

I turn and see that old guy from the shop that bought a light wand. A miner or something. "To school of course." I say to his nose because that's the only part of his face that isn't covered by hair or a hat. *Why didn't I get a hat?* "I think it's leagues away still."

The old man looks up and down the street. Then he looks back at me.

"Well?" I try to coax him into making a sentence. "Wanna give me a lift?"

"To the school? Big Julie's school?" The old Human says.

Some people! "You know of any other schools around here?"

The miner looks up and down the street. Again. Then he looks back at me.

"School," I say. "You're killing me, Miner. Killing me!"

"Nope. That's the only one I can think of."

That's helpful. "No kidding. Hey, old timer?"

A nod.

I wave my arms again. "Can I get a lift?"

Another nod. "Sure, sure."

He takes me by the shoulders and turns me away from him. *Nice! I'll ride on his shoulders the rest of the way there.* "Any time you're rea..." Suddenly I get kicked. Kicked! Hard. HARD, I tell you! I sail a little bit and then land in a heap. "Hey! What gives?!" I stand up, rubbing my butt which is now throbbing.

"That enough of a lift?" He's pointing at something behind me. I look over my shoulder. It's Big Julie's school and it's a couple of blocks away. "Or you want me to kick you all the way there?"

I am sure there's a smile going on under that moustache and above that beard. I'm just sure of it! "No thanks!"

So I hobble my way to Big Julie's, butt throbbing the whole way like I had a really spicy meal the night before, hoping that old guy isn't watching. I look back over my shoulder. *Yeah, he is.* I give him my 'special wave' and he finally leaves to do whatever it is he does when he's not kicking poor innocent kids like me along the streets of Julesville.

As I get to the big double doors, I look at the two empty pedestals. *I hope those gargoyles got put back together without too much trouble and make it back sometime soon.* With a sigh, I squeeze through the open

door on the right. There's kids moving all over so I push my way through to Big Julie's office.

Her door's closed.

I give it a good knock.

Or two.

Nothing.

I give it a good kick.

Lots of times.

The door swings open and Julie pokes her head out. Way above me. Big Julie. "Heya there!" I say with a waggle or two of my eyebrows. She's a whole heap of woman all of a sudden. *Niiice!*

She looks down at me with a frown.

"You're a *whole* heap more woman all of a sudden, you know." I tell her. Mainly because it's true. "You're like the great outdoors." I add. "Makes me want to go on a hike." *Did I say that out loud?*

Now her eyebrows work their way up. Way up. "Excuse me?" Now they're back down, almost touching in the middle.

"Can't hear me from down here?" *Oh yeah, I might as well try.* "Why don't ya pick me up and then we'll talk?"

I think I'm getting my wish as she reaches down. But instead of a nice cradling picking up, I get a grabbed by the collar picking up. It's not the same, let me tell you. Not the same at all. Now I know how a kitten feels. "That's kinda personal. What gives, Julie?"

She turns me around and narrows those baby greens at me. "How about I expel you? *Personally*."

Then I realize she doesn't recognize me. Or probably doesn't anyway. Just in case, I let her in the know. "It's me, Julie!" I whisper as I move my head closer to hers. "Grimbledung!" I waggle my ears at her.

So I'm dropped from about Big Julie shoulder height to the ground as she staggers back. It's a good thing I'm young and springy or I'd have broken a leg. Or two. "Careful! That's kid abuse you know!"

Big Julie seems to recover. She grabs me by the front of the collar and yanks me into her office. "Grimbledung!" She hisses.

I make my way to the chair in front of her desk. Unlike last time, it's a climb to get into it. "So what'd'a'ya think?" I give my ears another workout.

"Land sakes, Grimbledung! *You are ADORABLE*!"

Dames. They know how to kick you when you're down. "I'm under cover you know."

Big Julie sits in her chair. I can't see her. She has to lean forward to see me over the top of her desk. Now she's smiling. "You're as cute as a button on a rabbit's butt!"

"Listen, Julie. I'm here to do some work." I look around the room. "Finding clues. Catching perps." I try to give her a business look. "I'm earning that hefty fee we discussed earlier."

Now she's giggling. *Dames*.

I scoot off the chair. "All right, Julie. Now that you've had your fun, what class you want me in while I take care of this problem? I'm looking to have this done before lunch."

"Lunch?"

I give her a nod as she moves around the desk. "That's the plan. I got a copper for my celebratory drink burning a hole in my pocket."

She stops when she gets in front of me. I take a step back so I can see her face. *Yeah*. She's thinking about something. I'd wager an entire month's take from the shop that it's not what I'm thinking about.

"You should go to Potions."

"Potions?" I ask.

She gives me a nod. "Yes. It's a nice full class so you'll fit in with no trouble. Just tell Professor Garibaldis that you're a transfer and I'm still getting the paperwork taken care of."

"Garibaldis? Nice. Where's the class?" I'm ready to get going so that I can make it to the bar before happy morning ends. I've got a fighting chance at two drinks for my copper. All I need to do is solve this mystery nice and quick.

"It's three doors down on the right." She says at me. She holds up her hand and she's got some fingers up. "It's on this side when you go out the door and go that way."

She jerks her thumb in what is probably the right direction. *Unless.* Oh yeah, that's a thought. Unless she's the thief and she's embezzling the wands herself. I got my first suspect. *Niiiice.* I raise the same hand she has up and the same number of fingers. "Got it. Anything else?"

She starts bending down towards me. There a kiss in my immediate future?

Nope.

She pinches my cheek. "You're as cute as a barrel of kittens."

Dames.

I start to raise another finger but then decide not to or I'll never find Garibaldis' classroom. "Dames." I say as I leave and go the direction her thumb pointed.

When I get to a door, I lower a finger. *Getting there.*

When I get to the next door, I lower a finger. *How much farther?*

When I get to the next door, I lower a finger. I got no more fingers. Is this the door, or is it the next one? She didn't explain that part. I look around- there's no kids in the hallway. "Rolton Chips," I say to the empty hallway. There's only one way to know if this is right... I reach up and pull down on the latch and yank the door open. As I peek in, I spy Garibaldis there in front of the class. He's saying something that's probably important as he points to a smoking vial in his hand.

I shuffle to an empty seat and climb into it. He gives me a look. I give him a wink. Now his look turns sour. I was supposed to tell him something. "Julie said she's transferring the paperwork for me to take care of." I

explain just like Julie told me to say. "No, wait. Julie's taking care of the paperwork for my transfer." *Smooth!*

"Julie?"

Right, right- I'm undercover. "Sorry; I mean Big Julie, Garibaldis."

"*Big* Julie?" He puts the potion on the table. The other kids snicker. Like I'm the only one here that calls her that. *Kids.* "Garibaldis?" He adds.

I give him a nod. Maybe he's forgotten his name or something. "Yeah."

"Yeah." He repeats.

I think he spends too much time being a Gila, or whatever it is he is these days when he's not working on his plan to off Pinky to get Big Julie all to himself. *Yeah, I know. It's my business to know.* "So what's cooking in the potion?" I ask, hoping to help him back on track. I'm helpful that way.

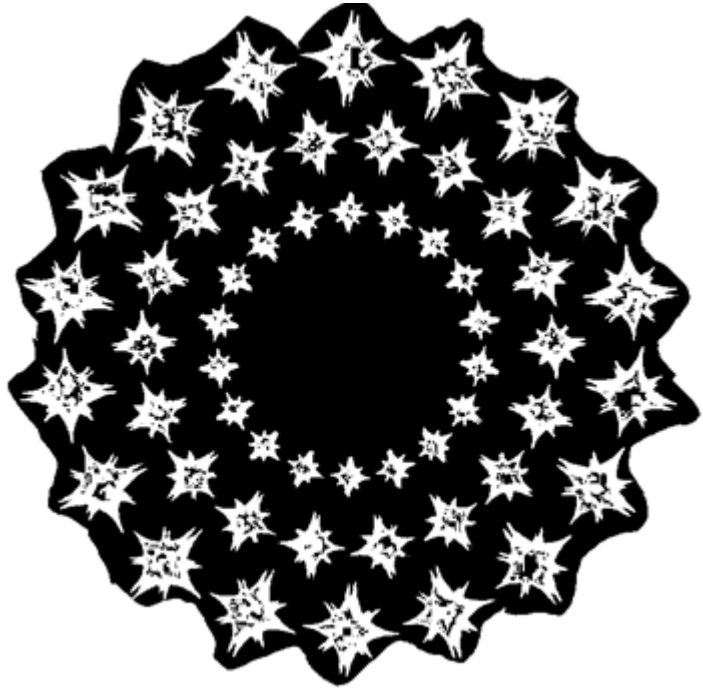
He shakes his head, to clear it I think maybe, then he picks up the vial again. "As I was saying..." he raises an eyebrow in my direction. I look behind me in case someone's sneaking up from there. Not today. When I look back he's talking again. About something. "... then it's not dangerous at all, so you mustn't skip that step." Or something. I'm looking around the room deciding who else is going to be a suspect besides Big Julie. There's lots of different kids in this class. Lucky for me I picked this one- there's plenty of kids so I can blend in nicely. I look at Garibaldis. He's still talking about something and pouring two potions together. The kids are doing what they're supposed to be doing- pouring potions together. I'm on a case, so I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing: looking for suspects.

"Now give it a taste," I hear the Professor say.

Don't mind if I do. I look at the table in front of me. Sure enough there's a vial just like that smoking one he was holding right there in

front of me. There's some other vials and some sprigs of something green and something blue. Garnish, probably. I look at the kid next to me and she's got this vial up to her lips. *Gnomess in the making.* It's not smoking like my vial is. Of course, she probably has to water down her drinks. *Dames.* I'm a professional. And I'm on a case. I pick up the smoking vial. It's not cold so that means it has to be safe. I give a wink to the redhead at the table with me "Bottoms up," I say as I take a swig.

Tastes like peaches.



Chapter 40

Grim Noir – The Case of the Missing Wands!

(Day Two) - The Players

Someone's calling me?

Someone's calling me.

Maybe they'll stop.

Someone's calling me.

Maybe they'll stop.

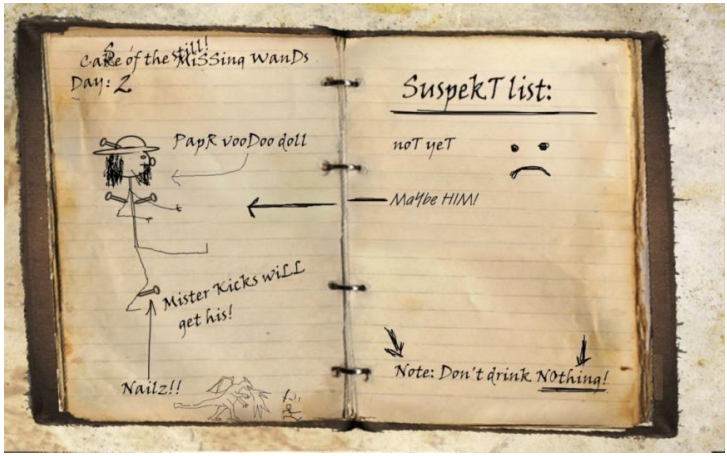
Someone's calling me!

Maybe they'll stop.

Someone's still calling me?

Maybe they'll stop.

Apparently not.



I sit up.

Why does it feel like someone has punched a hole right through my head? I feel my head to make sure it hasn't happened. This tiny head is creepy. No holes though. So that's good.

'GRIMBLEDUNG!' comes from outside my door.

My door? Why am I in my room? I was in class listening to Garibaldis talk about something. Something about potions. "I'm awake." I shout back at Drimblerod before he shouts my name again. "I'm awake!" I say for a second time just in case he's got my name at the back of his throat ready to go.

"Well, you're going to be late for school if you don't get a move on," he says as he pokes his head into my room. I think my condition has given him a father complex. "So get dressed," he adds.

In a fatherly tone.

I swing my legs off the side of the bed. It looks like it's a league to the floor and my head's throbbing. On a bright note, my butt doesn't hurt that much anymore.

"I'll be out in a shake." I give him a look as I make a leap for the floor. "While I'm getting dressed you can tell me what I'm doing here instead of in Garibaldis' class."

He pulls his head back out of my room. Seems now he's not interested in talking.

Thanks, *Pops*.

I eat breakfast alone. Drimblerod says he has to 'run the shop' or something. Eating alone isn't as much fun as eating with someone else. Still. The food goes down right and my belly's full. Now to solve this mystery which is now taking twice as long as I planned.

Not good.

Except for my expenses that is. I think for a moment. Not sure what I'll expense. Maybe a silver coin for that kick. I'll work it in somehow. I'm smart that way.

Good.

I move to the POOPA and look at the pole. It's a long way off. A real long way. I try to judge the distance then look down. It's a long way down if I miss that pole. A looong way. With a frown I return to the stairs.

I'm sweating when I get to the bottom. "Those stairs are absurd."

"Well, they've nowhere to go but up." Says my partner. Then he waggles his ears at me. I'm tempted to chuck the apple I'm holding at him. But it's a snack for later.

Still...

Drimblerod sees me eyeing the apple then him. He takes another couple of steps back. He stops waggling his ears too. "Anything else you want to tell me?" He asks.

"Nothing comes to mind," I lie.

"Very well then. Off you go," he says as his ears start flapping again.

Still...

After a moment's consideration I give him: "Well, I'm off to school then." I give him a stern nod. "To solve this mystery once and for all. Tomorrow I'll be back tending wand sales."

He gives me a nod like he doesn't believe me.

I make my way to the school on my own. But since I'm keeping an eye out for Mister Kicks, I move my apple to the same hand that has my wand sheath. If he shows up, he's the one that will get a kick. A magical one. That will send him to his grave. Here's hoping.

No such luck.

I make my way to the same class I was in earlier. Kids are still milling about so I'm not late this time. Nice. No one's in the seat by the little dame so I put my apple there. Garibaldis is out front of the class. 'On stage', I guess it's called. Time to get an ally. If you're going to get cornered, you always want someone in that corner with you.

Garibaldis is a good fit for a minion. Maybe if he plays his cards right, I'll make him a lackey by the end of the day. "Hey Garibaldis," I say as I approach.

"*Mister* Noir. It's nice to see you are up and about after yesterday's excitement," he says. "Notice I tossed a 'mister' at the front of that." He puts his hands on his hips. Do all adults do that to kids? Annoying. "And I'm not even a student talking to a professor." He adds.

That's right; I'm under cover. I give him a nod and wink. "Relax Garibaldis." I motion with my finger for him to get closer. He does. Definitely henchman material. "It's Grimbledung," I whisper when he's near. "I'm under cover for Julie looking for the wand thief. Only Akita and Drim and Julie are in on it. Now you are too."

Now he's laughing. Real loud like. The other kids are looking. He's gonna blow my cover. Maybe he'll just stay a nameless minion after all. I start laughing too, hoping that no one gets suspicious. Thieves do that. "That's a good one Professor!" I guffaw. "A first class riot."

He recovers enough to wipe a tear from his eye. Then he gets serious as he drops back down to my level. "Sorry, Grimbledung. You just caught me off guard is all."

"Yeah. That's what that looked like to me."

He looks around all suspicious like. "Got any suspects?" Back in the running for henchman. Maybe even lackey.

I shake my head. "No. I'm hoping to have some by the end of the day though. If I need some muscle, can I count on you?"

He gives me a nod as he stands up. "Sure, Mister Noir. You know you can always count on me." He gives me a wink.

Garibaldis- Confidant. Muscle. Lackey. I'll have it put on a card, I think. "Thanks Mister Garibaldis," I give him as I move to my seat. That little redheaded dame is there. She's got a big smile plastered on her face. *Now what?*

"I'm glad to see you're ok, Grim Noir," she says to me. There's something in her eyes I think because she's batting her eyelashes like she's trying to get her head to take off. "That was sure exciting."

"That's me; Mister Exciting." I give her hand a pat. "It's all under control now, doll."

Dolls.

Now she's breathing hard. There's no telling what.... Then I get it- this Dame's got the scorchers for me. Who can blame her, really? Normally, a Dame wanting to give me the time of day would make my time of day. But this gal's young. Low double digits young. Young with a capital whatever young starts with. Maybe I can redirect her attention. "So what's cooking, Red?" I point at the stuff on the table.

Her eyelashes stop trying to make her head fly. Now she's staring straight at me all serious like. "Amaryllis."

"Amaryllis is cooking? What's that?" I take a look at the vials on the table. There's a bunch of them today but none that look like that one from yesterday. There's plenty of garnish too. "That some kind of plant?"

"It's a flower actually." She scoots her stool closer to me. "It's also called Belladonna Lily" Another scoot. "And sometimes Naked Ladies."

"Well, what're we doing with that?"

Another scoot and our stools are touching.

Uh oh!

"Whatever. You Want."

UH OH!

"Now listen Amaryllis," I say. This'll get me locked up faster than the time I... Now she's on my stool! "We need to..." I start when all of a sudden Garibaldis is on top of me.

"Mister Noir," he says as if I'm the one on someone else's stool. "What is going on here?" There's giggles all around. None are coming from me though. Or Garibaldis.

"Nothing. Nothing at all, Professor." I point at the potions. "We were discussing the potions and the subject of Naked Ladies came up."

The giggles stop. Gasps replace them. Garibaldis still has a frown plastered around his face.

Here we go. "All I'm doing is sitting here minding my own business, doing nothing to nobody when all of a sudden this Dame in the making here," I give a point just in case he's not on track, "decides she needs to be using my stool".

"Dame?"

I nod at Garibaldis. "Dame. Doll. Skirt. Dish." I point at the gal. "She's one of them when she reaches triple digits."

"Well, I never!" lies the Dame-to-be.

"That's not what you said a little ago," I remind her.

Everyone's quiet for a little bit. Finally Garibaldis breaks through: "Well, let's get back to our instructions on reducing potions, shall we?"

He moves back up to the front of the class and starts talking again. About something. The pre-Doll is still on my stool. "Do ya mind?"

"Not if you don't," she says. Bonkers this one. Bucked off her rocking horse.

"Yeah. I..." Then a thought comes to me- I could use a Moll. I'm on the verge of a network all of a sudden. "Don't mind at all," I finish. She's picking up vials and mixing them as the professor talks. I start to do what she does. Mostly. Maybe there's a step here and there I'm missing, but I'm not here to learn. I'm undercover. "So wha'd'ya know about the missing wands?" I whisper as I put some sort of red leaf in my vial like she did. The stuff in her vial turns blue. Mine gives off a little puff of smoke that I swear looks like a skull before it blows away. Same thing, I think.

"Want me to tell you out behind the bleachers during lunch?"

I wonder if she has an older sister. Or a great aunt, now that I think about it. "Right now's fine. I'm gonna be busy during lunch, I think."

She gives a little pout that if I were her age would have me meeting her wherever she wanted- even the top of an erupting volcano tended by Lava Golems. Maybe she's got a mother. *That'll be my next investigation.* She's saying something all of a sudden.

"What was that?" I whisper. Garibaldis gives me a look. I wink at him as he picks up some other vial. Something about it being a fixative. I'm a fixer too. I'm going to fix this wand problem then see if the saying 'the turnip doesn't grow far from the stalk' is true about her mother. She's talking. Again.

"I said I don't have any idea," she whispers as she puts her thumb over the vial and gives it a good shake. "I just got a wand for my birthday but I'm not taking any wand classes this year. Mom says there're a lazy way to go and I need to be serious about my studies."

Wait, what? "Wait, what?" I say since she probably can't hear my inner monologue.

She leans in close, nose brushing my ear. "I don't know anything about wands. Mom says they are a lazy way to go."

Now I'm on to something! Oh yeah, there's that mother I was going to look into. "Mother huh? You got a mother?"

She gives me a funny look. "Most everyone does."

"Sure, sure," I agree with Amaryllis. "I had two, in fact." I look left and right. Everyone's working. This place is a dead end. I lean in close to her. "If you hear anything about wands, let me know."

She gives me a nod as I raise my hand. Garibaldis gives me a look. "Gotta use the lavatory, Professor," I toss at him. I add a wink to make sure he catches it.

He does.

"Off with you then, Mister Noir." Then he's back to talking about not drinking the potion on an empty stomach before swimming for half an hour. Or something.

I hop off my stool, and make my way to the door. When I get there, I realize I still have my vial in my hand. Maybe a properly made reduction potion will come in handy, I think. Looking around, I spy a cork on a table near a kid. I figure he's not using it because it's on the table instead of in his vial. He's putting that red leaf in his. I scoot over and grab the cork as he's shaking his potion.

I open the door a little and slide out nice and easy like. The hallway's got a few kids moving here and there. 'Free period' is what it's called. That's something I think I'll take back to the shop with me. Free periods. Nice. I figure that I need to talk to some more kids to see if I can get more people into my network. Soon, I'll have the entire place locked down. That wand thief is as good as caught.

As I make my way to the reading area in the center of the windmill, I hear some voices. Kid voices. Just what I'm looking for. Now my investigation is moving along nice and easy like. I slip the potion into my pocket as I round the corner.

There're four of them. No, five. There's a Halfling in the middle of them. A familiar looking Halfling. Probably a group of pals shooting the breeze during free period. I stop to listen.

"Yeah, mister tough guy. What do you got to say now, Walker?" The Halfling gets a shove from a mean looking Dwarf.

"What's wrong, Skies? Lose all your starch now that you don't have your crazy father around?" This is from another Dwarf.

He's not friendly looking either. He might be the other's twin brother. It's always hard to tell with Dwarves. These pals sure seem to like to dish out good-natured ribbing. Maybe I can get them to help me solve my case. At no cost to me, that is. I step around the corner as a lanky Human is poking his friend in the chest.

"Got nothing to say now, Skies? Now that your unstable low-ranking corporal of a dad is dead?"

That's where I know the Halfling from- it's Corporal Gigantus' kid that I beat to that seat that was rightfully mine!

"Who's your daddy now, Skies?" adds the last in the group - an Elf. "I'll be your daddy!" He punches the Halfling in the chest.

This group must be a real tight-knit group.

"Be quiet!" Little Skies says back as the Dwarf brothers shove him back toward the Elf. The Elf balls up his fist.

Kids. They're so cute at this age. So am I. I figure I'll join in and get accepted by this group. After all, what group doesn't want a good-looking Gnome in it? None that I can think of. "No, Skies Walker. *I am your father*," I say to him.

"Noooo!" He shouts as he tries to push out of the circle. Circle of friendship, I think it is.

"Okay, no. I can't back that up. But it's the thought that counts, right?"

"No, not really!" This time he makes his way past the Human and sprints down the hall.

"That was fun," I say to the four. "So..." I put my hands on my hips. Kids do that, I think. Or maybe it's adults. Someone does it, I'm sure.

"What you think you're doing?" Asks a Dwarf brother.

"Letting him run off like that?" Finished the other Dwarf brother.

How romantic; they finish each other's sentences. Might as well be Dames. I wonder if they know that. There's only one way to tell: "How romantic; you finish each other's sentences. Might as well be Dames."

That balled up fist that Elf had put together earlier comes into view. Real close view.

Kids.

I duck as his fist goes over my head. It catches one of the Dwarf boys' noses. Not sure which because they're behind me. He lets out a yelp. His brother doesn't follow suit. Odd.

"What'd you hit him for?" I ask the Elf. "Elves are sure unstable. No matter what size they are." I lick my finger and run it down his cheek. Elves *hate* that.

"Ewwww!" Says the Elf as he steps back.

See?

"What's going on here?" Says a familiar voice. Sounds like Big Julie. I look over. It's her. That's why I'm a detective.

"We're just having a talk," I say. Because we were. I leave off the 'Big Julie' even though she is because I'm undercover. I'm professional that way. I do let my eyes do a full circuit of her- she's in a long summer dress with Moonshine Yarrows all over it. It's cinched up tight at the waist with this thick leather belt, and it looks like 'the girls' are working on making a surprise appearance. I take a second look in case they do. I'm professional that way .

"Mister Noir. Can I have your attention please?"

I tear my eyes up to Julie's face. There's a raised eyebrow on one side of it. "Oh, you got it all right."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!"

"Yeah?" She says back.

I waggle my ears. "Yeah!"

"No."

The kids are looking back at our entendre-filled exchange. Clueless.

"Don't you fine young men have someplace to be?"

I look at the group. She must mean me. "You must mean me." I give her a nod. "I got someplace to be." I try to maintain eye contact with her as

I move past, but I don't quite make it. Professional or not, we investigators got our limits, you know.

"And you gentlemen?" I hear her said to the four youths as I move around the corner. My stomach gives a little grumble at me. "Thanks. Maybe I'll get a snack," I say to it. I fish the apple out of my pocket. It's a little dented in on one side. Not the best of snacks. My stomach does that thing where it gurgles. "Well, let's go see what's cooking at the cafeteria," I offer. "It's better than a battered apple, I'm sure."

With a nod to my belly, I make my way to the front doors and out them. There's kids wandering here and there. I start towards the cafeteria like a bunch of other kids are doing when someone bumps my shoulder. In a hard but yet friendly kind of way. I'm sure it's friendly because I've had plenty of the unfriendly bumps and they're pretty easy to tell apart.

"Hey you!"

"Amaryllis, shouldn't you be in class?"

"I'm on a free period this period. Are you on a free period this period? You know, it's like fate that we both have free periods right now. We should spend our free period toge..."

I stop listening to Amaryllis. There's clouds in the sky and an apple to be eaten. So I have at them.

Chapter 40.5
Grim Noir – The Case of the Missing Wands!
(Day Two) - Lunch

"... better to spend a free period with someone else," says Amaryllis when I get to the cafeteria doors.

DAMES! I pop the apple core in my mouth. "If you're going to be a wet rag..." I say around it.

"A what?"

"Wet rag. Drip. Party pooper," I try. I've only got so many synonyms in me; I'd hate to waste them all at once.

She puts out her lower lip again.

"So that Mom you mentioned earlier..." I say as I hold the door open for her. Yeah, I'm a professional.

She claps her hands as she moves through the doors. With a suspicious look around, I follower her in.

The place is a madhouse like the last time I was there with Drimblerod. When that Skies kid tried to steal my seat and we ended up running from his unstable father for no reason whatsoever. At least that's how I remember it.

"Where're we going to sit?" Amaryllis says to me. "How about a quiet corner?" Her eyelashes bat together all innocent like. Except there's nothing innocent with this girl. She's a professional too, I think.

"How about along the edge of one table so that I can keep an eye on things."

"What do you need to keep an eye on?"

"Things. I just said that." I point at the end of a table where there are a few spaces open. "Over there even."

She gives a nod, grabs my hand, and drags me there. Like a panther dragging a meal into its lair.

We sit down and I raise my hand over my head and give it a wave. There's got to be a Gnoll nearby. I look up and realize my hand isn't even near to being above the heads of the kids around me. "Rolton chips," I say.

"What? I don't think you're supposed to eat those."

Dolls. I climb up on the table, kicking a glass just for fun on my way up, and have a look around. It looks like there's a Gnoll just a table away. Maybe Bonk. Or Clash. There's no telling. "Hey!" I give him a shout and a wave.

He looks over my way.

I give another wave and point to where I'm going to be sitting. "Over here, you!"

He puts his hands on his hips.

Adults.

I clamber back down and sit on the bench. Amaryllis is talking up the three mooks at our end of the table. Keeping her options open, probably.

"What're you having?" I say to the mook across from me. He's a youngish looking Human- it's always hard to tell with the shorter-lived races. I mean, I'm a Gnome kid who's got a few years in double digits. This kid is barely even in double digits. *Humans*.

"I'm having a snack," he says back to me. He puts his hands under the table then he smiles real wide. "Wanna see what I got?"

"Yeah!"

I give Amaryllis a glance.

He pulls a wand out from under the table.

"It's a wand," says the kid next to him, in case we've suddenly lost our ability to spot a wand.

A wand. Nice. I wonder how he got it. So I ask. "Where'd you get that?"

"I bought it" He tilts it back and forth.

Looks to be an EmberStick. So I tell him. "Looks to be an EmberStick."

"It's an Assassin Wand," he says with a frown.

Humans. "That's an EmberStick, kid."

"Who you calling kid, kid?" Says his partner next to him. Angry all of a sudden.

"Listen, kid. I'm calling the kid with the Ember Stick kid, kid." I say. "Kids." Oh yeah, I'll take this conversations to levels of absurdness that will make these kid's heads spin. That's 'cause I'm a professional.

"Who do you think you're kidding, kid?" He says again.

Here we go.

"Well, I say it's an Assassin Wand."

"You can say it's a white turnip for all I care. That doesn't change the fact that it's an EmberStick." Finally one of the Gnolls comes over. "Finally. I'm starving here," I say to him. "Starving."

His hands are back on his hips. Apparently that pose crosses racial boundaries. Then his eyes get large. Real large. He bends over and smells my hair. Real deep. "Heeey." He says.

Uh oh.

"Hey!" He says again.

Here it comes. My cover is blown. "Grimbledung?"

I narrow my eyes. "I go by Grim. Grim Noir nowadays...," I trail off. Hoping.

"Bonk."

Nice. "Bonk. I'm just here having a meal with some of the other kids." *Follow along you Gnoll!* "I'm that transfer Big Julie is taking care of."

"Big Julie?" The kid with the ~~Assassin Wand~~ Ember Stick giggles.

So does the one next to him. He gives his buddy a shove. "Big Julie, right?" He holds his hands out in front of him, hands cupped. "Right?"

Exactly. I press on, "I was hoping I could get something to eat while I'm sitting here bench-racing wands. Seems there's a lot of action going on with wands around here these days." *He's got to be able to follow that. I practically drew him a map to what I was saying.*

He gives me a wink. Then a grin. "Well, I'll bring something small over." Another grin. "A wee bite to eat."

Great. I'll be hearing about this for a month.

"And something for your... classmates?"

"That'd be nice, Mister Bonk," I give him. "Some meat and cheese and bread would go nicely."

"Nothing with melons, I imagine."

"Well with *my* imagination, I think a little..."

He lopes off.

"You talk to the Gnoll brothers?"

"Sure, why not?" I say to EmberStick's pal. "How else you get something to eat around here?"

"You eat what they bring you, stupid. That's how the meal plan works."

I pull out my wand. It just happens to be a *real* Assassin Wand. "What," I say as I point it at EmberStick, "did you just call me?"

His eyes are trained on the end of my wand. Where it's starting to glow a deep red. "What's that thing?"

Amaryllis moves closer so her hip is touching mine. "That's a really nice wand you have, Grim." She leans in even closer. "Can I touch it?"

What's with girls these days? And why weren't girls like this when I was young?! "This is an..." I pause as I decide that maybe a student having a real Assassin Wand is probably not good for my cover. Of course, if

I'm trying to find a wand thief, it's probably the perfect bait. "Assassin Wand." I give it a little flick. It goes 'Ka-Clack' just like it should. "Of course."

EmberStick's eyes get real big. So do the other two kids' at the table. They know the real thing when they see it. He puts his wand back in his pocket. "Wow," he says.

I feel Amaryllis' arm go behind my back. Low on my back.

Wow.

"How about we go someplace and... you can show me your wand and… talk?" She says to me as smoky as a gal three times her age. Maybe four if that's even a real thing.

"Wow," says Ember Stick again. But for a different reason.

I mean, sure Amaryllis is well put together for a young teenagerish female and I can completely understand what old EmberStick and his pals are 'wowing', but I'm on a case. And she's young enough to get me tossed in jail for a long time. Triple digits long. But still... "Sure," I say. "Let's go find a quiet spot, you and me."

I stand up just as Bonk gets back to the table with a tray. I sit back down. *Nuts.*

"Got ya a samplin' ," he says as he slides the edge of the tray onto the table.

You can't work on an empty stomach, my stomach warns me.

Amaryllis puts out that lower lip. "Aww," she adds just in case the pout wasn't enough on its own. She plops back down on the bench.

"Nice!" Says EmberStick. "I never knew we could order off-menu."

Bonk shakes his head at the kid. "You can't. This here is a special occasion for..." His voice trails off.

"For what?" Asks the other youth.

"Grim's birthday, 'course," Bonk finished all smooth like.

Nice.

"Happy birthday, Grim," says Amaryllis. She puts her hand on my arm. The one holding the wand. "Maybe I'll give you something special later." There's that smoky voice again. Finding this girl's mother is moving higher and higher on my list of things to do.

"Wow," say all three lads at the table.

"Uhm..." Tries Bonk.

"Well, thanks all," I say, trying to diffuse this potentially imprisoning situation. "Let's dig in while the cheese is cool," I try. I grab a piece of meat and roll some cheese in it. "Thanks very much, Mister Bonk." I give him a nod.

He narrows his eyes and then looks at Amaryllis and then back at me.

"We'll have a nice celebration," I offer. "Right out here in public even."

He gives me a wary nod and moves off. At least now I know I've got the Gnoll brothers watching my back. Nice. I have a Moll, and some Muscle. Now I just need some lackeys. To join Garibaldis, that is.

I put the cheese wrap on a slice of dark bread. As I put it in my mouth I realize that there's nothing to drink on the table. I start to raise my hand but Amaryllis is still holding that arm. I start to raise my other hand - the one holding a half-eaten piece of bread and cheese, when Bonk slides a pitcher on the table.

"Got some apple juice." He lets his tongue hang out. "For you youngsters."

"Thanks Bonk," I say around a mouthful of food.

"Clank, you daft Gnome."

"Coming to see the show?"

He nips my ear. "Wouldn't miss it for the Lands." He lopes off, chuckling as he does.

I'll be hearing about this for two months, I think. Amaryllis pours us all drinks while I'm chewing. The good news is that she had to let go of my arm to do it. I slide the wand into my wrist sheath and reach for my cup.

"A toast to Grim and his birthday," she says as she puts her arm around my back again. "Happy birthday, Grim."

We all drink. I think her arm is getting tired or something because it's moving down again. All the way down. Or something, all right. "Whoa there!" I say. "Let's just get something to eat before we got to get back to class."

EmberStick nods. "Yeah. You'll need your strength if you're in Pee Eee with us next."

"Pee Eee?"

