

They stopped at a crossroads outpost about half a day's ride north of Harriston, though what passed for a road in that corner of the world was little more than parallel grooves worn in the dirt from all the other wagons that had come and gone before them. Well away from the cooling influence the Odola had over the prairie, the sun positively blared down upon the parched desert grassland.

The outpost itself was just a pair of adobe buildings ruddy in the afternoon glare. One a cottage with weathered pink shutters and lacy curtains drawn across the windows and a shaded pen out front. Hogs lolling in the dirt beneath the lone juniper. The other structure, larger, a general store and saloon.

"Is this why we've come all this way?" the girl asked. Staring up at the sign for Keller's General Store, she was unsure of what to make of it.

Linebaugh pulled the brake and helped the girl down from her seat in their funerary wagon. She groaned and rubbed at her backside and moved away as the dwarf unchained the bandit's ponies from the traces and tethered them at the hitching post. He worked the pump to fill a trough and watched the ponies slop.

"Aye," he said. "For the most part, anyway. I figured ye could use a few things."

"I don't have any money," she reminded him.

The girl and the dwarf went to the well and leaned against the coping to drink their canteens dry and fill them and drink again. A few chairs were strewn across the covered porch out front, bleached and peeling from the sun. Boards creaked underfoot. Linebaugh pushed on the latch of a glazed door and a bell tinkled overhead and they went in out of the heat into still, musty shade.

A man in a high-collared shirt with little spectacles balanced on his nose looked up from a ledger and bid them a good afternoon. His enthusiasm at the idea doing any custom at all at such a notoriously slow time of the year quickly faded as a dwarf wandered in, holding the door ajar for none other than one of the fae-folk. A shabbily dressed one at that. The shopkeep's wife appeared from the kitchen and her silence was all the welcome the two visitors were likely to receive from her.

"Afternoon." The dwarf paused. "Any chance we can get a bite to eat?" he asked.

The woman looked to her husband and he shrugged at her. She disappeared again. "Set y'self anywhere," came her disapproving voice from beyond the curtain.

Linebaugh dropped his pack and sword belt onto a chair at a table by the window. The girl was teetering around the shop on her cane, peering at everything and anything. Things familiar to her and things for which she was at a loss to even describe. The man behind the counter was watching her closely. The dwarf watched the man in turn and cleared his throat for attention.

He had the shopkeep weighing out dried beans and rice and other staples he'd need for his trip home into linen sacks while he piled goods upon the counter. Clothes he held up against the girl to get a vague sense of their size. Knickers and socks. A big straw hat. A canvas rucksack similar to his leather one. A belt and good knife to go along with it. Brand new boots he made her try on.

She grabbed Linebaugh's arm and spun him around. "I don't have any *money*," she said again in case he hadn't understood her the first time.

“Easy now,” he said softly. “Mrs. Harris was real insistent that ye be given a part o’ whatever bounty they collected on them bandits.”

*“I didn’t help them for meed.”*

“I know, lass. It’s just somethin’ to get ye started.”

She glanced toward the door, still holding onto his sleeve. “Started on what?” she asked of the dwarf, or perhaps herself.

“That’s what we’ll figure out. In the meantime, go pick out a poncho ye like.” He guided her toward a stack of woven blankets. She wondered what purpose they served, as they all had a wide slit in the middle, but she did as she was told, and she picked out a sage green one edged and fringed in cream.

As the shopkeep tallied their purchases the girl leaned on the wood of the counter, staring past the glass at a collection of pocket watches and various bits of mismatched jewelry laid out on dark colored velvet beneath. What really drew her eye, however, were the heavy-looking contraptions of blued metal.

A wooden hoof at one end and a cylindrical section in the middle and then a long tube. The whole thing about the length of her forearm. Hoops and flanges in odd places. She nudged Linebaugh and tapped the glass.

“It’s a pistol,” he told her.

“A what?”

The dwarf interrupted the man and his adding. “Ye got any .42 Long?” he asked.

The man ducked beneath the counter and put a paper box in front of the dwarf. Linebaugh opened the lid. Polished brass stumps stamped with miniscule runes partitioned out in five rows of six. He lifted out a bullet and dropped it in the cup of her hand.

The girl hefted it, tossed it lightly. “It’s heavy,” she commented.

“That’s the weight o’ a life ye hold in yer palm.”

Her smile faded.

“This bit,” he tapped the lead with his pinky, “comes outta this barrel here well faster an’ harder than any arrow ever could. Loud as anything.”

She held the bullet up between her fingers, the brass gleaming in the dim shop interior. She looked dubious. “More powerful than a longbow?”

Linebaugh nodded. “Much. The days o’ swords an’ bows an’ shinin’ suits o’ armor’ll all be a thing o’ the past soon enough. Hell, they probably already are, but half o’ us are too behind the times to even realize it.”

The girl set the bullet back in the box and put her hands behind her. Linebaugh closed it up and slid it back across the counter, ignoring the perturbed look of the shopkeep.

“That seems sad, somehow,” she said.

