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Save the Dragon

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Save
The
Dragon

By
Emily Malone

Chapter 1:

Every plant in the overgrown garden shook as a young girl ran past them towards the wooden gate on the edge of her property. Willow Kipps, age 13 and 11 months, ran through the gate, not even bothering to close it behind her, and continued into the field of tall grass. Her light brown hair was long and curly, but tied back halfway in an intricate braid leaving enough down to flow behind her like a cape as she ran. The loose bits of hair were littered with tiny fairy braids, which were more evidence of a nervous habit than a fashion statement. Her boots, tied together by the laces and slung over her shoulder, bounced against her as she ran. Willow maneuvered through the field like a dance, carefully distributing her weight on the balls of her feet and placing them strategically on the softest parts of the soil. It's the quickest way into town, but not necessarily the easiest. For someone not used to it, they may be discouraged by the number of holes dug by the lottles that live in the ground or the large stones hidden in the grass.

When she finally reached the stream on the edge of the field, she lifted her long skirt up to her knees. It's rare for the stream to be deep enough to reach the fabric, but she's always been careful after the weekend of the big storm when the water went up to her hips. At the time she had thought she would get swept away by the current, but instead she had just had to spend the rest of the day in a wet skirt. It was not an incident she was looking to repeat.

On the other side of the stream, Willow continued up the small grassy hill and onto the dirt road leading to the town center. The doors to the main building were propped open with stones, and the center circle was full of tents for the market. As it was middle day on Saturday, the center was full of people stocking up on fresh produce, bread, clothing, and tools for the upcoming week.

Willow continued at a hurried pace, but slowed down slightly as she approached the crowd. She scanned the area quickly, even standing on a spare stool from the wood carver to get

a higher vantage point. Unsatisfied, she jumped down from her stool and continued past the market and on to the field on the other side of town. The grass was much shorter than the field near her house, but mainly because it was filled with bright pink and pale yellow wildflowers. She focused her path towards the hill on the far right where a pitiful little tree perched firmly on top. Willow has always loved this tree. It had fallen over in the storm a few years ago. The remains of its long trunk had already begun its journey back into the soil, wild flowers covering what was left, but the trunk still clung to life. Instead of giving up, the little tree continued to grow with small branches sprouting from the decapitated stump until it could almost be considered a tree again. At the top of the hill, Willow finally found who she had been looking for.

A small piece of yellow fabric, much brighter than the yellow of the flowers, poked out from the side of the tree. She knew it was Lira's favorite scarf, which she wears to tie back her fluffy dark brown hair, slightly lighter on the ends due to the hours she spends in the Sun. If she's not wearing the yellow scarf, she's wearing some other equally bright color, but the yellow is her favorite because of the way it complements the warmth of her tan skin in a way the others don't.

"Lira," Willow shouted on her way up the hill. Lira Birdsong poked her head out from behind the little tree, the Sun caught her face in just the right way to turn her brown eyes to honey. She placed her sketchpad and pencil down next to her before running to meet Willow halfway.

"What is it?" Lira asked. A smile jumped onto her face with the contagious excitement pouring off her friend. Willow took a moment to catch her breath before she answered.

"I got my power," she said, still slightly out of breath.

"Really? Man took you long enough!" Lira said.

"Hey now, the normal range for powers to develop is nine to thirteen. I'm not even a late bloomer," she said sternly.

“Whatever, whatever, are you gonna show me or what?” Lira said, nudging Willow playfully.

“Okay okay,” she laughed. Willow took a moment to breathe before she closed her eyes and balled her hands into fists at her side. For a split second, Willow’s body turned into a pale blue light not quite bright enough to make Lira squint. The light quickly shrank and twisted until it formed the shape of a long creature with short stubby legs and a tiny snout before the light materialized into a small ginger lottle with a small heart shaped white spot on its snout.

“You’re a morph!” Lira shouted, clapping her hands. “I never would have guessed.” The little lottle jumped around Lira’s feet in excitement before turning back into Willow.

“What do you mean?” she asked when she turned back into herself.

“I don’t know, I mean your mom’s was just so cool. Not that morph powers aren’t cool, but you know what I mean.”

“She could talk to animals, it’s not really that special,” Willow said.

“She could communicate with any living thing, don’t act like you don’t think it’s cool.”

“Yeah, I know,” Willow said, trying to end the conversation. “We have to go find Teddy and tell him.”

“I think he’s at home, but I’m not sure. Last I talked to him he just got some new book or something, so I can’t imagine he’s doing anything other than reading till his eyes bleed.” Willow laughed, and Lira quickly grabbed her stuff from next to the tree and then held out her arm for Willow to hold before running down the hill towards Teddy Trumbo’s house.

The two of them walked until they reached the gray stone house down the lane from the center of town. It’s larger than many of the other houses in town, but a lot colder. The main room of the house was visible through the large front window. It looked mainly hollow with two big tables in the center. The walls were lined with all sorts of potions and tools. This was the home of the two great healers in town, well, the only healers in town. They had arrived only nine years ago, saving this little village, and bringing Teddy with them.

“Ey, Teddy,” Lira yelled from the front lawn. When she didn’t hear a response, she yelled again. “Teddy, come out here!” Finally, the window on the far right of the house swung open.

“What do you want Lira, did something happen?” said a young boy with a mop of curly brown hair on the top of his head. “Oh hey Willow,” he said, his face softening a bit.

“Dude, come down here,” said Willow, unable to keep the excitement off her face. She’s never been a closed book. Teddy held up a hand, indicating that he needed a few minutes to grab his things. Willow could feel the excitement jumping around through her entire body. Those two minutes felt like a decade before he finally exited the house through the side door.

“What’s the big emergency,” he asked. Lira rolled her eyes at him, almost audibly.

“You’re acting like we tore you away from some big important project. We all know you were just reading about shiny rocks or weird plants or something,” said Lira. He didn’t dispute this, but still gave her a glare. “Anyway, it actually is really important.” She looked over at Willow, who suddenly felt a pinch of nervousness. She couldn’t think of what to say, so she just decided to show him instead. With a quick flash of blue, Willow revealed herself as a lottle again. Her small, long body ran quickly around Teddy’s feet and up onto the side of the stone fence where she would be almost level with his face. He smiled at her with excitement.

“Your powers!” he said. Willow jumped off the wall, and quickly returned to her regular form. “Can you do any others?” he asked.

“So far just the one, but I haven’t tried anything else yet. Apparently the first shape is usually the easiest, so I need to practice if I wanna get more under my belt,” Willow answered.

“We have to celebrate,” Teddy said, leading the way down the path. “Willow, put your shoes on, I’m getting us all drinks at Babbles’.” Part of Willow wanted to protest. She doesn’t like when Teddy offers to buy her things. It’s not that she thinks he does it out of superiority or pity or anything, she just likes to show her independence, especially when it comes to money. This time though, she allowed herself to get caught up in the festivities, and followed him with a skip.

Babbles' is one of the most popular places in town, mainly because it's one of the only leisure buildings, but it almost seemed as though the entire village was there when they arrived.

"Is someone getting married?" Willow asked, pulling her boots over her feet at the doorway. The further into the room they walked, the harder the energy hit Willow as being agitated instead of excited. It was much sharper and darker. It wasn't a happy crowd, it was an angry and fearful one. "I think somethings wrong," she told her friends as they sat down at the only empty table. Most people were crowded around the bar, the prime spot for gossip.

"It's probably nothing. Someone's put their market stand too far to the left I'll bet," Teddy said. "I'll be right back." Willow watched as Teddy squeezed through the crowd to order their drinks. He's always been pretty small, so this isn't the most difficult task for him. The return to the table with the three magenta drinks on the other hand was slightly more difficult. After a few close calls, he carefully placed the drinks on the table. Willow took a sip of her drink, the cold bitter taste swept across her tongue before settling into sweetness. This has always been her favorite drink. Her mother used to get it for her, Lira, and Teddy by the jug for them to drink in the garden. It reminded her of home.

"You read it too right?" Yelled a man by the bar as he threw his hands on the counter, pulling Willow back to reality.

"Of course I read it," replied a voice Willow couldn't quite pinpoint.

"Read what?" asked a woman at the end of the bar who looked like she had been in that spot all week.

"There is a dragon, they just found a dragon in the Septur mountains. The notice arrived this morning with a message from the king," said another man, this one she recognized. It was Mr. Marlo. He grows timble berries for the market. Willow's mother used to go over to his farm every week to help with his crops. She could tell him when they needed more water, or when the

soil needed more nutrients just by sitting with them for a few moments. He paid her as much as she would allow him to, which usually took the form of delicious juicy berries, or occasionally some jams or pies Mrs. Marlo made with them. From the few times Willow accompanied her mother, she always thought of Mr. Marlo as a level headed man, not one to be yelling in a mob in a bar.

“A dragon? No way! Those things are extinct,” replied the woman.

“Not anymore. Two travelers discovered one in a cave they said radiated with heat. It’s said to be almost the size of the mountain itself, and its crimson eyes are redder than rage.” Willow looked at her friends, whose eyes were glued to the crowd of people.

“What does this mean, a dragon in Septur,” she asked Teddy. If anyone knew about dragons, it would be him. He’s read almost every book in the town's book room, and a few his parents purchased for him through the port.

“I don’t know,” he said truthfully. “No one’s seen a dragon for at least 1,240 years, and there aren’t many books about them. The few people still alive from that time don’t have much to say about them either, except obviously that they are deadly. Not many people who have seen them have lived to tell the tale. I do know that for a while they terrorized the lands, burning down villages with their fiery breath and ripping up homes with their long sharp claws. Young dragons are already bigger than a house, but full grown ones can be bigger than three houses. That’s all I got.” Willow chewed on this information for a while. Something didn’t quite sit right with her, but she couldn’t pinpoint exactly what.

“We should start moving! We should start packing our stuff! A beast like that could get here in just a day, couldn’t it?” the woman yelled with a trembling voice.

“No, no,” said Mr. Marlo, “They’ve enchanted the cave, the beast cannot escape for now, we shouldn’t panic just yet.”

“But an enchantment won’t last forever,” the woman insisted. “What about when the protectors grow tired? The shields will be too weak to contain it!”

“King Relival has sent a request along with the notice, no need to worry. He has called for those bravest in the land to slay the dragon for us. The successful knight will be rewarded with honors and gold. He had a plan, so we should just remain calm until the beast is slain.” Mr. Marlo spoke confidently, but the woman did not seem quite so convinced, and neither did the crowd behind them.

