

Gwendala's Run

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The smell of the cauldron filled the room, reminding her that the process was nearly finished. She wasn't sure if this was the best solution but it's what she came up with. As she stirred the pot she watched as baby Edward sleep on the nearby counter. He was wrapped in blankets to restrict his movement as a portion of his right arm and leg were missing and she was concerned he wouldn't be able to catch himself. If he were in the surrounding villages that might have been a fatal but she was a witch and magic allowed her to cheat a little. At the ends of his little stubs was a bit of bark, it would take one or two years but eventually with enough care he would have artificial limbs. They would never be as good as the originals but it's the best she could do. When she first met him a group of terrorists were trading him as part of some grand scheme. She was able to trade some basic services for him, she had expected them to haggle more but they didn't seem to find much value in the child. As soon as she held him in her arms she felt a strength swell up in her and she knew she would do anything to protect him. She had always wanted a baby, she had never cared much for men. She didn't see what women saw in them but she still wanted a child. It's not that she didn't find them attractive, she had several lovers over the years but things always fell apart. She had traveled around the local villages asking for children but that was apparently not culturally appropriate or maybe the villagers felt the same way about their children as she did Edward. If she had gotten a child from the villages she would have also been able to ask for advice on how to raise them. She wasn't sure if little Edward could eat food or if he needed milk. Her solution was to provide nutrients through magic. A clever magic user like her didn't need to worry themselves with such knowledge as long as they could find a loophole or work around. That's what she was working on now in the cauldron, she learned of an

old spell that when cast would provided whatever nutrients were needed for a whole day. So everyday she would recharge an enchanted gem and place it around his neck on a string. She imagined other mothers would worry and argue over what food was best for children but she planned to feed him like this till he was old enough to make that decision on his own. She carefully ladled out the gem and secured it around his neck before picking him up securing him to her back. She would never leave Edward unattended when she went out, this wasn't a safe place. The witches' village was not ideal for a child, it was full of shifty figures and strange entities. On top of that it was not far from an active war zone, a war for which she had though would be finished by now. Today she had a goal in mind, She was going to get little Edward a friend. She grabbed her bag and headed out the door, she could feel Edward squirming but he usually settled down and enjoyed the trip. Friends are hard to come by in this world but she knew where to find one. They passed Mordecai's weapon shop where they could hear the buzzing sound of spinning blades being demonstrated for prospective customers and passed the alchemy shop where his soon to be divorced wife sold "magic crystals", really they were little more than glass but a foolish merchant might be enticed. Several Gnolls lined the streets, probably waiting to see if they were to go towards the front lines. Gholls were hyena like humanoids, Gwendala didn't care for them much. They were stupid and cruel but the witches circle needed an army and they were more than happy to fight for scraps. They passed several more store fronts and waiting creatures before they got to the menagerie. There was a baby catoblepas here and she thought that would be the perfect friend for little Edward. Catoblepas were like buffalo if they had much much longer necks that could wrap around trees and the head of a warthog, they had the reputation for having such a terrible smell that people had died from just their proximity. Which is true but its mostly cause of their diet, they eat dead things in the wild. A domesticated Catoblepas typically doesn't smell worse than any other large furry creature, assuming you feed them fresh meat and vegetables. As a herd animal they would do anything to protect one of their own so it was important to get a young one that would bond with Edward. Even powerful witches had fallen to Catoblepas in battle, they grew to massive sizes and could even project a