EmberStick's partner nods. "Yeah, physical education is supposed to make us better citizens by making us fit, and teaching us important life lessons."

"Such as?" I ask as I roll another piece of meat.

"Getting hit in the head hurts."

"Well, that is an important life lesson."

Nods around the table let me know they've all learned that lesson several times. "Well, I think I do have Pee Eee next, so you can show me where it is."

After we finish eating, we all head out to the sparring area. Amaryllis is beside me the whole way. "You ever play dodge the ball?" She asks me when we get to the big doors.

"Not in ages," I say. *Woops.* "It's been almost a month, I think." *Smooth.*

"Well, it's probably just like you remember it," she tells me. "Just try to get picked onto the upper class team if you can." She gives my arm a squeeze. It's the first genuine thing she's done. "Well, if you get the chance, pick me Grim Noir. You're my only hope."

"Don't worry, doll." I give my ears a waggle. "I got this." I give her a nod as old Vera[27] makes his way to the front of us. He starts talking about rules and gamesmanship, and something about fair play and not aiming for heads.

I don't think anyone listened to a single word he said.

It was a massacre.

So I was told later.

"Grim, can you hear me?"

Someone's calling me.

"Grimbledung?"

Someone's calling me?

Maybe they'll stop.

Now someone's kissing me? Oh boy. All things being equal, I'm hoping it's Amaryllis and not EmberStick.

I peek an eye open. All I can see is hair. Did Amaryllis have red hair? I think she did. Auburn is the term, I believe. Another kiss? Well, at least... Now someone's blowing into my lungs! Gah!!

I sit up.

Big Julie is over me.

Nice!

"Are you okay?" Big Julie looks worried as she sits back on her knees.

"Oh yeah. I'm okay." I lick my lips. "Real okay."

Several giggles let me know we're not alone. *Drat.* "What happened?"

"We lost," offers EmberStick. "Like usual."

Now Amaryllis is beside me. She gives me a worried look. "You saved me." The one she gives Big Julie is a look that would freeze a Fire Dragon's heart. "I was taking care of you just fine until *she* came along."

"Excuse me?" Says Big Julie. She puts her hands on her hips.

Here we go.

Big Julie stands up. Her hands go right back to her hips. "You need to..."

"Ladies, ladies," I say soothing-like as I stand up. "There's plenty of me to go around."

Now Amaryllis' hands are on her hips.

Uh oh. It's time for a tactical flanking maneuver. "I think I'm going to call it a day."

"Want me to walk you home?"

"I think you need to get back to class, young lady," says Big Julie in her best Head Mistress who also happens to be a former Crime Boss of Bosses voice. "*Everyone* back to class."

Even Vera gives her a nod as the everyone goes back to wherever they were supposed to be.

"Thanks Julie," I say. "What happened?"

"Apparently it was a massacre."[28]

I give a nod as I dust my breeches off. "These kids."

"Yeah. They ran off Akita within two hours. I'll have to tease him that you've made it two whole days so far."

I give another nod as I brush my arms off. Something's not right. "Rolton chips. Steaming piles of rotten rancid Rolton chips."

"It's just a game, Grim." Big Julie puts her hand on my shoulder. "Maybe next time."

I shake my head as I pull up my sleeve. "My wand's gone."

"My right hand!"

I look up at her. "It's just not the same when you do it. Let me try." I clear my throat. "Julie's left teat!"

She gives me a slap to the head. I'd complain to the headmistress about the student abuse, but that's her.

I shrug. "It was worth a shot."

A worried look comes to her face. "What kind of wand did you have?"

"A worthless stick that I imbued with a glowing tip and a precursor spell."

"What?"

"With how wands are disappearing from around here?" I give her a look. "How many today?"

"Not counting your stick, eight."

"I didn't want to risk losing something expensive. Or lethal." I put my hands on my hips. *Finally.* "I'm a professional, you know."

I'm treated to a hearty laugh from Julie. "That's what I hear." She points toward the windmill and we start walking. "So do you have any suspects?"

"Well, I thought it was maybe you, of course."

"Uhmm. Of course?"

"Then I thought it was Amaryllis."

"She seems..."

"Exactly. But I think she's just overcome by my general hotness."

"Uhmm. Of course?"

"And then there's that old miner."

"Old miner?"

"There's always a chance, you know." We get to the windmill. "I think I'm going to call it a day. I don't think it's anyone in Garibaldis' class, so it's definitely a possibility it's a student from a different class."

"That's dozens of classes, Grim."

"Exactly. The net is tightening."

"I think it's 'noose'."

"Well, no noose is good noose." I give her a nod. "I'll be back in the morning for another class."

Julie gives me a wink. "A different class? Amaryllis will be heartbroken."

"Well, who can blame her?" I strike a pose. "With looks like these, I should be illegal."

"*She* is illegal. To you. You should be ashamed of yourself."

"Says the woman who smooches me as soon as I'm unconscious. I hope Pinky doesn't find out." I leave Big Julie gaping.

Nice.

I walk home, trying to decide who is the likely culprit when I pass the Duck Inn and Dine. Maybe a drink will help me get things sorted out.

I duck in[29] and make my way to the bar. It's a climb to get into a stool, but I make it on the second try. I sit on my butt and look around. It's quiet since it's still early in the day. Neckless comes over to me. He's got this expression on his face like I'm holding a lit Red Dragon. Then I remember what Maca told me. "Float me a bottom-shelf triple, Maurice; I'm starving. I've had a rough day and I've only a got a copper to improve it." I give him a nod as I slide my copper across the bar. "And a water back, if you please."

Now he looks at me like I'm chucking said Red Dragon at him. "Wha.. what?"

"Get three of the cheapest alcohols you have, pour them gently into a glass over the back of a spoon with the heaviest first, and let me drink it as you take my copper coin. Then my day will seem better for it. Oh, and I'll sip the water in between the drink, of course." I put my hands on the bar. "Honestly, I shouldn't have to translate to a respected bartender like yourself." Now I'm trying to butter him up to hopefully get an extra shot added in. A copper only goes so far.

"How's about I give you a nice shot of apple cider and I'll even put an olive in it?" He levels his eyes at me.

I level my eyes at him.

Then I remember: without Akita, that's probably the strongest drink I'm getting out of him.

Still.

"Fine, Maurice. Just make it dirty, and don't be stingy with those olives."

Maurice shakes his head as he turns to pour me an apple cider. Starting with the olive juice, of course.

"So how're things, Maurice?" I ask his back.

"Same as usual, I suppose," he says as he reaches for the olive jar. He spears several out and drops them into the glass.

"Nothing out of sorts?"

Maurice turns with the drink in his hand. There is a small paper umbrella in it. And four olives sitting at the bottom of the cider. "Dirty cider fizz," he says as he slides it to me, picking up the coin smoothly with his other hand.

"Nice. I'll get your tip next time." I take a sip of the drink. *Nice.* "So nothing out of sorts?"

"Besides a kid sitting at my bar during school hours, ordering drinks like a professional?"

"Well, there's an easy explanation for that."

Maurice starts wiping down the bar. "Yeah?"

"I'm a professional."

"Yeah. I can tell." He gives me the once over. "You remind me of someone, I think."

"Yeah? Probably someone famous. I get that a lot."

"That's not it."

"You sure?"

He eye-balls me again. "Hey..."

Uh oh.

I down the drink in three long gulps. The fourth time I raise it, I get the olives. "Well, Maurice, I need to head out. Things to do, you know."

"Good."

"Yeah?" I ask, since that wasn't the friendly response I was expecting.

"Yeah, really. Listen, you've used up all the polite a copper will buy, kid. So why don't you make like a tree."

"And leave?"

"Get out of here."

I purse my lips at Maurice. Overall, he's not a bad guy, I suppose. I consider for a moment not giving him a hard time about his lack of a neck.

Nah.

I hop off the stool and with a wave over my shoulder, I leave a bar sober for the first time in... well, a really long time, I think.

I get back to the shop without anyone else giving me a second look. Door opens for me, which is nice. "I'm home!" I shout at the top of my lungs.

"Grim. I'm right here," says Drimblerod. "What's with the shouting."

"Old habit, I guess, sorry." I move to the counter and climb up onto a stool. "So how are things? Anything out of sorts?"

"Besides me having to work the shop all by myself while you wander around? No." He leans forward on the counter. "Do you have any idea who is stealing the wands? Any at all?"

I give him a nod. "Oh, I have a list of suspects. Or really, a list of non-suspects."

"Non-suspects?"

"Sure, sure. It's almost the same thing."

"Do tell." Drimblerod leans back over the counter and sits down. "Let's hear the non-suspects."

"Well, there's me and you, of course."

"Of course."

"And Big Julie, and Amaryllis."

"Any more?"

Is there anyone else? "Yeah, now that you mention it. The Gnoll brothers and Maurice are on that list as well."

"Maurice?"

"No-neck at the Duck Inn and Dine."

"You stopped in for a drink?"

"Well, a cider. Honestly, I'm underage, Drim. You'd think I would try and order a drink in this condition?" I shook my head at him. "Not on your life," I lied.

"Right. So besides the less than a handful of people, everyone else is town is a suspect. That's what you've accomplished in two days of goofing off?"

"Well, in my defense, I spent a bit of yesterday unconscious."

"Well, that is true."

"And part of today as well," I added. "From what I can tell."

"What happened?" Now he's leaning forward again.

"Apparently they have this game now called Dodge the Ball?"

"I've heard of it. What's the problem with it."

"Apparently I can't dodge very well."

"Not with all that hair." Now he's chuckling at me. Partners sometimes.

"Do not disparage the hair. I'll have you know I've got a gal head over heels for me." I flex my arms. "Between the hair and my muscles, they don't have a chance."

"Minors."

"These are not, for your information, minor muscles." I flex again to prove my point.

"The gals are."

That's true, I suppose. "Yeah, Big Julie told me the same thing after she was done kissing me."

"What?!"

"That's what I said. Apparently she likes short males."

"Pinky is huge."

"Opposites attract?"

"That's an old wife's tale."

I skip the joke and move to more pressing matters. "Oh, I was robbed at the school."

"Robbed? Someone took your copper?"

I shake my head. "No, that I spent well. I took a magicked stick with me to school like a wand, and someone took it."

"Very nice. So now the wand thief has an easily identifiable wand." He pats me on the shoulder.

What? Well, I suppose so, now that I think about it. "That was the plan all along. Now when I catch the thief, I'll have proof they are the thief," I ad-lib.

"Well, if you'll go get changed, Grim, I'd love for you to man the counter for a little. I'm feeling cooped up after two days straight with only Dummy to talk to."

Wow. "Sure thing. Let me run around back and then I'll be back down in two shakes of my tail, and I'll take the helm."

"Nice. Nice, but gross."

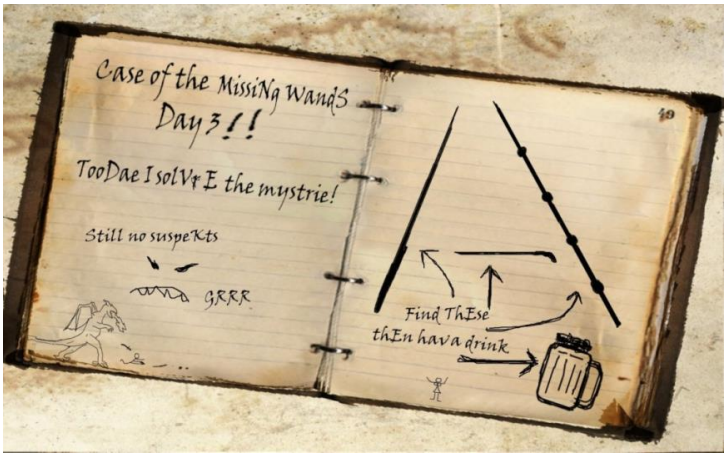
After taking care of some personal matters, I came out and replace Drim at the counter. And, I have to say, made a few sales while he was out.

Things were definitely looking up! Tomorrow, I'd catch me a thief.

Oh yes. Tomorrow!

Chapter 41
Grim Noir – The Case of the Missing Wands
(Day 3) - You should just skip this...

Success. I can feel it in my bones. I can smell it in the air. It smells like… success.



Oh yes. Grim Noir, private investigator is going to solve a case.

Today.

Justice will be served. With a Gnomish ladle of upper handedness. On the platter of sneakiness. With a side order of trickiness. Garnished with investigativeness.

Steaming hot.

Like the hearty breakfast that I ate before coming to Big Julie's school to solve the mystery of the disappearing wands.

Drimblerod said my first class today was on wand safety.

Perfect.

A classroom full of students all wielding wands. That's where I would be if I were stealing wands. And, that is where I'm going to be. In order to catch the dastardly (that's a private investigator term) thief that has eluded me for three days straight.

'Grim', I hear a female call from behind me.

Uh oh.

I turn around and there she is again- my number one stalker: Amaryllis Bose. 'It rhymes with rose. That's another flower. You like flowers, right?', she had said to me. Standing right up against me.

"Good morning Amaryllis," I say to her. There's no reason to be impolite. After all, I still hadn't found out where she lives. Or more precisely, where her mother lives. Priorities; you have to have them if you're a private investigator. "What's shaking?"

"You always know the right thing to say to a girl," she says. I could have told her that her face looked like the insides of a blowfish and she'd have said the same thing. Smitten, this girl was.

"Well, I try. So are you in the wand safety class?" I point at the door that has kids filing into it. I know there's no way she's in that class. She told me on Day 1 (of my journal) that she had nothing to do with wands. "I've brought mine." I hold up another stick that I've Magiked to toss off sparks. It's not much, but this crowd would believe anything.

"Sure! I have my wand right here!" She held up this long brown affair and waved it around.

A Levitator. A cheap one. Not worth more than a copper on a good day. "That's a really nice wand you got there," I lie through all my front teeth - top and bottom. These two must be really hard up for money if this is the extent of their wand collection. "What kind of wand is it?"

She looks at it like she's seeing it for the first time. "I haven't a clue."

Stolen from Mom. Maybe I can return it and get a reward. Personally. "That looks like a levitation type of wand. Don't point that at anyone or they'll float away."

She giggles and slips it down the front of her dress. It stays put, sticking out about an inch.

That's an attention getter.

"After you, 'Rillys," I offer. The last thing I need is to float off on the day I'm going to solve the mystery.

She gives me a wink and a smile and enters the class.

"There room for one more in there?" I hear a voice behind me say.

I look over my shoulder at the Gnome behind me. "Sure, if you've got a wand, that is." I hold up my stick and make sparks fly from the end. Just a few. There's no sense in overwhelming this kid.

"All I got is this." He holds up a pudgy black leather tube.

It seems heavy the way he's hefting it. Probably filled with iron pellets. "Listen, runt; you're in the wrong class. This is *wand* safety. What you need is blackjack saf..."

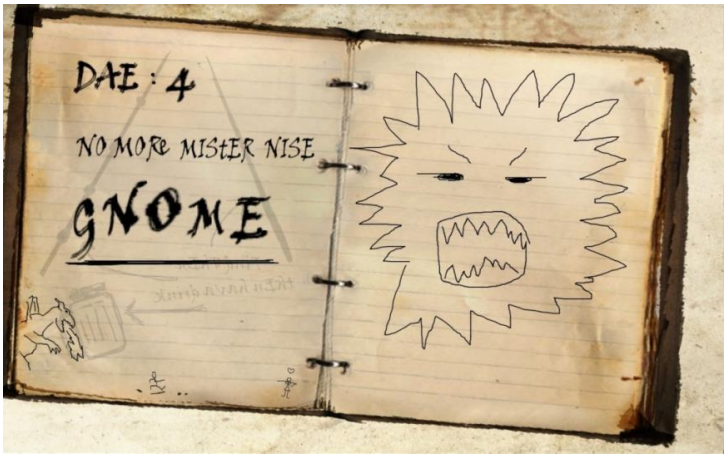


Chapter 42

Grim Noir – The Case of the Missing Wands

(Day 4) - The Hook

I wake up but my eyes are still closed. It seems like someone's standing on my head. I crack my eyes open to have a word with them.



Odd- no one's there.

Still, I can hear stomping. Right on my head.

Odd.

I cautiously move my hands up there, expecting to catch a Gremlin acting... well, like a Gremlin.

Nope - no Gremlins.

There is however a very large bump on the top of my head.

"Rolton Chips!"

"So how's the case going?" Drimblerod asks as he peeks his head into my room. I turn my head slowly. There's kind of a smile on his face, I think. He's kind of fuzzy at that distance.

"Great. Just great. Got me a looooong list of suspects," I tell him. "So what's for dinner?"

"Breakfast."

"Breakfast? What about after-school snack, supper and dinner?"

"You missed those, Grim. The doc said you should just rest and I should let you sleep till breakfast. He said that sleeping is the best thing for a concussion"

"School sucks."[30]

"Like I don't know."

"Did you lose two out of your last four days?" We'll see what he thinks of that."

"No," admitted my partner.

"Well then, you obviously don't know firsthand, so I'm telling you. School sucks."

Drimblerod nods at me. "That's why we all get all our schooling finished at a young age. Going back later is a real pain."[31]

"No kidding." I say as I sit up. My head's throbbing. Again. At least my butt doesn't hurt anymore. I swing my legs off the bed. There's a footstool there right at them. I look at my partner. "Thanks Drim."

Drimblerod gives me a nod and pulls his head out. "I'll get breakfast on the table while you get ready." He says as he closes it.

What a pal.

Except he's wrong about one thing; I'm not the one that needs to get ready. It's the students. The school. The lands. They need to get ready for *me*.

No more Mister Nice Gnome, esquire.

After a quick dressing and a trip around back, I'm at the table ready to eat. Focused on my mission.

"You okay Grim?" My partner asks as I shovel down my breakfast. Focused.

I give him a nod from behind a spoonful of eggs. I'm focused. On the eggs right now, but later it will be the school. "No more Mister Nice Gnome." I tell him.

"Esquire?" He adds nervously.

I give him another nod. "Yeah; esquire."

"They're just kids, you know." He says. Now he's fidgeting.

"Oh, I know. Just. Kids." He has no idea. But I do. And I'm going to handle it. Because I'm Grim No More Mister Nice Gnome Noir, esquire. And I've got some missing wands to find. "I'm going to need some supplies," I tell him as I shove the last of the bacon in my mouth. I hop off the stool. "Meet you at the counter?"

"Sure?" The fidgeting has stopped, but he's still a nervous Gnome.

With a determined nod, I turn and go to the POOPA, dragging a chair with me.

"That's a long jump, Grim," warns my partner as I open the door. "What's with the chair?"

I pull open the door and push the chair against it so it stays open. I back up a few paces.

"Grim?" Drimblerod says from behind me.

I'm focused.

On the pole.

I run for the pole that's hanging out in open air. At full speed, I reach the edge of the floor and I jump, hands out in front of me.

I fly.

I get the pole with both hands and as I twirl around it, I slide to the bottom. It's a shame I'm in the shaft and no one saw my descent. Fancy stuff. And flashy. Oh yes, those kids are in for it today.

Drim's at the counter when I get there. "What're you thinking of taking?"

"I need The Black and a handful of Magic Marbles," I say as a plan starts to work itself out in my head. We hadn't discovered all the

properties of the wand that Orc had brought in so we were just calling it 'The Black' until we could properly classify it. Plus it really sounds ominous. I might start naming wands all the time.

"The Black?" He shakes his head. "I don't know, Grim. We don't really know everything that wand does yet. Besides, didn't you tell Garibaldis he could have it? He said he was coming by today or tomorrow to take a look at it," he said.

He's stalling.

"I'll give it to him personally." I stride to the counter and put my hand out. "The Black, if you please." I hold out my other hand. "And a side of glass."

"You're bringing Magic Marbles to school? I don't think they're allowed there."

"Neither is stealing. Or assault." I rub my head. "Repeated assault." My hand is back out. "Hand them over, Drimblerod. I'm solving this. Today."

With a worried look in his eye, he takes the wand from under the counter and hands it to me. I slide it into my sheath. My empty sheath since my last wand was palmed. Filched. Snatched. Five Finger Discounted. From me. Even though it was a barely Magiked stick, it bothers me. "And the marbles." I waggle the fingers of my hand to get him to move faster. "I've got places to go. Perps to collar."

Again with a worried look he hands me a few marbles. I stuff them into my pocket. With a nod I'm out the door. I'm Grim Noir, Private Investigator, undercover and on a case.

Esquire even.

As I make my way to the school, no one gives me a second look. I'm just like all the other kids making their way on a school day. Until.

"Hey-a, kid. Why you walking down-a the middle of the street?" I hear from over by the Milliners. "That a dangeroso."

Pozzuoli's sitting in front of his shop. Beside the Milliners. I make a quick detour. "Pozz," I give him, "looking out for little kids in the street now?"

"What?" He gives me a frown.

I add a wink to counter it: "I always knew you were a softie."

"I a-know you?" He gives me the once over. "Hey! You look-a familiar, you little bambino!" Then he gives my cheek a pinch. Me. Grim Noir! Esquire even.

"Watch it there, Pozz; there's no handling the produce."

He gives me a chuckle. "It's just that you make such a cute bambino, Grim." Then he startled. "Grim?" Now he's bent over poking me with his eyes.

"It's me, it's me." I assure him. I give a quick look left and right to make sure no one's around. "I'm undercover at Big Julie's. There's a thief stealing her blind in wands."

"I know. I a-heard that from a friend who knows a guy with a kid that goes there."

Typical Pozz. "Yeah? You know who's doing it?"

"It's-a kid, from what I hear. A new transfer. I heard that last night over dinner. I was gonna tell Julie today." He puts his hand on the top of my head. "You cute bambino. I have to show the Mamma!" Before I can say anything, he's yelling over his shoulder. "Mamma! Come out here!"

Great.

Mamma Consigliore comes out of the shop. She's wiping her hands on her apron. She always seems to be doing that. Then she spots me. Another cheek pinch later, Pozz breaks the news to her. "It's a Grimbledung!"

"Grimbledung's got a bambino?" She shakes her head and presses her hands together in front of her like she's praying. "That-a poor girl."

Great.

"No, Miss Mamma" Everyone calls her that. "It's me Grimbledung. I'm undercover trying to find out who's stealing wands from Julie's students."

She raised an eyebrow at me. "Si?"[32]

"Yes, Miss Mamma. So I have to get going."

"What you using to catch the thief? You wanna catch him on the first day, no?"

I haven't the heart to tell him. "Sure, Pozz. That's the plan. Catch him on the first day."

"Then I got-a the thing for you!" He turns and runs back into the shop leaving me and Mamma standing there.

"So you no got a girl, then?"

Great.

"No, Miss Mamma, not at the moment." Then I give her a smile. "I had one interested in me just recently."

"You lost her?"

"Well, she and her partner were trying to kill Drim and me and then liquidate the shop. So..."

"I find a nice girl for you." She starts to turn away from me.

"That's..." I start when Pozz comes barging out of the shop. For some reason, Mamma goes in. She got a girl stashed in the shop?? That's the kind of thing you tell a Gnome.

"Here you go Grimbledung." He offers me what looks like a chunk of coal.

"Coal?"

He shakes his head. Then he nods. "Well, no and a yes."

That really didn't answer my question so I try it again. "Coal?"

"It's tracer."

"Tracer coal?"

He gives me a nod. "Like when you want to draw something."

"I don't think I have art class today."

"No art? What kinda school doesn't have art?"

"I don't know. A school that focuses on magic?"

"But without-a art..."

"Listen Pozz, I'd love to stand here and discuss the benefits of having art classes," I lie, "but I'm on a job. What's tracer coal? It for art classes?"

A head shake this time. "No, no. It traces things that you write on. Like-a this." He rubs the coal on my head. A lot.

"I just had a bath you know."

He ignores me and keeps rubbing. A lot.

"Recently."

"You got a wand?" Now his hand is out and he's snapping his fingers. "Hand it a-over quick."

Now Pozz is an unusual fellow. Even for a Dwarf that lives above ground. But, there's one thing I've learned- he knows his business. So when Pozz gives advice, I tend to listen. So I hand him The Black.

He gives it a double take. "You take-a *this* to school?"

"No more Mister Nice Gnome." I tell him.

He gives me a nod. Then he rubs the coal all over my wand. A lot. Then he hands it back to me. "There you go. The case, she is solved!"

"Listen Pozz, you know I always appreciate the advice you give me..." Mamma comes back out. She's holding a plate of something steaming. The smell is amazing. I try to concentrate on what I was talking about. I have no idea what it was. Not a clue- the smell has flummoxed me. Dee-licious! "And..." I try, hoping he will fill in whatever I was talking about.

Pozz waves a hand. "It's a simple filching hex."

"A hex? I try to avoid them things, Pozz." Hexes are definitely part of the dark arts, or as some people call them The Dark Arts. "Messing with that sort of thing never seems to work out like you planned. And never in a good way."

"No, no. This a good hex."

"There's no such thing."

Pozz starts to say something, then stops. Then he smiles. "Well, that-a is true. But this is a *helpful* hex." He holds up the coal. "The tracing coal makes a sigil from the two things that are colored with it." He points at my head then my wand. "When that'a wand get away from you, you'll know."

"How?"

"You'll feel it." He pulls down his lower eyelid with his finger. "Then you-a know who the thief is."

Mamma gives a nod then bends down. The plate is covered with these longish, golden-brown looking things. Fried Slugs? Giant toes??

Sure, they smell great, but I'm not sure what's going on inside that golden coating. "What're those, Miss Mamma?" I learned very early on that with Pozz's wife, it was important to remain formal. Just calling her Mamma, or Miss M, or anything else besides Missus Consigliore or the preferred Miss Mamma, involved getting your ear tweaked. Being a Gnome, I had a lot of ear to tweak. I solved that particular mystery pretty quick, I have to say.

"Can't go to school on an empty stomach."

I give her a nod. She's a good old broad. And a top-notch cook too. Even so. "What're those then?" I just gave her a 'Miss Mamma' so I figure I'm fine for an exchange or two before I need to refresh the formality bin.

"They're an old family recipe." She says as she takes one off the plate.

"Of?" I am waiting for the word 'slug' or 'giant toe' to come out of her mouth. Instead she takes a bite of the thing. A trail of cheese runs from the half still in her hand to her mouth. I smell ham on top of the cheese. And potatoes? "Potatoes, Miss Mamma?"

She gives me a nod as she chews.

"You-a take few potatoes, peel them, then cook them." Says Pozz as he takes one himself. "Then mix them with a whipped up egg and roll them with cheese and ham in the centers. Then you roll them around in bread crumbs, toss some oregano and garlic on them, and then fry them till the cheese melts."[33]

"Or bake them to be healthy," says Mamma as she pops the rest of the thing in her mouth.

I take two, just so I'm not being impolite. They're nice and warm. Pozz starts rubbing the coal on my head again. "How much do you have to do that? I need to get to school, you know," I say to him.

He gives me a smile and wink. "Oh, just a dab would do the trick. This way, you are-a sure to know when it a-happen to you."

Great.

"Thanks Pozz. I think." I wave at him with one of whatever the things that Miss Mamma made are called. Since footnotes aren't in sight, I have no idea of their name. I give the Missus a nod, "Thanks for the snack Mamma." It's a slip-up that I think I'm okay for. Hopefully.

As I'm walking away, I take a bite of one of the things. A shudder starts in my mouth and works its way down my back, ending up in my right foot. I have to stop as it taps the ground while I chew. A couple of people give me an odd look, but I ignore them and pop the rest it in my mouth. Between gooey cheese, hot ham with crispy edges, and the soft potatoes, I feel like I'm feasting in Gnomehalla as a reward for a well-lived Gnomish life.

Great!

Now I wish I had taken a couple more just to be extra polite. Maybe I'll stop by Everything In Between instead of the Duck Inn and Dine to see if any are left.

By the time I get to Julie's school, the second one is gone. Even though I ate it in small bites to make it last longer. Now I'm down to business.

No more Mister Nice Gnome!

I push my way through the left door (since the right one is closed now) and down the hall, through the crowd of students. Julie had said my first class today was in the room with the big red door. Not sure what they teach there, but that's where I'm heading. And from there I'll solve the mystery.

I turn sideways to get through group of Elves arguing with some Gnomes about some rugby match that happened recently. "Stinking Bee Bee's!" I add helpfully as I make my way past. I ignore the taunts because I'm on a job so I just keep my head down and make my way through them.

I bump one of them and all of a sudden a lightning bolt seems to bounce around in my head! And it's not a one-time thing- this is an ongoing bolt! I think my eyes are going to pop out of my head. As I shudder, I grab for my wand to try and fend off this heinous attack.

It's not there.

Not Great. At all.

Everything gets dark around the edges as I drop to my knees. The darkness gets more and more into my line of sight. "Gah! My wand!" I screech as I grab my head. To keep it from popping off. "Who took my wand?!" The Gnomes scatter and the lightning bolt finally decides it is through scrambling my brains and goes wherever lightning bolts go when they are through for the day. My guess is the beach. As my sight returns, I see my wand on the ground beside me. The last thing I want to do is pass out. Or really, pee myself, so I start taking long deep breaths. And clenching.

An Elf picks up my wand and hands it to me. "You all right, pal?"

I shakily take my wand from him. "Oh, I will be. I will be," I assure him as I push myself upright. "Who? Those guys?" I point in the direction I

think the Gnomes ran. My brain doesn't seem to be working full tilt yet. "Gah?" I add, helpfully.

The Elf youth shakes his head. "Yeah. Stinking Jute United enthusiasts. I hate those guys."

"No, who were they?"

"Gnomes."

Even though my brain isn't working completely, it seems my buttons are. Because this guy is pushing them.

"Names. Names of those Gnomes. Do you know them?"

"Why would I know their names?"

"That's not what I asked." Now I'm not sure if he's just stupid, or an accomplice that's stalling. "Names." I point my wand at him to make sure he answers me. No more Mister Nice Gnome. "I want names" Ka-Clack goes my wand to provide punctuation. It's an exclamation point.

"I don't know!" Says the young Elf as he backs up. Everyone else does too. "I'm not sure who they were."

I spin in a shaky circle. "No more Mister Nice Gnome."

"Why? He dead, or something?" Asks another Elf. As he jabs at one of my buttons.

I don't bother answering him. I turn and make my way down the hallway, looking for a red door. After a few steps, my vision has cleared. And I'm not angry at Pozz anymore. Well, not really. I'm a little upset he rubbed so much of that tracing coal on my head that he almost fried my brain. But not upset that he showed it to me. Otherwise The Black would be out there with those other wands. I realize I'm still carrying it in my hand. And the end is a bright orange. I'm making good time though, with everyone moving out of my way, so I leave it there until I spy a red door ahead.

I slip the wand back up my sleeve. It's hot, but I leave it there anyway. Things are starting to improve. Now I know I'm looking for a

fellow Gnome. Or Gnomes. There were several there. Maybe three. Possibly four. There's no telling. I reach out and work the latch on the door and pull it open.

Chapter 42.5
Grim Noir – The Case of the Missing Wands
(Day 4 ½) – It's Art

As I step into the class, I see easels standing up in wide arcs around a raised center stage.

Art Class.

I sent a curse towards Pozz hoping it reaches him in a timely manner.

A couple of wide eyes and gasps from the students in the room let me know the curse stopped by them on its way.

I move over to an empty easel. There's a piece of canvas stretched across it and some sticks of charcoal of different colors on the tray in front of it. Maybe I can ask around and see where Jute United fans that also happen to be Gnomes hang out. Rugby fans, like most fans of sporting endeavors, tend to hang out together. Birds of a feather get the second worm. Or something like that.

"Hey you!" I hear a female voice say beside me.

Great.

I look over, my stomach already in knots. "Amaryllis. How're tricks?"

"Four copper." She deadpans.

"What?"

"What?"

"I asked you how are things going?"

"Oh." She gives me a sweet smile that I know is only teeth-deep. "They're going pretty well, I suppose. Better now that you're in class. So you're taking art too?"

"It seems so." I say as I look around for an empty easel. Anywhere else. Preferably one in Picistan.

"A renaissance man?"

"Well, truth be told, I prefer curves." I have no idea what she's talking about.

I get another giggle from the unstable broad to be.

"So you got a much older sister? Or a mother?" I fish.

Another giggle. "I have both of those. Three if you count my brother that's the oldest."

"I prefer curves," I say again. Maybe she didn't hear me right the first time. Then I wonder if Amaryllis is interested in clinching the position of Moll. "Say, you follow sports."

"I follow athletes, if that's the same thing."

"Kind of. How about rugby? The local games."

"That's some full contact action." She says.

"Well, rugby is a rough and tumble game."

"I wasn't talking about the game."

I really, really got to meet the mother of this kid. Maybe I'll ask her to the jubilee. I think they're going to start planning that real soon. I need to get this case solved. And quick. "You make it down to the Jutes?" Most folks didn't bother with the north or the south; they were close enough that one name fit them both.

"Oh, I get around."

Mother. To the jubilee. It's now at the top of my list of things to do. "You know where the Jute United players hang out?"

"Sure." She picks up a piece of charcoal and starts to doodle on the canvas. "I see them around."

"Gnomes?"

"Mostly."

Great.

"So Amaryllis, daughter with a mother. Where do the Jute United fans hang out when they've got nothing else to do?" A thought comes to me. "Present company excepted, of course."

She gives me that smile again. "The top of the windmill." She points up in case I don't know which way is up. With this girl, there's no telling. "I can take you up there and give you a personal tour."

"Of the windmill?"

"That too," she adds, noncommittally. "If you want."

"The top of the windmill? I'm sure I can find it on my own." I point to let her know I have a pretty good idea of where that is. "It's up."

The teacher comes in from a side door. She's clapping her hands to get everyone's attention. Now she's talking in some sort of screeching that I realize is her actual voice. I wonder if there is a Harpy perched somewhere in her family tree. "We've had a cancelation, ladies and gentlemen," she says. "We shan't be doing sketches of four legged creatures today as the Shambler we had scheduled seems to have been borrowed from the livery."

Several groans and moans could be heard from students. Apparently, the Shambler was a big hit. Maybe I'll see if Rat wants to come pose for sketches. Now the Harpy's talking again. Screeching, really.