The words he spoke echoed in Willow's mind. They're just going to kill it? It hasn't done anything wrong except exist, is that enough for a death sentence? Her stomach felt uneasy, and she suddenly felt the need to escape the suffocating room. She ran out through the front doors and sat herself down on the dirt path, leaning herself up against the side of the building to help settle her upset stomach. Her friends quickly joined her.

“What's wrong,” Teddy asked, joining her on the ground.

“I don't know,” Willow said, “It just doesn't feel right. And people are excited about killing it, it's just, it's wrong, and I couldn't be in there.” Lira and Teddy looked at her slightly confused.

“But it's a dragon,” said Lira. “It's a big scary monster that is known for wiping out entire villages. Do you really think we should wait around until it starts killing us?”

“But,” Willow started. When said like that, Willow did sound a bit crazy. Of course she thought they should protect themselves, but is that what they were doing? She tried to wrangle her conflicting thoughts. On the one hand, she knew it was silly to be upset at the King, but on the other hand...on the other hand she knew deep in her heart there was something wrong.

“Teddy,” she finally spoke, “didn't you say that young dragons are usually the size of a house?”

“Yeah, I mean roughly,” he said.

“Well, they said this one was almost the size of a mountain! Doesn't that mean it should be full grown? Or at the very least not young. And it takes, what, 100 years for them to fully grow? If it's so deadly and dangerous, wouldn't we have heard something about it by now? Wouldn't we have been clued in on its existence by all the burned down villages and ripped up

homes? Why are we just now learning of its existence if it is so dangerous? I think, maybe, it's just trying to survive. When was the last time you heard about people going through the Septur mountains? It's probably just trying to hide. It's probably scared of us. We did wipe out all others of its kind. Those men were face to face with the dragon, close enough to look it in the eyes, yet they lived to tell the tale. That doesn't sound like a beast to me. Attacking it will only make the issue worse. We might create a monster by antagonizing it when it's only trying to survive. We can't let them kill it out of fear. We can't let them just kill this creature for sport!"

Lira and Teddy just stared back at Willow for a moment. It's not often she gets this fired up about something, not enough to yell in the middle of the streets. They knew she was serious, and she felt strongly about what she was saying. The shock showed on their faces, but Willow stood her ground.

"Okay," Lira said finally. "you know I've got your back." She smiled at Willow, then looked over to Teddy, who nodded in agreement.

"Okay," said Willow.

Chapter Two:

Lira and Teddy followed as Willow marched home, stomping with every step. Her brain was so full with the news about the dragon that she walked through the river, boots and all, crossed through the fields and through the gates of her mother's garden, all without speaking a single word to her friends.

"So, what are we going to do?" Lira finally asked, looking at her friend intently. Willow took a moment to answer, her mind still running in circles.

"Well, I'm not quite sure," Willow said as she chewed on her lip. "But we have to do something, right?" Willow looked at her friends, but her eyes wandered to the overgrown beds of her mother's garden. She wished she could take care of it as well as her mother could. Truly, the state of the spilling vines didn't look all that different than they had before her mother's passing. *The plants don't like to be trimmed*, her mother would always say. She worked in that garden for hours, never to make it look beautiful or polished, but always to make the plants happy. She fed them and cleaned them and talked with them. Willow would often spend her evenings in this garden listening to her mother sing them goodnight. After her passing, Willow took over the task of caring for it. Her mother had taught her many things growing up, but without her mother's powers, there were many things she could not do.

"Willow," Teddy finally spoke. "What are you thinking about?"

"I," she started, but she took a long breath to think before finishing. What was she thinking? There was a small idea forming in the back of her mind, but she wasn't sure what her friends would think of it. "Well, I was thinking, but I just don't know because it's kind of a lot, and I don't even know if it will work, so it probably won't even be worth it..." she started. Teddy didn't look away from her.

"Oh just get on with it!" Lira said, throwing her arms in the air dramatically.

“Well, I thought maybe it would be worth a shot to try to write a letter to the king,” Willow said quickly, forcing the words out of her mouth. “Maybe explaining it to him would make him see reason. I can voice an opinion here all I want, but what really matters is getting my feelings directly to the king.” She looked to Teddy for support, but he just looked absently at the flowers in the bed next to them, carefully playing with its petals. His silence made her insides uneasy.

“Well,” he finally spoke, “we may as well try. Why not? But, how do you plan on getting it to him? Are we going to walk all the way to the Kingdom Center? That could take years.”

“That’s the thing, I’m not exactly sure, but he sends us stuff by port all the time, right? So I was thinking, the port probably goes both ways. If something from him gets to us, we could probably get something from us to him. If that makes sense.”

“Yeah, but we don’t have a teleporter in the village. We just have the port rock, and that doesn’t go both ways.”

“I know, I know, that’s why I was thinking we could journey just to the nearest village with a porting station and use theirs.”

“Where’s that?”

“I’m not quite sure. Teddy, I told you it wasn’t completely developed.”

“I think it’s a wonderful idea,” shouted Lira. “If anyone’s words can change the king’s mind it’s yours.”

“So it’s settled? Teddy, is there any record of the teleporters in the kingdom? We can’t really start preparing if we don’t know where we’re going,” said Willow. Teddy nodded and opened his mouth to speak.

“I’m sure I could find a map somewhere. I can’t be sure how accurate it is, but most big cities should have at least one teleporter,” he said.

“And your parents should know a bit about the journey,” Lira cut in. “They’ve been everywhere.” Teddy nodded in agreement.

“Great, so Teddy, you’ll be in charge of the route, and me and Lira can be in charge of getting supplies together. We can leave at the next sunrise” Willow said with a grin.

“Okay, hold on. Let’s not get too ahead of ourselves. I totally support this letter idea, but to journey to another village, that’s not just a walk in the gardens. You need to talk to your father first,” Lira said. Willow frowned at the idea.

“I don’t need his permission,” she said.

“Yeah, but, come on, you and I both know you’d be more comfortable with his support.” Willow prepared to snap back, but stopped herself. She didn’t like that Lira was right.

“Fine,” Willow said reluctantly. “Sure, I’ll ask him, but he won’t be home till the evening.” Lira smiled.

“In the meantime then,” Teddy said, pulling their attention back to the task at hand, “if we are going to be leaving in only a sundown to two, we should really get started on our research.”

“Well then, lead the way,” Willow said, motioning for the door.

“I should have most of the books we need at home,” he said as he began to walk, “but I know of a few in the library we could look at if necessary.” The two girls followed close behind.

“Who knew your hoard would actually come in handy someday,” Lira laughed, giving him a hard nudge in the arm.

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After a long evening of reading through Teddy’s old books, Willow returned home sleepy, but full of excitement for the coming adventure. They had successfully mapped out a course that should only take them three days to the nearest town with a teleporter, if they stayed on track,

and put together a short list of supplies they may need for the journey. Only the essentials, like nutrition bars, health packs, and some survival tools. They had even written up the letter they were going to send to the king. Teddy had done most of the research, mainly confirming what he had told Willow at Babbles', but the words were all Willow's. After they finished, read over it, and read over it again, they all signed their names big at the bottom of the page. Willow held it securely in her pocket as she walked up the front path of her home. She could already see the main room window was lit, which meant her father must be home. She had been dreading this conversation all night. Her relationship with her father has never been quite what it was before her mother died. He spent most of his time outside of the home, and didn't talk to her much even when he was around. She didn't know what would hurt worse, him not caring if she went, or him refusing to let her go.

"Where have you been?" Her father asked as she walked through the front door, surprised to have not seen her resting in the garden like she is on most nights. He was sitting in a chair by the light holding a book close to his face. It was the same book he had been reading for the past couple months. Each time he reached the end, he simply started back at the beginning again.

"Just Teddy's," she said, working up the courage to tell him about their plan.

"Ah," said her father, turning back to his book. She remained standing in the same spot, waiting for him to look up at her again. She cleared her throat.

"Uh, father," she said hesitantly. "Can I talk to you about something?" He set the book back in his lap, holding the page open with his finger.

"Yes?" he said with strength, but Willow could see the look of concern on his face. Maybe this wasn't the best idea.

"Uh, well, I got my powers today," she said, trying to lighten the conversation with good news.

"That's fantastic news," he said, his face softening.

“I have morph powers,” she said. “So far just to a lottle, but they say more will come with time.”

“Well, isn’t that great,” he said. He started to pull the book back up to his face, but Willow jumped back in.

“Um, have you heard about the dragon?” she asked quickly, trying to keep his attention.

“How could I have missed it? Everyone in town is talking about it,” he said from behind the book. “But it’s very far from here, and held by the strongest protectors. There’s no need to fret.”

“Actually, about that,” she started. “That’s what we were discussing at Teddy’s tonight. The force fields and the dragon. We actually, we were talking about, well we have this plan to actually try to set it free. To save it.” This confession got his attention. He threw the book down in his lap, not even bothering to save his page.

“Absolutely not,” her father said sharply. “What are you thinking? Dragons are not creatures to be messed with, and neither are the king's guards.”

“No, no,” she said. “We just want to send a letter. Just to the king, we won’t go anywhere near the dragon. It’s not fair that it doesn’t even get a chance, father, we need to ask the king to reconsider its execution. Please. I have the letter right here, will you please just read it and hear what we have to say?” She pulled out the letter and held it out to him.

“Willow, you’ve never gone beyond these home fields,” refusing to grab the piece of paper. “It’s too dangerous out there. I cannot let you go.”

“I’ll be safe about it, promise, and I’m not going by myself.”

“Teddy is no bodyguard,” he insisted. She wanted to argue, but she knew that ultimately he was right. She didn’t know the dangers out there, and none of them had real defensive magic. Lira’s was the closest thing they had, but she doesn’t practice her shout enough to build its strength. Her father wasn’t just being the bad guy. There was no anger or dominance in his eyes, only fear.

“It’s what she would have done,” she said with a crack in her voice. She knew this was a low blow, but she also knew it in her heart to be true.

“She would have wanted you to be safe,” he said quietly. He let out a heavy sigh and leaned back in his chair. He was silent for a moment before sitting back up and speaking again. “What if the letter doesn’t work?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Willow, I know you. What will you do if the letter doesn’t work?”

“I’ll,” her brain stuttered a moment. “I don’t know. We’ll cross that bridge when we get there. Please father, will you just read the letter? Can I please have your blessing?” she pleaded. Her father paused and clenched his teeth as if he didn’t want his next words to escape.