field of death magic from their snout. She thought about all these things as she looked at the little creature in front of her. It was about the size of a common pig and was the second cutest thing she had seen all day. The price for that one there is only a couple gems said the attendant, or you could trade me that child he said pointing to her back. He was only half joking. I'm not trading the child today, I have four gems and that will be enough. She paid the attendant his gems and tied a rope around the creature's neck and began to lead it away from the menagerie. She would name the creature calamity, cause she stomped as she walked. Her sisters Agatha and Mary used to be her traveling companions and their coven was feared throughout all the valarian forests but all flowers wilt eventually and so the same for relationships. She wasn't exactly alone, she still had a larger community of fellow witches but things were changing and she didn't know how much longer her allies would stay in these forests with the war so close. She had all but decided to leave before the situation got any worse the only problem was she couldn't decide where she needed to go? To the south various creatures were being dredged up from the swamps to fight in the war, to the north was the front lines and even if she made it to the other side there was no guarantee they would welcome her. You would think a clever spell caster that could feed a baby using only magical gems would be able to figure out some trick to whisk them away to somewhere safe. Wars however have a habit of attracting other powerful and clever spell casters and she didn't want to leave the safety of the village just yet. These were the things her sister's were good at, they liked to fight. She wished they were here but also she remembered that fighting was the reason they weren't here anymore. Edward squirmed and began to cry, which is expected behavior for a baby. Babies cry for any number of reasons however its dangerous to cry when creatures like gnolls are around so she held him close till he calmed down. Once he seemed relaxed she secured him to calamity's back. On the way back they passed the same shops as before only both Mordecai's weapon shop and his soon to be ex-wives shops were closed. Closing a weapon shop during an ongoing war is strange behavior even for Mordecai. What concerned her more is she didn't hear anything coming from the shops.

The silence warranted an investigation, so she tied calamity to a post outside the shop and gave her strict orders to attack anyone that approached them. The weapon shop was attached on top of another building like a strange wooden tumor, she was on the of the building with stairs leading up so she made her journey towards the entrance. The door was already open when she got there, inside was empty. There was nothing left. She had just passed she shop earlier and heard him demonstrating his strange wares to move so many sharp objects so fast was very difficult. The room was bare without even shelves on the walls, there was simply a square room with a small counter at one end and a door way leading to the back. Peaking into the doorway confirmed that the entire place was empty. There was a moment when the silence of the shop drowned out her internal monologue and the crushing weight of what this might indicate paralyzed her. The trance ended when she heard Edward screaming, she rushed out the door and down the steps as fast as she could run. When she got back she could see three gnolls were circling calamity and Edward, at the sight of the witch running towards them they decided to flee rather than risk a confrontation. She felt guilty for leaving them alone, She would have to keep them close now. If Mordecai was clearing out something must have happened. To find out what spooked Mordecai she went towards the village square. The square really a circle with several massive trees exploding from the ground on the edges. The massive trees had assortments of buildings tacked to them and various rope bridges connected them. In the middle was a fountain with a statue of the witch's patron god Gogossum. The stone base harshly transitioned to a poorly shaped bronze hand the size of a dire bear, atop the hand was the figure of a woman whose face was shrouded by a massive hat. The staff on her hands acted as the outlet for the fountain, meant to symbolize the endless magical potential of Gogossum. It looked tacky if you asked Gwendala, she preferred they just tear it down and plant another tree where it stood. Just in front of the fixture was the pit fiend, a tall red tiefling who traveled around mostly working as a headhunter connecting groups with problem solvers. Typically it was boring stuff like criminal organizations looking for muscle or lock picks but occasionally he had worked with political groups and he had a better understanding of the situation than she did.

Greetings fiend! She called out as she led calamity over with the rope. As she arrived beside him she leaned up to him real close and let him know about the weapon shop. He gave her a look that told her he would be able to provide some information but not enough to solve the puzzle. His face was tired, normally wars and political unrest are good for business but he didn't look to be having a good time. Peace talks between the republic and the witches' circle broke down he explained, the spy master that had originally forged the alliance ordered gnoll troops to attack republic towns and before anyone noticed the alliance was over. The war now consisted of three factions, the Republic of Aramoor, The witches' circle and the empire which was large enough to swallow the other two and still have room for dinner. The more concerning thing was that It seemed like there might be other factions in play, he had assumed dragons were involved in some way although he couldn't quite figure it out. Its very difficult to get inside the mind of a dragon, they live for a very long time and its difficult to imagine what one thinks of the world after a thousand years. Dragons can be concerning but they also have a habit of restoring order in the world when things get too chaotic, hard to say from his view if this was benevolent or just beneficial to themselves. The thing that worried him more than dragons was that he saw an old Sigil post glowing on his way into town, this was the sigil post by the road to the song wood. She heard Edward let out a cry and she picked him off Calamity to hold him and take this as a moment to think. Sigil posts were large wooden plates attached to trees or other standing objects. If a certain kind of creature got near they would glow, in this case this one glowed when the scourge was nearby. It was quite common to find strange beasts in the forest or the surrounding swamps, even magical creatures, it was even not uncommon to find legendary creatures sleeping beneath the mud. The scourge was a different kind of threat, almost an existential threat. If what he said was true then she would have to risk leaving. There were two things the gods collectively feared, the first was death and the second was the scourge. She thanked the tiefling and tipped him with some gems she had in her pocket. Any chance you know a way out of here? To the north there is a town called summerfel, it used to be a bit of a dump but its built up quiet nicely and no faction is brave enough or stupid enough to