“The world changes, lass. Not always for the better.”

He paid the man in gold and was returned a half dozen coins. A few silver and a few coppers. They took a seat at the table and went through her new things, folding them and packing them away in the rucksack and splitting the bags of dry goods between them.

Soon the woman reappeared and brought them bowls of a thin, but flavorful pork stew, another bowl with beans, and more of the region’s ubiquitous flatbread still warm from whatever oven it was cooked in. She brought them glasses of corn liquor, sweetened and spiced and ferociously potent.

Linebaugh laid his change on the table.

“That’s too much,” the woman argued.

“Ye throw in a jug o’ this,” he raised the glass, “an’ we’ll call it even.”

They ate at a leisurely pace, the weariness and aches of the day smoothed over nicely by the effects of the drink. Part of their reluctance to push themselves away from the table in any sort of timely manner was the sight of the wagon parked just beyond the window. The grey-green corpses stacked in its bed like so much cordwood, covered with a tarp and swarming with fat black flies. The shopkeep never asked where they were headed or why, and for that Linebaugh was grateful.

He snapped the reins and got the wagon moving out across the dun landscape. The girl was quiet for a time, looking back over her shoulder with her hat clapped to her head. The store and the cottage all that was visible. Nothing else out there but the dry, tufted grass and that red clay earth. A lonely sort of life.

They came to an embankment shortly where barely visible trail through the dirt led up and over. Linebaugh halted just before the earth began to ramp up toward the crest and pulled the wagon off beneath a few scrubby trees and out of the slanting sun.

The girl looked around. "Why are we stopping?" she asked.

"Oh," he said nonchalantly, "just thought it might be a good time to take a break."

"Why are we really stopping?"

He tethered the ponies, pointedly ignoring her. "Patience, lass."

She limped away muttering to herself and climbed to the summit where steel beams ran east and west along the embankment, joined all the way to the horizons as far as she could see. Polished bright and hammered into the dirt with great iron spikes. Bound to their fellows across the way with

thick planks of wood. A twin to the first set of rails stood off about another ten feet or so.

“What’s all this?” she called.

“Come on down from there,” was the dwarf’s only answer.

She rejoined him in the shade and he reckoned the sun by the span of his hand. “Not long now,” he said.

The girl felt a trembling in the soles of her feet, and she wondered if some malady had befallen her. Linebaugh tapped her on the arm and pointed east. She moved from under the trees to get a better look at whatever he was indicating.

Along the track some object was moving toward them. A black speck growing ever larger with the passing seconds, belching smoke and preceded by a chuffing, rushing sound. The word ‘dragon’ passed through her mind in a flight of fancy.

The engine man must have noticed the two travelers, and he yanked at his pull cord.

A gout of steam burst forth as the whistle issued a high-pitched bay, a drawn-out note followed by two abbreviated ones. The enormous machine screeched and clattered its way across their path, hauling its burden along the rails in a cacophony that lasted, seemingly, for minutes.

The girl screamed in fright even as she laughed uproariously. Passengers waved from the windows of their black and gold lacquered cars as they flashed by, and the girl and dwarf waved back.

The locomotive quickly receded into the west, and she hobbled up the banks of the railroad to watch it go, sweeping her hat back and forth in farewell. She bent and put a hand to the rails and Linebaugh headed up to join her.

*“By the sun and the stars,”* she exclaimed, *“that was incredible!”* She jammed her hat back down on her ears. “Did you know that—”

“Train.”

“—train was coming?”

“It’s entirely possible I might’ve heard a rumor.” He studied his fingernails. “Or I might’ve found a copy o’ the train schedule at the bottom o’ my pack.”

The girl fixed her sight on the point where the track disappeared into the distant hills. She turned a leisurely circle, surveying the rugged breadth of Kelm as if she were its assessor, and for a moment she looked almost lost.

Down below the wagon awaited. Linebaugh scowled at the corpses bloated and festering in the beating sun. He’d be glad to foist them off on the wild dogs out here and make for the comfort of Harriston again as soon as possible.

“Come on.” He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “Let’s get this over with. Should be just a few more miles.”

The girl stood on the embankment a while longer as the dwarf went to wrangle the ponies back onto the track. The Greenhome appeared no taller than a patch of lawn, shimmering and vanishing and reappearing in the rising heat. The wind picked up, whipping her hair as the hat skittered away. She lifted her face and filled her lungs and bellowed to the wide open sky a joyous shout. A defiant shout that went on and on as she purged herself of something indefinable. An exorcism of voice that cast her breath back into the world that her life might mingle with all life and some shred of her be borne upon the air to visit other lands in her stead and follow those winds wherever they rambled.

The dwarf let go of the ponies and caught up her hat as it gamboled toward him. He beat the dust from it on his knee

and studied the girl as she challenged the sun lowering in the far western boundary. Sapphire locks streaming and coiling like an animate thing. She turned a wide, toothy grin on him and she laughed again. She looked wild. Unrestrained. Something tugged at the corner of the dwarf's mouth and he grinned right back.