“Your mind is made up,” he said, his tone unsure if it was a question of not. Willow nodded. “Then you have my blessing, under three conditions. Please, allow me to help you prepare for the journey. We will go to the spell shop tomorrow for potions, and I will give you coins for a place to stay. I’ll give you my knife in case you need it. Let me see the route you’ll take so I can warn you of any obstacles I have knowledge of.” That sounded easy enough, Willow nodded for him to continue. “I also request that you find someone to come with you, someone with strong defensive magic.”

“But I don’t know anyone like that,” she insisted. “Why can’t you just trust me and my friends.”

“I do trust you, but Willow I must insist. There are plenty of people in town with defensive magic. Please, find someone.” She knew he wasn’t going to budge on this subject, so she nodded to accept. “And finally, if the letter doesn’t work, I need you to promise me you won’t do anything impulsive.”

“Okay okay, I promise,” she said quickly, before he could change his mind.

“Well then, hand me the letter,” he said, holding out his hand. She gave it to him, and waited anxiously as he read it.

“This is very impressive,” he finally said. “May I sign it?” Willow smiled at the idea.

“Of course, yes, please,” she said, running to grab a pen. Joy fluttered in her heart as she watched him sign his support onto her letter.

“Fine then,” he said. “Now, go on to bed, we will leave early, before sunrise, to gather your supplies. She nodded in agreement, and walked down the hall to her bedroom.

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Willow and her father had spent the morning together gathering potions and learning about the native creatures outside of their fields. None of them sounded all that scary, except maybe the Wot that lived in the trees. He said they have big, strong, stomping feet and long, vine-like tails. Apparently they wrap up their prey and can eat them in one large chomp. Just thinking about it made her shiver, but she wasn't entirely convinced her father wasn't just trying to scare her into backing out. The one task she hadn't completed was finding someone with defensive magic. It was the only requirement her father had wanted her to complete on her own. When the Sun hit midday, Willow met with Lira and Teddy at the fallen tree to discuss their plan.

“You know, your father's not entirely wrong.” Lira said as they sat on the hill overlooking the market square.

“He is being overprotective and you know it,” Willow said.

“He's being smart. It's dangerous, and I wouldn't say we are exactly the strongest bunch.”

“We have Teddy,” said Willow. Lira glanced over at Teddy who was distracted by the book of plant identifications spread out on his lap. He looked up at the mention of his name.

“You know I love you Teddy, but I bet even I could beat you in a fight. I think it could be useful to have a little defensive magic with us. I mean, truly, we have to admit our weaknesses

here. We are a couple of kids, a morph with one shape, a healer who can barely fix a scrape, and my shouts can barely shake an apple out of a tree. We shouldn't go out there unprepared because we don't want to admit that"

"I agree," Teddy stepped in. "You guys have never been outside this village before, the more help we can get the better. We could maybe ask Brim. He's got strength."

"Yeah, I don't know, he's kind of creepy," Lira said. "What about Xander?" Willow leaned back into the grass to think while her friends brainstormed possible companions. Who would she want to accompany them? She didn't know very many young people in the village. Willow was more shy than her village was small. Most of the people she talked to, outside of Teddy and Lira, were friends of her mother's who she would visit when taking care of their plants. Willow sat back up and looked down into the market square. A thin line of smoke was floating up from the chimney of the small stone bakery. She and her mother had always made their own food, her mother was very particular about how her food was prepared, but she had been in there a few times. She closed her eyes and tried to remember the smell of the freshly baking bread.

"We could ask Ramsey," Willow said, startling her friends with her break in silence.

"Ram- Do you even know for sure her powers?" Teddy asked, thoroughly confused at the suggestion.

"Her entire family has fire powers," Lira cut in.

"You know that doesn't mean anything," he said.

"Yeah, but seeing as there is not a single person in her family that hasn't had fire powers in their entire family tree, I'd say it's a pretty good bet. She's been an assumed burner since birth. I think it's a great idea," Lira said.

"The least we can do is ask," said Willow, trying to convince him.

"Isn't she a little scary," Teddy asked.

“Come on, we buy bread from her mom all the time. I mean, I’ve only met her a few times, but she seems nice enough,” Lira said, grabbing Teddy by the arm and standing up quickly, taking Teddy with her. “If we go right now, we can get there before closing!”

Lira ran down the hill at full speed, dragging Teddy behind her. Willow pulled her skirt up to her knees and ran down after them, following through the market streets and to the front door of the baker. Willow took a moment to catch her breath before walking through the doors.

It didn’t take long to spot Ramsey Egan, and not simply because of the bakery’s small size. Ramsey has naturally red curly hair that’s cut short and blunt and sits in a vaguely triangular shape at the base of her jaw. Her silhouette is different from most of the girls in town. She rarely wears skirts, and is more likely to be found wearing a loose fitting pant that wraps snugly around her waist just above her belly button. She’s also never seen without her dark brown leather jacket that is almost wearing her more than she is wearing it.

“Hey Ramsey,” Lira said as if they’ve been friends for years. At the sound of Lira’s voice, Ramsey’s wide eyes rolled almost audibly. Lira either didn’t notice, or blissfully ignored it. “We have a proposition for you,” she announced proudly. Ramsey looked over at Willow, who looked quickly at the floor.

“I don’t have time,” Ramsey answered, barely looking in Lira’s direction.

“That’s a lie, I know you’re almost on your last loaf of bread,” Lira started. “Just listen to us for like five minutes and then we will leave you alone. It’s really important I promise.”

“Fine,” Ramsey said sharply, looking at Lira with a glare. “Just, whatever you want, make it quick.” Instead of acknowledging the rudeness, Lira took this as a success and smiled wide.

“We are going on an adventure to save the dragon, you know, the one they found in the caves?” The look on Ramsey’s face made Willow’s stomach hurt. She couldn’t tell if they were about to be laughed out of the place or yelled at.

“You are absolutely nuts,” said Ramsey, dismissing them and turning around towards the kitchen.

“We were hoping you would join us,” Lira called out over the short distance Ramsey had put between them. This got Ramsey’s attention, and she turned quickly back around.

“And why would I do that?” she asked. Willow couldn’t tell if she was angry at the suggestion, or intrigued with the idea.

“Just hear us out, will ya? I have a whole pitch and everything,” Lira said. The annoyed look remained on Ramsey’s face, but she didn’t protest. Lira straightened her posture, cleared her throat, and started her speech. She told her all about Willow’s idea, how old they suspect the dragon to be, how the travelers who found it weren’t hurt, and ultimately how they believe it deserves a chance before being killed. She told her about their plan to send a letter to the king and how they need her defensive magic to get there safely, or to at least convince her father they will. “Come on. People are just acting out of fear right now which is understandable given the circumstances, but also so unfair. This creature hasn’t done anything wrong in the past several hundred years, and it may never. You have to help us.” Lira didn’t even seem winded by her speech. Willow had been too nervous to look at Ramsey while Lira was talking, but now that she did, she noticed Ramsey’s face had softened. Maybe it was just too tiring to hold a scowl for as long as Lira can talk, but Willow thought she looked almost interested with her head cocked slightly to the side.

“Is that it?” Ramsey finally said, looking unamused. This was one of the first times Willow had seen Lira at a loss for words.

“Will you please help us,” Willow said, the first words she had spoken since entering the bakery. Ramsey turned and looked her dead in the eyes, an oddly vulnerable stare. “I know it sounds crazy, but I think it’s important.” Ramsey looked away, taking a moment to respond.

“Yeah sure, I’ll do it,” said Ramsey casually, surprising everyone in the room. “I mean, I’ll go along with your little plan, but a morph and a loud mouth? It’s not gonna work. Your leader has the most cowardly magic there is. You really think you're gonna persuade him to change his mind?”

“Cowardly-” Lira started, but Ramsey cut her off.

“Yes cowardly, a magic that allows you to hide instead of fight. I see why you need me to come with you. You’d never get there on your own.” Willow could feel the heat rising in the room.

“So you will help us then?” Willow asked carefully. Ramsey took a deep breath and sighed.

“Yeah, I’ll help you,” said Ramsey. “But leave before I change my mind. You all are already starting to get on my nerves.”

“Okay, we are leaving at the next sunrise. We already have the route and supplies, so all you have to do is meet us at the bush tree before the Sun rises.

“Fine,” said Ramsey, turning around and walking into the kitchen, indicating that the conversation was over. Despite the harsh attitude, Willow felt something warm and soft in the air. Perhaps it was just the fire burning in Ramsey, but Willow wondered if maybe it was something more. She just couldn’t pinpoint exactly what.

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Willow, Teddy, and Lira met the next morning as they had agreed. Willow’s bag was packed to the brim with all the things her father had insisted she bring, and her little coin bag sat heavily on her waist belt. She had filled it with all the coins she had hidden away in the flower beds, and a few hundred more her father had given her for the road. Willow wiggled her toes in her boots.

“Are you sure she’s gonna show?” Lira said, kicking at a pile of stones. Lira had mountains of energy, despite the low position of the Sun.

“She’ll show,” Willow said, trying to hide the doubt from her voice. Ramsey hadn’t been too convincing when they spoke, but something about the look in her eyes when they told her

about the dragon made Willow sure she wouldn't back out. However, that trust was beginning to waver a bit until she saw the bright red of Ramsey's hair poking up over the base of the hill. "See, I told you she'd show." Willow said loud enough for Ramsey to hear.

"Just don't make me regret it," she said, while pulling her large bag to a more comfortable spot on her shoulder.

"Okay, now that everyone's here," Teddy said, taking out the map from his pocket and unraveling it in front of everyone. "We don't want to over exert ourselves the first day, so we are just heading through the Sprog fields and into the Mill town for the night. It should be a full day's walk, but nothing too strenuous."

"Sounds good to me," Willow said, looking up at her friends. Lira and Ramsey nodded.

"Let's get a move on then," Lira shouted. "We don't have all day!" The four of them began their journey in the direction of the rising Sun.

Chapter 3:

The Sun shone harshly on Willow and her friends as they made their way through the sticky Sprog fields. They had only walked a few miles since they had set off that morning, but this was the furthest Willow had ever been from her home. She looked over the lush blue grass and to the dark purple, prickly bushes that littered the fields. She hadn't seen anything like it. Her feet sunk into the earth with every step as if it was trying to consume her, maybe as revenge for trampling through their home. Maybe she was reading too much into it, but either way, it worked her muscles in a way she hadn't expected.