"So instead we'll be doing two legged sketches."

More groans. There's no pleasing these kids, it seems. Maybe she should just eat the little street urchins and call it a day. Then a Gnomess walks in. No. Glides is more like it. It's like she's walking on a cloud. The long silky white dress she's wearing trails behind her as she goes. The kids are all fumbling for their charcoal. I'm just watching the show. She's got this billowy white dress looking thing on that covers up her curves, but I can tell there's a lot of them under there. Lots. And she's got a smile that would knock my socks off if I wore socks. Whatever socks I probably would be wearing if I wore socks, just fell over. Wherever they are.

"Wowsa," I offer.

Amaryllis gives me a look.

I only barely notice because the Doll moves to a stool there at the front of the class and sits in it. She does it with class. "So that's all we're drawing today? A Gnomess in a dress that's too big for her?" I say to no one in particular. Particularly because I don't really expect an answer.

Then I get my answer.

The answer is No.

It's more than that. It's No. NO. **NO**.

The Doll, sitting there as calm as if she were in a nice restaurant waiting for some sort of roasted animal to be served to her, dumps all that white fabric on the floor around her stool, crosses her legs, and puts her hands on her knee. As if she's just sat down to watch the Downton Ascot races.

"Wowsa," I offer up again.

"I'm glad Professor Murphy was able to catch her," says Amaryllis.

"Yeah, me too." I give the Doll the once over. Twice. I pick up a piece of charcoal and clear my throat in what I hope is an artistic manner. "I'd not mind that either."

"Getting caught by Professor Murphy?"

I give Amaryllis a glance. Just a quick one, then my eyes go back to work on the Doll.

"Mom said she could stay for this period and the next, so I don't know what the afternoon classes are going to do. Draw fruit maybe."

I fall off my stool.

Everyone looks. I sit up. "Gah!" I offer to no one and everyone at once. The Doll on the stool doesn't even seem to notice. She's staring off into space above our heads, stage left. Peacefully smiling.

Amaryllis grabs me by the arm and pulls me up. "That your Mom, then?" I ask just to make sure we're both on the same page.

She gives me a nod. "That's her, I suppose."

I suppose so to. A horrible thought occurs to me. "Is she going to the jamboree with your Dad?"

"Dad's not around anymore," she says, in a sad kind of a way.

I do a flip on the inside. "I'm sorry to hear that, Amaryllis," I lie to her as she finishes pulling me up. We're nose to nose.

"Want to come over after school to meet her?"

Sure thing! I think. Then I remember- I'm a kid right now. If I tried to make any sort of move, I'd end up getting shot down like a crow on the first day of the hunt. For crows. It's a Gnome thing, hunting crows. Hate them birds- crows. "No, that's all right. Maybe some other time," I say.

She gives me a nod that lets me know she's sorry I didn't say yes. "Maybe some other time then." With that pout on her face, she moves back to her chair and starts to sketch her Mom.

That sounds like a good short-term plan. Ogling... I mean sketching Mom. I pick up my chalk and get to work. She's easy on the eyes, that's for sure. Which means I'll be able to draw her with no trouble at all.

The hour seems to breeze by.



By the time class is over, I think I have found my new career if wand sales ever goes belly up. I just wish I'd have gotten her leg done. I got the important parts though.

"I'm going to take this to show to Drim."

"Drim?"

Uh oh. "Yeah, I'm his Ward." *Smoooth!*

"What's a ward?"

"It's a place where they keep crazy people."

She gives me a look. If I had a copper everytime someone gave me a look like that, I'd be retired and living in a penthouse overlooking

the ocean in Eterncity. Unfortunately, I haven't figured out how to make money on it. So far.

"Well, I gotta run," I say as I take down the canvas and roll it up.

"But school's not half over."

"I'll be back. I just got to take care of something." 'Clingy Dame', I want to add to the end of that. But I want to get to Drim to tell him that it's a Gnome that's stealing the wands. And to show him the sketch I made of the next ex-Missus Sixtoes. Esquire. "See you in quick like."

I hop off my stool and make for Second-Hand Sorcery. Not only is the mystery solved, but I've got a new gal! That's worth two birds in the bush where the second one gets the cheese. Or something like that.

As I go out a side door, I run into someone's leg. Being this small is really becoming a hassle. I look up the leg to whoever it's attached to. I can't see their face because it's blocked by a bushy beard. And moustache. And a floppy hat. "Hey old timer, shouldn't you be down in a hole in the ground or something?" I pick myself up. At least I didn't land on my sketch. There'd be trouble right here by the side exit if that happened.

"Shouldn't you be in school?" He says down at me. "Want me to punt you in the right direction, *younster*?"

I thought old people were supposed to be friendly since they didn't have a lot of time left before they died. Maybe he can explain it. "I thought old people were supposed to be friendly since they didn't have a lot of time before they died."

"And I thought kids were supposed to be seen and not heard." He tilts his hat back a little bit. His old wrinkly grey eyes meet mine. There's not a drop of friendly in them.

"That's females," I correct him as I move off. Some folk.

Thanks to little bitty legs, it takes me twice as long to get to the shop. And I'm a sweaty mess when I get there.

"Drim!" I yell as I run through Door. "Where are you?"

"Honestly. I'm at the counter. Tending the shop. Honestly."

"Well, I'm glad you're all honest and such."

"Aren't you supposed to be in school."

"I have news."

"You actually made it through an entire class?"

"No, that's not it." Well, actually that kind of did happen. "Well, yes, that did happen, but that's not why I'm here."

"So what's the big news?"

"Two things. First, I am close to solving the wand mystery."

"How are you close to solving a mystery? Either you do or you don't, I would think."

"I found out it's a Gnome who's stealing the wands."

"A Gnome?"

"And he's a fan of Jute United."

"That's a shame."

"Right? I mean, they're one more loss away from ending up dropped down to League Two."

"Is that what you came to tell me?"

"Well... yes." It seemed more Lands-shattering while I was on my way over. Rolton chips.

"You want me to put that on the cupboard?" Drimblerod says as he points at the rolled up parchment.

I do a little hop. "Right! This is the other thing. I've met a gal."

"You met a gal while you're... presently you?"

"What's wrong with me?" Now he's trying to push my buttons.

"Well, Grim, remember you look like a lad of maybe fifteen years." He gives his eyebrows a workout. "What sort of gal?"



"She was posing for us in art class."

"You're taking art?" Now his cheeks are getting a workout.

"Yeah. Big Julie has me in all sorts of classes to try and find this nefarious thief."

"Nefarious?"

"It's a good and proper word." I tell him even though I know he knows that. He's used it describing me. Me!

"I know it is. I'm close personal friends with a nefarious wand seller, you know."

See? "Are you done?"

A smile lets me know my partner is done. For now.

I hand him the parchment and watch as he unrolls it. His eyes get wide. Then narrow. Then wide again. "You drew this?"

"Right? I mean, if wand selling goes belly up, I think I could make a go of this art gig."

"This is the gal?"

"Yeah. She's something, right?"

"That's the word I was thinking of; something."

Seems Drimblerod isn't done just yet. "What're you saying, exactly?"

"Well, I'm sure that in person, she's a very nice, clear, gal." The smile is back.

"What?"

He turns the parchment around so I can see it.

Rolton chips. Steaming Rolton chips.

"It didn't look like that when I rolled it up just a little bit ago," I assure my unbelieving partner.

"I would hope not."

Now I'm hopping back and forth. "Just wait till you see her in person!" Then he'll lose that smug smile.

"What's with the black block? You drop your charcoal or something?"

"Censors."

"Censors? There're censoring art at the school?"

"No, not at the school." He's giving me the look. Another copper lost. I really can't explain it. So I tell him. "I really can't explain it. It kind of, sort of just happened all on its own." I give him a shrug. "That's all I got as far as an explanation."

"I'll put it on the cupboard, Grim." He gives me a smile.

I don't know why, but it makes me feel better. All glowing on the insides. Weird.

"You playing hookie, youngster? I just may have to tell the law, you know. Truancy is a crime 'round these parts," says Rat as he scoots down the stairs.

No more glowing insides. Not weird, really. Not with Rat around. "You doing anything to earn your keep?"

Rat twitches his whiskers at me. Mostly, that means 'no'.

"Well, I need to get back to class to wrap up this mystery." I turn and look at Door. It's a long way back to Big Julies. A long way. Then I have a thought. "Hey, Rat. Get me back to the school and I'll let you come to class with me."

"Really?"

"Sure, other kids have familiars. You just need to make sure you don't do any talking."

"Him not talk?" Drimblerod tosses into the conversation.

Now Rat twitches his whiskers at him.

Nice.

"Let's go Rat. I can't take half the day going back and forth." I pull out The Black. "I'll just make you a Shambler to get us there quick like. Then I'll change you back."

"You sure that spell is going to work with you... in that condition?"

"Why wouldn't it?"

"Well, I'm tied to you because of the spell, but since you're not looking like you, it might not work right."

"Quit being a scaredy-rat and get over here." I waggle my wand at him. "It's not like you could die, right?"

"Well, there's no telling." He says warily as he comes around the counter. "I'm nice and settled in my life right now. I don't know if I can handle the kind of life-changes death would bring. Such as..."

I slash my wand at him before he tells me.

Rodentus Grigo

Transmutis Completes!

Shambler Verdes!

I intone.

In a golden flash of light, Rat is transformed.

Kind of.

Drimblerod's laughing so hard I can't hear Rat.

Maybe that's a good thing. He sounds upset and the words I'm getting here and there aren't to neighborly. I try to listen anyhow.

"I told you that the enchantment was tied to you!" He wails. "Just *look* at me."

"You're more a Shetland Shambler," Drimblerod finally manages to say. He's wiping a tear from his eye. "That's the best news I've seen all month."

"Well, I'm none to keen about it," says RatShetlandShambler. "Not one bit!"

"Well, look at it this way," I say to him as I move over and look him in the eye. "At least I won't have any trouble getting on you this way."

"And nobody'll recognize you either, you wee little Shambler, you," offers Drimblerod. Not too helpfully, I might add.

RatShetlandShamber's cursing up a storm again.

Door rattles his latch and opens for us. His latch is going back and forth. Seems he sees the humor in a tiny Shambler as well. At least I'm not going to need a ladder or a rope to get up and down. "Let's go Rat," I say to him. "I need to get back to class."

"Fine, fine. At least no one I know'll recognize me."

"And I'll tell you about the case I'm working, while we get back to school."

"Will we be there in time for lunch?"

"If we hurry." Now all of a sudden, I'm in a hurry too. "So let's get going."

With a nod he exits the shop. As Door closes, I can hear Drimblerod start laughing again. Door's rattling isn't helping. I swing up on RatShetlandShambler. It's an easy mount. "OK, to the school and I'll fill you in."

Rat gives me a nod as he moves to a pretty quick trot- he doesn't want to miss lunch.

Me either.

Chapter 42.75 something
Grim Noir – The Case of the Missing Wands
(Day 4 ¾) - Lunch

"So why's this miner keep coming around the school?" Rat asks me as we get to the windmill.

"Who cares? I'm on the lookout for a Gnome kid who follows Jute United. Like I told you."

"Right, right. There's just something that isn't sitting right with that old guy."

"Maybe it's his glowing personality." I get off my mount and draw The Black. We move around the pedestal where Pollux used to sit. Or maybe it's Castor. Either way, the thing gives us some pretty good cover for my work. "Hold still". I wave my wand at RatShetland Shambler and whisper the incantation.

Rat's cursing up another stormfront of, well... curses.

"Quiet down, Rat! You want to get me expelled? You're not even supposed to be talking."

"Just look at me!" he squeaks. "I'm the size of a Shambler pellet!"

"Well, you're bigger than that," I try to assure him as I stow The Black. "Two at least."

"You're not helping." He says as I pick him up and put him on my shoulder. He fits fine on just it. "I better not see anyone I know," he whispers in my ear as I made my way around the pedestal and towards the cafeteria.

"Look on the bright side, Rat," I say.

"Bright side?"

"Now it will just take a little speck of food to fill you up."

He bites my ear. Hard.

I let out a yelp as we get to the cafeteria doors. There's an upper classmen there.

"What you squealing about, *first year*?" He says as he looks from me to Rat and back to me. "That thing even weened yet?"

"Nope," I say as I push past him. "He was on your Mamma's teat just this morning. Right after me."

"What?!"

I duck in the cafeteria and weave through a few groups of kid to make sure the guy can't follow me.

"Nice one, Grim," Rat whispers in my ear.

I give him a nod as I search out a table with friendly faces. I spy Amaryllis at a table with some kids from the art class. One of the Gnoll brothers seems to be sliding plates onto the table. I make my way over there fast so that I don't miss a plate for me.

"Yer runnin la..." Starts the Gnoll as he gives me a nod. Then he spots Rat. His foot starts stomping the ground but he's keeping a straight face. "Errr..." He tries as his tongue hangs out one side of this mouth.

"Just a plate of food will do it, I think," says Rat. "Light on the comments. Real, real light."

I can see that the Gnoll is biting down on his tongue. He manages to slide a last plate to an empty spot and makes a quick exit.

"Some folk," I say as I sit down. I notice everyone's eyeing Rat. "I just got him. He's my new familiar." I invent a story as I go: "He's the offspring of a very important and powerful familiar of an all powerful wizard." And a bit of truth never hurt anyone. Mostly. "And wand salesman. A true seller of fine magical artifacts."

Rat gives a nod. Then he hops onto the table. He sniffs the plate then looks at me. "What's this?"

"It's the student menu," says the Human kid next to Amaryllis. "They bring something and we eat it."

"And you pay for this?" Rat sits down.

The Human smiles. “Oh, no. No, we don’t.”

“Well, that’s a relief...” Starts Rat.

“Our parents do, of course.” He finishes.

Rat smells the plate again. “They’re getting ripped off.”

“We’ll just make due, Rat,” I say. Then I lean in close. “Remember you’re not even supposed to be talking.”

He gives me a nod.

“A talking Rat. That’s wizard[34], Grim!” Amaryllis isn’t helping.

“Let’s just eat, all right?” I look at the plate. There’s some meat of some kind. Some sort of brownish bread, and a slab of a soft cheese. Or something. If nothing else, this gives me ammunition that I can use against the Gnoll brothers. For months.

“Want some cheese, little rat?” Says the Human. He’s holding up a hunk off his slab of soft cheese. Or something.

“I’d love a piece of cheese.” Rat twitches his whiskers.

Here it comes.

“If you find any cheese, you just let me know. You can keep that lump of hardened milk, you lowbrow consumer.”

“Ok,” says the lad as he pops the food in his mouth.

“Sarcasm is lost on youth,” remarks Rat as he smells the meat again. With a sigh he takes a bite. Then another.

“So, anyone here a Jutes United fan?” I toss out there on the table.

Everyone stares at me.

“Those losers?” Says the kid beside Amaryllis. “No way.”

Amaryllis gives me the stink eye. “Did you go up to the top of the windmill without me?”

Now the two guys at the table are giving me the crazy eye. Apparently, she’s never asked them to the top of the windmill.

Wonder how I can make coins when I get those looks. “I’m planning on taking you with me,” I lie to the Moll. “Relax or you’ll

pop a button." I give her a look over. "You've only one left." I add. Because she does.

There's that pout again. "Sometimes I think you don't like me."

Now the guys are giving me the agog eye. No coppers in that either. "Don't worry. You'll be the first to know when I decide to go up the windmill." I give her hand a pat to make her think I mean it. "Well, I need to go talk to Missus Murphy about my sketch. I'll catch up with you mooks later." I pick up Rat and head for the door.

"Where are we going?" he asks me. "I was just getting the taste for that meat."

"We're going to the top of the windmill so I can talk to these Jute fans up close and personal."

"How up close? Remember your size, Grim"

I draw The Black. "Don't worry Rat; I'm packing."

"But what about Amaryllis? She's going to be upset, you know."

We go into the windmill and make our way to the big spiral staircase. It seems like a lifetime ago that I climbed it for the first time with Drimblerod on my tour. A smile comes to me as I remember how up close and personal I got with Big Julie that day. And not completely as innocent as I had let on. "She'll be fine. Something tells me she's the kind of girl that always lands on her feet."

"Feet?"

"Well, there's no sense in being impolite about it," I give him. Rats. When we get to the first landing, I stop to catch my breath. It seems a lot farther now that I'm teeny.

"Hey, Grim." Rat twitches his whiskers. "Remember the last time we were up here and I was on your shoulder? With Big Julie?"

"Nope. Must have slipped my mind."

Focused.

Rat frowns at me. But now I'm back on the stairs, still breathing deep but making progress.

We finally get to the top and the place is empty. Of perpetrators, that is. There's plenty of other junk up here. Just not anyone I can get up close and personal with.

Nuts.

"Nuts." I say. Outloud this time. "This is no good."

Rat makes the jump from my shoulder and moves around the room. "I'll see what stuff is behind this other stuff. Maybe that'll help."

"If you find a stash of wands, let me know." I sit down on the couch and look out the large window across the Great Shambler Plains while I catch my breath. There's as much to see out there as there is in the room. "Anything?" I ask my trusty Rat.

"Nothing yet."

Great. All that walking with nothing to show for it. "Great all that walking and nothing to show for it." You know, I might just subcontract this entire affair to Colossus. Mayhap he can make something of..."

"Grim!" I hear Rat screech from the far corner. "Watch..."



Chapter 43

Meanwhile In an Almost Forgotten Secondary Plot...

Chéri lay down and rolled over several times to reach Colossus. Since the bed they were in was made large for even a pair of humans (a single Orc could sleep in it comfortably) they were completely overwhelmed by it. "Colossus, are you awake?" She cooed.

"Nope." He pulled his pillow over his head.

"Well, we need to see about at least getting one more load of wood from Aution before those brothers out there turn it all into charcoal."

"Sounds good." Colossus said from under the pillow. "But I'm asleep so I can't hear you."

"If you can't hear me," Chéri sat up. "Then you're not going to know..."

"Nope."

"...when I've let the covers fall down while I'm sitting up."

"Seen it." He clamped his hands tight on his pillow.

"What willpower, this mighty Corporal of the Great Halfling Empire has," Chéri remarked. "When an uncovered maiden is so close. Dare I say, close enough even to touch!"

"Touched it." The pillow remained firmly in place.

Chéri narrowed her eyes. "Then I guess the dance being done is all in vain." Chéri shuffled around in the bed, making it bounce. "A dance in vain."

Colossus' grip on the pillow loosened.

"Really, it's more writhing than dancing."

"Writhing?"

"Oh yes. With some wriggling just in case." Chéri signed loudly. "But, if it's all in vain, then I suppose that the fair maiden should just get up and get dressed."

"Well, let's not be hasty." Colossus rolled over.

Chéri was sitting up in the bed. Fully dressed. She was flapping her arms up and down to make the bed bounce. It was in no way dancing. Or writhing.

"That's making a false statement to a lawman."

Chéri grabbed his pillow and rolled off the bed. "Well, now that you're awake, let's get going, *lawman*. I've been up for over half an hour already."

"But..." Colossus frowned. "A reliable witness said there was dancing."

"I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about." She dropped the pillow on top of hers- far out of the Corporal's reach. She dusted off her hands. "There's work to be done."

"And writhing. I'm sure that was reported as well."

"Witnesses can be so unreliable."

"But... bouncing, I definitely was under the impression that..."

Chéri raised an eyebrow at him. "Bouncing? *Bouncing*? I can't imagine that a proper maiden would ever conduct herself in that manner."

Colossus sat up. "Well, I'm pretty sure I've not been in the company of a proper maiden anytime lately."

Chéri's other eyebrow raised.

"There's this one reliable witness that describes the aforementioned as a Minx."

"What?"

"Or maybe it was a Polecat."

Chéri put her hands on her hips. "Well, that all depends on present company, I suppose."

Colossus brought his legs up as he propped himself against the headboard. "What depends on present company?"

"Whether later this evening, this very room," Chéri held her hands out wide, "will be occupied by a prim, proper, *and chaste* maiden, or a wild and carefree Minx."

Colossus scooted to the edge of the bed and hopped out. "Now don't get hasty! I'll be down for breakfast in ten minutes!"

"That's what I thought. Ten minutes, soldier." Chéri turned and left the room.

"Colossus, you've got no spine at all when it comes to that female," he said to himself as he grabbed his trousers and slipped them on. He grabbed his socks. "Well, given the choice between a maiden and a minx, you wouldn't either," he said as he hopped about while trying to put them on.

True to his military training, Colossus came bounding down the stairs, dressed with combed hair and brushed teeth - inspection ready - in under ten minutes. "Corporal Colossus reporting as threatened," he rendered a snappy salute to Chéri.

"Threatened? Someone threatened you?" Chéri said innocently. She looked around the room. "Well, as a lawman, you should bring charges against them."

Colossus sat at the table. "Oh, I've plans for how I'm doing to deal with the perpetrator, don't you worry."

Chéri smiled. "Well, I'm sure with you on the case, justice will be served." She poured him a cup of coffee. "Vigorously."

Colossus stared at Chéri as she did.

She put the carafe down self-consciously. "What?"

"It's just that I can't believe that we're together. Really together." He gestured around the room. "Here, in public. And no one cares a bit. This town, I have to tell you..."

Chéri laughed. "You looking to put down roots in this one-Shambler town?"

"Well, if I were going to put down roots, it should be in a place where our kids are going to be accepted."

Now Chéri stared at Colossus. The future of their relationship had always been something neither discussed. There were, in fact, many cases of inter-race families that were well accepted, however when it came to Halflings, that was not the rule- mainly because Halflings tended to invade, devastate, and occupy other race's territories. Not too many folks wanted a Halfling, or even a Halfling-mix as a neighbor. Julesville seemed to be a very unusual exception. "What did you..."

Colossus plopped several cubes of sugar into his cup and then added milk to it. "You heard me." He stirred his cup. He took his napkin out of its brass ring. He snapped his napkin and put it on the table. "You heard me good and well." Colossus stood up and moved to Chéri.

Several patrons turned to look as the Corporal got down on one knee. "Chéri Belladonna, would a Grand Master Assassin ever consider marrying to a wayward Corporal of the Great Halfling Empire, with nothing to offer but..."

"Ye - yes," she stammered.

Colossus slipped the hammered brass napkin ring over Chéri's hand onto her wrist.

Several patrons clapped as Chéri kissed Colossus. "We should celebrate," she said.

Colossus smiled wide. "That sounds like a great idea to me." He pointed at the stairs.

Chéri picked up her fork. "By finishing breakfast and going to get some wood so you can build me a good and proper home before those men turn the rest of Aution into charcoal."

"But... when... where..."

Chéri gestured at Colossus' seat with her fork. "Your seat is right there, dearest."

Colossus returned to his seat, retrieved his napkin, snapped it and dropped it onto his lap. "Oh, that female of mine."

"Oh? You have a female?"

Colossus nodded as he picked up his cup. "Well, you've never met her, of course. But let me tell you; she's one-minded when she latches onto an idea."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. Sure, she's a knockout to look at, and witty. But one minded?" He picked up his fork with his other hand and scooped up some eggs. "Like no other you've ever met."

"She sounds interesting. I'd like to meet this woman of yours," said Chéri.

"I'm not sure I'd want the two of you together in one place." He sipped his coffee. "I don't know if I can handle that." He put his cup down and ate some of his eggs.

"A tough Corporal like you?" She skewered a sausage link and pointed it at him. "I can't imagine there's anything you couldn't handle."

"You'd be surprised." Colossus smiled at Chéri. "But for now let's go get some wood so I can get a nice cottage with a couple of spare rooms in it built someplace in this town."

"Tonight when we're back, we'll make an official announcement to our friends."

"Friends?" Colossus chuckled. "We've only been in this town a few days and we already have friends we'd make an announcement to?"

"The folk that have welcomed us here should be told." She ate some of her sausage. "And be invited to the event."

"Now there's an event?" Colossus picked up a roll. "When did *that* happen?"

Chéri tapped her brass bracelet. “Just recently this Halfling asked to marry me.” She leaned forward. “Soon even.”

“Soon?”

“While the weather’s still nice.” Chéri ate another sausage. “So that’s soon.”

“Well then you should stop dawdling so we can get the wood to build a place.” Colossus shoveled the rest of his eggs in his mouth.

“You soldiers need to learn to chew your food.”

“No time; I’m on the tail of a one minded female.” Colossus slurped down the last of his coffee. “Let’s go then.” He picked up his last sausage and shoved it into his remaining roll. “Walking food.”

Chéri picked up two sausages and a roll. “Well then, let’s go.”

The two left the shop and made straight for the stables. By the time they got there, they had finished the rest of their breakfasts.

“Make sure you ask for some rope and some tools to take apart planks and cut them,” said Chéri as she looked around the yard. There were quite a few horses and shamblers, as well as two donkeys in the field. It seemed the blacksmith also ran a very successful livery stable.

Colossus laughed. “Of course we need those. Who’d go out wood gathering without tools?”

Chéri moved to the wagon and hopped onto it, not wanting to answer the question. As Colossus loaded the wagon, she sat and turned the brass bracelet on her wrist. Even thought it was roughly hammered brass made to hold a rolled napkin, it was by far, the most beautiful piece of jewelry she had ever worn.

Within a few minutes, Colossus had the wagon loaded with tools and rope. The ancient-looking, one-armed blacksmith had a horse hitched to it.

“You’ll be back by tonight then?” The blacksmith asked, tersely. “Don’t want my animal out at night.”

Colossus smiled. “Definitely; we’ve got a celebration to go to.”

"Celebration, huh?" The grimy blacksmith said as she tossed the reins to the Halfling.

"We're announcing our engagement," said Chéri to the female, hoping for a congratulatory response.

"What, to each other?" The blacksmith looked back and forth between the pair. She put her hand in the front pocket of her leather smock. "On purpose?"

"Yeah; we're getting married on purpose," said Colossus testily as he eyed the Dwarf. She had to be at least to three hundred fifty years old. "Don't let your beard get all in a knot."

"Why don't we just get going," suggested Chéri as she took the reins. "So we'll be back in time." She looked at the Dwarf, "Since we've already arranged for the day's rental and all."

"You're paid up," snapped the Dwarf blacksmith. "So take your *male* and get out there and back."

"I don't need any comments from you, you old *iron hammerer*," said Colossus angrily. "A deal's a deal. So deal with it."

"Up yours, Halfling," the blacksmith said as she turned and walked off.

Stunned, Colossus sat.

Chéri snapped the reins and the horse trotted out of the fenced in area. "Colossus?"

Colossus stared straight ahead, eyes wide.

Chéri leaned on him. "What did you expect? 'Welcome, sonny'? 'Make yourself at home'? 'Marry that Gnome'?" She put her arm around Colossus' shoulders. "You've got to remember that she's just a simple blacksmith. She's a person of the land. The common clay of Julesville."

Colossus looked at his fiancé.

"You know; morons." Chéri said with a smile.

"She's definitely off the guest list."

Chéri laughed. "I agree. But you can't expect *everyone* here..."

"I suppose," Colossus cut her off. "But after my speech about how tolerant the folks around here were, you'd think..."

"Let's get that wood and not build on this side of town," suggested Chéri.

Colossus nodded. "My sentiments exactly." He thought for a moment, "But not too close to the Gnomes either."

"You've got something against Gnomes?" Chéri prodded him.

"In general? No." He nudged her back. "In Grimbledung? Yes. You want him as a neighbor, so you can talk to that fellow Gnome on a daily basis? Loan him sugar, flapjacks, and whatever else he probably runs out of. On a daily basis?"

Chéri stuck out her tongue. "Maybe someplace in between."

Colossus nodded. He sat back. "Well, since you've been there before, I'll let you drive."

"And you're going to stay awake the whole time?" Chéri glanced at him.

"Sure, sure!" Colossus stretched. "Since I got to sleep in and was woken up so nicely? I'll definitely stay awake the entire trip."

"Sure, sure," repeated Chéri. "We'll see how that goes."

The pair chatted as they rode to the ruins of Aution, discussing the plans for their home as well as their upcoming nuptials. In a testament of his feelings for her, Colossus didn't nod off once on the way there.

Moving around the back of Aution, the pair avoided the coal-making brothers. Thanks to Chéri's levitation wand, the pair was able to load the wagon within three hours.

Covered in sweat, the pair rode back in content silence. Colossus nodded off twice, Chéri once. Since the horse knew the way home, the pair came into view of the stables by late afternoon. By then they were both awake, thirsty, and hungry.

"Where're you keeping this wood stacked?" Asked Colossus. He was back to managing the reins.

"Round the back of the barn with the green roof." Chéri pointed. "There's a pile of my wood, and a pile of the two Magicians."

"Those two." Colossus shook his head. "You don't really think they'll actually make enough money to pay you back for their tab, do you? Typical Humans."

Chéri shrugged. "They saved my life on several occasions, Colossus." She turned to him. "I was completely defenseless. Tied up and prepared to die when one, or the other, or both, came to help me when they really had no reason to." She thought back to the first incident. "Especially that first time with the Pics. I was not..."

"Pleasant?"

"Pleasant," agreed Chéri, "with them at all, so they really didn't need to include me in their escape plans." She put her arm around him. "And the second time with the Orcs was actually *two* separate times in the span of a day where they could have easily left me to deal with three Orcs on my own, yet they didn't. And for his trouble that second time, Semfeld was run through by an Orcish long knife. He nearly died."

Colossus nodded.

"They're honorable men, those two."

"They're complete buffoons," offered Colossus.

"Well, sure; they're that in spades." Chéri laughed. "But that doesn't make them bad people." She shrugged. "You know, I really want Liverioso to find that gal of his."

"You're such a romantic."

"Curious is more like it," said Chéri as they turned through the gate. "I just can't imagine the type of gal that would be interested in him."

"Every pot has a lid," Colossus reminded her. "Even the buffoon pot."

"He's the lid, of course."

Now Colossus laughed. "Now wait a minute, the males are the pots. The females are the lids."

"No. We females're the pots" said Chéri.

"We're Pots!"

"You're Lids!"

The pair rolled up to the blacksmith. She stood with her arm behind her back as they approached. "Hey there lid," said Colossus.

"Pot," corrected Chéri.

"You two finished?" Snapped the blacksmith.

The couple looked at each other then nodded.

"That's about it, I think." Colossus stifled a chuckle.

The blacksmith let out a long sigh. "Remember what I said earlier?"

Colossus nodded. "Yeah. Something about having your horse back before nightfall."

Chéri elbowed him. "Hush," she whispered.

Colossus nodded at his fiancé. "Yes Blacksmith, I remember."

"Well, I meant it." Said the Blacksmith. "You two lovebirds can giggle and carry on like fools all you want. The bottom line is *your* people," she pointed at Colossus with a hammer, "killed nearly everyone in my village."

"Well that's..."

"Save the 'that was other folk in the past, and I'm better than that now' crap for someone else." She lowered her hand, tapping the well-worn hammer against her thigh. "And included in them was the one I giggled with and carried on with." Her eyes grew cold and her knuckles whitened as she clutched the hammer. "And the kids the two of us had made. All three of them." She pointed the hammer at him again. "And my left arm when *even all that* wasn't enough."

Colossus looked her in the eye. "That was war."

"Soldiers wiping out a defenseless village isn't *war*." She shook her hammer at him. "So don't even bother unloading that wood. And I expect the rest of your wood to be gone by tomorrow night or I'll have me a big celebration of my own. With a bonfire. You Halflings are all alike."

"We had a deal," said Chéri. "When we first brought the wood in."

"That was when I thought it was two Humans associating with a Gnome." Now she shook her hammer at Chéri, "Nothing's wrong with that. Once I knew you were..." Her voice faltered. "... with a Halfling, I could barely stomach the thought of the two of you in my wagon." She let the hammer drop to her side. "But a deal's a deal," she said, mimicking Chéri. "And that deal is done now. So get your Halfling tainted wood off my property or I'll burn it up."

"Fine," snapped Chéri. "And I'll make sure I tell Semfeld and Liverioso that..."

"The Humans' wood is fine where it's at." The blacksmith interrupted her. "*They* came to our aid and fought off the likes of *him* and bandaged up my stump."

"Semfeld and Liverioso didn't come to your aid; *Humans* did. You can't lump all folks together," said Chéri.

"I'll lump folk any way I want to lump them. And if you don't get off my property right now, get that wagon unloaded, and back before nightfall, I'll have the Constable lump both of you together and lock you up."

The blacksmith let the hammer fall to the ground. It landed on its head, handle sticking into the air. Without another word, she turned and walked into the stable.

"Let's go Colossus," said Chéri. "Maybe we can store this wood behind Second-Hand Sorcery, or out at Julie's school.

Colossus snapped the reins harshly, sending the horse off at a quick trot.

"It's not true what she said."

Colossus didn't look at Chéri. "Yes, it is. That's how we are."

"But you didn't attack her village."

"No, but I would have if I were part of that mission. Without a thought against it." Colossus took the whip from beside the seat and snapped it savagely at the horse. It broke into a gallop. "I'll get this wagon unloaded, move the rest of our wood, and get it back to her. I'll drop you off at the Duck beforehand so you can get cleaned up and get something to drink and eat."

"What about you?"

"Have something put together for me and I won't be far behind you."

Chéri looked forward, with the speed Colossus had the horse running, she didn't doubt that he would finish his task quickly.

The horse was flecked with foam and snorting when the wagon tore up to Nulu's establishment. "Take this to help you unload," said Chéri, handing him the Levitation Wand. "Where are you going to check first?"

"Probably the wand shop." Colossus gave a smirk. "The word on the street is that Gnomes are poor judges of character."

Chéri kissed her fiancé. "Well, I'll be here and waiting for you when you get back. And we'll make the announcement then." She hopped off the wagon. "Then we'll have a proper celebration, you and I."

Colossus nodded. "A proper celebration?"

"Oh yes."

"I'm just curious; will that fair maiden be at the celebration, or that Minx?"

"Neither."

"Neither?"

"I think maybe that Polecat might just make an appearance."