make peace with its leaders. She thanked him again for his time and made her way back to her tree cottage. She had been to Summerfell before, in fact she had once had a shop there but terrorist had burned the whole town down causing her to move to the next town Rustgarden. After she had setup shop due to once again more terrorists she was forced to resettle after the town found out about her magic. The thought of dealing with these terrorists... maybe they were more like political activists? Regardless of what they were they were trouble but they might be just enough trouble to be a headache for everyone else too. Plus she knew of a couple hiding places from when she was last there. As she approached her cottage she noticed she no longer could sense any creatures nearby. There were no gnolls or other humanoids going about their business. She picked up the pace and burst through the door. gathered her things from the house and packed them into a bundle which she then secured to Calamity. She secured Edward on her back, grabbed a map before heading out the door. The road to SummerFell was probably not the safest route so she would first head straight north through the woods and then head west when she got to a safe place. As she walked north she couldn't hear birds, the silence was only broken by the stomping of Calamity. They walked for a while before She heard something faint, a creaking sound coming from one of the nearby trees. As she leaned in to study it further she noticed vines wrapped around a bluebird slowly pulling its form against the tree. Behind her she heard movement and she smelt a distinct smell, gnolls. There were three gnolls a couple meters away closing in, surrounding her with her back against the tree still making constricting noises. The gnolls were not making noises like they normally do before a fight, no jostling between them to see who got the first blow. They were eerily quiet as they advanced. She could easily dispatch these three but they were moving so slow so she just casually walked away with calamity in tow. She was surprised how well that worked but she didn't want to relax just yet. As they got further away from the heart of the forest she noticed the sound of the forest returned. When she finally reached the tree line it was the middle of the night, as she passed the tree line she felt a sense of calm come over her.

She decided to make camp outside the forest but not any further into the fields in case scouts were nearby. She assumed the actual battle lines were much further out but she wanted to play it safe. About an hour or two later she heard rustling in the grass ahead of her towards the lines. She could see a group of three men with short swords and bows approaching the tree line. They hadn't seen her yet and seemed to be going right past her. When they got to the tree line they went to one of the larger trees one of the men took out a flask and shouted "FOR ZIO" whatever that means. After pouring the flask's contents on the tree he set it ablaze. What were they thinking, the whole forest will know they're there now? They kind of danced around the fire for a bit before she could hear the forest reacting. She could hear rumbling like a hoard was coming towards them but it suddenly stopped and she saw in the shadows were large humanoid figures with glowing eyes. They were just beyond the light of the moon, the men had noticed the figures and seemed to be walking slowly away but they didn't make it far before wooden tendrils pulled them into the shadows. The shadowy figures began to recede into the woods when Edward woke up and made a quiet yelp. The shadowy figures instantly halted, there was a moment of silence before they began slowly moving in her direction. She quickly secured Edward on the back of Calamity and whispered specific instructions to her in beast tongue. Catoblepas sometimes can be intelligent enough to understand instructions, she hoped this young one would be so lucky. In her bag she pulled out several luck charms and quickly fastened them to Edward's good arm before sending them off to the north. She drew her wand and took aim.

This is the second short story I've written and published on my site. A number of elements are borrowed from the Dungeons & Dragons universe but the story takes place inside a homebrew campaign. To find out what happens next you might have to join in on one of our sessions.