"Are we there yet?" Lira complained, dragging her feet through the sticky, grass covered soil.

"For the hundredth time Lira, it's just over that hill. You will literally see the buildings when we reach the top," Teddy said with a sharpness in his voice. Lira just grunted in response. Lira and Teddy had been bickering for most of their journey, in the way they often do. Willow looked back at Ramsey, who had been staying a safe five meters away from the group since the moment they left the fallen tree. Willow wished she would walk with them, but maybe it was best not to push it. They were lucky to have convinced her to join them at all.

"It looks like the Sun is getting low Teddy," Willow said, turning back around.

"Yeah, it will probably be getting dark in a few hours. We should find a place to sleep and get some real food as soon as we get into town," he said.

"Thank goodness," Lira said in a huff. Willow was not as vocal as her best friend, but she couldn't deny that some real food would be quite nice after such a long day. The Meel root they had packed gave them the required energy for the walk, but never made her stomach feel exactly satisfied.

“Look, I told you it was just over this hill,” Teddy said, elbowing Lira softly in the side. Willow looked down at the Mill town in awe.

“Wow,” she said, accidentally out loud. She hadn’t realized how small her town truly was until she had something to compare it to. She could barely comprehend how so many buildings could fit into one place. She wasn’t sure if she could even count them. “Are you sure we didn’t walk all the way to the city by mistake?” she asked.

“If you think this place is big, just you wait,” Teddy said, giving Willow a proud grin.

“What, are we gonna stand here and sight see all day? Or are we gonna get a move on?” Lira said, jumping in front of her friends. Willow could see the gears turning in Lira’s head and the smirk spread on her face. She knew what that meant. Lira grabbed the bottom of her skirt and pulled it up to her knees before letting out a yell. “Race ya to the bottom!” she said with a powerful laugh. Willow shook her head and laughed, following Lira’s lead down the steep hill, careful not to stumble on the unfamiliar soil.

The town looked even bigger once they entered the main street. Hundreds of tall buildings lined the street, which was filled with rows and rows of little wooden market stands and various vendors. Despite the Sun actively preparing to set, the streets were packed with people.

“It’s not even a Saturday,” Willow whispered to her friends.

“Hey, let’s stop in here,” Teddy said, pointing to the small wooden doors of a pub a few buildings in front of them. Lira pushed past Teddy and in through the doors, not even pausing to give Teddy an answer.

Willow was surprised by how empty the place was, especially compared to the crowd outside. In her hometown, the pub was always the most crowded before sunset. It was the best place for some end of day gossip. Then again, nothing in this town was like hers. There had to be hundreds of pubs just like this one. It was also much smaller than her pub at home, but there was almost three times as much seating. Tall, tiny round tables lined the back wall with only a

small space about the size of a child between them and the bar. Even Willow would have to go in sideways to fit through.

“Look, only three coins for a plate!” Lira said, leaning over the bar for a better look at the menu pasted to the wall. “How much do we have? We should be able to get one for everyone right?” Willow untied the coin purse from around her waist and dropped it heavily onto the table, spilling out a few coins as it fell. She started counting silently to herself and she fingered through the coins on the table.

“Would you like a sandwich?” Willow asked Ramsey, who had just entered through the pub doors and sat begrudgingly beside her.

“I can feed myself,” Ramsey said sharply.

“Well, okay that’s alright,” Willow said, her body stiffening at the cold response. She instead turned her attention to Teddy who had seated himself on the other side of Lira. “Should we talk about the plan for tonight?”

“Stop worrying for a minute Willow. Let’s just eat,” he said with a soft smile. “Pass me the coins and I’ll count them out.” Willow started to scoop up the coins that had fallen on the counter and pass them down to Teddy when she noticed a wooden door behind the bar swing open.

“Put that away,” the bartender said. “Hasn’t anyone ever told you not to pull out your valuables in public? What business does a bunch of kids have with all this stuff anyway?” Willow’s stomach shot into her throat.

“Well, we, uh” Willow stuttered. She hadn’t thought about it before, but this was the first new person she had talked to since Teddy arrived in town 8 years ago. She had no idea how to talk to someone she didn’t grow up around.

“We are on a journey to save the dragon,” Lira announced confidently. The bartender stiffened at this announcement.

“Lower your voice kid, you don’t know whose around,” he said sternly.

“What do you mean?” Lira asked, looking around at the empty chairs that filled the pub.

“Don’t be stupid loudmouth,” Ramsey said, finally joining in the conversation. “It’s obviously a controversial issue. People will think we are trying to destroy the kingdom or something. Practically everyone thinks of dragons as a monster or a weapon.” The bartender nodded.

“How do you intend to set this dragon free anyway?” he asked, keeping his voice low. Lira looked at Willow. It was her idea after all.

“Well, we just thought that ...” she hadn’t really practiced her pitch, and public speaking isn’t really her strength. Then an idea popped into her head. “Here actually, we are sending this letter to the king.” She stuck her hand into the pocket of her skirt, pulled out the carefully folded letter, and handed it over to the bartender. For all she knew, he could destroy it the second she handed it over, but something about him felt trustworthy. Or maybe he just seemed genuinely intrigued. She watched nervously as he scanned the page, slowly and carefully.

“It’s well written, for a bunch of kids. A stupid idea, but eloquently put,” he said, looking back up at them. Willow’s heart sank a bit. She had been so sure that if someone actually heard what they had to say, they would understand, but what if that wasn’t the case? What if the king didn’t understand? She hadn’t even considered that could be the case, but what would they do then? While Willow was having an existential crisis, Lira simply scowled at the bartender.

“It’s not a stupid idea, it’s a noble cause. We are saving a life!” Lira shouted.

“Sit down, you kids look hungry,” he said, changing the subject entirely and as if the conversation had never happened at all. “What can I get you all to eat?”

The bartender didn’t engage with the topic any further. He simply took their orders, went to the back for several minutes, and returned with four plates of food. They weren’t all that large, but the food was filling, much better than the Meel root they had been munching on all day. After thanking the bartender for the food, the four of them headed back out to the street in search of a place to stay.

It wasn't entirely dark outside yet, but the Sun was setting quickly. The streets were much emptier than they had been before, which made walking around much easier, but also made it feel a lot more eerie.

"Look, this place says 13 coins for the night," Teddy said, pointing up at the sign above a tall but thin cottage-like building in front of them.

"That sounds a lot. Are you sure we can afford it?" Willow asked, picking up the coin purse and thumbing through its contents. "I feel like we should look for something under 10 at least. It doesn't have to be nice, it just has to have a bed."

"I will sleep on the floor if I have to," Lira said. "My feet are killing me, can we just pick somewhere already?"

"Then why don't you be in charge Lira," Teddy said, crossing his arms.

"Hey I'm just-" Lira started, but Willow grabbed her arm suddenly.

"Lira, quiet. Do you hear that?" Willow said. Something felt off. Maybe it was just the empty streets getting to her, but she was sure she could hear a faint crunching noise. She couldn't tell if it was close, but it was definitely there.

"Hear what? I don't hear-"

"Shush will ya," Teddy said, catching on. Suddenly, before she could even pinpoint the origin of the sound, something that felt like a rope slapped against Willow's ankles and snaked up her legs and onto her wrists. She pulled and fought against the ropes, but it was useless. Willow couldn't move, not even a muscle. She couldn't tell if she was paralyzed or if the ropes were just so tight. Willow's mind went blank with panic.

"Hey get off!" Lira yelled without hesitation, lunging towards Willow like she was going to tear the ropes off herself. As soon as she got close, three figures appeared from the side alley. Teddy grabbed Lira by the arms to hold her back. He wasn't going to let both of his friends get hurt if he could help it. Lira gave him stern glare, but the moment of pause reminded her to keep her head on her shoulders.

“There will be no trouble unless you make any,” one of the men yelled back, stepping forward and giving Lira, Teddy, and Ramsey a better view. He was holding something long and thin in his hand. No, he wasn’t holding it, it was growing out of the palm of his hand, and it wasn’t a rope, it was a vine leading down onto the ground and all the way to Willow.

“I said get off!” Lira said again, stomping her foot onto the ground. When he didn’t respond, she stiffened her stance. “Don’t make me..” Lira started. She took in a deep breath, pulling all the energy from around her into her lungs. “SHOUT,” she yelled. A loud gust of air shot from her mouth with a physical force. The attackers were merely knocked slightly off balance. Lira cowered like a young lion pup who had accidentally meowed while trying to roar.

“Haha, this one’s got a bit of a fight, only a bit though,” the man with the vines said with a laugh. “Max, take the stuff and go.” Another man ran up to Willow and pulled a sharp tool from his pocket. He quickly cut the coin purse from around Willow’s waist and ran off back into the empty streets, leading his crew with him. As they disappeared into the empty, darkening alley, the thick green vines slowly retreated from Willow’s body, dropping her heavily on the ground. Teddy ran to her and lifted her up to a sitting position.

“Are you okay?” he asked desperately. Willow nodded, still a little fazed out by the experience. Lira marched up to Lira and gave her a strong shove in the chest.

“What was that?” Lira screamed, getting in her face.

“What was what? You seemed to have it under control. What do you want me to do?” Ramsey said in her usual sharp tone, but Willow could swear she heard it shake.

“You were supposed to help keep us safe. That’s why you came along in the first place. You have the strongest power out of all of us, and you didn’t even threaten to use it!” Lira yelled back.

“In case you didn’t notice, Lira, we are in the middle of a town. I’m not getting myself thrown in jail because of this stupid mission. That is not something I signed up for.”

“They were attacking us, that’s self defense,” Lira argued.

“God, don’t you get it? He said she said. Who are they gonna believe, some walking flamethrower from out of town, or some resident watching from their window. You really don’t know anything do you.” Lira continued to fight, but Willow began to drown their words out. Her energy was slipping, and she couldn’t hold her focus. She looked down at her body and noticed the dark red blood dripping from her hands. She hadn’t noticed the sting until she saw the thin red lines wrapping all the way up her arms. Carefully, she lifted her skirt above her knees to assess the damage. The cuts on her legs were even deeper.

“Ow,” Willow squeaked, pulling everyone's attention towards her.

“Oh my god, the vines cut you,” Lira yelled, running to her friend's side.