"Well then," he said with a wink, "see you shortly, my dearest Polecat!" He snapped the whip between the horse's ears. With a whinny, it was back at a gallop, heading toward the wand shop.

Chapter 44
Grim Noir – The Case of the Missing Wands
(Day 5) -The Tale

Knocking. Here we go again. I'm really getting tired of my days starting this way. I think I'm going to have a talk with management about this. Maybe even Management.



I wake.

"Grim you awake?"

I nod.

Nothing happens for a little bit so I doze off again.

"Grimbledung! Are you awake?"

Gads.

I give another nod. "Yes, I already nodded that I was awake."

I hear the door open. "Well, I can't hear a nod, you know."

I give a shrug.

"I saw that."

Great.

"So what happened?"

"I'm not sure," I say as I sit up. "I had some suspects suspectedly suspected, and was checking out what I thought was the thief's lair when all of a sudden everything went black."

"Black?"

Black? Uh oh. "Well, there were stars first, of course." I say as I try to avoid the subject.

"Of course."

"What's Rat got to say about the incident? I don't think he was waylaid."

"Rat's not here."

Uh oh.

I flip my legs off the bed. "What do you mean he's not here? Is he out gallivanting or something? Is that what you mean?" I ask hopefully.

"I mean Julie's groundskeeper that carried you here, only brought you. No Rat."

"Well he's small now. Did you check my pockets?"

"Yeah. I made a copper doing that."

Nice.

Drimblerod gives me a real serious stare. "You lost The Black, didn't you?"

Nuts.

"Only for the moment, Drim. I need to get back there. I think I have narrowed down my list of suspects."

"Really?" Drimblerod's hands went to his hips. I'm beginning to not like that move. "Who's off the list?"

"Well, you for starters."

"That's nice."

"And me of course. And Julie. And anyone who isn't a student."

"Grim, that's pretty much the list you had when you started." Drimblerod moves to the bed. "You've made no progress at all?"

"Well, there's a few students I don't think are on the list." I stand, then hop off the little footrest. "So there's progress being made. Definite movement in the direction of progress."

"At this rate, the school'll be shut down by the time you figure it out."

That's what he thinks. "Well, the case is turning a corner, Drim. Turning a corner. It's turning off of Unresolved Street onto the Cul-de-sac of Solved."

"There go the property values." He gives his head a shake.

"Well, I'm going back to find Rat and the thief." A thought occurs to me. "Unless..."

"Rat is *not* the thief."

Nuts.

"Well, I'm heading back, so if you have something I can carry and eat, I'll take it." Can't solve a mystery on an empty stomach. "Got a snack handy?"

"My little Grimmy is hungry?" Drimblerod leaned over, hands on his knees. "Mayhap I can find a Grimmy-snack or two."

Adults; I'm beginning to hate them. "It's awfully early in the morning, Drim." *For me to knock you on your butt.*

Drimblerod waggles his ears at me. I decide that it's most annoying having someone waggle their ears at you. "Well, I'll see what I have. What if I can't find anything handy?"

"Then I'll sit down and have a good and proper breakfast. Besides brunch, second breakfast, lunch, tea, dinner, and supper, it's the most important meal of the day."

"You forgot snacks."

No I didn't. "I never forget a snack," I assure my partner. I'm a professional- no snack left behind.

Drimblerod turns to leave the room. "Well get dressed and I'll put some eggs and bacon in a roll so you can eat on your way."

That's my partner! "Be out in a flash." Another thought occurs to me. "You know, if I ..."

"You're wearing clothes to school today."

Nuts.

"I'll have your sandwich ready by the time you come out." With that Drimblerod leaves me to my ruminations.

So I ruminate as I get dressed:

1. It could be a teacher so they would have access to the whole place so no one sees them coming or going.

Or

2. It could be someone disguised as a teacher so they have access to the whole place so no one sees them coming or going.

Or

3. It just happens to be a student because they have access to the whole place and no one sees them coming or going.

Or

7. It could be someone disguised as a student so they have access to the whole place so no one sees them coming or going.

Wait

B. What kind of disguise could someone use to give them that level of access?

Uh oh.

I'm back on the list of suspects!

Nuts.

I stop ruminating so I can tie my shoes- it's hard enough to do normally!

Drimblerod is waiting for me with a wrapped up parchment when I get out to the table. "Reading won't fill my belly." I tell him.

"Your sandwich is in it, Grim," he offers it to me. "You can eat on your way." He looks worried.

"I'll find Rat and The Black, don't you worry; I'm..."

"A professional. Yeah, that's what I've heard."

"Well, you heard right." I turn and hop down the stairs making sure my sandwich doesn't make a run for it. When I get to the bottom of the stairs I turn and give Drimblerod a salute with the wrapped up sandwich. "Don't you worry, partner."

He still looks worried.

Annoying.

Door opens and I'm out on the street. Folks are moving here and there. Maybe one of them is disguising themselves to get those wands. I stick my eyes on them as I walk along eating. A few of them look back. Most just move to the other side of the street. Those go on my list.

I finally get to the school and I spy Amaryllis sitting on Castor's pedestal. Or maybe it's Pollux's. She looks as worried as Drimblerod did. "What're you doing out here Amaryllis?"

She looks up at me. I can tell she's been crying. That will not do. She's my Moll. No one makes my employees cry but me! "What's wrong?"

"My... my... my..." She stutters.

"So I'm guessing it has to do with you," I toss out there. I'm a professional.

"Wa... wa... wa"

"Stop crying Amaryllis and tell me what's wrong." I put my hands on my hips. Rolton chips; now I'm doing it. "What's got you all wet around the eyes?" I move over and sit down beside her. I put my arm around her. I'm a comforting professional. "There, there," I say. It's the most comforting thing I can think of saying.

"Where... where..." She stammers.

"I wasn't talking about anyplace in particular." I give her a look. It's not quite a stink eye since she's crying. It's more of a stench eye, I think. "I was being comforting."

For a while we just watch the people walk in front of the school. She's still sniffling but the tears have stopped. I'd offer her a handkerchief but I just use my sleeve. I'm not sure I like her enough to offer her my sleeve. That's pretty personal.

I see that old miner walk by. It's more of a skulk than a walk, really. He looks over at me. I give him the full blown stink eye. Almost to a reek, in fact.

He tilts his hat back. "Broken little hearts?" He puts his hands on his hips. It's really annoying when other people do it. "How nice."

"You know for someone who's a miner, you sure spend a lot of time above ground and around this school," I toss at him.

He pulls his hat back down. "I didn't ask for your opinion, squirt."

"That's good because I didn't give it!" Now I'm up to a full-blown reek-eye.

He starts to say something, then shuffles off around the windmill and out of sight.

"Where..." Starts Amaryllis again.

"I told you I didn't mean any place in particular," I tell her.

She shakes her head. "No, I mean where were you?"

That's not very specific, so I tell her: "That's not very specific."

She sniffs in again. Deeply. I'm seriously considering loaning her my sleeve just so I can stop listening to her snort in that wayward snot. "I went to the top of the windmill because I thought you were going up there without me."

I give her my most innocent look. "What would give you that idea?"

She snorts again and my stomach does a little flip. "Terrance said he saw you going up there."

"Terrance? I don't know any Terrance." Now I'm stalling. If there's a stool pigeon around here, that's going to cause problems. Especially since I don't know anyone named Terrance.

"You talked to him at lunch." She explains. Finally she runs her sleeve across her nose. I look at her sleeve and decide I made the right choice by not offering her mine. "He was the nice boy with the wand."

"Emberstick," I say.

She gives me a nod. Then snorts again. Apparently the other nostril is busy making snot now. I take my arm off her shoulder and scoot away a little in case she plans on putting her other sleeve to use. "That's Terrance."

Terrance Stool Pigeon Emberstick. I might just put him on the list of suspects. "So what did this Terrance say exactly?"

"He said he saw you and that rat of yours going up the stairs in the windmill."

He's an accurate stoolie, at least. "Well, Rat said he wanted to look around up there and since he's an old business partner of mine, I figured I'd just take him up there quick-like."

"Business partner?"

Nuts.

"What kind of business are you involved in Grim?"

"A little of this and a little of that," I say. Then I try to change the subject. "So you went up the windmill?" Then a thought occurs to me. "Without me?"

"Looking for you," she says. "But you weren't there."

Ah ha! "Was there anyone else up there? Perhaps a wand thief?"

"Yes."

AH HA! "What did they look like?" Now the case was taking a turn toward that elusive cul-de-sac. I was on my way!

"I don't know. I was looking behind some boxes for you when all of a sudden someone bonked me on the head." She sniffed again.

"Well, I'm glad you're all right," I tell her, glad the subject's been changed. "Then what happened?"

She thinks for a moment. She wipes her nose with the same sleeve. At least this side of her is safe now. I scoot closer again. "I woke up and... and..." The tears start up again.

I put my arm around her, careful to keep it on her shoulder and nowhere near her sleeve. "And?"

"And my wand was gone!"

Nuts.

This was getting out of hand. The only one who can steal from my Moll is me! "Did you see anything else?" A thought occurs to me. "Like perhaps Rat?"

"A rat?"

"Yes, the rat that was with me," I remind her. "He's missing too."

Amaryllis shakes her head. "There wasn't any rat up there, sorry."

Now I'm grasping at straws: "Do you remember anything else from up there? Did you hear anyone say anything? Did you smell anything? Anything at all?"

"Well, now that you mention it, I did notice a bunch of dirty footprints up there."

"The place was a mess Amaryllis," I remind her. "How could you tell the dirt apart?"

She looks out at the street, like she's trying to remember. "Most of the dirt up there was grey dirt and dust. But there were these

footprints with reddish dirt on them that didn't seem to fit in with the rest of the mess. Does that help?"

I give her a nod. "Maybe. Maybe it will." I tell her. I have no idea what that means.

"I'm sorry about your rat. Maybe he was scared off but he'll come back on his own?"

I give my head a shake. "He doesn't do anything on his own except eat and sleep, nap, doze, and sometimes snooze."

"Aren't those all the same thing?" Amaryllis says with a confused look on her face.

"Apparently since they're spelled differently, there're different things."

"Oh". That confused look looks like it's going to stay put for a while.

"Well, why don't you get to class and I'll see what I can do about finding your wand."

"And your rat," she reminds me.

Right, forgot about Rat. "Him too."

"Maybe if you went back into the windmill and called for him, he might come out. That poor little thing is probably scared half to death."

Hey; That's an idea! Now I just need to borrow a wand. "That would never work." I shake my head. "Dames," I toss at her. "Why don't you just run off to class and let the big boys work on solving the mystery?" I pat her shoulder as I stand up. "Leave this to the professionals."

"Professionals?" She says as she stands up.

"Yeah, that's me."

She lunges at me and gives me a big hug. Her arms go around my neck and squeeze. I think my head's going to pop off. "Thank you so much Grim!" She says as she squeezes even tighter. Now there's no air getting down my throat. Finally she lets go enough to smooch me.

Ewww! "That's not necessary, Amaryllis," I say as I try to push her off before I get another kiss that could land me in the pen. I can just see the

head shaking and tut-tutting Akita would give me for cavorting with a minor. Right after he locked the cell door.

She gives me a nod and heads to the door.

Now I've got two things to do: First, I'm going to go wash my neck where that Moll's slimy sleeve rubbed against it. And then go see Garibaldis about a wand.

I leave the bathroom and make my way to Garibaldis' class. I'm hoping he's not teaching so I can get to him right away. I'm on the verge of solving this case. Because I'm a professional.

The door to his classroom is closed so I pull it open nice and quiet like and peek in. The stools are all empty and there's no one up on the platform where he was teaching from the last time I was in here. I slip into the room, hoping Garibaldis is there. I'm trying to be sneaky so I only shout his name once. "Garibaldis!" I shout. I follow up with: "Where are yoooooou?!"

The thin door behind the platform opens and Garibaldis comes out. "Grimbledung. What's wrong now?"

What is wrong now? I'm not sure. I think it's the same thing that's been wrong all along. I run through current events in my head to see if anything new is wrong. Seems not. "The same thing as usual," I say to him. "There're wands going missing."

"So have you any suspects?"

I give him a head shake. Then I remember. "Rat's missing too!"

"Maybe he's out sleeping someplace?" He moves to the bench by his big teaching table and sits in it. "Or dozing or napping even?"

I give him another head shake. "No, he turned up missing after I got hit on the head when..." Uh oh. I'm not sure I want to mention The Black just yet. That's a pretty powerful wand to now have in the mix.

"When?"

"When I was up in the windmill, of course," I say. Smooth! "And I need to borrow a wand to find him."

"You didn't bring a wand to school with you?"

"Not on your life, Garibaldis," I tut-tutt. "What kind of irresponsible person would purposefully bring a wand into the school when there's a notorious thief on the loose?" I move to a stool myself.

"Well, that's good to hear," he says. "So what do you need a wand for? How will that help you find Rat?"

"He's been taken by the wand thief and he's a rat right now," I explain. "I'm going to change him into a Shambler so that he can get back to me quick like and tell me who the thief is."

"Are you sure he's been taken."

All of a sudden I'm not too sure. "I'm absolutely positive." I hold out my hand. "Can I borrow your wand for just a moment?"

Garibaldis hops off his stool to hand me his wand.

"This should take no time at all," I assure him. "I'm a professional you know."

"Oh, I know," he says.

I raise his wand

Rodentus Grigo!
Transmutis Completes
Shambler Verdes!

I intone...

Chapter 45
Rat Not Noir – The Case of the Missing Wands
(Day 5 still) - The Wire

Earlier...

Rat poked around behind the boxes as Grimbledung babbled on about something or another. Rat tended to only listen to the first parts of anything Grimbledung said; everything else just tended to be fluff. Confusing, non-pertinent fluff. Especially now that he was pint-sized.

As Rat pushed behind a box, he heard a creaking from the other side - closer to where Grimbledung was. From what he had seen, there was no one else in the top of the windmill when they had arrived. Another creak let him know that was no longer the case.

Rat scurried around the box, back into the open area of the room. Grimbledung was sitting on the couch looking out the large window. There was a young-looking Gnome sneaking up on him. In one hand he had an ominous looking blackjack. The other held a wand. Grimbledung had no idea he was there, if his babbling was any indication. The youth raised the backjack over his head.

"Watch out Grim!" Rat screeched as the youth brought the blackjack down on the side of Grimbledung's head. He immediately slouched over, unconscious.

The youth wheeled on Rat. "Com'ere you meddling rat!"

Rat looked left and right; there was only one way out of this uppermost room and the youth seemed to be between him and the top of the stairs. At his size however, he hoped he could just scurry past him.

"I said come here!"

Rat bolted for the stairs.

The youth raised a piece of rusty twisted wire and slashed it at the scampering rat. "*Come HERE*!" The rat lifted off the ground, tiny feet still moving back and forth. It seemed to run in the air as it floated to the youth.

"Put me down!" Said Rat.

"A talking rat, huh? Wonder what you'd be worth," said the youth as he put the blackjack in a back pocket. "Probably a few coins."

"I'm worthless! Worthless I tell you!" said Rat. Then he startled, "Well, not metaphorically speaking, that is. No one is truly worthless. You see we are all part..."

"Shut up, rat. I don't need a philosophy lesson from you." The youth gestured toward a small box with his wire wand. "Get in there and keep your trap shut."

"If you think you can keep me from talking..." Said Rat as he floated towards the small box. "You've got another..."

Silence, immobility, and quiet
Is where it's at.
First and foremost-
from this rat!

Intoned the youth.

Rat continued to complain but no sounds came out. He tried to thrash about but now his tiny legs seemed immobile as well. He floated over the lid of the box then dropped into it in a heap. He twitched his whiskers at the youth as he picked up the box. At least those're still working! Darkness enveloped him as the lids of the box were folded over.

With nothing else to do, Rat closed his eyes to take a well-deserved nap.

Rat woke up as the box jostled onto a shelf. He had no idea where he was and still couldn't move. One corner of the box seemed to be bent upwards and he could see flickering lamplight coming through it. Along with the light, a dank, wet smell entered as well. I've been buried alive! Rat panicked. Then: No, Rat. Who would bury you alive with a lamp? Calm down. Rat breathed in and out deeply, trying to calm himself. After several long moments, he twitched his whiskers. This is a fine mess you're in; stuck in a box, Grimbledung's knocked out and missing his wand, and you can't move.

Rat heard shuffling from outside the box. The lamplight flickered as someone stepped between him and the box. Things were being pulled around, and he heard squeaking wheels. Squeaking wheels underground? Rat strained to move his legs. They didn't budge. Somehow, this youth had figured out how to affect Grimbledung's enchantment on him. Or maybe he doesn't know there's an enchantment on me so he just cast at me anyway. I wonder how this spell was able to fix me in place over Grimbledung's enchantment.

Rat was under the impression, like Grimbledung, that other person's spells could not affect him since his enchantment was cast by Grimbledung. This was a false assumption mistakenly perpetrated by Grimbledung.

The fact of the matter was that any spell that didn't directly counter Rat's original enchantment as a familiar would work on him as it would any other creature. He couldn't be made bigger or smaller, or any other creature for that matter. But quieter? Definitely. Slower or faster? That too.

Stinking Rolton Chips! Thought Rat as he caught part of the narration; it was his discouraging of Drimblerod that had caused them

to be caught by the magically-fast invading Halfling horde at the battle at Littlehorn. With cherries on top even.

Rat spent the rest of the day alternating between sleeping, dozing, and napping in the box. At one point, he relieved himself. He wasn't happy about it, but there was not much one could do when nature called. Or, as was his case, continued to call until Rat was forced to answer.

Rat startled awake to the sound of more squeaking wheels. What are those wheels? And why doesn't someone oil them? Folks are trying to sleep around here! Rat tried moving his limbs, hoping that the enchantment had worn off during the night. No such luck. Rat rotated his eyes to the bent up flap. The flickering light was still there. He could also see the top of a shelf. Stuck on a shelf; disgraceful. And he wasn't alone if the rusted wheels were any indication. Rat's stomach growled. Panic took him as he realized he might actually starve to death stuck in the box. He tried in vain to move.

It's no use, Rat; you're going to starve to death here in the dark alone.

A twitching of his insides told him something was wrong. Perhaps 'wrong' was the incorrect word. 'Happening' was more like it. It was a familiar sinking feeling that happened to him when he fell a great distance. It was as if his stomach was moving into his throat. But I'm not falling! He thought. That's not the only time you feel like that, though. It happens when you're becoming you again. Or... turning into a Shambler!

The box tore open as Rat grew into the size of a Shambler. Or, more precisely, a ShetlandShambler. Either way, the box no longer could contain him. Or the shelf it was presently occupying. RatShetlandShambler kicked his legs as the shelf teetered since he was making it top-heavy. He inadvertently kicked against the wall and the shelf began to fall away from it in what seemed to be slow motion. You idiot! You just kicked over the shelf! Kicked over! KICKED OVER?! He tried twisting as he fell but was too large and caught between two shelves. As he hit the ground on his

back, the top shelf broke off and he rolled free. He thrashed as he got to his feet.

RatShambler looked around the room. It was more a cave than anything else, and not a big one. There were two small tunnels leading out of it- one had an upward angle, then other went deeper into the ground. The room seemed to have been carved out where the two tunnels met - the one going up doubled back to the other going deeper, creating a blind spot. There were several boxes stacked against the wall and another shelf like the one he had just occupied. It was full of boxes as well. He looked at the boxes that had occupied his shelf; several were open and wands had fallen out of them. "What's going on in there?" He heard a voice call.

RatShambler looked at both the tunnels. He wasn't sure which one the voice had come from. Hoping that the upward sloping tunnel led to the surface, he bolted up it, hooves clattering on the hardpan as he went. Darkness enveloped him as he moved out of the lamplight and into the tunnel. As he rounded a gentle bend, he saw a dim light ahead. Daylight? Freedom!

He moved to one side of the tunnel. He was trying to avoid the iron rails that ran down the middle of it, making him guard his steps lest he break a leg. Thanks to his size, he was still able to gallop in the confined space. The light at the end of the tunnel grew in size as he approached the entrance. Suddenly, it went out as a figure stepped between him and the exit. RatShambler lowered his head and moved to a full gallop.

"Stop, you!" said a voice from the black form.

RatShambler collided with the dark shape, his hard Shambler skull saving him from the dizzying flashes of light and following unconsciousness the figure experienced as their heads connected.

After only a minute, he burst into sunlight. Squinting his eyes to the morning glare, he continued to run blindly away from the tunnel entrance for another hundred yards into the shade of some trees.

RatShambler stopped to catch his breath- the uphill run had taxed him. He looked around to get his bearings; he seemed to be past the outskirts of Julesville, on the west side of town where a forest began. It was a large forest that he had never really explored. He knew that past it lay a large plain that ultimately led to another range of mountains. "The Freelands," he said aloud. Surprised to hear his own voice. "That's much better." He shifted his gaze eastward. He could see several familiar buildings in the distance as well as the very top of the windmill, blades turning peacefully in the morning breeze. Not that they needed it.

He glanced at the tunnel entrance and was startled back to his present predicament, RatShambler bolted towards the windmill. I'll get back and let Grimbledung know where all those wands are! He thought. In that underground lair. Or cave. Or whatever it is.

Within the hour, RatShambler trotted (he had long since switched to a trot since he was running on an empty stomach) to the large double doors of the windmill. The right one was open, so without stopping, he pushed past students and made for Big Julie's office. When he got there, he turned and kicked the door. Having learned his lesson with Grimbledung, only once. "Open up Julie!" He shouted. "Open up!"

Big Julie opened the door just as RatShambler turned around. "We were just talking about where to look for you next"

RatShambler nodded. "I'll bet." He looked around conspiratorially. "I need to come in. I've got news. Big news!"

Julie moved to the side to allow RatShambler to enter her office.

Grimbledung, Drimblerod, Akita, and Amaryllis were sitting around her desk.

"Rat!" Said Grimbledung as he stood and hugged his friend around the neck. "I found you!"

"What a wee little Shambler you are," remarked Julie.

"There'll be time for teasing later Julie," said Akita. "So where've you been?"

"Captured!" Said RatShambler. "I was captured and put in a box to starve." He sat on his haunches. "I'm starving at this very minute, in fact."

"We'll take you to the cafeteria just as soon as you tell us what happened, Rat," assured Julie.

"Well, I was captured and put in a box to starve..." Began RatShambler.

"You said that part," interrupted Grimbledung. "Where were you?"

"In a box, in a cave." Rat looked at Akita. "At the western outskirts of town near where the forest starts."

Akita nodded. "I can go out there and check to see who's camping out there." He stood up. "Did you get a look at who grabbed you?"

RatShambler shook his head. "I was busy trying to get away at the beginning, then later on it was dark. And I was in a box."

"That's it?"

He nodded at the Constable. "Wait! Now that I think about it, you know, I did run into him."

"Yeah?" Akita leaned forward.

"And we butted heads."

"Well with your attitude, that's not surprising," said Grimbledung. "Honestly."

"No, no," said RatShambler. "We literally hit heads. Caught him square on at a dead run." He nodded. "There's no way he got out of that without a huge bruise or a black eye. Or both."

Akita patted RatShambler's shoulder. "I'll head out there and see what I can see."

"Good luck, Constable," RatShambler said. He looked at Grimbledung. "Can you change me back to a Rat so I can eat?"

"So it will take less food?"

RatShambler shook his head at Grimbledung. "So it will taste better; rats have a better sense of taste. Shamblers smell better though."

"I find that hard to believe," offered Grimbledung

"Well, that's as good a reason as I've ever heard. Food's only worth eating if it tastes good," said Drimblerod.

Grimbledung pointed at his friend. "I've seen you eat moldy bread."

"Well, that was an exceptional circumstance."

"You said you didn't want to get up to get another piece of bread..."

"So am I going to get my wand back then?" Interrupted Amaryllis. "It was a gift for my last birthday. Mother would be really upset if I lost it." She poked out her lower lip- this time for real. Tears welled up in her eyes.

Grimbledung stood...

Chapter 46
Grim Noir – The Case of the Missing Wands
(Day 5) - The Windup

I'd been betting Rat would flush out the thief. And it looked like my bet was going to pay off. Three to one. Or maybe one to three. Either way, I was coming out ahead. I looked over at my Moll. Sweet kid. Gropey, but sweet.

"Sure you will, Amaryllis. I told you you'd get your wand back and I meant it." I gave her a wink. "That's cause I'm..."

"A professional?" Akita interrupted me.

I gave him a look. "I thought you were going to check out the hideout." I reminded the Werewolf. Like most flatfeet, he sometimes gets off track. "Out west."

Akita gave me a stare. He does that a lot. Making a copper when that happened would be nice for my wallet as well. "I'll be back," he said as he loped out.

"Anyone have a wand I can borrow?" I asked.

Drimblerod held his wand out to me. "Just for the moment, right?"

I passed him the stare Akita gave to me. "Sure, sure. I'm just changing him back is all."

I took my partner's wand and with a flourish (for Amaryllis since I'm still hoping to take her mother to the Jubilee) pointed it at Rat.

Shambler Verdes!

Transmutis Completes!

Rodentus Grigo!

My trusty Rat flashed back into existence. Or actually, the smaller version of himself.

"Thank Nari Bai!" Rat ran his claws down his fur. "Back again." He clutched his belly. "And starving."

I gave him a nod. "How about you go get something to eat while I work out a plan?"

Rat scampered off without so much as a 'how's your birthday?'.

"Well, I'm glad this is over with," said Big Julie.

I gave her a look that started on one side, went across the top, then down the other. "Not yet, Doll. Not yet." I struck a pose. "First I need to reveal the devious thief."

She rolled her eyes at me. Mostly, I take that as a signal that she was interested in me. Because it happened a lot. "And second?"

I give her the once over again. "We work out my fee."

There's that eye roll again.

Oh yeah.

Drimblerod's got his hand out. "So how're you going to reveal the thief, Grim?" Now he's waggling his hand at me.

Some folk.

"Call a school-wide meeting tomorrow morning."

"An assembly?"

I give Drimblerod what I had left of the stare I gave Julie. There wasn't much left, but I think it was enough. "Of course assemble the students. How can you have a meeting if they're not all there?" Now I give him Julie's eye roll for no extra charge.

"I've got one more loose end to take care of. Got a few copper, partner?"

Drimblerod still has his hand out. Not sure what that's about. But with the other, he reached into his pocket and fishes out four copper.

"That'll do," I tell him as I take the coins. He's still waggling his hand. So I shake it. "See you back at the shop." Then I march out of the office.

I ease myself into a stool. "Dirty cider fizz, Maurice," I say as I slide two copper across the bar.

Maurice gives me a nod.

"Been a rough week." I toss at him. I'm still hoping a shot of something makes its way into my fizz.

Maurice looks over his shoulder at me.

I slide another copper across the bar. "Real rough."

He turns back around.

Here's hoping.

After just a few moments- Maurice is a professional in his own right- he turns around. He's not holding a cider fizz. It's a tall glass with what looks like three different colored liquors in it.

"Bottom-shelf triple," he says as he slides it gently across to me. "Back coming up."

"What?" I give him.

He turns back around, a tumbler of water in his hand. "Akita stopped by yesterday. Filled me in." He puts the glass down. "Enjoy, Grimbledung."

I slide the last copper across the bar. "Maurice, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship." I take a careful sip of my drink to not disturb the layers. Oh yeah. Beee-utiful.

Chapter 47
Grim Noir – The Case of the Missing Wands
(Day 6) - The Finale

I hopped out of bed, ready for the day. As I was tying my shoes, Drimblerod knocked on my door.

"You up Grim?" He called.

Oh yeah. I'm up. Up and ready to close this case. This has been the toughest case of my investigative career. I am ready. Ready to collect my hefty fee for all my prep-work. Ready to be paid for my deep investigative digging. Ready to be reimbursed for establishing a wide network of trustworthy informants. Ready to be remunerated for the supplies and my time in using them. Ready to be compensated for the bonkings on the head I endured (on purpose of course) as part of my investigation. So I told him so: "Yeah."

"Well good, because the assembly will be taking place in half an hour so we need to get going!"

I gave the closed door a nod. "Got it." I moved to the door and opened it. "Half an hour to glory."

"Well, let's eat quick-like so we're not late for the glory." Drimblerod pointed at a plate of eggs and bacon sitting in front of the barstool he had borrowed from Nulu a few days ago. It had a back and arm rests. Ours didn't have those. I was considering keeping it as part of my fee.[35] I climbed onto it and dug in. "Is Rat around to give us a ride?"

As if on cue, Rat cleared the top of the stairs. "Oh, I'm ready to have justice dealt to this person that thinks he can put *me* in a box! On a shelf. In a corner."

I give him a nod. "*Nobody* puts Rat in a corner!"

Rat hops up onto the chair then the table. At his current size, he can't make it in one leap. He picks up a slice of bacon. "That's what I said."

"No, I just said it." Rats. They're all right in general, but not the best conversation partners. Still as far as a sidekick, a Private Dick could do worse than Rat. "But I'll let you have it."

Rat gives me a nod. His mouth is too full of bacon to say anything.

Which is fine because now mine is too full to answer him. So I push the eggs to one side of my mouth and say to Drimblerod, "So I'm glad this case was resolved before this spell wore off." I use my fingers to pick up the pieces of egg that made it out of my mouth as I said it and put them back in their proper place.

Drimblerod's not making eye contact with me. Sure they are some good eggs, but not that good. Something's not right. I swallow hard. "What?"

"Nothing, nothing," he said as he crams an entire muffin in his mouth. Stalling.

I keep my eyes slapped up against him. "What?"

Now he puts the muffin on the side of his mouth. "Well, remember when they made you..."

"Tiny" tossed in Rat.

Drimblerod nods. "Tiny?"

"Yeah. Maca did it."

"Remember dying?"

"Which time?" It's a valid question. I think I've made a record this week for meetings with that gondolier. Soon we'll be on a first name basis. Right now he just calls me 'You again!'. I think that's spelled kind of like Grimbledung. He's added a bench so I've got a place to sit. Nice fellow, that gondolier.

"When you were made tiny." Drimblerod says.

Nope. Not at all. That one must have slipped by my somehow. "Sure."

"Well, that was because it seems you are allergic to jointed charlock."

No kidding. "Well, that's not a surprise; everyone's allergic to it; it's highly poisonous."

Now my partner's shaking his head at me in that way that he does. "No, Grim. It's only poisonous to Dwarves."

"That can't be. Everyone in my family is deathly allergic to the stuff. Mom said it was deadly poison. To everyone."

"Only if you're a..." Starts my partner. Then he gives me a sigh. He does that a lot too. "Well, the potion that made you young ended up killing you, so Maca had to bring you back."

"Mighty neighborly of her." I pick up a piece of bacon and begin to gnaw on it.

"Well the effect of bringing you back made it so the youth potion lasts..." He looks at Rat. Rat gives him a shrug. "Longer."

He needed Rat for that last word? That seems... Wait a grain of sand! "Wait a grain of sand!" I drop my bacon. "When you say longer, what exactly do you mean?"

"A month." Rat says. He seems to be enjoying this all of a sudden.

A month? What kind of... Then a thought occurs to me. A wonderfully wonderful thought. "So Rat's stuck at his current size until then as well?"

Drimblerod gives me a nod. "I suppose so. Until you regain your regular size and then transmogrify him."

Wheels are turning in my head. Oh yes, wheels. "So even after I'm large, until I swap him back to a Shambler, he's going to stay a tiny little rat-lette?"

"Now hold on, Grim," Rat starts. "Let's not get hasty."

I hop onto my stool and do a little jig. At Rat. "Best news of the week." Then another thought occurs to me. Uh oh- the jig stops. "So, Drim, do you mean a month *total*, or a month after it was supposed to end?"

"Total."

The jig starts back up again. "So I've only got three weeks to go! Rat? There's no telling."

Now Rat's twitching his little bitty whiskers at me. "Grimbledung Sixtoes, that is not funny."

"You two can finish this discussion later. Now we need to get going." He waggles his finger at the both of us. "Grim, I'm going to go down and drag around that half-sized eyesore of a wagon. You two get out front. Grim you make Rat a ShetlandShambler and I'll meet you there."

"Got it, Drim." That will get us there in style. I climb down the stool, holding my last piece of bacon. "Let's go Rat. We're going to show up in style!"

Rat doesn't know. "Style?"

"Oh yeah; style. You'll see."

I pick up Rat and hop down the stairs. "We're going to solve the mystery!" I tell Door as he opens. He clatters his latch. We get out into the street as Drimblerod comes around the side of the shop pulling our half-sized wagon. A bright red half-sized wagon. "Sleek!" I say.

"What have you done?" Asks Rat.

"Looks real sporty; just what an investigator of privates should be riding around in."

"Nice and subtle, Grim," said Drimblerod. He drops the thill of the wagon. "Let's get going or we'll be late."

I pull out my (spare) wand. "Get in place Rat. We're going to be late!"

Rat moves beside the thill, next to the harness. "Let's go dole out some justice."

I give him a nod as I start the incantation...

We race up to the building used for physical fitness. The large double doors are open and there are students milling around out front. More are already seated in the building itself. Several students turn to watch us approach. "Flashy, just like I said," I say to Drimblerod.

Drimblerod nods. I could tell that he was enjoying the looks the sporty, bright red wagon got as we tore through the streets of Julesville. I am sure he's not going to ask me to repaint it back to boring brown. I grab the handbrake and give it a stout tug. The back end of the wagon slides to the side as we skid to a stop making even more students turn and look.

Flashy!

Rat turns to look at us. "I think it's faster now that it's red."

"Well, it's common knowledge that red makes anything faster."

Amaryllis walks up to the wagon. "I was worried you were going to be late." She put her hand on my thigh. "Really worried."

"Case in point," says Drimblerod.

I start to say something back, but then realize; he's right. "I'm fine Amaryllis." I move her hand off my thigh so I can hop out of the wagon.

"Nice wagon," said Terrance. He gives it a hearty looking-at. "It's wizard!"

"Stop that," I say to him. "I mean it." I hop out of the wagon on one side as Drimblerod hops out the other. "Want back to a rat, Rat?"