“Yeah, I noticed,” Willow said softly. The pain she hadn’t noticed before suddenly became unbearable. The blood made her feel light headed, or at least she hoped it was just the sight of blood and not a sign of something worse. She tried to keep calm, but she was beginning to panic. “Um, Teddy, is it too much? Do you think you can heal it?”

“Uh, um,” he said, inspecting the wounds. “I can try.” Teddy’s hands shook as he hovered them over the cuts on Willows legs. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. A small white light emanated from her wounds, but they were small and dim. He held his position for a few sections, but the brightness never grew. “I, I can’t do it Willow. I’m sorry,” he finally said, dropping his arms.

“It’s okay, don’t worry,” she said, unsure if the words were meant for Teddy or herself. She looked down at her injuries and tried to think of a solution. There had to be a healer in town, how could there not be? They just needed to stop the bleeding until they could find one. There was enough fabric on her skirt to tear and use as bandages, but the fabric was thin and wouldn’t last too long. Her mind began to spin. Why hadn’t she done anything? She had her power now, why hadn’t she thought to use it. The second she felt that vine climbing her she should have transformed and ran, but she didn’t. She didn’t even think to. She just panicked. Her spiral was interrupted by the creaking of a wooden door.

“You kids, get inside quickly,” a voice called from down the street. Willow squinted her eyes to get a closer look. It was coming from the pub they had visited that evening. Without much time to question it, Teddy and Lira helped Willow to her feet and balanced her as she walked. Each step hurt more than the last, but she managed to make it to the doorstep of the pub. “Get her in and lay her down, now,” the bartender said. Willow watched as he locked the door behind him. She propped herself up on the leg of a table as the bartender leaned down on the ground next to her. “I need you out of the way,” the bartender said to Teddy, who was still at Willow’s side.

“No way,” Teddy started.

“Do you want my help or not?”

“It’s okay,” Willow said, desperately. She needed help, and she needed it fast. The pain from the wounds was unbearable and she couldn’t push away the scary feeling of floating away. The bartender held his hands over Willow’s legs first, his muscles stiff and strong. Willow watched as a bright white light erupted from her wounds. The light spiraled up and around her until it covered every wound on her body. She had to squint her eyes because of the light. She watched as her skin stitched itself until it finally closed, leaving a thin pink line where the cuts used to be. The pain quickly vanished along with the bright lights.

“You’re a healer!” Lira yelled excitedly.

“My, the brain on this one,” the bartender said, standing up and helping Willow to her feet. “How are you, little one?” He asked her. Willow nodded, but realized that wasn’t at all the right way to respond.

“Yes, thank you. I feel much better,” she said, and the bartender smiled.

“I just meant, I wouldn’t have guessed you were a healer,” Lira started again. “I woulda thought you’d be something else.”

“Like what?” he said, turning around and heading back to his bar.

“I don’t know, like a potions guy or something,” Lira said with a shrug. “Hey, why are you a bartender if you heal? Why wouldn’t you be like a real healer? You know, help people?”

“Did I not just help you friend here? Besides, I don’t like people very much.”

“Then why do you run a pub? You gotta see people every day,” Teddy chimed in.

“This way, I can drink,” he answered simply. “Now, what were you kids thinking going up against those three?”

“We didn’t, they just came at us,” Lira shouted.

“I told you all, be careful and don’t pick fights,” he said, clearly frustrated.

“We didn’t pick a fight they-” Lira started.

“Whatever. You kids want a drink?” The bartender said, pulling out a pitcher from behind the bar along with five small glasses. He motioned with his head for them to sit down at the bar. Willow’s face brightened as she noticed the purple liquid pour into the glasses. She really needed this reminder of home.

“Um, bartender sir,” Willow said softly, sitting down at the bar and grabbing one of the glasses.

“Marty,” he said.

“Mr. Marty sir,” she corrected. “Those guys, they took my bag with all our money. Will you help us get it back?” Marty laughed mockingly.

“That stuff is gone, you should just accept that,” he said. Willow’s spirits dropped more than she thought they could. They really had been unprepared when they left, and now they don’t have any money or supplies for the rest of their journey. Marty looked at them with softness in his eyes. “You kids really shouldn’t be out here by yourself.”

“We have to save the dragon,” Lira insisted.

“Yeah yeah yeah,” he said. He took a long pause and glanced back at the doors behind the counter. He clenched his jaw, but then spoke. “I’ll tell you what. I’ve got an extra bedroom here. It’s just the one, so you all will have to get cozy.” Willow smiled and looked at her friends for

support. Everyone nodded in agreement, except Ramsey who just crossed her arms and glared like she usually does. Willow took that as a yes.

“We have no way to repay you,” she said. Marty thought silently for a moment.

“Let’s make an agreement then,” he said. “When you make it to your destination, and you send this letter to the king, send one over to me too. Just to let me know you’ve made it safely.”

Willow smiled widely. That was definitely something they could do. “And don’t be so stupid next time! Don’t start fights, and definitely don’t show off your money in the middle of town.”

“Well, that won’t be a problem anymore will it,” said Ramsey pointing to the empty buckle on Willow's belt.

“About that. I have a friend in Old Town.” He pulled out a piece of paper from behind the bar and scribbled something on it. “She’ll take care of you if you give her this. You still have your potions and food?” Willow nodded. “Hold onto that stuff tightly. She’ll give you a place to stay, but I can’t guarantee she’ll give you anything else. I can help you kids map out a route that avoids the cities, it’s much safer that way. Thieves will see you all as easy targets.”

“Thank you,” Willow said gratefully. She thought for a second, an idea forming in her mind, but she feared asking too much of the kind bartender. “I know you don’t like our idea very much, but I was wondering if maybe you would sign our letter? You seem like an understanding person, and I was hoping you could help support our cause, even if you think we are stupid for trying.” Marty laughed.

“You sure are a strong willed young lady,” he said. “Maybe you will succeed after all. Sure, I’ll sign your letter.” He held out his hand for her to place the letter. She smiled as he scribbled his signature at the bottom of the letter and handed it back.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Now, get on with it. Don’t make me regret giving you all a room for the night. I’ve gotten used to having this place to myself.” Marty showed the four of them to their room. It was a fairly small room with a short ceiling, but it had a single sized mattress, thick carpets, and plenty of

blankets to get comfortable. “There should be an extra dress in the chest,” Mart said, pointing to the small box in the corner of the room. Willow looked down at the dress she was wearing. It was torn from the vines and still had splotches of blood from her injuries. Maybe a different dress would be a good idea. She opened the chest and started looking through them. The ones on the bottom were quite small, but there were several at the top that were about her size. Willow wondered who these dresses had belonged to, and where the girl had gone, but she thought it was best not to ask. If he wanted them to know, he would have told them.

“Thank you,” she said again, and he left them to get some rest. After such a long day, it didn’t take long for the four of them to drift off swiftly to sleep.

Chapter Four:

Willow, and her friends left early the next morning, their spirits significantly lowered from the altercation the previous night, and started on the route Marty had talked them through. They had decided to avoid the major towns and take a path through the Tawl Forest instead. Marty insisted they would be much less likely to run into any more thieves looking for easy targets that way, but Willow shivered at the idea. Going this way meant they would need to spend one night sleeping on the forest floor, which was not something they had prepared for. They may be avoiding thieves, but she worried about the natural creatures that lived there. Willow shook her head to throw the idea out of her mind. She tried to remind herself that it was just one night. One night, and they will be back in a warm cozy bed in Old town.

Willow gasped as they approached the edge of the Tawl Forest. It was massive, way bigger than Willow imagined a forest could be. The trees were dense, and their trunks were enormous. If she and her friends stood together in a row, they wouldn't be able to touch each side of it, even if they stretched out their arms. She wondered if anyone had ever thought to hollow one out and put a home in one. It would definitely be big enough to. There were lots of creatures in the forest as well. She couldn't see many of them, besides the shaky branches they left as they ran between trees, but she could hear all the unique chirps and calls of each of them. It was almost like they were singing to each other.

Willow and her friends spent the entire day hiking through the woods. The terrain was much different than Willow was used to. The soil changed with every step she took, and there were many obstacles she had to learn to avoid. One place would be soft and slick, and another would be hard and rocky. Occasionally she would slip on some wet leaves or a soft patch of stone. It left her legs even more tired than the sticky soil from the Sprog Fields. The air was also thick and wet, making it hard to breathe at times and making them sweat through their clothes.

After hours of walking through thick, dark forest, Willow noticed a strange bright, fuzzy light off in the distance.

“Is that the end? Are we really almost out?” Lira asked excitedly, swatting a bug away from her face.

“No, it can’t be,” Teddy responded, frantically looking at the map he had gotten from the bartender. The light made Willow nervous to look at. The last thing they needed after such a long day was to discover they had gotten lost. One night in the forest was enough, but two would be dreadful. Lira ran up ahead to get a closer look.

“Guys, you have got to see this!” Lira yelled, jumping with excitement. Willow ran up to see what was going on, and she sighed with relief when she realized what it was. They weren’t at the edge of the forest, it was just a clearing. The edges were covered in what looked like a thick green moss. Willow threw off her shoes and stepped into it, her feet sinking into the soft squishy ground. Past the moss was a thick stoney beach made up of smooth pebbles and stones of various sizes with several larger boulder sized rocks scattered around it. In the very center of the clearing was a great big lake that shimmered in the evening Sun. Willow could feel the cool air wafting off of the water and the soft warm Sun on her skin.

“We have to go swimming!” Willow said with excitement. Lira hadn’t even waited to make an exclamation and had already jumped into the water with a big splash. Willow laughed and turned around to Ramsey who had just walked up behind her. “Are you going to join?” she asked. Ramsey just crossed her arms.

“I’ll pass,” she said sharply, and made her way to sit on one of the boulders. Willow was disappointed with the interaction, but quickly shook it off when she remembered the water. She dropped her shoes and ran full speed into the water. She was shocked by how cold it was, but not upset by it. It had been such a warm and exhausting day, and the cool water soothed her aching body. Willow realized she had never swam in a body of water this big before. The only place she had swam in was the small puddles that would form in her fields after a heavy rain, but those

were shallow enough that she could always keep her head above water if she just stood up straight enough. Willow soon learned that if she held in a deep breath of air and spread out her limbs, she could float on top of the water without using any energy. The cold, rocking water and the soothing warm Sun almost made Willow drift off to sleep right there, but a cold splash of water quickly woke her up.

“I told you to stop splashing me,” Teddy said, throwing his hands into the water and splashing Lira back. Lira just smiled and dunked her body under the water. She disappeared for a few moments, and appeared again on the other side of Teddy with a big eruption of water that splashed all over Teddy. Willow laughed a big heavy laugh.

“Lira, it’s not fair that you can shout under the water,” Willow said, splashing some water back at her with the back of her hand.

“It’s not my fault. I’m just using what I have,” Lira grinned. Before going under water and splashing again. After the water settled, they heard another splash come from behind them. Willow stiffened when she realized it was Ramsey.

“It’s just getting hot out there, don’t think anything of it,” she said, walking carefully into the water.

“Hey, do you think you could make the water warmer?” Lira asked, unphased by Ramsey’s attitude.

“No,” she said simply, not even offering an explanation. Ramsey didn’t talk to them any further, but she didn’t stray far from them either.

They spent the entire rest of the evening swimming and playing in the water, only getting out to dry on the boulder and watch the setting Sun. As the air grew darker, they noticed a strange bluish glow emanating from the water.

“What is that,” Willow asked, looking at Teddy. He always had the answers to strange natural occurrences.

“There must be luminescent algae in the water,” he smiled in awe. Willow suspected this was another one of those things he had read about but had never had a chance to see in real life.

“I think I may have swallowed some of that water,” Lira said, her eyes wide. Teddy just laughed.

“Don’t worry, it’s harmless. It’s actually got some good nutrients in it,” he said. “But only in small quantities,” he added quickly, anticipating Lira’s jump back towards the water. Willow watched the glow of the water strengthen as the Sun slowly disappeared. She had been so worried about this night, but this was the most calm she had felt since she left home. It felt almost like a dream.

They decided to sleep in the moss that night. The soft glow comforted them in the dark forest, and the moss reminded them of their soft beds. Willow slept peacefully, feeling confident about the final stretch of their journey.

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Willow woke up with the Sun early the next morning, feeling more rested than she had anticipated. She was surprised by how soft and comfortable sleeping in the moss had been. After rubbing the sleep out of her eyes, she looked around and noticed Teddy was already awake and sitting along the edge of the water. She walked up behind him, sleep still clouding her vision.

“I couldn’t sleep,” he said, noticing her behind him. He was washing something in the water that looked like a giant leaf. It was thin and somewhat slimy and was a deep green with speckles of purple in it. Willow looked to his side and noticed a pile of things just like it mixed with a few more strange objects. Some looked identical to the one in his hand, but others were more round like a fruit or thinner and more branchlike like a small tree.

“What’s all this?” Willow asked. Teddy added the object in his hand to the pile and grabbed another one.

“Well, I realized that I actually knew a lot of the plants that grow here, and a lot of them are edible,” he said, smiling proudly. “I don’t know about you, but I was getting tired of that Meel root.” Willow’s stomach growled at the thought. She looked at the pile of soggy plants. They didn’t look exactly appetizing, but Teddy was right. Anything would be better than another Meel root breakfast.

Willow grabbed one of the plants from the pile and looked at it intently, unable to hide the concern on her face. Teddy laughed at her.

“I promise, it’s not as gross as it looks,” he said. “That one’s actually supposed to taste sweet like syrup. And this one,” he grabbed a prickly looking blue one and held it up to her, “if you take off the spikes, the inside tastes almost exactly like roasted apples.” Willow took a bite of each one. After getting past the strange textures, she smiled pleasantly. They really were good.

“Make sure you leave enough for me,” Lira said, woken up by the talk of food. Willow and Teddy looked down at the pile. He had only grabbed as much as he could carry in one trip, which definitely wouldn’t take long to get through now that Lira was awake.

“If you tell me what to look for, I’ll go grab some more,” Willow said, standing up.

“Are you sure?” Teddy asked.

“Yeah, no problem,” she said. Willow really didn’t mind an early morning walk. She was actually used to starting her day this way when she was at home. It was a great way to wake her body up.

Teddy gave her a quick description of what to look for, a short bush close to the ground with wiry branches and big leaves. It was important that she only grab the ones that were speckled with purple. If the purple had spread to the leaves, then they were no longer good. That sounded easy enough. Willow made her way into the forest.

“Just stay close to the edges,” Teddy said as she left.

“Of course,” Willow said as she walked away into the thick woods. The moisture was slowly leaving the air as the Sun continued to rise, although she could barely see the Sun the

further into the forest she walked. Despite how different the forest was from her fields back home, it made her think of her mother's garden. She would have loved to see this place and all the different types of plants and creatures. She may have even been more excited than Teddy. Willow laughed at the idea of him and her mother talking about all the different organisms that lived here. The adventure through the forest hadn't been as bad as she was worried about, but she was relieved by the thought that the journey was almost over. They just had to walk a few more miles through the forest, and then it was just the Pip Flower Fields before they were in Old Town. She was comforted to know that they had a place to sleep tonight, and the journey would soon be over.

Suddenly, Willow felt something thin but strong slap the back of her arm and start to wrap its way up. She recognized this feeling. It felt exactly like the vines. Willow started to panic again. She wondered if the thieves had followed them through the forest, or if they were just unlucky enough to stumble across someone else with the same magic. Or maybe it was something else entirely.

Willow quickly caught herself. She couldn't freeze like she did before, especially knowing she was alone this time. Before she could think it through, Willow bawled her hands into fists and turned into a bright ball of light before shaping into her little lottle form. With her change in form, the vine loosened its grip and fell away. Willow scurried away before it could latch on again. From a safe distance, she turned around to see what had grabbed. Standing no more than a meter in front of her was her biggest fear. It was a massive furry creature with big stomping feet and a long vine-like tail. It was a Wot, just like her father had warned her. Willow had to warn her friends. She ran as fast as her little lottle legs would let her until she reached the clearing again. Willow quickly changed back to her regular form.

"The Wot!" she yelled, out of breath. Everyone stood up at the news, preparing to defend themselves.

“Where, what do we do?” Lira yelled. Willow knew she was also thinking of their run in with the thieves. Willow turned around quickly and pointed into the woods, expecting to see the animal at her heels, but she couldn’t see it at all. Had it not followed her?

“It was, it was right there,” she said, confused. “I swear it grabbed me by the arm, but I escaped.” Her friends looked at her like they wanted to believe her, but couldn’t. “I’m not lying,” she insisted. Willow stepped back into the woods to look again. It had to be there. She knew she hadn’t imagined it. Teddy followed close behind her.

“I don’t see anything,” he said. “Maybe a branch just grabbed onto you. It is dark in here. It wouldn’t be hard to get confused.”

“No, look,” she said, pointing. A few meters in front of them was the big furry creature, its tail swinging behind it like an uncontrolled whip. It had an enormous mouth that hung open as it stomped. It swayed with each step, moving so slowly Willow questioned if it was even moving at all.

“What is that?” Teddy asked.

“It has to be the Wot,” Willow insisted. “It’s exactly how my father described it. I mean, almost exactly. I always thought it would be, I don’t know, more scary? More aggressive? It doesn’t look like it’s in much of a hurry to get us.” Willow and Teddy watched as the Wot jumped up against a tree, latching its long, strong nails into the tree’s stump. It slowly crawled up the side of the trunk, peeling the bark as it climbed. With its long tail, the Wot latched onto a higher branch, pulled it down closer to its mouth, and opened its giant mouth as wide as it would go before chomping down on the branch and its leaves.

“Willow, that’s no big scary monster. Look at those teeth,” he said, pointing at the creature’s huge, short, flat teeth. “That animal only eats plants. It probably uses that tail to grab leaves that are too tall for it. Why would people be scared of a creature that doesn’t even eat meat?”

“I don’t know,” Willow said, feeling almost sorry for the creature. “Maybe they had only seen its big mouth and vine-like tail and figured it had to be a monster.” Willow wondered how she would feel if everyone thought she was a monster without even bothering to get to know her. It was probably very lonely. The Wot didn’t seem to mind too much though. She watched it grab another branch with its tail and chomp down onto it. Maybe it didn’t know.

After the incident with the Wot, Willow and her friends decided to pack up their things and continue their journey. Just because the Wot turned out to be harmless, doesn’t mean there wasn’t something else in the woods that was less so.

Thankfully for Willow, the rest of the journey through the forest was uneventful, other than a few slips and bug bites. Once they reached the edge of the trees, they were greeted by the thick field of orange Pip Flowers. The smell was almost overwhelmingly sweet, but much more pleasant than the muddy forest smell. Willow tried to avoid stepping on the flowers as they walked, but the patch was way too thick to miss all of them.

“Look!” Lira yelled, running ahead as if she hadn’t just been complaining of her feet hurting and cramping in her side. At the edge of the field, a city was beginning to appear. “Signs of life!” Willow had thought the previous city was big, but this one was several times bigger. From their view on top of the Pip Flower Fields, she couldn’t even see either end. There was a big, long, stone wall that surrounded the city with a large archway in the middle. She could hear the crowds growing louder and louder as they approached the entrance.

“You know, I’m glad we didn’t decide to go to Kingdom Center. I think it would have swallowed me whole,” Willow said, making Lira laugh. It had taken them longer than they had expected to reach the city, and they could feel it in their stomach.

“We should find the place Marty told us about,” said Teddy, reading everyone’s mind. Although the city was big, it wasn’t too difficult to find the place with the directions Marty had given them. The streets were laid out in an easy to follow grid system, and each street was marked with a unique symbol at each corner.

At the corner of the street marked with a tree was a big cottage shaped building. Willow checked the instructions one more time to make sure it was the right place, and then led the group inside.

Willow was surprised by the interior of the building. It looked more like a pub than a place to sleep, but she was sure it was the place Marty told them about. There were several more people here than had been at Marty's bar, and it was much bigger too. Willow looked around for someone to show their message too, but there was no one there that looked like an owner. They decided to just sit at the bar while they waited.

"I just can't wait to send this letter," Lira said. "Just one more night and all this will have been worth it." Just thinking about it made Willow's heart jump. She was so proud of herself and her friends, and she was so excited for it to finally be over.

"Well it's not exactly worth it until we hear back from him about the dragon," Ramsey said, turning Willow's excitement into anxiety.

"How long do you think that will take?" Lira asked, not having thought that far herself.

"Who knows," Teddy answered. "I mean, he must be pretty busy, so maybe a few days?" Willow dreaded the thought. She didn't think she could handle waiting a few whole days for a response, if they even got one at all.