Rat nods at me. "I'll take going back so I can watch from the front row."

I draw my wand. "Step back Amaryllis," I say. I'd hate for some of the magic to leak out on her. Mom probably wouldn't like it if she had whiskers or a tail.

I give my wand a flourish for the benefit of Amaryllis- or actually, my benefit with her mother.

I hack my wand at him.

Amaryllis claps. "Neat!"

Oh yeah.

Big Julie is calling all the students to their seats as I put Rat on my shoulder. "Let's go." I motion to the front. As I go, I'm looking at students, hoping to see a shiner, or a bruise.

No such luck.

When I get to the platform, I spy Akita crouched there. I give him a nod. He gives me one back with a wink tacked on.

Nice.

"Any luck, Akita?" I whisper to him as Big Julie's rambling on to the students about something school-ish.

"He's there on the front row, near the end, to the left."

"Left?"

He raises a paw and puts it on my shoulder. "That side. At the end. Little smug-looking Gnome."

I look over. So does Rat.

"That's the kid who bopped you on the head," he whispers in my ear. "I'm sure of it."

Nice.

I slip my wand from my sleeve as I move beside Big Julie. She's still talking but now I think it's about me--

"And I know you will all be relieved that the wand thefts will be stopping shortly." She looks down at me. "Right?"

I give her a nod.

"Thanks to some excellent private investigative work, I might add," she says to the students.

That's me; Private Investigative. I give her a poke on her hip. "Told you I'd have it solved before lunch."

"Lunch?"

"Right? That's not for a little while still." I pose. "Just like I said."

She giggles at me. "I suppose so." She looks back at the students. "So I'll turn it over to... Grim Noir." She gestures at me.

"That's right, you Mooks. I've been watching you! Watching you all!" I say real loud-like so the ones in the back can hear me. "And I am here to reveal the thief!" I point my wand around the room, hoping I got them all.

The kids begin to murmur. It sounds like lunchtime. Without the snogging. I look up at the rafters. Well, there's snogging going on there. But I know from personal experience, haylofts can be real romantical locations.

Big Julie gives me a nod. "On with it, Grim."

I move to the front edge of the platform. I look at the sea of students. Or maybe it's a lake. Definitely more than a pond, in any case. I give a glance at the perp. He seems bored. "So after a great deal of exhaustive investigative investigating, I have finally discovered the identity of the thief!"

The students all stare at me. I think they're all too impressed to speak. I think it's called 'agog'.

So I continue: "And I'll reveal them now!" I hop off the platform. I move away from the little smug Gnome, knowing he's probably going to put up a big ruckus when he's nabbed. I go to the opposite end of his row and a couple down then I cut in. "Justice is going to be served on a platter. With a side of comeuppance even!" I say as I walk across the laps of the students. It's hard to keep my balance because they keep squirming as I step on them. "Oh yes! On a platter!" I shout as I make my way to the end of the row.

Mister wand thief is staring straight ahead as I hop off the last kid's lap. "And he's right here!" I lunge forward and grab the little scoundrel by the collar. "Collared!" Maybe that's where that term comes from.

"Hey! Leggo of me!" The little criminal squeaks at me.

"Not so tough now, are you?" I give him a shake.

Just because.

"Grim?" Akita says.

I ignore him because I'm on a roll. "Now you're going up the river, mister. To the pokey. The pen!"

The kid starts to cry.

Like that's going to get him off. "You'll probably get the chair."

The kid sobs.

"And a table and a cot," I finish. That's usually what's in a cell. "And maybe a bucket. But that's it!"

"Grim?" Says Akita again.

He's stealing my lightning. I give him a look. "I'm doling out justice here, Constable. What gives?"

He points at the kid that was sitting next to the one I just snatched up. I give that other kid a look. He's got a black eye. "So this scoundrel of a thief assaulted that student as well??" I give the kid a shake. "That's an extra year at least!"

The kid sobs even louder.

"No Grim." Akita points at that other kid again. The one with the shiner.

The.

One.

With.

The.

Shiner.

It's a good thing I'm a professional and little details like that don't escape me.

"Oh, I know, Flatfoot. *I know.*" I drop the kid I'm currently holding. "I was just getting close to the little perp without him suspecting I was onto..." I launch at Mister Shiner. "You, Mister Shiner!"

Mister Shiner gives reaches into his back pocket.

Not this time.

I slash my wand at it

When a pocket comes along
You must stitch it!
Before the blackjack sets to bonk,
you must stitch it!

Just stitch it!
Stitch it real good!

I intone.

The pocket closes up around his hand.

One down.

"All right you little rascal," I pull the kid with me onto the platform. I want everyone to see me in my glory. "Let's go! It's time for the big reveal."

Akita crouches down, ready for action, but I've got the kid by the collar. "So!" I say to the room. "When I first discovered wands were missing. I suspected Headmistress Julie!"

"What?"

I give her a nod. "But soon after, I decided it had to be one of you little urchins!" I give the kid a shake. "This perp in particular."

"Stop doin' that!" The little perpetrator complains.

"And thanks to some clues he left, he was easy to catch." My mind goes blank. I give Rat a look.

"Only student's wands missing, not professors," he whispers.

"Only student's wands were missing, not professors!" I declare.

"The dirt in the top room of the windmill," Rat says.

"Right! The dirt in the top room of the windmill!" I proclaim. "And..."

"Me seeing him bonk you on the head?" Rat suggests.

I'm going to skip that one, I think. "Led me to this kid here!" The room is quiet as can be- you could hear a cricket tell you to follow your conscience. If they said such things. So I press on: "But, that's not who he really is!" I give the kid a glance. "What's your name again?"

"Hank," says the little culprit.

"But that's not who Hank really is!" Still nothing from the crowd. Maybe this will help. I waggle my wand at Hank.

Dis guy's

Disguise

Unguise!

I intone.

Suddenly, Hank pops up twice his size and his head explodes into hair. The last thing to appear is a big floppy hat.

"The old miner!" Says Rat, Julie and Akita at the same time.

"Jinkies!" Rat says. All by himself.

"So Jinkies," I say to the miner since Rat thinks he's called that.

"Ferty," he corrects me.

"Ferty?" I ask. "That's a male's name?"

"Ferty Nainer."

"You the guy who makes the rugs?" I ask. If he can make me a rug, I might get his sentence reduced.

"That's Nain. My name's Nainer." He starts to take a step away from me.

Akita moves beside him. “Not so fast Mister Nainer. You’re not goin’ anywhere.”

“Except jail,” I correct smugly. I say it again, because that’s what you’re supposed to do in situations like this: “Except jail”.

Akita gives me a nod.

See?

“So why was he stealing all the wands if he had a mine?” Asked Julie.

I have no idea. I might as well take a blind guess: “Well, you see Julie, the mine wasn’t paying off and when he found out that your school was crawling with untraceable wands in the hands of easily robbed kids, he decided that wand filching was a much better use of his time.”

No one says anything. Maybe I’m getting it right. So I finish up: “And having the mine gave him a perfect place to store the wands until he resold them later on.” I point at Ferty. “Plus it gave him the perfect hiding place. Until he made the mistake of kidnapping my trusty Rat!”

Ferty shuddered with anger. “I would have gotten away with it, too, if it hadn't been for you, you meddling kid and your dumb rat!”

I give a deep bow as Akita leads the miner Ferty Nainer away.

The kids burst into applause.

Well, not the ones snogging in the rafters.

“Good one, Grim!” Says Julie.

“You said it toots. You said it.”[36]

She gives her eyebrows a workout that lets me know she likes being called that. Who wouldn’t?

Now there’s only one more thing for me to take care of.

“Let’s go get some drinks,” says Nulu.

I like that broad. “Lead the way,” I tell her. Because the view’s better...

Chapter 48
Only One More Sleep to the Jamboree?!

"What?" Grimbledung put his drink back on the table and leaned back in his chair. "What did you just say?" He was sitting with Drimblerod and Nulu on the ground-floor level of the Mora Tau Bar and BAR. "How can that be?" His feet hit the bottom of the table, keeping him from falling backward. It was one of the things he learned in school. One of the only things.

"You missed the entire planning committee for the jamboree, Grim, because you were in school all week," explained Nulu.

"Whaaat?"

"You said it would take you a day to solve," she reminded him. "A single day."

"I said that before I was made tiny!" said Grimbledung. "To scale, I think it was a day."

Nulu thought back. Considering the amount of time Grimbledung spent in the school actively doing anything, as opposed to being unconscious and in his bed, it was actually almost one entire school day. She just didn't want to admit it. "Well, you can still enjoy your time at the jamboree without having spent all that time and energy helping plan it." She smiled. "That's even better, right?"

"Whaaaat!?"

"Just go and enjoy the festivities in the morning," suggested Drimblerod. "That's what I plan on doing."

"Fine. But I'll just go out and see how things are set up."

"Grim..." Nulu shook her head. "Just leave well enough alone."

"Well, if it's well enough, I well will." He let his chair clatter back onto all four legs. "I'm just popping around for a moment to make sure, that's all." He picked up his drink as he stood.

"Where are you going?"

"Just for a quick walk, Drim. Nothing important. Seeing the sights, breathing fresh air; all that."

"We're going to celebrate Colossus and Chéri's engagement at the Jamboree, so don't go muck it up."

"You're kidding! They are getting married?" Grimbledung gaped. "When did that happen?"

"Sometime around the time that Rat was kidnapped."

"Well that's a fine how-do-you-do, now isn't it?"

"Grim, you can join in the celebration," said Nulu. "We all will."

"Well, I still should go check out..."

"Julie said to stay away from the jamboree," warned Drimblerod.

Grimbledung raised his hands. "Jamboree? What jamboree?" He snapped his fingers. "Oh, right? I completely forgot about that. That's soon, right?"

Drimblerod stared at him. "Julie said to stay away from the jamboree," he tried again.

"I'm not going anywhere near it. I just need to see a guy about a thing. It's not even near where they're setting up not that I even know where that is because until you reminded me I had forgotten they were even going to have a jamboree somewhere here in town that I don't even know where it is but I'm probably going to be on the other side of town from it because I had forgotten they even were going to have it because Julie said to forget about it so I did." He smiled as innocently as he could manage.

"Julie said to stay away from the Jamboree."

"Right, right." Grimbledung quickly left the store.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Drimblerod said to Nulu.

"I have a feeling too," said Nulu. "I have a feeling he stiffed us for his three drinks."

Drimblerod nodded. He was thinking of how he could get away from the table so that Nulu would pay for his three as well. He looked around the establishment.

"Don't you even think about it," warned Nulu. "He's *your* partner, remember."

"That Gnome," said Drimblerod as he fished out some coins.

Nulu laughed. "As long as he doesn't try to cause a ruckus this late in the game..."

"That Gnome?" Drimblerod waggled his ears.

"Yeah, that Gnome." Nulu downed the rest of her drink. "I'm going to make sure we're ready for the Jamboree. You know we've a table set up as well."

Drimblerod nodded. "Don't worry, Nulu. I'm sure it will be fine." He didn't make eye contact with the Trolless.

Grimbledung snuck into the large open area that marked the center of town. There were several tables set up as well as two gazebos and several tents. It was a good start, but nothing like he expected. "Well, this is a good start, but nothing like I expected," he said as he moved around the tables. A large tent with two large knives crossed over the opening signified the butcher had set up as well. "Barely set up," corrected Grimbledung.

Grimbledung looked at the table. There was an assortment of meats and cheeses on the table, as well as some bread, but not enough to feed an entire jamboree. "A test fit, huh?" Grimbledung shook his head. "Anyone home?" Grimbledung called into the tent. The table was situated so that it blocked the entrance of the tent- allowing

someone to bring food from the inside to the table without people in the way. "Hellooo!" He called. "Anyone home?"

A massive slab of a man filled the opening of the tent. He wore a typical butcher's apron, albeit a clean one. "Whaahht you want," he said in a heavy accent.

"Test fit?" He pointed at the table where the butcher had laid out several dishes.

"Yah." He frowned. "I am busy prepah-ring. Come back lay-tah" He put his massive hands on his hips. "You lit-ahl per-sohn."

"What you call me?"

"A lit-ahl per-sohn." He held up a monstrous hand, his thick pointer finger and thumb close together. "Lit-ahl. Small. *Klein*. Not biiiig." He thought for a moment. "I've eaten bigger things than you! Then pooped them out lay-tah."

"All, right, all right, I got it." Grimbledung shook his head at the giant of a man. "They put two humans together to make you or something?"

The man laughed a deep laugh, mouth open at the sky. "Hah hah! A good wun" He blinked. "Wait. Two humans *did* come together to make me. My mo-thah and my fa-thah." He laughed at the sky again. "Now I make the joke!"

"You're a regular jokester, aren't you. You and Pozz should go on tour."

"Yah, that's me. A joke-stah." He put his hands back on his hips. "I can't stay to tawh-k. I have meats to prepare. Come back lay-tah and I'll see you at the pah-tee."

"So I take it you're the new butcher in town? Nice to have a butcher."

"That's me. The new but-chah." The man leaned over the table and extended a massive hand. It was attached to a muscled forearm. Things got bigger from there. "I'm Trench Richards."

"Trench Richards, the Butcher?" Grimbledung reached out and shook the man's hand. His fingers completely engulfed his hand. "Pleased to meet

you. I'm Grimbledung Sixtoes. I'm the co-owner of Second-Hand Sorcery, the best used wand shop this side of Orcistan." He raised an eyebrow. "So where you from?"

"Ah-m from Bakerville by the western jungles."

"So, Mister Trench Richards the butcher of Bakerville. About this spread..."

"It's a good spread. I live to see you eat it!"

"Riiiight."

"It is good to mee-ht you, Grim-bahl Dung." The man smiled as he released the Gnome's hand and straightened. "Ah've got to get to the choppa!" he pointed at a massive butcher block table. "See you at the pah-tee."

"Yeah, you said that." Grimbledung glanced at the table. "Say, Trench, I hate to mention it but...So what are you going to be serving? Just this?" Grimbledung gestured at the table and the minimal amount of food on it.

"Well, to staah-t with," said Trench. "Once I see how many folk are coming to the pah-tee, then I can put more ow-ht. There's no sense in wasting food by putting it out na-ooh. Besides no one eats right when they show up!" He gestured around the large open area, back rippling as he flexed his arms. "Folks find a place to sit. Get settled! Maybe get a quick sna-ahck. But they won't get real food until the pah-tee staa-hts."

"But, with this showing of foodage, no one will show up!"

"Listen to me nahow! Eat with me lah-ta!" He clenched his hands together as his muscles rippled all the way up to his shoulders. "Ah-'ve done this sort of thing before, you know!"

"I've ORGANIZED this sort of thing before, you know!" Countered Grimbledung. He clambered up on a chair to emphasize the point.

"Don't be a pah-tee poo-pah. This is plenty," said Trench. "You sissy-girl." He started to turn away from the clearly unstable Gnome child.

"This! Is! Spartan!" Grimbledung kicked a goblet.

Trench Richards turned back to face him. "I've had enough of you! Go nahow or suffer!" He flexed his fingers. "Go nah-ow!" he shook his head. "I thought wee-folk were jolly and cordial." He moved around the serving table to stand before the Gnome. Even on the chair, at his current size, Grimbledung only came up to the man's waist. "Cordial, ya?"

Grimbledung pointed a finger up at the man, "What'd you call me?"

The Butcher kicked the chair out from under Grimbledung. As the Gnome toppled to the ground and onto his back, the Butcher leaned over him. There was a very, very large knife in his hand all of a sudden. The disturbing part was that the knife looked large in the Butcher's hands, meaning it was practically a short sword. Grimbledung noticed that the tip was up near his eyes, and a quick glance let him know the hilt was below his knees. "Ah-ll serve you *fricasseed* if you don't get out of here right nah-how."

"Well, there's no call for *that* kind of language, I'm sure." Grimbledung scooted away from the knife-wielding butcher. "I mean, honestly." He got to his feet. "I just stopped by to offer some advice and lend a hand." He dusted off his breeches. "And what do I get for my trouble? Insults." He pointed at himself. "Aspersions cast directly at me. *Me!*"

"Stop whining! You are soft." The man waved the knife at Grimbledung. "You lack discipline!"

Grimbledung stood. "You're unstable, and I have to tell you, coming from *me*, that means something!"

Trench narrowed his eyes at the Gnome. "Big Julie sent word to all the businesses yestah-day!" He gestured around at the various shops, arms out wide. He stretched out one leg and flexed his thigh as he did so. Several muscles bulged in different directions. "We were told that if a certain Gnoh-m came by trying to get involved *at all* with the pah-tee, we were to tell Constable Aki-tah. Who, I have been informed, has been told by the

Mayoress to lock the fellow up until after all the celebrations are done!" He moved his hands back to his hips and flexed his shoulders. That seemed to be their resting place. His hands, that is. "And then a day la-tah just for a good measure!"

Grimbledung got to his feet. "Well, all I know is that Grimbledung asked me to come down here and relay that message. He's my partner at Second-Hand Sorcery you know. A bit unstable at times, from what I hear, but well-intentioned nonetheless." He dusted his hands off. "I'll make sure I let him know what you just said, Mister Richards."

"Yah," the Butcher said, unconvinced. "Lie to me now. I hit you lay-tah, girly-Gnome."

"Well, I need to get back to the shop, you know. I can just imagine Grimbledung is wondering where Drimblerod... That's me by the way. *Drimblerod*. Where I am." He turned and walked quickly from the man.

After he was a dozen paces away, the Butcher called to him: "Hey, Grim bahl Dung!"

Grimbledung turned around. "Yeah?"

"That's what I thought!" The Butcher pointed his very, very long knife at him. "I lied; I hit you nah-ow! Come hee-yah!!"

"Yaaa!" Grimbledung screeched as he turned to run, arms flapping as he went.

Grimbledung scooted back to the shop as fast as his tiny legs would take him. He skidded through the open Door, around Big Julie and then counter.

"Back so soon?" Asked Drimblerod.

"What happened to you?" Big Julie looked at the sweat-covered Gnome peeking around the counter. "Someone chase you all the way here?"

Grimbledung shook his head. "I don't think so. I'm not really sure, actually; I was too afraid to look back." He pointed at the door. "That new butcher is unstable."

"Unstable?" Big Julie smiled wistfully. "He's built like a *siege tower* that one is. I don't think unstable is a word I'd use to describe him." She gave a low whistle. "Nice and solid."

Grimbledung raised an eyebrow at her. "Does Pinky know?"

"Hey," said Julie defensively. "You like gals with curves. I like men with bulges." She nodded. "Pinky knows that's what I like. He's got them too, you know."

"Yeah, yeah- I've seen the two of them. It looks like they've both been stung or something."

"Yeah," said Julie wistfully again.

"So what did you do to upset the butcher?" Drimblerod asked.

"Who me?" Grimbledung raised his hands defensively. "I was just walking by, minding my own business, not doing nothing to no one, when all of a sudden he pulled a knife on me."

"Well, he *is* a butcher," offered Julie.

"Who doesn't know how to set up for a jamboree," countered Grimbledung. As soon as he said it, his eyes got large. "What I meant was..."

"Why don't you go get cleaned up and then come mind the store?" Said Drimblerod, offering his friend a way out of the hole he just dug.

"Good idea!" Grimbledung took to the stairs, grunting as he climbed them. "Another almost three weeks of this," he said to no one in particular as he climbed the knee-high steps.

"It builds character!" said Big Julie.

"You think he's not enough of a character already?"

"I suppose he is, Drimblerod." She rubbed her hands together. "Well, I think I'm going to pick up some meats and cheeses and then head home."

"Meats huh?"

Now Julie raised her hands defensively. "A gal can look at the menu as long as she eats at home."

"Uh huh."

"Whet my appetite," she offered. "Yeah...."

"Now it's getting uncomfortable." Drimblerod pointed at Door. "Door?"

Obediently, Door opened.

"Shoo, you window licker!" He shooed Julie towards the door.

Julie moved to Door. "I believe the term is 'window shopper'."

"In your case, I'm not too sure."

Grimbledung reached the top of the stairs. "Hey! Are there entendres going on down there without me?"

"Nope!" Julie slipped out the door.

"What'd I miss?" Grimbledung called down.

"Big Julie likes guys with a lot of muscles."

Grimbledung nodded. "That's what I heard. I hope someone tells Garibaldis before he finally manages to kill Pinky."

"What?!"

"Nothing," said Grimbledung. "There's no need to worry until something happens."

"Unless you're Pinky! Then it might be too late."

"I don't think he's in any real danger; he's got some powerful, *opinionated* folks in his corner," assured Grimbledung.[37]

"Isn't he a little old for Big Julie."

"Yeah, that's the consensus as well, apparently."

"Well, if you say so," said Drimblerod. He rubbed his hands together. "Hurry up, up there. I want to go get the lay of the town for the jamboree before tomorrow!"

"Right, right!" Grimbledung turned and went to the sink by the cupboard. Thanks to his size, he could wash up in it without any problem. Thanks to seeing him do it, Rat said he was scarred for life.

After only twenty minutes, Grimbledung came hopping down the stairs. His hair was still wet, leaving drips as he went. Colossus was there with Drimblerod. When he got to the bottom of the stairs, he shook his head fiercely. Water went everywhere. "Hey Col."

Colossus ignored the annoying shortening of his name. Halfling names conveyed greatness and power. He knew that Grimbledung didn't shorten it out of malice, but it was annoying just the same. "You need a haircut."

Grimbledung shook his head- water went everywhere again. "Cut *this*? That'd be like cutting down the Giant Bluewoods. Majestic things, those trees."

"I don't think your hair is in the same class as those three hundred foot trees."

Grimbledung posed. He ran his hands through his hair, it all pulled back as he did. When his hands reached the ends of his hair, it sprang back up even higher than a moment before. "Really?"

Drimblerod laughed. "Fine then; it's in the same school as those trees, a couple of classes down."

"I'll accept that." Grimbledung moved to the counter. "Well, I've got the shop if you want to go walking around." He smiled at Colossus. "You going with?"

Colossus nodded. "Well, I suppose so. I came by to talk to Drimblerod about some construction work..."

"Oooh- If there's one thing I do well it's not construction! Want my help?"

"No?" Tried Colossus.

"That's a good choice, I think," admitted Grimbledung. He snapped his fingers. "But, I'm a great painter so once you get it built, I can help paint whatever you're building."

Colossus looked at Drimblerod. "Painting?"

Drimblerod shrugged. "The wagon does look nice and sporty now that he painted it."

"I'll think about it, Grimbledung," promised Colossus. "And when we get our house built, I'll let you know."

Grimbledung did a little hop. Water flung out in all directions.

"Let's go Colossus, before we get soaked."

Colossus nodded. "A haircut would solve that, you know."

"Solve what?" Grimbledung ran his fingers through his hair again. Water ran out of his hands and down his arms.

"Never mind," Drimblerod put his arm on Colossus' shoulder. "Let's go. We can talk along the way."

Colossus smiled at Grimbledung. "Oh, I forgot to mention; the Lord High Priest of Halflings is coming to the festival."

"What?" Grimbledung clambered onto the stool behind the counter.

"He was invited since it's supposed to be a celebration of the armistice," explained Colossus as he and Drimblerod moved to the door.

"I thought the jamboree was because we are celebrating for kicking the Halfling's butts all over the map."

"Not as neighborly sounding that way. So since he's coming, you should lay low."

Door opened behind the pair.

"Lay low?"

"Not come to the jamboree."

"Whaaaat?!"

"You can go to the next one." Colossus backed out of the shop pulling Drimblerod with him.

"Yaaaaa!!!"

Grimbledung was still shrieking as Door closed.

"I like pushing his buttons every so often," explained Colossus. "Keeps him on his toes."

Drimblerod nodded. "You'll get no complaints from me. I push them as well for fun."

As the pair walked towards the center of town, Colossus explained his plans, even pulling out the sketches he had made in the Duck Inn and Dine.

As they got to the center of town, they ran into a very determined Pinky- he was on his way to have a talk with the town's new butcher. A serious talk. About who was the one and only male who should be paying any sort of attention to Big Julie.

Colossus and Drimblerod followed along, hoping for a good knock-down, drag-out between the two behemoths.

They ended up being sorely disappointed...

Chapter 49
Let's Get Ready To Rumble?

Pinky walked up to the table in front of the butcher's tent- there was an assortment of platters and trays spread out on it. *Stinking meat cutter making the moves on my woman! I'll serve* you *up on a platter you little pipsqueak.* "Hey, butcher!" Called Pinky tersely. He had heard of a certain man whom his current lover seemed visit regularly. It took just a day to discover it was the town's new butcher. From extensive experience, he knew that men became butchers when they were unable to master any sort of other physical profession. *Meat-cutting pipsqueaks!* Without mentioning anything to Julie about his insanely unstable jealous streak, he decided to have an up-close and highly personal talk with the man. By personally pounding him to a pulp. He had decided earlier in the day that he wouldn't mention his jealous streak until the aforementioned pounding had taken place. It was, he thought, an excellent idea:

Being the size that he was, he was confident the pounding would go just as he planned- completely one-sided with some hapless meat-cutter ending up looking like something he'd serve. And, Julie would appreciate his willingness to pound any and all male suitors to a pulp to ensure she only had eyes for him.

Perfection in one simple plan.

As he looked into the tent, a hulk of a man ducked under the flap with four plates in his hands. As he stood, Pinky noticed they were the same height. And width.

Trench nodded at the man before him. After a strange discussion with an equally peculiar Gnome child, Trench was now arranging his wares to determine how many of each dish he could fit on the table.

Just in case. "Ja," said Trench as he put the plates on the table. Out of habit, he wiped his hands on his apron then extended a massive hand. "That's me."

Pinky extended an equally sized hand.

The two exchanged a *very* firm grip. Pinky stared into Trench's eyes as he squeezed.

Trench stared into Pinky's eyes as he squeezed.

Any other's hand would have been crushed into a soupy mess.

After a long ten seconds, they both smiled.

The pair became instant, lifelong friends.

Dejected, Colossus and Drimblerod went to the Mora Tau to have some drinks.

Grimbledung caught up with them later that evening.

He almost, almost immediately started a brawl.

Almost.

Chapter 50
On the Great Shambler Plains

After the brawl but before daybreak...

Thanks to the full moon, a dark shadow crawled along the Great Shambler Plains. It passed over yet another dead wild Shambler. It was the seventh. Well over a dozen arrows were stuck in it. Just like the others. It had passed near ten more, just not over them. It's gigantic oars - two per side - moved back and forth, turning to slice forward, then they rotated to present their broad, flat canvas and wood faces to the nighttime breeze. Almost in unison, they moved backward, pushing the air in that direction and the craft in the other. Only the sounds of the oars creaking in their rowlocks and the rigging holding the five bladders of air above the decks gave away its presence. That and the 100-foot shadow it cast in the moonlight.

Pollux leaned over the side of the massive craft. "What is going on with these Shamblers?" He said in hushed tones because the crew was asleep. His stone features scrunched up. "Wasteful killing; that's all it is." He turned and moved back under the peaked canvas and glass that covered the deck. "Makes me want to find out who's doin' it and..."

"Yeah, I know," interrupted his brother. "I know; it's all you've talked about since the sun went down. You wan'ta do the same to them."

" 'Xactly," agreed Pollux. "You wanna help?"

Castor shook his head. "I just got put back in one piece." He sat down. "Now I want to just go sit out in front of that school and just relax for a good year or ten."

"Too much excitement?" Pollux moved beside the other gargoyle. "Yer getting' old, brother." He nudged him.

"That's true and I like it that way. *Not* getting old is high on my list of things not to do."

"What's on your list of things not to do?" Asked Koza as he walked over. Of the group of ten gargoyles, only the two goats had decided to join Castor and Pollux on their trip to Julesville. "Drawing the attention of nesting birds?"

"Not getting old," offered Castor.

"I know I'd like to get old," said Koza. "That's why we're coming to Julesville for a while."

"To sit still," offered Pollux.

"To rest up," said Castor. "And do a lot of nothing for a while."

"I suppose I can do that," said Pollux. "Well, for a little while anyway."

Koza grinned at the gargoyle. "Course we two don't have a nice cozy place to sit like you and your brother have. Think you can find us a nice perch?"

"Well, if you want to be entertained while you relax, I'd suggest sitting in front of those Gnomes' wand shop."

"Which Gnomes?" Koza sat facing the other two. "Gnomes plural?"

"Well, one was sort of at the battle." He thought back. "I think he spent most of it unconscious or hiding behind a golem, now that I think about it. He's got a partner."

"Well, that's one method, I suppose," said Koza. "Who's the partner?"

Castor shrugged. "Another Gnome like him. They sell used wands together."

"Used wands?" Koza said with surprise. "And folks buy used wands?"

Pollux nodded. "They do. Seems they're pretty successful at it from what I hear. So I wouldn't worry." He patted his friend on the shoulder. "I imagine he's a nice stable Gnome so you'll get to sit and relax and watch

folks walk by. They'll prolly even be willing to make you a nice stand so your feet aren't in the mud."

"Well, that doesn't sound so bad," said Koza. "I'm sure Gafr will appreciate it as well."

"No worries, you old goat," said Pollux. "What're friends for?"

It would be well over a century before Gafr stopped teasing Pollux and Castor about whose shop he and his brother were duped into sitting in front of. Koza would go on for another half-century past that.

"Well let's just all relax until we get there," suggested Castor. "I heard we're going to get there in time for the festivities this afternoon. So let's all relax so I can enjoy it when we get there. What're you two trying to do; to wake up the crew with your babbling?."

Pollux moved back to the railing and peered over. "Well what I want to do is find..."

"We'll do that too," interrupted Castor.

"Promise?"

"Promise." Deep down, he was also upset with the wanton killing of the shamblers. He wasn't against hunters or even eating meat- he appreciated the purpose of both quite well. Even though he did neither. It was the wasteful killing of creatures that didn't sit right with him. He looked up at the full moon as it cast its yellow light down on the plains. It hung low in the dark sky foretelling of a soon-to-happen sunrise. He hoped the hunter wasn't in town.

The massive craft continued on a generally straight path for Julesville. It would arrive on time later that afternoon.

And dock right next to the party that was killing shamblers.



Chapter 51
Shambler? On a Pike?

Earlier at Second-Hand Sorcery...

Grimbledung waved at the two Humans as they left the shop. "Thanks for shopping at Second-Hand Sorcery," he called. "And come back when you need another wand." He turned and looked at Rat. "Is it closing time *now*?" he hopped back and forth. "It's practically dark out!"

Rat nodded. "It's close enough, I suppose."

Grimbledung hopped back and forth. "Ooooh! I'll get that stinky Drimblerod for sneaking off to the Mora Tau without me." He punched one hand into the other. "I mean, what kind of partner says they're going out to take care of official work-related business only to end up at some alcohol-serving establishment for the rest of the day?"

"Well, you, for starters."

"Well, that's different," replied Grimbledung. "I'm usually a victim of circumstance."

The bell over Door rang as it opened.

"Ooooh!" Grimbledung hopped back and forth.

"You should have flipped the sign," offered Rat. "Now you're stuck until you deal with these customers that will probably browse the shelves." With a smile he added: "For *hours*."

"Ooooh!" Grimbledung scowled at Rat. As he turned, the scowl became a smile. "And welcome to Second-Ha...." His voice trailed off as he looked at the four heavily armed Halflings. "... ha... ha... hand sorry, we're closed!" He finished quickly.

"Yer sign says your open, kid," said the lead Halfling.

The other Halflings nodded in approval. Two repeated 'kid'.

"Well, you just can't trust that sign. I blame upbringing for that. I'm sure that sign's parents did their best to raise him from a wee 'no pets allowed' sign to a full-fledged 'hours-of-operation' sign, but you know the story; a sign falls in with the wrong crowd, usually a group of mile markers. Then the next thing you know he's playing for money in a pinch back suit and listening to some big out of town jasper talk about horse race gambling..."

"Shut up," said the Halfling. He put his hand on his sword.

"That I'd like to see," admitted Rat. He twitched his whiskers.

"Shut up, *rodent*," said the Halfling. The rest of the Halflings put their hands on their swords. "Your parents here?" He said to Grimbledung.

Grimbledung looked behind himself. Wondering if his parents were there. He was very relieved they weren't- they had been dead for quite a long time. "No, thank goodness," he said as he turned back around to face the Halfling soldiers.

Rat looked from Grimbledung to the Halfling and back again. "Want me to take this so we can get to the bar quicker?"

Grimbledung nodded. "All of a sudden, I need to pee." Without another word, he turned and ducked under the curtain. On the other side, he turned and peeked out.

"Well, Mister Halfling. If you want me to be quiet, this is going to be a real one-sided conversation." Rat sat up. "So what do you need?" He spread his furry arms out wide. "You folk looking for a quality used wand? Or four?"

"We're looking for a shambler."

The other Halflings nodded. They were looking for it too.

"Well then you should try the livery. Wands is what we have here. Livestock is what they have there."

"We've already been there," said another Halfling. He frowned.

Rat grinned. "Not the most pleasant of Dwarves, is she?"

The Halfling nodded. “Some of the things she said really hurt.”

“Shut up!” The lead Halfling punched the other. He turned back to Rat. “So we talked to that vile Dwarfess and she didn’t have no talking shamblers. Said she’d only heard one shambler talk but didn’t know where it was from. Since folks said this shop had a talking rat, we came here.”

“I can assure you that I have never personally seen a talking shambler.” Rat smiled as a devious thought came to him. He looked over his shoulder at the curtain. He was sure Grimbledung was hiding behind it. He looked back at the Halflings. “I saw a potato stand. Heard a rubber band.” Rat twitched his whiskers. “And I’ve seen a needle that winked its eye. But I be done seen about everything...”

Grimbledung burst from behind the curtain. He dropped to one knee and sang

When I see a Shambler talk…
What’s that?

When I see a Shambler taa-aalk!

He spread his arms out wide.

“You people,” said the Halfling. He drew his sword. “I want to know where the talking shambler is, and I want to know now.”

“Why-eee?” Grimbledung sing-songed. He still had his arms spread wide. He waggled his fingers.