"Well, as long as we can save that dragon, I'll be fine to wait," Lira said.

"Yeah," Willow agreed. "I just hope they can call off the competition in time. I wonder what he will do instead. Do you think they will just leave it be? Or maybe they will try to relocate it." Willow said, the excitement building up in her again. She had been so focused on delivering the message and stopping the competition, she hadn't let herself think about what would happen next.

"Will you shut up with that nonsense," a voice called from across the bar. Anxiety shot through Willow at the sound. She turned around to see where it came from. At the end of the bar was a young guy maybe two years older than Willow. He looked tall, but nowhere near as tall at

Teddy. He was definitely more muscular than Teddy. He definitely didn't look like the strongest guy in town, but did look like he had something to prove. Willow noticed he was wearing thick leather clothing that looked kind of like armor, and on his right side sat a long thin leather bag with an ornate metal handle sticking out of it. It was a sword.

Willow stared at him speechless for a moment. She hadn't realized anyone could hear their conversation, let alone be paying enough attention to comment on it. Her mind flashed momentarily to the evening in Mill Town. The one thing Marty had told them was not to start a fight.

"It's not nonsense," Lira said, startling Willow. She was planning to be as non confrontational as possible, but it looked like that was out the window. Willow knew they had to be careful with what happened next. The boy didn't seem aggressive now, but it could easily get out of hand, especially if more people overheard.

"You kids are just trying to start something. It's not going to work, so just leave people alone," he said. He seemed tired, like he had been traveling all day, but he also didn't seem like the type to back down from a fight if he was approached by one.

"We should just leave it," Teddy said, trying to get Lira to back down, but Willow stood up and moved to a seat closer to the boy. She wanted to settle this conversation, but she wanted to avoid as much unwanted attention as possible.

"Yeah, you're right, we are trying to start something," Willow said. "If we don't, an innocent life could be lost. Just because people are scared. And what happens if we fail? What happens if no one can kill it? We could lose even more innocent lives. You really don't think this is important?" The boy was more pale than Willow had realized from far away. He wasn't ghostly white, but there was color missing from his face that she had expected to see there.

"Yeah, that's exactly what I'm saying. Who cares about its life? It's just some monster, so who cares? And we won't fail. I'm on my way right now, and I'm going to kill it. Elroy Sallow will save the day quickly and easy. It's really not that big of a deal." His passivity surprised her. Most

people that opposed her felt very strongly that the monster deserved to die. She genuinely didn't know how to respond.

"How can you really not care?" she asked.

"Because some people need this. At the end of the day, it's not about some stupid dragon, it's about competition, honor, and most importantly the rewards," he said, aggressively blunt.

"There are other ways to make money that don't involve killing," Willow insisted.

"Where? Cuz I'm not seeing any," he said. "When you don't have a useful power, there is no place for you. There is no way to make money or respect. This is the only chance some of us have," he said, turning away to end the conversation. His words couldn't be true. There had to be other ways to make a living that didn't involve your powers. Marty was a bartender, and that had nothing to do with his powers. Then again, it probably was easier to choose when you have one of the most prestigious powers around. She was curious to know what he meant by useful power. She wondered what power he could have that had absolutely no use, but she figured it would be better not to ask.

Willow returned to her table, shaken a little by the conversation. She hadn't thought of that argument before, and she feared what it would mean for the fate of the dragon.

"What are you kids doing starting fights in my house," a woman said walking through doors on the far end of the bar.

"We have a note," Willow said quickly, hoping to change the subject before getting into any more trouble. She pulled out the note from her pocket and handed it to the woman. She took a few moments to read it, her face tightening as she got to the end.

"That damn Martin," she said, shaking her head. Willow was worried she would turn them away, but then her face softened. "Well, at least he's talking to people again. I can give you one spare room, but just for one night." She turned away and walked back through the bar doors before returning a moment later with a key that she dropped down on the table in front of Willow.

“Thank you. Thank you very much,” Willow said, her entire body softening with relief.

“You kids need to clean up after yourself though. Don’t leave any messes,” she said.

Willow and her friends nodded. That wouldn’t be too difficult. “Now, what do you kids want to eat?” Willow couldn’t believe they had almost forgotten about food. They each ordered a large plate and scarfed it down like they had never eaten food in their lives. It wasn’t long before they had cleared their plates. With full stomachs, Willow and her friends decided to finally go to bed, aggressively sleepy, but restless with anxiety about the next morning.

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Willow woke up that morning with a flutter in her chest. All that they had been working for would come down to today. The woman at the bar gave them instructions to the port station, which was only a few blocks down the road. It was a large stone building with a hollow center that was divided into four equal sections representing the four quadrants of their land. There were hundreds of port rocks, two for each porter. From what Willow could tell, the darker rocks indicated outgoing mail and the lighter rocks that looked more like hers from home represented the ingoing mail.

Willow squeezed the letter in her pocket as they approached the Port Station. She could feel it in her bones that everyone who doubted her was wrong. She had made it, and she was going to convince the king. She pulled out the letter and read it over one more time. She looked over the signatures and smiled proudly. Yes, they were wrong. They had to be.

“We’d like to send this to the King’s Castle please,” she said, holding out her letter to the porter, her hands shaking only slightly. The porter took the piece of paper and placed it on the port rock by her side. Without a word, the letter was gone. Willow felt a weight leave her chest as she watched it disappear. It was almost anticlimactic how quickly it was gone. She had finally done it. The journey was over.

Before the smile could fully form on her face, the letter reappeared on the darker stone on the other side of the porter. Without even looking at Willow, the porter grabbed the paper and handed it back to her. Willow didn't know what was going on. She wondered if it didn't go through. There was no way the King could have read it so quickly, let alone make a decision. It took everything in her to look down at the letter. Her heart sank to her stomach when she noticed what was written on it. In big dark red ink was a word stamped across the entire page.

REJECTED

Chapter 5:

Willow's stomach ached as she stared down at the big red REJECTED stamp on the letter that she and her friends had worked so hard to write and deliver. Her mission had ended so abruptly, and without even an explanation. She wondered if the King had even read the letter, if he had even taken a moment to consider it, or if she never really had a chance to begin with. Maybe everyone was right. This had been a silly idea. There was no way they were ever going to succeed in saving the dragon.

"What do we do now?" Lira asked, looking to Willow for an answer, but she didn't have one. They couldn't just turn around, not after everything they had been through, but what other option did they have? They asked the King, and he said no.

"Now we just go home," Ramsey said, as if it was the dumbest question she had ever heard. "There is nothing else *to* do, other than set the thing free ourselves." Everyone turned to look at her. Willow had never even considered going to the mountains and setting it free. She had always assumed the King would change his mind when he read the letter, but that certainly was an idea. It wasn't impossible either. They would only need to get through the forcefields, which shouldn't be hard because they were sending people through them all the time to slay the dragon. If she was right about the dragon being peaceful, then that shouldn't be an issue. They were actually in the prime location for it. The Septur mountains are only a day's journey back through the woods, and they were used to that terrain already.

"I mean, that's not the worst idea," Willow said.

"I was not being serious," Ramsey demanded. "This note idea was stupid, but physically setting the dragon free? We'll be killed, no question."

"Not necessarily. If we are so sure the dragon isn't trying to hurt anyone, all we need to worry about is finding a way through the forcefields," Willow fought back.

“Plus the King's knights, plus the hike up the mountain, plus all the other people fully stoked to murder this dragon. You think they are going to let a couple of kids get in the way of them and a stack full of money? It's stupid,” Ramsey said.

“No it's not stupid! We can do this. We did not come this far just to give up here. We can't let them kill it. We set out to save this dragon and that is what we are going to do. Are you guys in or not?” Lira and Teddy looked at each other, a little unsure.

“I mean, if you're all in I guess I will be too,” said Lira. Willow relaxed a bit, then looked at Teddy. He seemed a bit more hesitant.

“We need a plan, a solid one. But if we can do that then, then yeah sure. Let's do it. I'm in.” Ramsey just crossed her arms. Willow started to consider if they could do it without her. Her defensive magic would be really helpful on a mission like this, but it's not like she had used it so far. Still, the idea of losing Ramsey made Willow's stomach hurt.

“Fine, whatever,” Ramsey said, rolling her eyes. Willow smiled at the realization that this plan might actually work.

“Great, it's settled,” Willow said. “We have to work fast, so is everyone prepared to leave tomorrow?” Lira and Teddy nodded in agreement, but Ramsey only uncrossed her arms. Willow took that as a yes.

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Willow and her friends had spent all evening formulating a plan for their rescue mission and left as early the next morning as they could manage. The Septur Mountains were only a day's journey from Old Town and sat on the far edge of the Tawl Forest far away from any major city. Luckily, they were prepared for this type of terrain and knew they could make good time. They would get as close to the mountains as possible before the Sun went down, and then sleep for the night to be well rested for the final part of the mission. The force fields protecting the

dragon were run by the protectors, which means that they simply needed to distract them to weaken their magic. Lira and Teddy would stay on the ground and create the distraction while Willow and Ramsey went up the mountain to the dragon.

“Do you think we’ll run into any fighters?” Lira asked, concern heavy in her voice.

“We’ll be fine,” Willow said, trying to convince herself as much as she was Lira. The thought had crossed her mind. They weren’t the strongest fighters, as evidenced by their most recent altercations, but they weren’t defenseless. If they could just stay quiet and out of the way, they should be fine.

Although the walk was quite far, they were able to cover a lot of ground before the Sun began to set. They still couldn’t see the mountains through the thick canopy, but as long as Teddy’s map skills were as good as he insisted they were, they should be very close. They decided to set up camp on the driest patch of dirt they could find. Willow wished they could have found another mossy beach to sleep on for the night, but unfortunately they were stuck with the deep, dark forest floor. Willow was restless for most of the night. Every sound she heard made her jolt with anxiety. If the wrong person ran into them while they slept here, it would all be over.

As soon as they felt the Sun, Willow and her friends packed up their things and left in search of the edge of the force fields. After only a few meters, Willow noticed they had reached the edge of the forest line. Teddy really was useful with a map. She was curious why it hadn’t been as bright as the last time, but as she approached she realized why. Directly ahead of them was a blue hazy wall blocking out most of the Sun. Willow held out her hand to touch it, but hesitated before she made contact.

“Do you think it blocks both ways?” she asked Teddy, worried she may get burned. He thought for a moment, and then leaned to the ground to pick up a stone.