“Stop doing that, kid,” ordered the Halfling. “That’s your last warning.”

Grimbledung dropped his arms to his sides then stood.

“What do you want with a talking shambler?” Rat asked. “Looking to hire him?”

"Kind of." The Halfling pointed his sword at Rat. "We're going to try it, convict it, then stick it on a pike."

"Never seen a talking shambler," said Rat again.

Grimbledung dropped to one knee. "Want a second verse? Got one all thought up and it mostly rhymes."

The Halfling slammed his sword into its sheath. "If you see one, report it to us and you'll be repaid handsomely."

"Fine. But don't call me handsome," said Grimbledung. He put his arms out and waggled his fingers. "Hah chaaa!"

The Halflings turned and left the shop without another word.

"Well, that's not good, right Rat?"

Rat shook his head. "Not one bit. I think we should keep my shambler days to an absolute minimum for a while."

Grimbledung nodded. "Ooooh!" He hopped to his feet and ran to the sign in the window. He flipped it. "We're closed! Let's get to the Mora Tau! We've important business there!"

"I agree," said Rat. "We need to let Drimblerod know that the Halflings are looking for me".

Grimbledung shook his head. "Well, I suppose that too. I meant catching up on the drinking."

"No brawls this time." Rat pointed a finger at Grimbledung. "Not a single punch thrown. Especially with all these Halflings in town all of a sudden."

Grimbledung feinted offence. "*Me*? Who me?" He pointed at his chest. "I just can't imagine. You must have me confused with some other Gnome."

"That's probably it." Rat hopped off the counter, scurried over to Grimbledung and ran up his side. He sat on his shoulder. "Let's go have a nice quiet, *non-brawling* evening then."

"A nice quiet evening? What's that like?" Grimbledung waggled his ears.

"You should really try it, you know." He twitched his whiskers. "Hey, at your size, a regular mug is almost the size of the drinks that Nulu drinks. To scale that is."

"Wooo!" Cheered Grimbledung. He scooted out of the shop and practically jogged to the Mora Tau Bar and BAR.

When they arrived (and after he snuck in since he still appeared to be underage), they found Drimblerod and Colossus sitting at a table in the basement room. As usual, all the tables were occupied by a variety of races. There were however, a large number of Halflings present, spread out at several tables.

Chapter 52

Gnomes, and Halflings, and... Mary?

Oh My.

"Drimblerod!" Grimbledung hopped into the empty chair at the table gingerly. "So this is where you're hiding out!" He looked at the table. It was covered with slash marks from the barmaid. "Hey! That's a lot of drinks!"

Drimblerod toasted his partner. "So how's it feel when your partner says they're going to take care of business and disappear for the rest of the day?"

"Do not answer that," warned Rat.

Grimbledung nodded. "My legal counsel has advised me to not answer that question."

"Want a drink?" Colossus asked.

Grimbledung craned his neck to look at Rat.

"Yes," suggested Rat. "Two, in fact."

"Yes. Two in fact," repeated Grimbledung.

Colossus waved at the barmaid and held up two fingers.

"So how has your day gone?" Grimbledung asked suspiciously.

"Quite well," said Drimblerod. He took another sip of his drink. "Got a lot done."

"I see that," said Grimbledung. He looked at Colossus. "How about you, deputy? Lots of law enforcing accomplished on your shift?"

"Well..." Began Colossus.

"He's been keeping me company, Grim. And keeping an eye on the Halflings down here."

"I'm a little worried with the number of Halfling soldiers that have shown." Colossus looked around the bar. "And I don't just mean down here. I mean in town, here."

"They all come together?"

Colossus nodded at Rat. "They are the Lord High Priest of Halflings' security contingent. If it's a full contingent, there's a hundred of them." He shook his head. "Not sure why he'd need that many with no hostilities going on."

The barmaid slipped two mugs onto the table.

"Hey Mary!" Said Grimbledung. "You're looking fine this evening!"

"Excuse me?" Mary glowered down at the youthful looking Gnome. "We don't serve minors down here."

"No, no! It's me!" Grimbledung waggled his ears. "See?"

"That's not much of an endorsement," said Mary.

"It's all right," said Colossus. "It's Grimbledung; he was just undercover at Julie's school. I can vouch that he's really of legal drinking age."

"Grimbledung?"

Drimblerod nodded. "Hard to imagine him as a kid, huh?"

"Not at all what I pictured." Mary laughed. "That's sure an epic amount of hair you have there."

"Right?" Grimbledung waggled his ears again. "I'm a good looking kid!" He smiled at Mary. "So how're things?"

"Better without brawls," she warned. "Even miniature ones."

"See?" Said Rat.

"Well, I'm on my bestest behavior tonight," Grimbledung assured her.

"That didn't go so well last time," she said as she added two slashes to the table. "Two more drinks and you'll have to settle your tab," she said to Drimblerod. "Sorry."

He gave her a nod. "No worries. Bring them on your next pass, along with the tab."

The barmaid gave a nod then moved off to tend other tables.

Rat hopped off Grimbledung's shoulder and onto the handle of the mug. "It seems, Colossus, that among other things, those soldiers are here looking for a talking shambler."

"Talking shambler? I've never heard a shambler talk."

Grimbledung stood with a smile. He spread his arms out wide and cleared his throat.

"No singing!" Rat, Drimblerod, and Colossus all said at the same time.

Grimbledung sat with a frown.

"Well, that's what they're looking for," said Rat. "If you could find out more details that might be helpful."

Drimblerod winked at him. "Well, I'll keep an eye out."

"Sounds good to me," said Rat.

"I propose a toast to a quiet evening of drinking," said Drimblerod.

"Here, here," said Colossus.

"Of course here," said Grimbledung. "Where else?"

"Here we go," said Rat. "I might as well start numbing the senses." He stuck his head into his drink.

Mary returned with two fresh drinks for Drimblerod and Colossus. "That'd be four silver." She wasn't worried about the Gnomes - or the Deputy for that matter- skipping out on their tab; they were regulars. It was just that ParmerLee had a ten-drinks-per-tab rule that she had to follow.

Drimblerod reached into his belt pouch and pulled out four silver coins. "I'll get yours at the end." He gave Grimbledung a wary glance. "It's on a sliding scale depending on how things go."

Mary took the four coins. She smiled at Drimblerod. "No worries." She was well aware of the Gnome's tipping habits and knew that he would do her justice before the end of the night. "Let's hope for a quiet evening." She looked around the room. " ' Course the deck's stacked against it right now."

"We'll do our part, Mary," assured Grimbledung. He hefted his mug with two hands to toast her. "Don't you worry!"

With an unconvinced headshake, she moved off.

"Well, I need to run out back and get rid of some drinks." Colossus stood. "Keep an eye on my drink, will you?"

Drimblerod was torn. He also needed to use the outhouse. Badly. But he didn't want to leave Grimbledung alone. Invariably he started a brawl when left on his own. He looked from Colossus to Grimbledung, a pained look on his face.

"Go pee, Drim. I'll just sit and enjoy my drink." Grimbledung waved his hand at his partner. "Shoo."

"Well, honestly..." Began Drimblerod.

Grimbledung startled. "Oh, that's fine too!" He smiled. "Poop if you have to. I'll wait here."

"Nice," said Rat.

Drimblerod shook his head. "No, Grimbledung. That's not it."

"Throw up?" Tried Grimbledung. "Go right ahead, I suppose. But that seems like a waste of good alcohol."

"No!" Drimblerod stood. "I'm just worried about you being here by yourself. You usually start a brawl."

"I still gotta pee," said Colossus. "If you ladies are going to take all night..."

Grimbledung winked at his partner. "I give you my word I shan't throw a single punch this entire evening."

"I'll keep an eye on things," assured Rat. "Go pee."

"Or poop," offered Grimbledung with a wink.

"I'm leaving," said Colossus. "My back teeth are floating." He turned and shakily walked to the spiral staircase.

Drimblerod moved to follow the Halfling. He didn't walk in a straight line either.

"So we're just going to sit and drink then," said Rat.

"Not a punch from me," said Grimbledung. "Don't you worry." He picked up his mug. "Besides, I'm way behind here judging how

them two made it to the stairs." He took a deep drink of his ale then appraised the mug. "Niiiice. This thing is *massive*!"

Mary approached them. "So you fellows looking for something to eat as well?"

Rat nodded. "Anything but vegetables for me."

"How about those turn-baked chickens."

"Rotisserie?" Mary leaned way down onto the table putting herself at eye-level with the small Gnome.

"Well, if that's what they come with." Grimbledung waggled his ears. He tried furiously to maintain eye contact with Mary. For the most part he did.

"How many do you want?"

Grimbledung thought for a moment. "Have they had anything to eat?" He pointed at the two empty chairs.

Mary gasped and stood upright.

"Sorry! I didn't realize that was a sensitive question!" Grimbledung exclaimed.

Mary turned around. "One of you pinches me again and you'll be out on your ear," she said to a table of Halflings- four in all.

"What's that I just heard?" Said a Halfling. "A complaint from a doxie?"

The Halflings at the table all laughed.

Grimbledung stood. "That's my *friend* you're handling there, pal. I'll not tolerate that."

"Friends with a doxie?" The Halfling snorted. "Or are you a *paying customer*?" He leered at Mary. "*Servicing* minors? You should be ashamed of yourself, doxie!"

The laughter spread to the adjacent table of Halflings.

Grimbledung shook with anger.

"Grim," said Rat. "You *promised*."

Grimbledung nodded at Rat. "I did. I promised to not throw a single punch." He picked his chair high over his head- he was surprised with the weight of it. *Someone's carried a chair from upstairs down here!*

"What're you going to do with that light bit of kindling?" The Halfling smirked at Grimbledung.

In one fluid motion, Grimbledung shifted his feet to handle the regular-weight chair and brought it down on the Halfling's head. Even being a regular chair, it splintered into a dozen pieces as it knocked the Halfling to the floor, dazed.

Grimbledung backed a step and kicked the Halfling in the head, knocking him onto his back. When he got there, he didn't move. Grimbledung pointed the chair leg at the other Halflings. "Stinking Halflings!"

All the Halflings in the room stood.

The chatter stopped completely.

All eyes were on the youthful-looking Grimbledung and the broken chair leg he was holding.

A sharp *Ka-Clack* broke the silence.

All eyes turned to the bar. Maurice had a very large, loaded crossbow in his hands. "There'll be none of that."

Mary smiled at Grimbledung. "Thanks Grim," she said.

"Sure thing, Mary." He turned to look at the bartender. "Thanks Maurice!"

Maurice gave Grimbledung a nod. "No trouble at all, Mister Sixtoes." He looked around the room. "Now why don't you all sit back down and continue to enjoy your evening?"

"You heard Mister Tarbender!" Grimbledung said. "Back to the enjoyment!"

He grabbed a chair from a nearby table. It felt as light as it should have. He hopped onto it. "So where were we?"

"You want chickens for everyone?"

"No vegetables," reminded Rat.

Mary nodded. "Three chickens, four plates. And no vegetables."

Grimbledung toasted her with his mug and took another drink. "Sounds great!"

Rat followed suit.

While they were drinking, another employee of the bar brought a chair over and put the still-groggy Halfling in it. After a stern warning, he left the wobbling Halfling with a new drink.

Drimblerod and Colossus came down the stairs. The bar was full of people talking and laughing. Not a chair was in flight, not a mug shattered. "Well, that's a sight!"

"I'll say," said Colossus, "I expected a full on brawl going on. Maybe we should keep that partner of yours pint-sized for a while longer."

The pair made it to the table as Mary slipped three smoking chickens onto the table. She dealt out four plates. "The chickens are on me." She gave Grimbledung a wink.

"So what's that all about?" Drimblerod asked.

Grimbledung pulled a leg off the chicken. "Nothing at all, Drim." He waved the leg at his partner. "Now eat up and don't cause any trouble."

The Halfling at the table beside them fell out of his chair.

"What's with him?" Asked Drimblerod.

Grimbledung shrugged. "Probably can't hold his liquor."

Rat nodded. "That's it, most likely."

The foursome drank and ate late into the evening, and then the early morning. They were finally shoo'ed upstairs by Maurice after all the other patrons. They weaved and teetered their way up the stairs and out into the street.

Drimblerod, Grimbledung, and Rat made their way back to Second-Hand Sorcery and into bed. With no fighting and just good, solid drinking and eating to fill their evening, they were very pleased with themselves.

Colossus made his way back to the Duck Inn and Dine.

Chéri was not pleased with him at all.

Chapter 53
It's the Day of the Victory over Halflings Day Jamboree!!

"Shhh, not so loud." Grimbledung rolled out of bed. His head throbbed. "It's the day of the victory over Halflings day jamboree," he whispered. "Say it like that." Gingerly, he made his way to the POOPA. Each footstep felt like a hammer hitting his head. He looked twice to make sure there wasn't someone behind him, bopping him on the head. Tentatively he reached out for the pole- it was fuzzy but still in focus enough for him to aim for. He took several steps back and leapt towards it. The squeaking of the pole as he slid down it sounded like the shrieks of the BanShee.

By the time he made it (again gingerly) back upstairs, Drimblerod was sitting at the table. With his head on it.

"You alive?" Grimbledung asked.

"I don't think so."

"So that's a first."

"Me dying? I suppose it is."

Grimbledung shook his head. It felt as if there were several loose rocks bouncing back and forth in it. "A night at the Mora Tau without a brawl."

Drimblerod raised his head. "We need coffee."

"You going to make coffee?"

"Shhh!" Drimblerod said. He clutched his head afterwards. "It would be too loud. Want to sneak over to the Duck?"

Grimbledung nodded. Now the rocks were bouncing up and down. "Only if we do it quietly."

"You want to grab Rat?"

"Only if we do it quietly." Grimbledung looked around the room through squinted eyes. "Where's the little rodent?"

"Downstairs was the last I saw him. Pushed up against the counter."

"What's he doing there?"

Drimblerod stood. "I tried to put him on the counter but I missed. Then I was afraid if I bent over to pick him up, I'd throw up then fall over. Or fall over then throw up. Or however else you can make a combination of those two." He rubbed his eyes. "So I left him there."

"Better safe than sorry, I suppose. He's on the way so I'll grab him."

Drimblerod came around the table and grasped the bannister. "Let's go." He cringed as he made his way down the stairs, his partner right behind him.

When they reached the bottom, Grimbledung made a detour to the counter. Rat was propped up against it, head down, tail in the air. Snoring loudly. "C'mere you." He picked up Rat, using the stool as support on the way down and back up.

"We there yet?" Rat asked.

"Almost. Go back to sleep. I'll let you know when we're there."

Rat returned to snoring.

Door opened to allow Drimblerod and Grimbledung out. The bright sunshine assailed them. "Stupid sun," said Grimbledung. He shaded his eyes with Rat. "Let's get indoors quick-like."

Drimblerod nodded. "Follow me."

The pair made their way down the boardwalk, trying to avoid the direct rays of the sun as much as possible. Finally after what seemed like an eternity -but was actually less than ten minutes- they reached the door of the Duck Inn and Dine.

Drimblerod tugged the door open. "After you." He gestured into the welcoming darkness of the foyer.

Grimbledung, still holding Rat over his eyes, ducked into the building. "Finally. I think that sun had it out for us."

The pair turned left and managed to push their way through the curtain. They selected a booth in a quiet corner. Grimbledung put Rat on the table. "We're here Rat."

Drimblerod waved at the serving wench.

The Gnomess came to the table with a smile on her face. "Well, look what the Rat dragged in. Mister Grimbledung Sixtoes, I presume?"

"Technically, I dragged him in," corrected Grimbledung. "And stop shouting, *Mistress* Flora O. Willowfeet."

Not only did Flora never shorten Grimbledung's name, Grimbledung always called the serving wench by her full name.

"So some coffee, eggs, and some bacon?" Flora gave a fake frown. "For the poor, hung-over shop owners?"

"And me," said Rat. "Don't forget me."

Flora laughed. "How could I? You're a key employee. Or so I've been told."

Rat rolled over onto his back. "You'll just have to pour the coffee in me, Flora."

"If you two are done being loud," said Drimblerod, "I'd appreciate some quiet". He put his head back on the table.

"And some toast 'n butter," said Grimbledung. "If there's any to spare."

Flora nodded. "There is. We were just getting ready to throw it out."

"Throw it out, Flora O. Willowfeet?" Grimbledung peered up at her through fuzzy eyes. "What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing at all. It's just that lunchtime crowd prefers rolls over toast. And it'll be stale by tomorrow."

"Lunchtime?" Drimblerod rolled his head to the side to look at her.

"Yes you... three," she said. "It's practically midday."

"Then we better eat quick-like so we don't miss lunch."

"I'll be right back, Grimbledung," said Flora with a smile.

"You know, that Flora gal's all right," said Rat. "Why don't you stop chasing around other Gnomes and set your sights on her, Grim?"

Grimbledung put his head on the table. "Don't be absurd. That female drives me insane."

"-er" said Drimblerod.

Rat laughed.

Grimbledung didn't get the joke. Ever. "Or what?"

"Fine then. Insane-or," said Drimblerod.

Rat laughed.

"Or what?" Grimbledung held his head. "Stop doing that. Or at least do it quieter."

By the time Flora returned, the Gnomes were sitting up and chatting. Though still quietly. "Here we go gents." She slid the tray she was holding against her hip onto the table. "Just what the doctor ordered."

"Doctor's orders?" Asked Grimbledung. "Sounds official."

Flora rolled her eyes. "Yes, so you have to eat all of it. In the correct order."

"Correct order?"

Rat snickered.

"Yes. First all the eggs, then the bacon, then the toast." She stifled a smile. "And the coffee alternates between bites as needed."

"That's how I was going to eat it anyway."

"Well, aren't you the professional, Grimbledung."

Grimbledung nodded at Flora. "I really am a professional."

"If you two are finished with your lively, bordering on flirting banter."

"What?"

"What?"

Rat gave them each the once over with his good eye. "Never mind; hangover humor." He sat up. "Let's get this meal in us."

Grimbledung nodded. "Sounds good to me, Rat. I'm starving you know. Starving."

"You ate three chickens last night," said Drimblerod.

"And not a thing today," replied Grimbledung as Flora moved the food from her tray to the table. "And it's almost half over." He groaned to emphasize the point. "Starving."

Flora picked up a piece of bacon and held it out for Grimbledung. "There, there, you poor Gnome. This will get you going."

He ate it from her hand. "Thanks, Flora O. Willowfeet."

"Am I the only one seeing this?" Rat shook his head. "Pour me some coffee someone."

Drimblerod obliged Rat, then his partner, filling his own cup last. "Thanks Flora. You're a lifesaver."

"Only not quite as round." Grimbledung gave her a once over. "Well, mostly anyway."

Drimblerod cringed because he knew what was going to happen. It happened nearly every time they were in the Duck Inn and Dine. Sometimes more than once during the same meal.

Rat leaned forward in anticipation.

Flora bonked the tray on Grimbledung's head. Hard. "Good day to you, Grimbledung."

"What'd I say?!" Grimbledung rubbed the top of his head. "I'm telling you; that female's going to be the death of me!"[38]

After an hour of eating, the Gnomes had regained enough of their strength to order lunch. Rat decided to skip the second meal and wander the booths to see if he could hear anything else about the Halfling's plans.

"We'll catch up in a little bit," said Grimbledung as he picked up a radish. He waved it at Rat. "Find out who's got the best deals for food."

Rat nodded. "I'll do what I can, but I'm mainly going to try and find out more about this crazy Halfling plan to kill any and all shamblers."

"That's important too, I suppose." Grimbledung popped the radish in his mouth. "And not very neighborly, I must say."

Rat scampered out.

"Say, Grim," said Drimblerod. He leaned back and peeked out the window. "The weather's fine out there. Want to take what we have left and go walking around?"

"Take it to go?" Grimbledung looked at the table. "I suppose we could. All we need is some flatbread and I think I can roll up all I have left in a couple of them." He waved his hand over his head furiously.

"You know she hates when you do that, right?"

"How else does one get the attention of a female?"

"Well you could start with a compliment."

"Really?" Grimbledung stopped waving his hand.

"I couldn't hurt," offered his partner.

"Really?"

"Try it," suggested Drimblerod. "You'll see."

Flora approached the table. She tucked her tray under her arm. "What's the crisis now?"

Grimbledung looked appraisingly at Drimblerod.

Drimblerod nodded. "Go on," he said.

Grimbledung turned to look at Flora. "You know, your hair is long."

Flora looked at Grimbledung.

Grimbledung looked at Drimblerod.

Drimblerod nodded. Again.

"You don't look like other gals."

Flora took her serving tray from under her arm.

Grimbledung looked at his partner, panicked.

Drimblerod gave a wink with his nod. "You got this."

"You have beautiful eyes. Can I touch them?"

Flora grasped her serving tray with both hands.

"You're attractive, but not in a traditional sense!"

Flora raised the serving tray over her head.

"Gah! You'll make a great mother!"

Flora lowered the tray slightly.

"You sure have the hips for childbearing," Grimbledung added triumphantly.

Flora bashed Grimbledung on the head with her serving tray. It bent in half with the force. She walked off angrily, but Grimbledung didn't notice because of the bright flashes he was seeing.

"You're about as wrong as can be," said Grimbledung.

"Me? What'd I do?"

"You said it couldn't hurt." Grimbledung rubbed his head. "My headache is back."

"I don't think we're getting flatbread," said Drimblerod.

"Should I try again?"

Drimblerod shook his head. "Let's just cut our losses. You might just spend the rest of the day at the doctor's office."

Grimbledung nodded. "Well, I'm at least taking the *radishes* with me. I paid for them fair and square." He began stuffing his pockets with radishes. When he couldn't fit any more in, he stood, and then added several more. The rest he shoved down the front of his pants. The front of his trousers were bulging out considerably. "How's that?"

"Now you might just spend the rest of the day in jail."

Grimbledung waggled his ears. "I'll be fine. Let's go see what there is to see in yon Jamboree."

Drimblerod stood up. He took several pieces of meat and stuffed them into the remaining roll. “Better than nothing, I suppose.” He toasted his partner with the meat-filled bread. “Let’s go.”

Grimbledung waddled to the curtain. When they got there, Flora was stepping around the bar with several drinks on a new tray. “Flora O. Willowfeet, I have to confess...”

She looked in his direction.

Grimbledung put his hands on his hips. “You bring out the worst in me.”

Flora gaped at Grimbledung’s bulging trousers. She took a drink off her tray and threw it at him.

Grimbledung ducked as the drink sailed right where his head was a moment before. It shattered against the beam beside him, showering him with Ale. “Gah! Mad Gnomess! Mad Gnomess!” He ducked under the curtain as she reached for another drink.

“Flora, I just want to say...” Began Drimblerod.

Flora put her hand on another drink. “Yes?” She said icily.

“In Grimbledung’s defense...” When she reared back with the glass, he also ducked under the curtain.

Chapter 54
Victory Over Halflings Day Jamboree!

Drimblerod scooted through the foyer and out the door. Grimbledung was holding it open. And chewing on a radish. "That gal's unstable." He pointed back into the establishment with the remnants of the radish. "Un. Stable."

"*You* need to work on your compliments."

"*She* needs to work on her unstableness."

"Let's deal with that later," suggested Drimblerod. "Let's go over to the square to... see... what..." His voice trailed off as he looked up at the sky.

"You all right, partner?" Grimbledung took a step towards him. "What's wrong?"

Drimblerod pointed at the sky behind Grimbledung. "That," he said simply.

Grimbledung's eyes tracked to where Drimblerod was pointing. There in the sky, ostensibly above the square in the center of town were two immense ships. They seemed to be lashed together. Above them were several equally massive bladders. Two pairs of oars hung down like four massive tentacles. "What in the lands?"

"I think the gargoyles are back!" Drimblerod put his arm around his partner. "Let's go see."

"The gargoyles ride in *that*?"

"From what I heard, the sorcerer that made them rides around in it when he's not doing sorcery stuff." He looked up at it again, squinting to try to make out details. "It's not exactly like I heard it described from back at Frank's Keep."

"Well, you know what they say; talk is cheap when the dirigible is good, and the tales grow taller on down the line."

"I don't know anyone who says that."

The pair rounded a corner- the square was less than a block away now. Groups of people were moving in the same direction to get a closer look at the monstrous contraption. "Well, it's about the same size, but it looks a lot more professionally built."

"Maybe they made improvements," offered Grimbledung. "Got some better artists working on it or something."

"They're called carpenters."

"Artists, carpenters; same difference I'd imagine."

"In any case," said Drimblerod. "Let's go see the gargoyles."

The two Gnomes entered the large open square at the center of town. Booths were lined up sporadically around the edges with more set up in groups of three or four pushing their way towards the center of the square. The entire set up created a maze for pedestrians.

"What in the lands?" Grimbledung motioned across the area. "*This* is what happens when you don't plan properly." He pointed an accusatory finger at the haphazardly placed booths. "What. In. The. Lands."

"Well, it's too late to do anything about it now," said Drimblerod. He looked around the large square. "You can complain to Julie later. The ship's moored on the far side. Let's go over."

As the pair moved through the crowd, weaving around booths as they went, they watched as a large stone goat was lowered from one of the ships.

"That there is one large goat hanging in the sky," remarked Grimbledung. "Don't see that every day."

When they got to the far side of the market, the goat had just reached the ground. Two men unlashed him and the ropes were quickly pulled back up to the ship.

"Excuse me, Mister Goat," began Drimblerod, unsure of how to address the gargoyle.

"Gafr," the goat said as he shook his head, letting the shake work its way down its massive shoulders, back, and finally its hindquarters.

"Excuse me, Gafr," Drimblerod said without missing a beat. "Would you by chance be traveling with a couple of gargoyles?"

"Can ya be more specific?"

"They are a couple of gargoyle brothers called Castor and Pollux."

Gafr nodded. "They're still up top with Phileous."

"That another gargoyle?" Grimbledung asked.

"No, sonny; he's our maker. Won't come down himself until we're all down safe and sound." Gafr looked skyward. "Here we go."

Grimbledung craned his neck to look up at the airship. There was another equally large goat being lowered from the floating craft by several thick ropes. "Well, you don't see that every day," he remarked. "Usually, that is."

"Does Julie know you folks are in town?"

Gafr shook his head at Drimblerod. "Just got in. Castor figured she'd see the ship."

"It doesn't look like I heard it described," admitted Drimblerod.

"It's the updated version," explained the gargoyle.

"Well, I'll go find Big Julie and let her know you and...and..." Grimbledung looked up again.

"Koza" offered Gafr.

"... Koza and her two gargoyle friends are back in town. I'm sure she'll be pleased."

"She doesn't know us, but you can mention us anyway. We were looking for a place to stay in town." Gafr looked around the crowded square. "Pollux said we should find these two Gnomes that sell used wands and park ourselves in front of their place."

"Should you?! Should you?!" Grimbledung hopped back and forth.

"Uhm..." Gafr wasn't sure how to answer the suddenly agitated Gnome.

"Grimbledung, why don't you go track down Julie and I'll stay with the gargoyles?" Drimblerod put his hand on his partner's shoulder to stop his hopping.

Grimbledung nodded furiously. "Oh... boy-oh, boy-oh, boy-oh!" He turned and ran off at top speed. Directly beside where the gargoyle's massive airship was docked was a large, black tent. Not wanting to waste time going around it, he ran through the flaps on his side.

The large tent was full of Halflings. He tried to weave between them but they seemed to be crowded together in some sort of formation. Unable to dodge them all, he bounced off one and fell on his butt. "Hey there!"

A Halfling seated in a massive, ornate chair leaned forward. "What is the meaning of this?"

Grimbledung turned on his butt to face the Halfling. "Well you see, I was minding my own business when this chap here," Grimbledung pointed at the Halfling soldier ~~he had run into~~ that had gotten in his way. "Stood right there!"

"What?" asked the soldier. "Get out of here, kid!"

Grimbledung scooted around on his butt to face him. "Don't you 'kid' me!"

"Oh, I'm not kidding," said the Soldier.

"Leave the jokes to the Gnomes!"

"If they could tell them, I would," countered the soldier.

"Hey!" Grimbledung pointed a finger at him. "Stop that!"

"Silence!" Commanded the Halfling from the chair. All the Halflings turned to look at him. "As Lord High Priest of the Great Halfling Empire, I command you to be quiet!"

Grimbledung pivoted back around to face him. "Who put you in charge?"

The Lord High Priest glowered at the insolent child. "I was put in charge by the *gods* when I was deemed worthy in the Rite of Bobbing."

"The what? Who's Bob?"

The Lord High Priest exhaled angrily. "All prospective priests are tied to a large stone and placed in the Pool of Reflections. The first one to come to the surface is deemed worthy by the gods to be the Lord High Priest."

"Well that's just absurd. Tossing priests into ponds is no basis for a system of government. Supreme executive power derives from a mandate from the masses, not from some farcical aquatic ceremony."

The Lord High Priest narrowed his eyes at the child that he would have executed. It would be the third this week. He was hoping for an even four so this one would put him over the hump. "What?"

"You can't expect to wield supreme priestly power just because some god helped you untie your hands from a watery grave."

"Silence!"

Grimbledung shook his head. "If I went around saying I was Emperor of the Five Gnome Kingdoms, just because I'd untied my shoes after a rainstorm, they'd put me away."

"Excellent idea; take him away." He waved his hand dismissively. "Stick him on a spear to make three."

"Yaa!" Grimbledung hopped to his feet. "Three on a spear is back luck, I should think." He dusted off his breeches. "Tell you what El-Aitch-Pee; I'll go fetch a handy lance to stick my dangling prepositions on." He peered at the soldier. "How was that?"

He scrunched up his face. "Good timing, but I think you forced it."

"Will it get me off?"

"No; once you're on the spear, you don't come off until we take you off." He motioned to his fellow soldiers. "Seize him."

Grimbledung held up his hands. "Now hold on just a grain of sand! No one, and I mean *no one* is sticking the mighty Grimbledung Sixtoes, esquire on a stick like some bar-b-cued squirrel!"

"Stick him on a pole." Commanded the Lord High Priest. He smacked his lips. "Then get me a bar-b-cued squirrel."

"Look up there! It's the king pole! That outranks a high priest pole!"

The Halfling soldiers looked at the ceiling of the tent.

Grimbledung sprinted for the closest flap. As he ducked under it, he was immediately surrounded by the crowds that seemed to be having a hard time moving around the haphazardly positioned booths. As he ran, he passed by a booth selling various smoked and roasted meats on skewers. "Got any squirrels?"

"I've only got two left," said the booth owner. "Seem to be pretty popular," he remarked absently. "Got more on the way but they'll not be ready until tonight."

"I'll take them both!" Grimbledung tossed two copper coins at the man. A devious thought came to him. "If a Halfling comes looking for one, tell them that you sold the last one to Grimbledung."

"Grimbledung?"

"It's an inside joke," Grimbledung assured the man as he took possession of the squirrels. "Thanks!" He turned ran off.

"That your kid?"

Drimblerod shook his head at the gargoyle. "It's a loooong story." He took a step back as Koza was lowered beside his brother. "Mayhap I can tell it to you one day once you're settled. I'm Drimblerod, co-owner of Second-Hand Sorcery..."

Grimbledung dashed around people, and sometimes under them as he made his way through the square. When he finished the squirrels,

he tossed the sticks aside so he could push his way through the forest of legs hampering his progress. He had given up shouting for people to move; they either didn't listen or seemed to get in his way on purpose. "Get outta my way!" He screeched as he ducked through a yet another set of legs. A large, very hairy leg filled his vision as he ran headlong into it. His head bonked against a leg that seemed to be filled with iron. Then covered with fur. He looked up. Way up.

A large Minotaur looked down at Grimbledung. "You almost made me spill my drink, kid," he said.

"Well watch where I'm going!" Grimbledung picked himself up. "You... you..."

"Mink," offered the Minotaur.

"Well, you don't look much like a mink," said Grimbledung. He moved a step away so he could look the massive creature in the eyes. "They're long and low to the ground with little legs. You're... You're..."

"Name's Mink, kid. I'm a Minotaur." Mink adjusted the paper umbrella in his drink, then took a sip. "Nice," he said to no one in particular. Particularly *not* the unusual Gnome child before him.

"Be serious."

The Minotaur snorted. "What?"

"There's only one Minotaur named Mink, and you aren't him. He lives in the Foreboding Forest and carries a huge stone hammer."

Mink leaned on his hammer as he pulled the tiny paper umbrella out of his drink and stuck it through the large gold ring that adorned his ear. "Right. We've met before.."



"No. The only Minotaur I've met is Mink. I told you that, you oaf. Two Minotaire called Mink? I've never heard such a thing." Grimbledung shook his head. "Some folk'll do anything."

"Kid, you're not going to be any such thing if you don't go away. I'm trying to enjoy this drink."

"Well who's stopping you, you lummox?"

Mink reached down and picked up Grimbledung.

"Hey! Put me down you big impersonating lout!"

Without putting very much effort into it (lest he spill his drink), Mink threw Grimbledung across the market square.

Grimbledung was pleased to see that the Minotaur had thrown him in the direction he was already going. He wasn't pleased where he was going to land. "Look out!" He shouted as he sailed headfirst. "LOOK OUT YOU!"

Surprised, Trench turned to look at the high-pitched voice that seemed to be coming from the sky behind him. It seemed that a small Gnome was sailing towards him. Hastily, he calculated the youth's vector, took several steps back and jumped. He caught the Gnome in the crook of his arm. Trench looked down. "Caught you, lit-tahl wun!" He looked in the direction the lad had come from. "Where you come from?"

"Some stinking Minotaur shied me in your direction."

"On purpose?"

"No, it was a complete accident." Grimbledung scowled. "He was walking along and accidentally picked me up and heaved me. He meant to take a drink but instead ended up tossing me."

Trench took a good look at the tiny Gnome. And recognized him. "You!" He dropped Grimbledung.

"Hey! Watch it!" Grimbledung got up and dusted himself off. "You big lunk."

"I'll give you a lunk!" Trench bent over to grab the Gnome.

"Yaaa! No more Gnome tossing!" He flailed his arms as he scampered under the table and away from the angry butcher.

Grimbledung made his way across the crowded square. As he went, he heard music. "And a band. Nice!" He angled toward the music. Suddenly he was in a large open space- a large dancing area had developed in front of the minstrels. He spotted a Dwarf standing in the middle of the large open area. He was tapping his foot and clapping. "Hey, you're the new town doctor, aren't you?"

"That's me." The Dwarf adjusted his spectacles.

"You going to dance, Mister Dwarf?" Grimbledung asked. "Or just stand there?"

The Dwarf was smiling broadly as he clapped. "Well, I like to dance and tap my feet. But they won't keep in rhythm."

"Don't..."

"You see," continued the Dwarf, ignoring the warning, "I washed them both today. And I can't do nothing with them."

"I'm telling you, you're going to get kicked right out of here." Grimbledung shook his fist at the fellow. "Right out on that ho-hum dumb tune of yours."

"In my defense, Gnome, the words don't mean a thing; it's a silly song for anyone to sing."

"Ooooh!" Grimbledung raised his hand over his head. He waved it around then pointed at the Dwarf, then gestured to what was ostensibly 'out' with his thumb. "Oh, that's it, mister!" He did the motion twice. No one seemed to pay him any mind. Akita saw him however, and moved in his direction.

The Dwarf smiled amicably and winked over the top of his round glasses and moved off.

"You know, I think that Dwarf got the best of you," said Akita as he put his arm around his friend. "And you got the worst of him."

"OOohhhh!" Grimbledung raised his hand, waved it around, then pointed at the Constable, and gestured 'away'. "You too! You're out of here!"

"No one who'cn do that is on *your* payroll."

"Well don't that beat all!"

"I thought four of a kind beat all." Akita let his tongue hang out.

"Ohhh!"

"So what're you doing running around like something's amiss?"

"Well, there's Gargoyles getting hauled out of a flying contraption." Grimbledung pointed at the massive craft. "Over yonder. I was going to tell Big Julie that her two Gargoyles were coming back."

Akita nodded at the Gnome. "I'm sure she'll be pleased."

"That's what I was hoping for." Grimbledung waggled his ears.

"She's not going to be *that* pleased." Akita turned Grimbledung back the way he came. "Why don't you go tell Castor and Pollux to stay there and I'll bring Julie to them? That way they aren't all running around missing each other."

Grimbledung opened his mouth, then closed it. "Well, that's a good plan all of a sudden." He frowned. "Would have been good to hear it before I made my way all the way here."

Akita nodded. "That's a long walk for someone your size."

"Well, I flew for part of it."

"Flew?"

"Sailed, really."

"Sailed?" Akita narrowed his eyes. "Ya got pitched?" A smile came to him. "Tossed even?"

"Mayhap." Grimbledung frowned again. "Go pass on the news and I'll go back and let them know to stay put."

"Good plan, Grrrim." With a friendly squeeze of the Gnome's shoulder, Akita also moved off. Humming a merry tune himself.

"Ooohhh!" Grimbledung called after him. When Akita didn't turn around - not even to let his tongue hang out- Grimbledung gave a shrug then he jogged towards where the Gargoyles were being unloaded.

Koza nodded at Drimblerod. "Well, that does sound like a nice set up you have there." He nodded at his brother. "And the two of us would like a quiet place to sit and relax..."

"For a little bit," interjected Gafr.

"...for a little bit," agreed Koza.

"Well, we'd be glad to have you." Drimblerod tried to maintain eye contact but was having a hard time doing it. "We've got buckets full of quietness around our place. More than we know what to do with, really."

Grimbledung skidded to a stop beside his partner. It had taken a little longer to get back because he had given the Halfling tent a wide berth. Pollux and Castor were standing beside the other two Gargoyles. "Made it!"

"So it's..." started Drimblerod.

"To where?" Asked Pollux.

"Here of course." Grimbledung shook his head at the Gargoyle. "Earlier I was over yonder and up yonder even at one point but now I'm not yonderwhere because I've made it to yonderhere is where."

Pollux looked at Drimblerod for help, not sure how to answer the immediately annoying Gnome youth that had just barged into their conversation. Or if he even should.

"Pollux, it's Grimbledung. He's been undercover at Big Julie's looking for a wand thief." He put his hand on his partner's shoulder. "The potion to make him look young hasn't worn off yet."

"Grimbledung?" Pollux smiled. "That you?"

"That's me." Grimbledung struck a pose. "I was under cover."

"Nice hair."

"Right?" Grimbledung ran his hands through his considerable mane. "I keep telling people that but they don't believe me."

Castor chuckled. "I just can't imagine why."

"Right?" Grimbledung struck another pose.

"*In any case*," said Drimblerod, "as I was saying, it's good to have you fellows back in town." He turned to Koza and Gafr. "And we'd be honored to have you two posted in front of our shop."

"We get our own Gargoyles to ride around on?"

Koza stared at Grimbledung.

So did Gafr.

"No, Grim. They are not there for riding."

Grimbledung frowned.

"We're there for ambiance," offered Koza.

"You're there to carry sick or injured folks?"

Koza stared at Grimbledung.

So did Gafr.

"It'll be fine, Gents, don't worry," Drimblerod assured the pair. "I'll make sure..."

"We'll fill them in on the backstory, Drimblerod," said Castor.

"Yeah. We've seen it up close and personal," agreed Pollux.

"Sometimes more up close than we wanted."

"Hey, if you gotta pee, you gotta pee! Besides it was dark."

Castor shook his head. "Not that dark."

"On that note, I think we'll be on our way." Drimblerod put his hand on his partner's shoulder. "Enjoy the festivities and we'll see you tomorrow or soon after."

"Oooh!" Grimbledung hopped up and down. "Oooh! Oooh!" He raised his hand and waved it.

"Now what?" Asked Castor.

"Akita said to stay put because he was bringing Big Julie here!" He smiled broadly. "Hah! You all thought I'd forgotten, didn't you?"

"How could we think you'd forgotten a message that we didn't even know you were supposed to pass on?"

Koza nodded at his brother. "What he said."

"Well you see..."

"We'll see you later," Drimblerod pulled his partner away before he could finish his sentence.

"What'd you do that for? I was going to explain to them how they should have known what they didn't know."

"How about we just get something to eat and drink instead?"

"Sounds good, partner." Grimbledung rubbed his belly. "I've only had two squirrels."

"Two whole squirrels?"

"Well they were small. They only roused my appetite without bedding it down."

"Well, let's get that appetite of yours down for the night." Drimblerod looked around the overly crowded square. Since most of the participants of the jamboree were human-sized, the two Gnomes were completely engulfed. "I can't see a thing."

"Me neither." Grimbledung frowned. "We'll never find anything to eat with everything set up helter-skelter like this."

"How about the Duck?"

"Haven't had duck yet." Grimbledung licked his lips. "If it has that crumbly coating, I'm all in."

Drimblerod shook his head. "No, no. Let's go to the Duck Inn and Dine and get a nice table by the window." He steered his partner in that direction. "We get a table by the window so we can see the folks and hear the music without being trampled."

Grimbledung nodded. "I'm all for that." He frowned again. "I'm kind of tired of having my face at butt-level, you know."

"I'll bet."

The pair stayed close to each other and forced their way through crowds the entire way.

Chapter 55
The (Fireless) Great Jamboree

Drimblerod and Grimbledung arrived at the doors of the Duck Inn and Dine exhausted.

"I'm exhausted!"

"Me too, Grim." Drimblerod leaned on the doorframe. "Let's get inside and sit down for the rest of the jamboree." He pulled the door open for his partner.

With a nod, Grimbledung entered the foyer. "I'm telling you Drim, next year they really need me on the planning committee." He held the curtain open.

Drimblerod nodded. "I hate to say it, but I agree. That place is a complete hot mess out there."

The pair ducked past the curtain into the tavern portion of the Duck Inn and Dine. It was crowded.

Very crowded.

"Rolton chips." Grimbledung put his hands on his hips. "Steaming piles of Rolton chips."

"Seems we're not the only ones to have this idea."

Grimbledung looked around the room. There didn't seem to be any tables available. "There don't seem to be any tables available."

"Well, we're regulars so maybe we can get something worked out." Drimblerod led his partner to the bar. "Evening, Will." He smiled amicably at the one-armed bartender.

"Hey One-Armed Wil!" Grimbledung clambered up on the only vacant stool. "How's things?"

"No minors at the bar," Wil answered.

"That's no minor," began Drimblerod.

"He's my wife!" Grimbledung interrupted. He waggled his ears. "Get it?"

"No, actually."

Wil looked down the bar, then slid a drink to a patron on the far end. "Me neither, Drimblerod." He looked at Grimbledung. "No minors at the bar."

"Listen One Arm," said Grimbledung as he stood on the seat.

Wil reached out and took him by the collar. "No minors at the bar."

"Wil, he's not a minor. It's Grimbledung. He's just been undercover at the school of magic for Big Julie."

"Likely story." Wil picked Grimbledung off the stool.

Flora put her trusty tray on the bar beside Drimblerod- -she had had it re-flatted by the blacksmith. She quickly moved a half-dozen empty mugs off it. "Refills of ale and mead, Wil," she said with a smile. "It's hopping out there."

"Flora O. Willowfeet!" Grimbledung said. "It's me! Tell him it's me!"

Flora narrowed her eyes at the youthful looking Gnome. She pursed her lips for good measure.

"You vouch for this?" Wil shook Grimbledung around.

"Gah! Come on Flora O. Willowfeet! You know me!" Grimbledung took his hands off Wil's arms and reached out to her. "Tell him!"

"Give her a compliment to remind her, Grim," suggested Drimblerod.

"You look great today, Flora O. Willowfeet. Absolutely great." Grimbledung waggled his ears.

"Oh, Grimbledung," said Flora with a smile.

Wil lowered Grimbledung back onto the stool. "Good enough for me." He took two empty mugs from the bar and turned to refill them with ale.

"Nice, Grim, real nice." Drimblerod patted his partner's shoulder.

"So I look great?"

Grimbledung nodded furiously. "You sure do!" He waggled his ears. "Niflheim, anyone would in *this* light! Can we get a table now?"

Flora knocked Grimbledung off the stool and marched off.

"Nice, Grim, real nice." Drimblerod shook his head at his partner. "Now we'll never get a place to sit."

Grimbledung sat up. "What'd I do? How it is my fault that that female can't accept a heartfelt compliment?"

"Well, we can share this one stool until a table opens up." He looked around. "*If* one opens up. I think these folks are in this for the long haul." He slipped onto the stool. "I suppose you can stand on the rungs."

Wil finished filling the empty mugs. "Yowp!" He called.

"Two ales, please Wil," said Drimblerod.

Wil was still looking out into the dining area. When Flora looked, he raised his hand and then pointed at the grouping of mugs. He lowered his hand when she nodded at him. "Two ales coming up after I do a circuit of the bar."

Flora moved beside Drimblerod- on the opposite side of where Grimbledung was - "Thanks Wil." She moved the mugs to her tray . "Got you a table over by the window." She gestured over her shoulder. "Over there."

Drimblerod tracked where she was pointing. There was a small table nestled between two larger ones. The tables seemed to have been moved apart to make the space. The table was right in front of an open window- a prime spot. "Wow, thanks very much Flora." Drimblerod smiled at her. "No hard feelings?"

"Oh, there're hard feelings. But they'll be soothed by the exorbitant tipping from a certain Gnome along with a proper compliment..." She gave a blazing look under Drimblerod's chin to where Grimbledung was cowering. "Or else."

Before his partner could respond with his obligatory 'or else what?', Drimblerod slid off the stool, pulling his partner with him. "Don't you worry, Flor', I'll remind him."

The Gnomess nodded at him as she moved off with her full tray.

"All right, Grim. We've got a place to sit and drinks on the way. So you need to be on your best behavior and give that female a compliment like no other compliment she's ever gotten."

Grimbledung nodded. "Sure, sure. I can do that. Bestest behavior is what I do best."

The pair made their way to their table.

"This here is a prime location" Drimblerod eased into his chair.

Grimbledung nodded. "Prime."

"So that means you need to be nice to Flora. Real nice."

"You want me to dance with her or something?"

Drimblerod shook his head. "Just say something nice." He paused for a moment. "And before any other thought can pop into your head, just stop talking."

"That's what I do best, you know."

A serving wench slid two drinks onto the table as she walked past.

"Prime location, this," said Grimbledung as he picked up his mug. He took a tentative sip. "Ahh, Ale. That's what's good for you."

Drimblerod laughed. "That's what I hear." He picked up his mug. "A toast to a successful jamboree."

"This is successful?" Grimbledung pointed out the window. "It's a mess. A hot one."

Drimblerod nodded. "And we get to watch it from in here without getting trampled." He tilted his ear towards the window. "We can hear the music." He gave a broad smile. "And the best part?"

"There's a best part?" Grimbledung raised his mug.

Drimblerod nodded as he clinked his mug against his partner's. "With the mess those booths caused out there, there's no way you won't get on the steering committee next year."

"Oh baby." Grimbledung took a deep drink of his ale. "Music to my ears." He sat back. "Above and beyond the actual music, that is." He put his drink down and peered out the window. "Prime."

Drimblerod saw Chéri and Colossus come through the curtain. They looked around and frowned- it seemed they had the same plan. Drimblerod waved at them. He held up two fingers and pointed at the table.

Colossus gave a smile and a nod. He had a quick discussion with Chéri- who looked toward Drimblerod twice. When she nodded, Colossus scanned the room again. There were no extra chairs either.

Drimblerod held up his hands in defeat.

Colossus pointed at the table and said something to Chéri, then disappeared back under the curtain.

Chéri made her way to the Gnomes' table.

"Sorry, Chéri. We've the table space, but not the chairs to go with it."

Grimbledung smiled. "Chéri! How is the house building going?"

"It's going pretty well. I think we have enough wood to probably get it almost all done."

Grimbledung looked at the two chairs he and his partner were occupying. "You wanna sit?" He hopped off his chair. "You can sit there. I'll sit on the window."

"That's all right, Grimbledung." Chéri smiled. "I think Colossus has gone to fetch some chairs."

Grimbledung frowned. "You sure? I was looking forward to sitting on the window sill."

Chéri laughed. "Well, I'll sit until he gets back, how's that?"

Grimbledung clambered up onto the window sill and sat. "I'm usually too big for this." He held out his hands. "Can you pass me my drink?"

Chéri obliged the Gnome as Flora approached the table. "Do I need to find more chairs?"

Chéri shook her head. "I think we'll be fine. Colossus has gone in search of chairs." She smiled. "And Grimbledung has offered me his in the meanwhile."

"Grimbledung?" Flora narrowed her eyes at him. "Did something nice?"

Grimbledung held his mug up. "Don't act so surprised; I do nice things all the time."

"I'll bet." Flora shifted her tray under her arm. "So shall I bring another couple of drinks on my next pass?"

"That would be nice."

"How about you and me go find a nice quiet corner?" Grimbledung said quickly. He waggled his eyebrows at Flora for good measure.

"What?"

"Well, you said you wouldn't serve any more drinks until you got a pass." He leered. "Want something tawdrier?"

Flora rolled her eyes. "I'll go get those drinks before I end up bending my tray again."

"Grim. You really need to stop pushing that Gnomess' buttons like that," Drimblerod tut-tutted.

"It's not my fault, Drim." He moved his mug to one hand and pointed across the bar. "She brings out the worst in me, I think."

"Brings it out? I didn't realize it was ever put away." Chéri waggled her ears at Grimbledung.

"Saaaay!" Now Grimbledung pointed at Chéri. "You offer a gal your chair and the next thing you know she's casting aspersions at you. Aspersions, I tell you."

"All I'm doing is minding my own business until Colossus gets back," Chéri said innocently.

"Speak of the devil, here he comes."

"The devil?!" Grimbledung leaned back. "In person?"

"Drink your drink, Grim," Chéri said. "Or I'll bop you with Flora's tray."

Grimbledung returned to drinking.

Colossus approached the table. He had only one chair.

"That's one hot commodity you've got there." Chéri smiled.

"It seems so," Colossus held up the chair. "Last one in the joint."

"I was talking to the chair." Chéri waggled her ears again.

"Oh, baby." Colossus put the chair down. "Looks like you found a seat."

"You've been hanging around Grimbledung too long, Cheri." Drimblerod took a drink of his ale. "I seem to be immune, thank goodness."

"Infected with Grimbledung antics? I don't know if I like the sound of that." Colossus sat in the chair.

"I'm right here you know." Grimbledung said between sips.

Colossus smiled. "And I'm glad you are."

"Really?"

"Yeah, otherwise we'd have nowhere to sit." Colossus reached up and waggled his ears with his hands.

Flora sidled up beside him. "So it *is* contagious."

"I'm immune, thank goodness," offered Drimblerod.

"I think I'm infected," admitted Flora. She moved two drinks onto the table.

"I can hear you."

"Well we can hear you too," said Drimblerod. "And since Flora can hear you, you have something you need to say to her."

"I do?"

"Yes, you do," said Chéri. She pointed a finger at him. "Right now."

"Well, if I have something to say, I should at least stand, right?"

Drimblerod shrugged. "You've no idea what you're going to say, do you."

Grimbledung shrugged. "Something'll come to me." He held his drink out and Chéri took it. Using both hands, he stood in the windowsill. He reached a hand towards Flora. Realizing he was too far away, he hopped to the table. "This works."

"Watch the drinks, bub," warned Colossus.

"Hush," said Chéri, "he's going to say something romantic."

Flora tightened her grip on her tray. "We'll see."

Grimbledung put one hand on his hip. The other he reached out toward Flora. He cleared his throat. Twice.

"Grim?"

Grimbledung held out his hand to silence his partner. "I got this." He looked directly at Flora and cleared his throat again.

Flora shifted her tray to one hand. She was prepared to fling it at the Gnome and knock him out the window.

"My dearest Flora O. Willowfeet. It is strange to think, I have not seen you in a day. Yesterday, I saw the new moon, but not you. I saw the sunset and the sunrise, but nothing of your beautiful face. The pieces of my broken heart could pass through the eye of a needle. I miss you like the sun misses the flower. Like the sun misses the flower in the depths of winter. Instead of beauty to direct its light to, the heart hardens like the frozen world your absence sent me to today. Tomorrow I'll be working at my shop. I'll find it cold and empty if you don't come by. Hope guides me. It gets me through the day and

especially the night. The hope that after you leave my sight, it won't be the last time I look upon you. With all the love that I possess, I remain yours Flora O. Willowfeet. *Yours*."

"Wow," said Chéri. She wiped a tear from her eye. She looked up appraisingly at Flora.

Flora was speechless. The tray trembled in her hand.

"So..." Grimbledung raised an eyebrow.

"Quit while you're ahead!" Drimblerod hissed at his partner.

"Mistress Flora O. Willowfeet..."

Drimblerod put his head in his hands. "Here we go."

"When was the last time you made it with a minor?"

"Wow," said Chéri. "And it all goes out the window."

Flora gripped her tray tightly. Her eyes were still trained on Grimbledung.

"If I told you you needed a little wickedness in you, would you let me?"

"Grim, stop." Pleaded Drimblerod.

"Wow."

Colossus nodded at Chéri. He was staying out of the conversation entirely lest the blast zone encompass him as well.

Flora still hadn't moved.

Grimbledung moved both hands to his hips. "Well?"

Everyone turned to look at Flora.

"When does the spell wear off?" Flora asked no one in particular.

"Let's see," said Drimblerod quickly . He wanted nothing more than to keep his partner from saying anything else. "Maca said a month, so exactly three weeks from today."

"I. Will. Deal. With. You. Then." Flora said. Each word sounded like a thunderclap. "Three weeks and a day from now." She pointed at Grimbledung. "Make sure you drink plenty of water."

"Wow." Chéri offered Grimbledung his mug. "Back to the window, you."

Grimbledung ran his hands through his hair. "Oh, I will be ready." He took his mug and hopped back to the windowsill.

Flora turned and walked off.

"Wow."

"Right?" Grimbledung took a drink of his ale. "That's one unstable Gnomess."

"Well, I think you need to let us do the talking for the rest of the night before you mess that up."

"Who me?" Grimbledung feigned innocence. "Mess what up?"

"Weren't you listening?"

"To who?"

Chéri shook a fist at Grimbledung. "To Flora while she was talking to you, you dolt!"

"She said something? I must have missed that part."

"Yes, she wants..."

"Why don't we just let this go?" Drimblerod interrupted Chéri. "If nothing else for the entertainment value."

"Entertainment value? Is that what we need?" Grimbledung took a long drink.

"You really need to work on your listening skills," suggested Drimblerod. For the fifth time just that week.

"So it's a request for a lively song then." Grimbledung stepped onto the table. He lifted his mug high and began to sing

Nog Nog!
Mkellen bebog!
V'luch Matuch Maluch M'tog!

After he was done, he took a bow to the scattered applause then moved back to the windowsill.

"What's that mean?" Asked Colossus.

"It's old Gnomish," Grimbledung said as he took a drink. "It really doesn't translate."

"Well, on that note, I propose a toast," said Drimblerod. He raised his glass.

Chéri and Colossus raised theirs.

Grimbledung's glass was already 'up'.

"To a fair jamboree with fine friends." Drimblerod moved his glass to the center of the table.

Colossus clinked his glass against his. "Here, here."

Chéri nodded. "I couldn't agree more." She tapped her glass against Drimblerod's then Colossus'.

Grimbledung hopped on the table. It wobbled precariously as he did. "Me too! Me too!" He lowered his glass and bounced it off the other three. He took another deep drink then jumped toward the windowsill. He missed completely and sailed right out into the darkness.

Chapter 56
The Great Jamboree After-Party

"Wow."

Drimblerod nodded at Chéri. "I couldn't agree more." He raised a hand and beckoned to Flora.

Flora approached the table. She had a barstool in her hand. "I saw the whole thing. When he makes his way back in here, have him sit on this." She put the barstool on the empty side of the table.

"You know he didn't hear..." Began Colossus.

Chéri kicked him under the table. Very hard. Assassin hard.

"Youch!" Colossus put his hands under the table, fully expecting to feel bone sticking through the skin.

"Didn't what?" Asked Flora.

"Didn't mean to jump out that window, of course," said Chéri.

"Exactly what I was going to say," offered Drimblerod, not wanting to incur the wrath of Chéri.

Colossus just grimaced and nodded.

"Well, I hope he's all right." Flora looked around. "I've got tables to tend to. I'll get another round here on my next pass."

Drimblerod smiled. "Mayhap you should rephrase that when Grim's around."

"Why would I do that?" Flora shifted her tray in her hands.

"No reason whatsoever," said Drimblerod quickly. "None at all."

With a curt nod, Flora left to tend the other tables.

"I think she'll be good for him."

"I think she'll end up killing him, Chéri," said Colossus.

"Potæto, Potáto."

"He's more of a radish kind of Gnome." Drimblerod waggled his ears.

"You sure you're immune?"

Drimblerod nodded at Colossus. "Speaking of the little devil; here he comes. Wonder what took him so long."

Grimbledung jogged up to the table. He had four skewers with squirrels on them. "Brought you each one."

"Thanks Grim." Colossus took a skewer. He smelled it. "I think."

"Squirrel on a stick just can't be beat!" Grimbledung offered one to Chéri then Drimblerod. "Everything's better when it's served on a stick." He thought for a moment. "Is that why Halflings are always trying to impale folk?"

"What?"

"It's true, Col. Even me earlier this day. They offered to put me on a spear, or a pike, or a lance." He shrugged. "Something anyway. I left before they could decide on what to use."

"Where were you when this happened?"

"In that big black tent full of Halflings next to where Pollux and Castor and those other two were lowered down."

"There's no black tent there." Colossus leaned forward. "A black tent?"

Grimbledung took a bite of his squirrel then nodded.

"What's the matter with a black tent?" Drimblerod asked as he took a bite.

"The Lord High Priest travels in a black tent," said Chéri. "He's the only Halfling who does. It's his royal colors."

"He didn't seem that sociable," said Grimbledung.

"You actually *talked* to him?" Drimblerod shook his head. "Dangerous stuff, Grim."

"It really doesn't matter because there's no royal black tent in the marketplace," said Colossus. "Believe me, I'd know."

"It was there," assured Grimbledung. "I saw it right after the Gargoyles were lowered down."

"They lowered... how many Gargoyles got lowered down beside that tent?"

Grimbledung shrugged. "Four. Two massive goats, and two even bigger dragons."

Colossus sat back. "That was probably not a good thing."

"Well, we'll just have to ask them when they come by the shop," suggested Drimblerod.

"They're coming by the shop?"

Drimblerod nodded. "The dragons are going back to Big Julie's, but the goats didn't have anywhere to go, so they're going to sit out front of the wand shop."

"You'll need to introduce me, I think," said Colossus. "So there's no misunderstandings." He finally took a bite of his squirrel. He nodded. "This thing isn't bad."

Grimbledung winked at the Halfling. "Because it's on a stick."

Chéri took a bite of her squirrel. It really was tasty. "I hate to admit it, but it's not bad."

The quartet ate and drank through the night and into the early morning. Finally, when only a handful of drinkers remained, One-Armed-Will shoo'ed them all out.

Flora even gave Grimbledung a wave goodbye as he left.

Chapter 57
Grim Noir- Door Always Rings Twice

I was sitting at the counter trying to make the pounding stop. My head was not going along with it. I think the Gremlins had something to do with it. Drimblerod blamed the alcohol. Personally, I've never seen a drink carry a hammer.

Gremlins?

All the time.

Since Drim didn't believe me - and said he didn't want me to explain it to him again - he went out and about something to someplace or another. Even in my condition, he knew I could run the shop.

Because I'm a professional.

The bell over Door jingled. Loudly. I picked up my head to see what sort of creature had just arrived to add to my headache.

Great.

"Hello Amaryllis," I toss at her. "How're..." I started to say. Then all my words left me. She had brought her Mom.

Momalicious, I think her name was.

Great!

I picked up my head and smoothed out my tunic. "What a pleasant surprise. And you've brought your sister."

Smooth.

Momalicious smiles at me.

"Is this the nice young Gnome you told me about?" She says all sweet like. I can tell she's a lot like her kid.

Speaking of her kid, she gives me the hungry eyes. "Yeah," she adds on dreamily.

I really got to do something about that.

"Sorry I missed you at the jamboree, Grimbledung," she says.

I can't tell her I spent the night dipping the bill over at the Duck. *See what I did there*? "Yeah, I was helping tend the tables at the Duck." I toss a wink in there just to get the lie moving in the right direction. "I'm helpful that way."

Amaryllis lets out this sigh. Momalicious just nods.

What a pair.

"So what brings you duet of dishes down here?" The company is nice, I suppose, but I've got an ache that still banging around in my head. Maybe I need to stop by the doc and see what he has for it. Or maybe Maurice.

"Mom and I were just out shopping and I told her you were here helping out at the wand shop so we stopped by to get a hello."

"Hello," I say. Since that's why they came.

Dames.

Momalicious is looking around the shop. Maybe I'll get a sale out of her. "I thought this shop was run by a couple of Gnomes," she says. "Drimblerod and..."

Uh oh.

"Yeah, that's true enough. Two Gnomes." *Think of something*! "I'm just here helping out Drimblerod while my Uncle is out at South Jute on a business trip."

Smooth!

"Oh," says Momalicious as she swallows the lie hook, line, and sinker.

Time to get the groundwork going. "Grimbledung's his name, my Uncle. Great Gnome, that one. I'm named for him even." I strike a pose.

"I see," says Momalicious. She's still looking around the store.

Maybe along with a foundation, I can earn a sale. "So Grimbledung is out doing what he does best; making great business decisions. He's really a great Uncle. Kind and thoughtful..." The bell over Door jingles so I stop laying it on thick to see who else is about to hear the great story of Grimbledung. It's that crazy dame from the Duck Inn and Dine.

Not Great.

Timing, that is. All in all, she's a great skirt. Knows how to handle a tray. If you know what I mean.

"Say there, toots." I toss at her. "What are you up to?"

She says something about me asking her to stop by. Some sort of love sonnet. Or something. Now she's got her eyes plastered all over me.

That's good, right?

"So this Grimbledung fellow," says Momalicious. "When does he get back. He sounds interesting."

Uh oh.

Now Flora has her eyes plastered all over Momalicious. And it's none too friendly. Luckily Momalicious is looking at me so she doesn't see. Amaryllis hasn't taken her eyes off me since coming in.

Time for a tactical flanking maneuver.

"Oh, I'm not sure," I toss at her. "There's no telling with... with Uncle Grimbledung." Now Flora's got her eyes banging up against me. And it's none too friendly as well.

"*Uncle* Grimbledung?" Flora tosses at me.

Hard.

I duck but it hits me anyway.

Momalicious turns to look at Flora. "He's out in South Jute on business so Grimmy here is helping with the shop while he's away." She purses her lips. "Anyway, that's what this young Gnome was saying before you interrupted him."

Uh oh!

"What?" Says Flora. In about the most unfriendly way possible. Now her hands are on her hips. It's not a friendly kind of hands-on-the-hips kind of thing either.

"Mom said you interrupted Grim," Amaryllis tossed into the conversation. She's still looking at me so she can't see the look Flora is giving her. "Why don't you let Grim Noir tell his story," she adds dreamily. "I love listening to him talk."

"What?" Says Flora. Now her hands-on-her-hips are pointed my way.

Maybe I'll just close up shop and take a nap. But first I need to get all these lookers out of the shop. "Well, I'd really like to finish the story, Amaryllis." I give a sigh and finish up as sincere as I can: "But I've got some inventorying to do so I think I need to close up for a little while."

That should just about do it.

Amaryllis narrows her eyes at me.

Momalicious narrows her eyes at Flora.

Flora narrows her eyes at Amaryllis.

One out of three isn't bad, right? "Thanks for stopping by," I say as I hop off my stool and move around the counter.

Big mistake!

Now all the narrowed eyes move to me.

My head starts to hurt a little worse all of a sudden. "See you all later if I'm still around."

"You might not be," says Flora. She says it all sweet like, but with the narrow eyes, it comes off like some sort of threat.

"Yeah?" I fish.

"Yeah."

All right, that sounded like a threat. No idea why. "Where'm I gonna be, toots?"

"You'll be gone."

There's that threat again.

"Where's Grim going to go?" Amaryllis sounds worried all of a sudden.

"Yeah? Where'm I going?" I say, worried all of a sudden.

"Well," begins Flora all sweet-like, "when Uncle Grimbledung gets back, you're going to have to head home to Fossatun, of course".

Now she's got her hand on the top of my head. She's patting it.

Hard.

"I'm sure your Mom will be happy to have you home."

"Fossatun?" Asks Amaryllis. "Where's that?"

I know where it is. It's deep in the Gnomelands. Deep. Six months walking deep. I figure I might as well be the one to break it to her but Flora gets to it first.

"Well, *little girl*, it's deep in the Gnomelands on the Grimsa River, below the Grimsarfoss Waterfall and the Troll Waterfalls of course[39]. Grimbledung was named for them." Flora lets a smile grow on her face. "It's a six month treacherous journey on foot." Then she brightens up just to be mean. "Of course if you owned a dragon you could do it in two weeks." The smile is real big now. "You own a dragon, right?"

Mayhap I'll not cross this Flora gal. She seems to play for keeps.

"Mom?" Amaryllis asks as the tears get bigger in her eyes. One runs down her cheek. "Did Dad leave the dragon when he left?"

All of a sudden, Flora's eyes get big.

Mine too. Now I'm worried I'm going to have to hop back and forth between Julesville and Fossatun! And having been there. Twice even! I know there's not a whole lot there. I look at Momalicious.

Here we go.

Momalicious shakes her head kind of sad-like. "No honey, he took that along with everything else." She gives me a smile that seems friendly all of a sudden. "If the youngster makes it back here for visits, you can see him

then." Then the smile takes on a hungry kind of look. "Maybe if I get to know his uncle good and proper, he can come visit more often."

All of a sudden, Flora's got a look on her face. It's not friendly or hungry. It's that look she gets before I get hit with her tray.

Only more so.

"Sorry, sister; *that's* not going to happen." She steps between me and the other two dames. "There's no getting to know Grimbledung. Good, proper or otherwise. *Got it*?"

The shop gets colder all of a sudden.

The two dames stare at each other for what seems like ten years. Amaryllis is wiping her eyes so I figure it's probably a little shorter than that. Even so, I should probably help their eye-conversation along. "Well, it was really great seeing you all but I do need to do some inventorying there in yon back room." I point over my shoulder to let them know where the back is. "Door?"

Door opens up for me.

Nice.

"How about we have a nice chat outside?" Flora says to Momalicious. The way she says it doesn't sound much like a question or a request.

Momalicious gives a snappy nod. I think she's ready to go a full twelve rounds on this one.

The pair go outside leaving me and Amaryllis to stare at each other.

"Grownups," she says. It sounds like an apology.

"No kidding, toots," I say back. I'm sorry too. Even though I'm not sure why. "So I'll definitely make sure I say goodbye to you before I leave," I lie to Amaryllis. "And I'll send my regards to Grimbledung from your Mom," I heap on top of the first lie. "And I'm sure I'll have a great time with Mom in Fossatun," I say because I might as well make a trifecta out of the lies.

Amaryllis' lower lip pushes out.

I really got to do something about that. Then all of a sudden, my decades of playing Trufflidge kick in.

It's a bluff!

Yeah. That's exactly what it is. I'm so sure of it, I'm willing to go all in on this one. I've got five aces and she's got a pair of fives, a seven, a nine, and a queen; the Dead Man's Foot. Sure; if it were Thraksday, she'll take the pot.

But it's Moonsday.

So I make my play. "You know, Amaryllis. Uncle Grimbledung's going to be in South Jute for at least another week." I step in close to her and take her hands in mine. Her eyes get big. Real big. Her lip pulls in to.

Oh yeah, it's Moonsday all right.

"It'd be great if you could meet him."

She gives me a smile. "That would be nice," she says as she squeezes my hands. "When he gets back, he can watch the shop and we can have some alone time." Now she's got that hungry look again.