“There’s only one way to find out,” he answered, and he threw the stone into the force field. Willow watched as it landed safely on the other side. Part of her wished it hadn’t gone through so they had an excuse to turn back, but they had to go.

“Well, we will see you when it’s over?” Willow asked, looking at Teddy and Lira. They both nodded fear evident on both of their faces. Willow closed her eyes tight and held her breath before walking into the force field. As she stepped through, Willow felt a sudden warmth that soon dissipated. She opened her eyes and found that she had made it safely to the other side. She turned back quickly to make sure Ramsey had followed her through.

“I hope you know how to climb,” Ramsey said, her eyes widening as she looked ahead of them. Willow turned to look and noticed they were standing directly at the base of the Septur Mountains. The rocky cliffs towered over her like she was nothing. No wonder a dragon would choose to live and grow old here. It felt powerful just to look at it.

“Now is as good a time as any to learn,” she said, dreading the trek ahead of her. If she had stronger magic she would transform herself into a big flying creature and carry them to the top, but she still could only manage to transform into her little lottle form.

“We should hurry,” Ramsey said. “We don’t know who else is trying to get to the dragon today, and we really don’t want to run into them.” Willow realized she was right. They didn’t want anyone to reach the dragon before them.

Willow gripped onto one of the rocks on the side of the mountain and pulled herself up, stepping onto another piece of rock a few inches from the ground. It didn’t seem that difficult, but after about a mile of climbing, she realized she had underestimated how much energy it would take. The further they went up, the windier it got, making her feel unsteady with every new piece of rock she climbed. They crossed one lip, and another, and another for what felt like hours.

Willow’s arms ached as she pulled herself up another lip of the mountain and onto a large slab of rock. The surface was flat and warm, so she laid herself out to rest.

“We can break here,” Willow called to Ramsey, who was only a step behind her. Willow’s lungs ached from the altitude, wheezing with every gulp of air. She laid her arm over her eyes to block out the Sun and focus on her breath. Suddenly, Willow felt the rocks beneath her shift and

rumble. She sat back up quickly and prepared herself for falling rocks, but there were none. The rumbling stopped as suddenly as it began. Willow checked her surroundings and noticed she was sitting at the opening of an enormous cave, bigger than even the biggest buildings in Old Town. The rumbling began again, but only for a moment before settling down once more. It didn't feel like a rockslide, it felt like footsteps.

"What's making all that-," Ramsey froze as she finally reached the top. They were looking directly into the deep red eyes of a massive dragon. Its snout was only inches from Willow, and about two times her size. It sniffed with curiosity, pulling Willow closer like a gust of wind. Its scales were a deep yellow, almost golden, and looked sharp to the touch. The dragon opened its mouth, letting out a heavy warm breath and showing its massive teeth. Heat was radiating off of the creature, making Willow wonder if it would burn her fingers to touch it. Unamused, the dragon lifted its head back up and stretched out its long neck. It towered over the two girls, its face almost disappearing into the sky. The dragon's toes stretched out in front of them, curling in and back out. Its thick black claws shimmered in the sunlight.

Willow's heart was beating so fast she could hear it in her ears. Here it was, the dragon they had been fighting for. She felt almost paralyzed. It was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen, but she had never been in the presence of this much raw power before.

"Well, now what," Ramsey said, still standing behind Willow. Willow looked at the blue hazy dome that still filled the sky.

"The force fields are still up, we have to wait for Teddy and Lira," Willow said, trying not to stutter.

"Yeah, okay," Ramsey said, out of breath with anxiety, her eyes never leaving the dragon.

"Or," said a voice behind them, "you can just get out of my way." Willow and Ramsey turned to see Elroy standing behind them. He held his sword out in front of him, his arm drooping with its weight. "I would hate to have to hurt you for getting in my way, but that doesn't mean I won't." The sudden excitement seemed to spook the dragon, and it began to

retreat back into its cave, shaking the ground with every step. Elroy swayed off balance, almost dropping his sword, but quickly strengthened his stance.

“We won't let you hurt it!” Willow yelled, throwing her arms out in front of the dragon. She had never felt so tiny in her entire life, even in Mill Town, even with the Wot, but she also never felt so sure she was doing the right thing. She looked to Ramsey for support. She was biting at her lip, still staring at the dragon. Hesitating only slightly, Ramsey took in a deep breath and joined Willow in front of the dragon. She threw her hand out to her side, a warm red ball forming in her palm.

“You are not going to hurt it,” Ramsey said, as powerfully as she could manage. Elroy just smiled at the display.

“Watch me,” Elroy said confidently. He threw his sword in front of him and charged full force at the dragon, with Willow directly in his path. A small ball of fire flew past Willow's face and hit the floor in front of Elroy, throwing him off balance but not off course. He swung his sword with anger at Willow. She dodged the first swing, and quickly changed form to avoid the second. As a small lottle, she was quicker at dodging and a smaller target to hit. She ran up to his feet, running around him in quick small circles to unbalance him. She just needed to knock him down, she just needed to take his sword. Elroy stopped suddenly, pulled one foot back and kicked Willow square in the center of her long body. She flew across the slab and into the side of the outer cave wall. Pain shot through her body as she hit the stone, but she had to get back up.

Through her dizzy vision, Willow saw Elroy lunge in Ramsey's direction. She was throwing fireballs at his feet, but he just walked right over them. Ramsey looked desperately at Willow. She knew Ramsey would never throw her fire directly at him. She would never risk hurting another person with her magic, but her options were running out. Ramsey threw up a thick wall of flames in front of her, throwing Elroy backwards with the sudden heat. Elroy put his sword out in front of him like a shield and inched towards the fire, breaking out in a heavy

sweat. With every step Ramsey made back, he took one forward, inching her closer and closer to the edge of the rock slab.

Still in her lottle form, Willow pulled her small body off the ground and ran, ignoring the pain still shocking her back and legs. Willow jumped onto Elroy's left foot, climbed onto his ankle, and bit him as hard as she could. Elroy screamed and dropped his sword on the ground, lunging towards the wound. Willow ran to Ramsey's side, avoiding his fists as he swung at her. She quickly changed back into her normal form, grabbed Ramsey's arm, and moved back to the center of the slab. She hoped Elroy would not stand back up. She knew she bit him hard, but her little lottle mouth can only do so much damage. Willow stiffened again as she watched him reach for his weapon. She couldn't believe she had been so focused on Ramsey that she had forgotten to take the sword. A strange heat began to warm Willow's skin, like the Sun's rays had suddenly become stronger. Willow looked up at the sky. The blue force fields were beginning to dim, and dim, and slowly fall away. They didn't have much time.

"Please," Willow said. "Stop this, please! What good is it to keep going?" Elroy shook his head.

"You just don't understand. I have to," he said as he approached them. He was favoring his right side and using his sword as a walking stick. He looked Willow directly in the eyes. She hadn't noticed how desperate he looked. Quickly, his eyes flashed to the dragon, who had hidden itself back into the cave, but was too large to completely disappear in it. Before Willow could process it, Elroy held up his sword in front of him and charged, aiming the sword directly between the creature's eyes, and all Willow could do was watch. The dragon opened its mouth wide. She wasn't sure if it was preparing to spit fire, or if it was trying to scream.

Almost as suddenly as he had started, Elroy began to slow his pace until he stopped dead in his tracks only a meter from the dragon's snout. His sword fell heavily on the ground, echoing through the cave. She noticed Elroy's shoulders began to shake, almost like he had been poisoned, but to her knowledge dragons couldn't drop poison. They could only spit fire. Willow

inched forward carefully. She didn't want whatever had affected him to hit her too, but she needed to know what was going on. As she approached, he turned to look at her. He wasn't shaking. He was crying.

"I've never felt so much pain and fear from a creature before," he said through tears. "I just can't make myself do it." The word *felt* lingered in Willow's mind.

"You can feel its emotions?" Willow asked in shock. He had said he had no useful powers. That's why he was doing this in the first place, but if he's an empath, then that's not a useless power. Either way, it confirmed what she felt. The dragon wasn't evil, and it wasn't bloodthirsty. It was just scared. It was hiding.

"You should help us set it free," Ramsey said. Elroy shook his head, but continued to cry.

"You don't need this competition," Willow said. "We can help you. There are other ways." Elroy hesitated, but looked up at her, tears still in his eyes.

"Fine," he said softly. He looked back up into the eyes of the dragon and held up his hands. "It's okay, I'll help you." The dragon closed its mouth and stepped back out slowly, rumbling the ground as it stepped. The kids pulled back, making a path for it to fly away, but it just sniffed the air, and laid its head back down.

"Why won't it fly?" Willow asked, looking to Elroy for answers. She knew he couldn't talk to it, but he could understand it more than she could.

"She's scared," he said. "She doesn't understand." Willow wished her mother was there. She wished they had someone who could talk to it, tell them their plan, tell them it was safe. But she wasn't. They would have to do it themselves.

"Ramsey, maybe you can calm her down, show her what to do," Willow said. Ramsey looked at her unsure, but stepped forward until she was face to face with the dragon. Ramsey formed a ball of fire in her hand and held it up to the dragon's eye. Her pupils shrunk into tiny slits pointing at the ball of fire. Ramsey smiled, and carefully pet the side of the dragon's face. At first the dragon pulled away, but then it settled and nuzzled into her hand. Ramsey pulled back

again and showed the ball of fire. She rolled the fire in her hands, tossing it back and forth, before finally throwing it into the air and through the hole in the force field. The dragon watched it fly, her eyes widening, but then she turned back to Ramsey.

“You can fly,” Ramsey said, pointing at the trail of smoke. “It’s alright, you can fly.” Ramsey threw another ball of fire and pointed again. The dragon lifted her head and leaned outside the cave to watch it. Carefully, the dragon stood and stepped out of the cave, shaking the ground as it walked. Once outside, it stretched out its giant wings, and shook them like they had been folded for ages. She was bigger than Willow had realized. Her wings probably stretched wider than Willow’s entire village. The dragon looked back at them with soft eyes before turning and stepping off the rock slab. The three of them ran to the edge of the cave and to the edge of the slab to watch the dragon flap its wings, almost knocking them over with the gust of wind they created. They watched as the dragon climbed higher and higher into the sky and out through the hole in the force fields.

Willow couldn’t believe what she had experienced. This moment had been only a dream five days ago, but they had really done it. They had saved a life. The dragon was free. She had really saved the dragon.