Sure, sister, sure. Moonsday all day long.

"Why wait?" I put her arms on my shoulders and put my hands on her hips. "We can go see him tomorrow."

"He'll be back?" She snuggles up against me.

I give my head a shake. I lay down the first ace. "No dearest, he'll still be in South Jute. We can go out there ourselves and visit him. Drimblerod doesn't keep any tabs on me so I can easily be gone." I give my eyebrows a workout. "Tell your Mom you're going to a friend's house for a few days." I add a wink.

'But...' Now she's trying to squirm out of my arms. 'South Jute's a good day's ride away.'

I give a shrug as the second ace goes own. "We'll sleep together under the stars. Then we can spend a day and a night with my Uncle, then we can

come back." Then the third goes down with a wicked smile. "It will be a glorious trip with just the two of us."

"Overnight?" Now she's really squirming.

Fourth ace. "Oh yeah. Over. Night.. In the dark alone."

'No... no, we can't do that!'

And that fifth ace, I toss out into the middle of the table right onto the pot. "Why not, toots?"

She yanks out of my arms and pokes me in the chest. "I'm not that kind of girl!"

I let go of her. "What?" I say just for fun as I count my winnings.

She makes a break for Door. Luckily Door's keeping track of what's going on so it opens just in time for her to scoot out of it. She runs into Momalicious' hip and hugs it. Flora drops her hand quick-like now that there are witnesses. It looks like she was doing some chest poking of her own.

Nice.

I watch Momalicious take Amaryllis by the hand and leads her out of sight.

Problem solved.

Door stays open because Flora's right there. I'm hoping she leaves too. So I can take that nap.

Hopefully.

"So, Flora O. Willowfeet, it was nice you stopped by." I give her a wave. "Really, it is."

"Grimbledung. I shall see you in exactly three weeks from today." Flora says as she points a finger at me. "Exactly three weeks from today."

I give her a nod. Mainly because I really didn't hear what she said; I was looking forward to the nap I was going to take when I got to the backroom. Or maybe a drink. Or both. "Sure, sure," I give her as I wave again. "What you said."

With a nod of her own, the crazy fillet of Gnome-ness leaves too.

Door closes all solemn-like.

"Exactly my sentiment, Door," I say to it. "I'm taking a nap. If anyone tries to come in, ring real loud so I'll hear them."

Door rattles its catch.

Peace and quiet.

Finally.

Chapter 58
The Seed is Planted!

Exactly two weeks and five days later.

Grimbledung rushed into the shop. "Drimblerod! You'll never believe what Pollux just told me!"

Drimblerod sighed. He had heard the same story from Koza the day before. "There's this massive mine that is full of gold and gems and wands but no one knows where it is?"

"No! There's this massive mine that is full of gold and gems and wands but no one knows where it is!"

"Grim, just listen for a moment." Drimblerod moved around the counter. He had been dreading this discussion since Koza brought it up a week before. "If no one knows where the mine is, it can't be found." He held his hands up. "Because no one knows where it is. That's why it's called the Lost Picman's Mine."

"That's what they *all* say!" Grimbledung winked. "But there is someone who knows where it is." He moved around the counter.

"Grimbledung," pleaded Drimblerod. "Please..."

"Ah ha!" Grimbledung flourished a sleek black wand. It seemed to have a glow all its own.

"The Black. It came in a month ago, I think."

"Exactly!"

Drimblerod moved to the counter. "Grim, what's that wand got to do with anything?" He took it from his partner. "Granted, it's definitely unusual wand." He drew it under his nose as he sniffed deeply. "Lots of power in it." He held it to his ear. "So much it's leaking out, in fact." He put it on the counter. "I'd have had Dummy

give it a test but with everything else going on, it's been stuck behind the counter."

"You know where this wand came from?" Grimbledung picked it up. He tapped the end against the glass counter. Little sparks flew out of it.

"Someone made it, of course." Drimblerod shrugged. "Like all wands."

Grimbledung shook his head. "Exactly!"

"Grim..." Drimblerod tried again. "What does that wand have to do with the Lost Picman's Mine?"

"It just so happens that this wand was brought in by an Orc."

"The one that shouts and shakes his fist?"

Grimbledung shrugged. "Well, it's all part of the art of haggling. But yes; that's him."

"What does that have to do with the Lost Picman's Mine?" Drimblerod looked at the wand. It was definitely unusual, but unusual wands often have mundane origins.

"The Orc said he got it off a dead guy who had a sack full of wands that he got out of a mine."

"Wait a grain of sand, Grimbledung..." Began Drimblerod.

"The guy would have carried more out but he was worried about having a bunch of wands in one sack." He winked. "Which was probably right because he ended up blowing himself up and this wand..." He tapped it with his finger. "... was the only one to survive."

"But if the guy was dead, who told the Orcs that?"

Grimbledung opened his mouth. Then closed it.

"Exactly."

Grimbledung frowned. "No wait!" Grimbledung snapped his fingers. "Maybe it was with his dying breath!" He smiled triumphantly. "Hah!"

"Grim, no one knows where the Lost Picman's Mine is. Otherwise it would just be called the Picman's Mine." He snapped his fingers. "Hah!"

"Well, this wand came from there, which means we can use it to find the mine once we get close to it."

"We don't even know where that was, Grim. We'd be wandering the wilderness looking for a lost mine."

Grimbledung shook his head. "S'Am told me it was past some town full of zombies on the way to EternCity."

"EternCity is a long way from here, Grim. A long way." He startled. "Did you say a town of zombies?"

"Well, we don't have to go there if you don't want to."

"I don't want to."

"Go to the town of zombies?"

"Go at all."

Grimbledung pursed his lips. "A mine full of gold and gems and wands; just think of it."

"Don't say it," Drimblerod warned.

"Fortune."

"Don't..."

"Glory."

"I said not to say it."

"Fortune and Glory, Drim! And it would be ours. All ours."

"Fortune and Glory is a myth that gets folks killed." *Fortune and glory*? Drimblerod thought. *Fortune and glory and songs sung about you!* "So who would watch the shop while we're away?" *Fortune and glory!*

Grimbledung considered that for a moment. "We could get Semfeld and Liverioso to watch it for us. Their place isn't built yet so they've no place to set up shop." He spread his hands. "They could set up here, we could give them part of the profits and by the time we get back, they'd have saved up enough to build their own place!"

Drimblerod shook his head. He wanted to go, but the thought of leaving the shop in the care of others scared him. "How do we know

we can even trust them?" *It's a chance at fortune and glory. They'll sing songs about the Gnomes who found the Lost Picman's Mine.*

"Chéri trusts them. How could you get a better endorsement?" Grimbledung crossed his arms.

Drimblerod exhaled. "Well..."

Grimbledung leaned forward. "Well?"

"Well, we'd have to wait for you to be back to normal size so we could make a normal sized Shambler to pull the wagon."

"That's soon right?" Time was something else Grimbledung had trouble counting.

Drimblerod nodded. "Another couple of days, by my reckoning."

Grimbledung hopped back and forth. "That's plenty of time to get everything in order- then we'll be on our way! Then we'll be back before anyone knows it. Then they'll all sing about it." Grimbledung winked. "Like this."

Fortune and glory for the Gnomes!
They' headed out of their homes
and out on the plains they went.

Darkness, rain, and such didn't scare them.
Zombies couldn't deter them.
But they came back with their fortune
and their glory too!

"Well that was about the worst song about fortune and glory I've ever heard," said Drimblerod. "Ever."

"Well, that was off the top of my head"[40], said Grimbledung defensively. "It'll be much better when the professionals do it."

"I'd hope so." Drimblerod looked around the shop. "So you think those two Humans can handle the shop while we're away?" He did some

rough calculations in his head. "EternCity will be about two week's walk there."

"So we're gone two weeks" Grimbledung thrust his hands in the air. "Easy radishy!"

"No, Grim," Drimblerod shook his head. "That's two weeks there, and two more back minimum. Plus we need to find what we're looking for and that could take another few days. Probably a week."

Grimbledung dropped his hands to his sides.

"And that's not taking into account anything that distracts us from our journey. Or if we get lost. Or if the weather gets bad and we lose a day. Or any number of other things." *Still- fortune and glory*!

"So we're gone just over a month then?"

Drimblerod nodded.

Grimbledung thrust his hands in the air again. "Just over a month for gold and gems and wands galore!"

"Oh, there's one more thing." Drimblerod leveled his eyes at his partner. "One very important thing," he said gravely.

"What's that?" Grimbledung moved to his partner.

"Flora is expecting you to be around in two days. You can't leave before then."

"She'll understand," said Grimbledung. He waved his hand dismissively. "Once she sees all the gold and gems and wands, she'll understand."

Drimblerod raised an eyebrow at his partner.

"I'm sure of it," Grimbledung assured. "So when am I full sized again?"

"Well, since the last time you asked me right before your terrible song?"

"Yeah."

"It's still two days." He looked worriedly at the door. "You sure you don't want to stay an extra couple of days so that Flora doesn't get upset?"

"She'll be fine, Drim." Grimbledung patted his partner's shoulder. "Trust me on that."

"If you say so," Drimblerod wasn't convinced. *Hey, it's not your girl that's getting upset. You'll have your fortune so you can have any female you want!* Drimblerod nodded.

"I'm glad you agree." Grimbledung rubbed his hands together. "So we need to gather up some supplies and make sure the Magicians are on board with the plan."

Drimblerod nodded. "How about I get the supplies and you talk to the Humans?"

Grimbledung shook his head. "Why don't you talk to the Humans and I'll get the supplies?"

"I think I'd be better at getting supplies." Drimblerod thought of being on the open road with only the supplies his easily-distracted, poor-judging, planning-inhibited partner decided to get.

"Not at all," said Grimbledung. "I'd be happy to get the supplies while you talk to the Humans."

"That's not what I said," said Drimblerod.

"So I'll go over to Pozz's shop and have him put together a standard adventurer's package for just over a month and you can talk to the Magicians."

If he's going to Pozzuoli's then we'll be fine. Pozzuoli wouldn't sell us short. Drimblerod nodded. "All right. Go to Pozzuoli's and explain to him in detail exactly where we're going without leaving anything out so he can get us properly outfitted with everything will need for the entire trip there and back again."

Grimbledung nodded. "I'll do that right now."

"In detail, Grim. Don't leave anything out or he won't know what to outfit us with."

Grimbledung waved over his shoulder since he was already heading toward Door. "I've got it."

"All right then, I suppose."

Door opened and Grimbledung stepped out onto the boardwalk. He turned to look back in the shop. "Don't worry partner; we'll have more stuff than we know what to do with," he called. Then he walked off.

Chapter 59
Outfitted For Glory?

Grimbledung moved down the street quickly. *Tell Pozz where we're going*? He shook his head. "Then old Pozz'll just go out there and beat us to it!" He said to a passerby. "Not a chance. Same goes for you, Mister Dwarf," he added. "Not a chance." He waggled his finger at him for good measure.

The Dwarf, not wanting to get caught up in (another) hour-long conversation with the odd Gnome, moved off quickly.

Grimbledung made it to Pozzuoli's shop *Everything In Between* in record time- since no one would stop to talk to him. He opened the door and stepped into the large shop. "Anyone home?" He called.

"If'a no one was home, the door, she would be locked," said a familiar voice.

"Pozz! It seems like it's been ages since we've talked."

Pozzuoli nodded. "It has been a long-a time." He frowned. "A real long-a time."

"I hope things have been going well for you in the meanwhile."

Pozzuoli shrugged. "Business is good." He looked left and right. "But the neighbors fight all-a the time."

"The hat and the shoe folk?"

"They no get a long."

"Sorry to hear that Pozz." Grimbledung moved to the counter. "Anything I can do to help?"

Pozzuoli shook his head. "No, no." He winked at the Gnome. "Don't need extra witnesses."

"What? Witnesses for what?"

He gave a noncommittal shrug. "I'm-a buying them out."

"You sure they'll go for it?" Grimbledung narrowed his eyes. "You going to make them an offer they can't refuse or something?"

"I make them one offer and they take it." He narrowed his eyes. "Or else."

"Or else what?" Grimbledung looked worriedly toward the two shops.

Pozzuoli smiled at the Gnome. "So what the Grimbledung need today?"

"Well, I need to get us outfitted for a little trip Drimblerod and I are taking."

"Oh? The trip; she is for business or pleasure?"

It's for fortune and glory! "Pleasure of course. We're just running over to..." *Don't say EternCity! And don't mention the Zombie town, or the Lost Picman's Mine!*

"You don't know where you're going?" Pozzuoli leaned forward on the counter. "You sure it's a pleasure and no business?"

Yaaa! He suspects something! "No, no. We're just running over to South Jute for a few days. We just need a few days supplies to get us to South Jute and back." *Smooooth!*

"How-a long you going to be gone?"

Don't' say over a month like Drimblerod said! Think another number that won't be suspicious! "Two weeks, I suppose."

Pozzuoli nodded. "Two weeks on the roads. You got a place to stay in the Jute?"

What would be more suspicious- a place to stay or not a place to stay? "We're going to be staying out in the open, I think. We'll be camping out."

"Why not in an Inn? South Jute has some nice hotels."

"No!" Grimbledung realized he shouted it. "Err, I mean, we're supposed to be camping. Drimblerod said so."

Pozzuoli shrugged. "So you need a tent then?"

"Sure."

"To buy or to rent?" Pozzuoli pulled out a long quill.

"What's the difference?"

"You want to keep-a the tent?"

"What'd I want with a tent?"

"Renting a tent," Pozzuoli said as he made an notation on a piece of parchment. "So food too?"

Grimbledung nodded. "We can rent the food?" He stuck out his tongue. "Does that mean we have to bring it back after we pooped it out?"

"Ahh." Pozzuoli began, flummoxed. "No. The food you buy."

"We should probably eat, Drim and I."

Pozzuoli made another annotation. "Just you two?"

"Mmm-hmmm," Grimbledung said, noncommittally. He moved to look at a shelf of lanterns.

"Need any wagon supplies? Extra wheel, parts, that-a sort of thing?"

"Prolly not for such a short trip." He picked up a lantern. "Folks buy these?"

"They a-do."

"Why don't they just use a wand?"

Pozzuoli put down the quill. "Some people no like magic. Other times, magic, she no a-work and you need good old fire to see what you are doing. Or to cook." He picked up the quill again. "You want one?"

"Maybe one, I suppose." *Smooth*! Grimbledung put it back on the shelf. He noticed coils of rope stacked beside the shelf. "We'll take some rope too."

"How much you need?" Pozzuoli dipped the quill in the ink well several times to load it up. Rope was a high profit margin item.

What's a good length of rope? Twenty is a big number. That's a lot of copper coins. "Twenty feet would be more than enough for what we're going to be doing."

"What you going to be doing?"

Yaaaa!! "Nothing. Nothing at all. I just like rope is all."

Pozzuoli made another annotation. "So anything else you need? You don't got a lot of stuff." He looked at the short, marginally profitable list he had made. *Time to upsell.* "Say, where you sleeping? On the ground? You need a good bedroll or two."

"That sounds reasonable."

Pozzuoli wrote down four bedrolls on the list. Just to increase profits. "You need rain gear?"

"Rain gear? What's that? I don't think we want to make rain on this trip."

"No, no. Slickers. Ponchos. Things to keep you dry if it rains."

"I don't think it's going to rain."

The profit margin on the rain gear was low, so Pozzuoli didn't press the issue. There was one item however that gave a hearty profit. "Anything to drink?" he asked nonchalantly.

Grimbledung did a little hop. "You betcha! A few casks if you can get them!"

Satisfied, Pozzuoli put the quill down. "So you send the wagon around and I will-a have it loaded up and tied down."

"Why you going to tie down the wagon?"

"The stuff I put in it." Pozzuoli was never sure when the unusual Gnome was being serious. "Packing the wagon, that-a part of the service."

"Really?"

Pozzuoli nodded. It was part of the service, but not free. Loading the wagon had gained him three more silver. Unknown to him, Grimbledung would gain extra rope and a tarp from the deal. Both would end up saving his and his partner's lives. "Anything else?"

Grimbledung thought over what he had ordered. Nothing seemed to let on where they were going or how long they would be

away, or even over what part of the lands they would be traveling. *Perfect!* "Nope, that's it, Pozz. I'll send the wagon over in the morning."

Pozzuoli nodded at the Gnome. "S'alright." He put the quill back under the counter.

Grimbledung waved as he opened the door. "See you later Pozz!"

Pozzuoli waved back. "Don't-a wait so long before coming back."

Grimbledung closed the door behind him, satisfied the trip was still a secret.

"What'd the Gnome buy?" Pozzuoli's wife said as he entered from the back room.

"He's outfitting for a trip."

"Oh? Where'd he say he's going?"

"South Jute," answered Pozzuoli.

"Not much profit in setting up a trip there. Not far at all." She moved to the counter and looked at the list. "What's the upsell?"

"Four bedrolls and loading the wagon." Pozzuoli cringed on the inside- there was a rebuke coming.

"You're slipping," his wife of many decades said with a wink. "Not even slickers?"

Pozzuoli watched the Gnome walk past his front window and out of sight. "Not even slickers. Said it wasn't going to rain."

"What, ever?"

Pozzuoli shrugged. "What he said."

"Such a cute little bambino. Put a couple in there just in case."

Pozzuoli moved to his wife and hugged her. "You softie."

"On loan." She kissed her husband. "I'm not that soft."

Chapter 60
The Road to EternCity

Exactly two days later.

Grimbledung hopped out of bed- he was full sized. "Woo! It's time to go Drim!" He shouted. "The wagon's loaded and it's time to go!"

Drimblerod sat up in bed. He had been both dreading and anticipating the day. On one hand, he was more than ready to be on the way to unimaginable fortune. On the other, he was worried that the two Humans would mismanage the shop while they were away. Twice he had considered just shutting the shop for the month he expected to be away, however the hit they would take in business would at best take four months to overcome. At worst, they would never overcome it and Second-Hand Sorcery would have to shut its doors for good. If he were completely sure of finding the mine, he wouldn't have worried about the business going belly up- but it was called the Lost Picman's Mine for a reason. Returning home with nothing to show for it and then losing the business would be devastating. The two Humans were the best possible solution.

"You up Drim?" Grimbledung called as he entered the living area upstairs. "We'll swing by Nulu's for some go-bags for breakfast and eat on the way!" He opened the door to the POOPA and slid from sight.

By the time Grimbledung was tromping back up the stairs, Drimblerod sitting at the table. "I'm up, I'm up." He looked at his partner. "You know, it's not healthy to see the sun coming up."

"That's an old wives' tale."

"That's what I thought. Now I'm not too sure." He yawned widely. "Is Rat even up and ready to go?"

Grimbledung nodded. "He's downstairs and hitched to the wagon already."

"Land sakes, Grim; what's gotten into you."

Grimbledung shrugged. "Good old-fashioned greed."

"Well, I can respect that." Drimblerod stood. "Will Nulu have coffee for us as well?"

"She said she would."

"Is Flora working this morning?" Drimblerod cringed. It was far too early for any sort of drama in the streets.

Grimbledung shook his head. "No. Nulu said something about avoiding bloodletting in the streets or something."

"Well that's a relief." He moved to the POOPA door. "Meet you downstairs."

Grimbledung nodded. "We'll be on the wagon and ready to go, partner!" Grimbledung slid down the banister and half-ran, half-stumbled to the door. "See you in a little bit Door."

Door rattled its catch.

"I told Dummy to keep an eye on things, but help him out if he needs it."

Door rattled its catch again.

Grimbledung left the shop and hopped onto the wagon. RatShambler was harnessed up. And asleep.

"Rat! You ready to go?"

RatShambler startled awake. "You remember that the Halflings are out hunting Shamblers, right?"

Grimbledung nodded. "I remember." He waggled his ears. "And I have the perfect disguise."

"No, I don't think..." Began RatShambler.

Grimbledung stood and brandished his wand

Shambler Verdes!

Transmutis Completes

Ovibos moschatus!

He intoned.

"What?" Asked RatShambler as a golden light enveloped him. "I really don't think..."

"You're fine, Rat," assured Grimbledung as the transformation took place.

"I don't *feel* fine," said RatOx. "I don't feel fine *at all*." He smelled the air. "And what's that stink?"

"I believe that's you."

"That's me?" RatOx sniffed the air again. "I smell horrible?"

"Well, sure."

"You made me something that smells horrible?"

Drimblerod walked around the shop and clambered onto the wagon. He sniffed. "What's that smell?"

"I blame Grimbledung," said RatOx.

"Well whatever you're eating, you need to stop." Drimblerod stuck out his tongue. "That's gross." He looked forward. "What in the lands is that?"

"That's Rat, of course," said Grimbledung. He gave a wink. "I got him a disguise so the Halflings won't kill him or us."

"But the smell might," offered RatOx.

"Well, let's get going. Maybe a breeze will help," said Drimblerod. "Let's get going Rat."

"Ox," corrected Grimbledung.

"I'm not calling him that. I think those things are mythological anyway."

"There isn't a gear in him. I'm sure of it." He smiled. "Remember when I whipped up that steam powered ostrich?"

"No, I can't say I do. That's the most absurd sounding thing I've ever heard."

"Must have been with a different partner then." Grimbledung waggled his ears. "Right RatOx?"

"I'm just going to call him Rat; not some farcical beast you just made up."

"Thank you."

Grimbledung smiled. "Fine, fine. Let's get going. Fortune awaits, you know." He rubbed his belly. "But first Nulu's place for some breakfast."

"Sounds good to me." RatOx started walking.

Drimblerod looked into the back of the wagon. "You sure that's enough supplies and gear?"

Grimbledung nodded. "Sure it is."

"And you told Pozzuoli exactly what sort of terrain we'd be traveling across and how long we'd be gone?"

"Yeppers. And he said that's all we needed. He packed it himself. Personally, even."

"To get there and back again?" Drimblerod leaned back on the seat. "Maybe we should inventory it first, just to be sure."

"Old Pozz is a professional, Drim. Stop worrying."

Drimblerod nodded. "If you say so."

"I say so." Grimbledung waved at Nulu as they approached. "Bottom of the night top of the morning to you Nulu!"

"Morning, gents," said Nulu. "It's early you know. Early."

The wagon rolled to a stop beside her.

"The second early bird gets the cheese," said Grimbledung.

"It's too early, Grimbledung," warned Nulu. "Take your go-boxes... and..." She sniffed. "What is that smell?"

"It's me, Nulu, sorry," said RatOx.

Nulu shook her head. “Oh dear. Well, be off with you.” She handed a largish box to Drimblerod. “Food and hot coffee await.” She sniffed again. “And be quick about it; folks are going to be eating their breakfast soon you know.”

“Thanks Nulu.”

“You sure that’s all you need?” Nulu asked as she looked at the contents of the wagon.

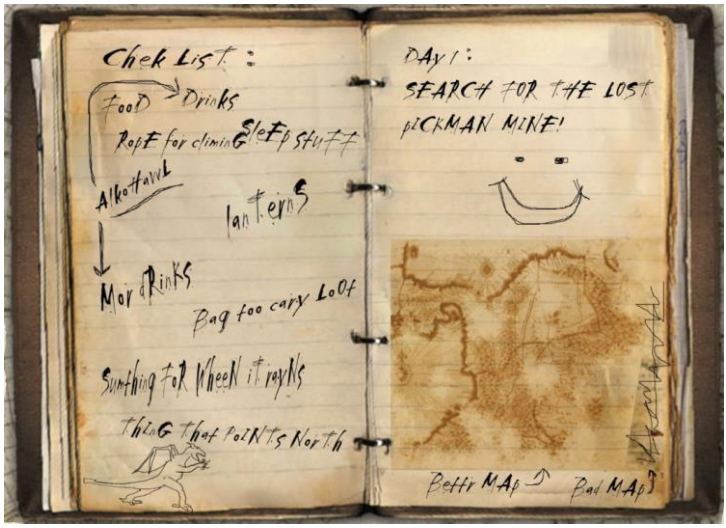
Grimbledung nodded. “The shop is taken care of. We’re all packed and ready to go. We just got some hot breakfast and coffee. We’re set.”

“Peek in on the place, will you, Nulu?” Drimblerod asked.

“Sure thing, Drimblerod.” Nulu shook her head. “You’re both nuts. You know that?”

RatOx nodded.

“Pushaw!” Grimbledung waved over his shoulder as the pair left town. “What could possibly go wrong?”



After their first week in the shop (which was mostly successful), Semfeld and Liverioso stole it, thanks to Chéri.

The entire shop.

Right about lunchtime that same day…

"So they left this morning?" Flora took a deep breath. She exhaled slowly. Through clenched teeth. "To find the Lost Picman's Mine?"

Nulu nodded at the Gnomess. Even though she was at least four times her weight, she didn't make eye contact with the Gnomess. "Yes, I suppose they did."

Flora took a deep breath. Then another. She stared at the ground.

Nulu waited patiently as the Gnomess mulled over recent events.

Finally after a long moment, Flora looked up at Nulu. "Well, I really hope Grimbledung makes it back safely," she said.

"That's really good to hear," said Nulu, relieved.

Flora nodded. "So I can kill him."

The End

About them Illustrators

Daniel Reuben "Roo" Young is another talented artist that is now part of The Fling. Roo's work centers around video game character conceptual art, but thanks to his association with Rio and Nikki, has been guilted into supplying sketches of RatShambler and Mink the Minotaur and even a very-much-improved flying barge.



Maybe he needs to reassess his life choices.

Rio Burton is at it again. When it comes to drawing the Gnomes- she's on it.

About the Author



(Robert in his natural habitat)

Robert P. Wills is a newly retired U.S. Army, Chief Warrant Officer Four. He and his long-suffering wife have retired to Kissimmee, Florida where they are spending far too much time walking around the various theme parks in the area.

Except Sea World.

The employees there tend to yell at Robert for petting the dolphins. At the dolphin petting pool. No, he doesn't understand it either.

He plans to continue his writing antics with several books in the works. Book five in his wildly popular Tales From a Second Hand Wand Shop series, *Grimbledung and the No Good, Terrible, Horrible Mine*, will be published in early 2016 with Book 6- *It's the Election, Stupid* moving along with a publishing date in late 2016. Along with unstable Gnomes, his rollicking -violent- pirate story *The Sailings of Pirate Nonn* should be ready for publishing by mid-2017.

Unless he is eaten by a shark first.

His inspirational, post-apocalyptic science fiction trilogy The Prodigals is available now on Amazon as an eBook, paperback, or audiobook.

Other Stories by Robert P. Wills

Fantasy

Next in this series are:

Book 5- Grimbledung and the Horrible, Terrible, No Good Mine

Book 6- It's the Election, Stupid

Book 7 - Killing Grimbledung

Book 8 - Close Encounters of a Grim Kind (mid 2025)

Horror

Diary of a Madman- The Haunting of Terrance Brushwood. Young Terrance is worried he is going crazy. No one else is seeing the things he is. Are they in his mind? His doctor thinks so. This is a 5,000-word short available on Amazon. Suitable for ages 13 and up due to language.

Easy Street Unpaved- A Vampire's Change of Fortune. Hugh has been a vampire since the early days of the Jamestown colony. He has seen fortunes come and go throughout the centuries. None of that will prepare him for what happens to him next. Frozen into a distance future, he finds himself living in an Amish community, of all places. Suitable for ages 16 and up- Hugh isn't a friendly vampire.

Adventure

The Sailings of Pirate Nonn. Pirate Nonn and his crew sail the Caribbean in search of treasure. Ruthless and cunning, Nonn and his crew are in search of a missing treasure with Her Majesty's Navy in pursuit. This story is suitable for ages 14 and up due to violence. Nonn isn't a loveable pirate.

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IT'S- A Brand New Series!

Sweets Finnegan-
Liaison Officer for the Conglomeration of Planets

Book 1: The Taming of the Crew

Sweets Finnegan, Liaison Officer of the Conglomeration of Planets. Forced to accept a commission, assigned a disgruntled crew, and issued a newly re-commissioned (AKA recently crashed and pieced back together) ship, his five-year (unless it gets extended involuntarily) mission is to bully strange new worlds, seek out new races and new civilizations.

To boldly invite them to join the Conglomeration of Planets!

Or else.

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"**G**reetings and salutations," said Sweets hesitantly. He wasn't sure what to think of the heavily armed natives that had come to meet his ship. They seemed good natured, but his extensive experience with extraterrestrials had taught him that good-natured natives could become caldron-boiling, head-chopping natives with little or no provocation.. Especially what appeared to be pre-Iron Age natives who had most likely never seen anything bigger than a bird fly, or seen
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races that were as different as the Humans were from the indigenous four legged, four armed creatures standing before him.

"Greetings," said one of the natives- ostensibly the leader if his towering headdress was any indication. "Welcome to BokoHammyPoota. Who are you?"

"I'm Captain Sweets. Sweets Finnegan." He preferred to use his first name with his official title because he felt it was more devil-may-care sounding. It also helped him lay groundwork with any potential female he encountered. Captain Sweets fought furiously to keep from smiling – or worse; laughing out loud. "Boko Hama whatee?"

"I am Chief Pamalamasooka," said the Chief as he pointed at himself with his lower set of arms. The upper ones he spread wide, "And these are my royal guards. Welcome to BokoHammyPoota." A smile spread across his face. It was, at least, welcoming.

"Your planet is called BokoHammyPoota?"

The Chief's smile faltered. "Yes. Yes, it is. And where is it you are from?"

Not wanting to alarm the native, Captain Sweets gave the absurdly unhelpful yet approved-by-High-Command response: "From a galaxy far, far away." It wasn't really true; this particular planet was a mere 80 light years from the High Command Headquarters. The brass just liked the sound of it so they forced all their liaison officers to say it to new races.

Chief Pamalamasooka raised an eyebrow. "That's not very specific. Does your land have a name?"

Sweets stool a little straighter. "Earth."

The Chief nodded. "Well that is to be expected." He gave a wink. "No gills. So what's the name of your planet?"

"It's Earth," the Sweets said testily.

The Chief leaned on his formidable spear. "So let me get this straight; you think BokoHammyPoota is funny when that means 'fourth planet from the sun' and yet you call your planet earth?"

The soldiers around him laughed.

"So you come from dirt. How quaint. What do you call your bodies of water; ocean?"

"Hey now..."

"I'm amazed how some of you species even make it into space." The Chief raised an eyebrow. "Have those damned Greys been helping you out?"

Sweets didn't make eye contact with the Chieftain. It had, in fact, been a crashed UFO that had given them the technical hints they needed to initially build their own spacecraft. Reflexively, he looked over his shoulder. The ninety-foot across circular craft they had arrived in suddenly looked like something from a mid-twentieth century science fiction movie. A bad one where the strings could be seen manipulating the cardboard spaceships and the smoke from their engines rose straight up even though they were supposed to be in space. "Uhm," he said unhelpfully.

"Those interfering *dolts*. I'll bring that up at the next council." He pointed a finger at the human. "There'll be fines for both of you, I'm sure. I hope you can pay." The smile returned. "Say, what do you use for legal tender?"

"Money," Captain Sweets admitted.

"Money!?" Chief Pamalamasooka laughed. His guards joined in uproariously. Tears streamed down their eyes.

Captain Sweets looked at the deep red dirt at his feet. *Earth.* "This is going to be a long five years," he muttered.

[1] That's *heaps*, you know...

[2] Here's the recap: The first time was from the Pics. The second was in the Forest from the Orcs, remember? The third event will be discussed in about 3,500 words in the of Tales From the Mora Tau Bar and BAR - 'Vagabonds Go Boom'

[3] Always, always ask. If nothing else, ordering off-menu makes you feel important. Try it sometime!

[4] Obviously

[5] Wouldn't you?

[6] Eater of the screaming. That will be important later on in the series.

[7] While speaking to himself, Liverioso had no lisp. The same was true when speaking to animals, or of his lost love.

[8] We blame the editors for this. There was a great, heroic scene involving this noble magician, but it apparently did not 'move the plot along'. And then Pinky showed up…

[9] *That* well-written, bloody scene, dear readers, was marked out with a thick red pen by an editor who is firmly in the middle of the "pro-Pinky" camp. Sorry.

[10] Book 10 - Grimbledung and The Rise of the Pic King

[11] Hah, hah? Just kidding guys!

[12] Technically at this point, it was staring.

[13] Yep- that's pretty normal.

[14] **WARNING MATH CONTENT:** With an average words read per minute of 250: 730/250 = 2.92 minutes.

[15] Right? No, wait...

[16] 'Wet Work' was the vague, non-prosecutable term the Gremlins used when they weighted someone down and tossed them into any body of water.

[17] Really.

[18] It will be a short chapter in the Tales From the Mora Tau Bar- *Red Door Sees Red!*

[19] Book 5: *Grimbledung and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good Mine*. We know that's not what the footnote said in Book 2. Things change, all right?

[20] That all depends on how much fan mail the Black Widows get...

[21] See?

[22] That's it. Only fan letters will bring anything new on these two gals.

[23] Took a while, but there it is.

[24] Everyone does it!

[25] Ask for it at any fine establishment.

[26] We'll discuss Grimbledung's waiting on the docks in the chapter *Grim Checkers*, in Tales From the Mora Tau Bar.

[27] Veratus "Killer" Bosconius, the sparring trainer. From Book 1? From (more of) Chapter Thirty? Come on, that's got to ring some sort of bell. It was a good scene!

[28] See? Told you.

[29] See what I did there?

[30] Stay in school!

[31] Stay in school!

[32] It's Dwarfish for 'really?'

[33] Yep- that's the entire recipe. They're called 'Panzarotti' in Southern Dwarfish. Most folks call them Crocché.

[34] There you go, Lucas. That's just for you. Maybe it'll take off *this* time.

[35] I figure she owes me for *something*!

[36] See?

[37] Tales From the Mora Tau Bar and BAR - Pinky Goes Fishing.

[38] Well, not really. It's still going to be a misunderstanding between that Pixie, that Dragon, and whatever else was mentioned earlier..

[39] Really.

[40] It actually was. Sorry.