

WYRD & WONDER

A SHORT STORY

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“DO YOU SELL GNOMES?” Bracken asked the frazzled shop assistant, who was trying to balance a stack of floppy-eared, plush bunnies. Bracken felt the urge to grab one between her teeth and flee. Her skin was tight against her skeleton, teeth and fur ready to emerge at any moment. All she wanted to be doing was running with her pack, not shopping.

“Gnomes?”

“Yeah. For the garden?”

“Do we look like we sell garden ornaments?”

Bracken peered at the shelves. All ornaments looked the same to her. A bit pointless, to be honest.

It was Sacha’s fault the gnome was broken. Why was she the one traipsing around Kirkhyrst searching for a replacement? He had appeared from nowhere, shifting right in the middle of Bracken’s personal space. Flailing to avoid touching his liminal form, she’d lost her footing and fell over. All he’d done was laugh as she landed right in the middle of Luna’s prized possessions.

Bracken had been raised with a fearful kind of respect for alphas. She couldn’t say the same for her cousin.

The streets were dark when she stumbled out of the shop. Everywhere would be closing up for the night, and she hadn’t found a single gnome for sale, let alone one balancing books on its head. Perhaps Luna wouldn’t notice the missing gnome. Wouldn’t notice the trampled grass and shards of pottery. Wouldn’t notice the smell of guilt and fear on Bracken. Yeah, right.

She’d been walking for hours, up and down alleys, in and out of shops. Her feet were killing her. Traversing the city would’ve been easier as a wolf, but wolves couldn’t speak, couldn’t hand over the money needed for every transaction in this very human city.

Ahead, a warm glow spilled out of an open door, lighting up a sandwich board promising to cater for every whim. She hadn't noticed the shop before, but it was worth a shot. The gnomes were definitely a whim.

A hand-painted sign above the shop read *Wyrd & Wonder*.

"Hello?" She called out, as she stepped inside, ready to explain what a gnome was for the gazillionth time that day. Her voice echoed back in response.

It was some sort of bookshop, its sections bearing names like *Bite Sized Islands*, *The Maze of Endless Series*, *Clockwork Castle*, and *Lover's Crossing*. Kinda quirky. On any other day she would have relished this find. She loved a good book—and a good bookshop. Today, though, she needed a gnome.

Committing the shop to memory, she turned around to find the door gone.

"Huh?" Had she wandered in further than intended? She really must be ready to shift; she was starting to lose her marbles. There was a yellowed map pinned to the wall, the sections written in a scrawled hand. This was no good—well, it was good in an artistic sense—but it showed an island, with the sections laid out as if they were landmarks or towns. What it didn't show was the exit.

It was hardly that big of a shop. She would just walk around a bit, have a browse. If she was lucky there'd be a rare book about gnomes. She could grovel at Luna's feet and offer it up as compensation.

What she'd thought was the front of the shop had a welcoming vibe. Cosy. She could almost smell the log fire, hear the crackle and pop of the hearth. She must be in the *Cosy Cottage* section. A squishy sofa beckoned her to sit. Yes, a quick sit down. That's exactly what she needed.

Bracken opened her eyes. Had she drifted off? How embarrassing. She needed to get back to the pack house and face her fate. With bleary eyes, she stood up and found herself face-to-face with a door. It had crown glass panes that distorted the outside world into oddly bright circles.

She turned the worn brass handle. The door swung open, pulling the handle from her grasp. Brisk air hit her face, carrying with it the smell of grass and clover. Instead of the cobbled streets of Kirkhyrst, a meadow stretched out before her. Great, she'd wandered into the only portal-based bookshop in existence. She wondered if it was owned by a Ratatoskr.

A movement in the long grass caught her attention. Bracken's thoughts flicked back to the fuzzy bunnies in the previous shop, and her wolf side started salivating. Just a little run—the landscape was practically begging her.

Just as she was readying herself to shift, a triangle of red appeared above the grass, moving at an erratic and rapid pace. What the... No, it couldn't be. Glad that she hadn't pulled the door shut behind her, she carefully backed-up, back into the shop. The red triangle was getting closer, and she didn't want to stop to see what it was. The door slammed shut with a loud bang that echoed through the empty shop.

"How, in Fenrir's name, am I getting out of here?" Bracken muttered to herself.

"Fenrir-rir-ir," echoed back through the shelves.

"Not creepy at all." She shivered, suddenly cold. The cosy sofa was nowhere to be seen. Instead, the shelves were frosted in a light dusting of ice, shimmering in the low light. None of the books had titles in this section. Their spines were blurry or simply announced To Be Confirmed... *The Icy Wastes of Waiting for the Next Book*, she presumed, remembering the map at the entrance.

Bracken had been waiting years for the final book in her beloved *Wizards of Waverley* series. Was it here, somewhere among the shelves? Many fans had already given up hope of ever reading it. Instead, they wrote fanfiction, posting it ongrid—constantly debating who got the ending right. Bracken pulled out a book at random, opening it half-way. The writing was full of typos and stopped mid-sentence. Even if the book was here, it wouldn't be readable, not in the way she wanted.

From deeper within the shop, a sound rippled out. A pitter-patter of footsteps. Someone else was here.

“Hello?” Bracken tried again, a wobble in her voice. She pushed her shoulders back, and took a deep breath, fortifying her voice, and tried again. “Hello? I’m looking for the exit, can you help?”

A gust of wind blew through the bookcases creating a trail of ice crystals. They wove around the corner and into shadow. Bracken hoped for dragons, not monsters, or perhaps a dark romantasy section with a vampire bookseller. She thought *Lovers Crossing* would be more welcoming than this though.

Luck was not on her side. Into the floorboards was scratched the words *Here Be Monsters*, deep gouges that looked like claw marks. She would know.

The footsteps were getting closer, speeding up. Bracken's voice stuck in her throat. She thought of the thing outside. The triangle of red that looked so like Luna's stupid gnomes' hats. But gnomes weren't real. They were dreamt up by some overactive imagination, shaped in clay, and fired hard, ready to sell to alphas with questionable taste.

Around the corner, a small figure emerged, no higher than one foot tall. Its face was scrunched up and ruddy, its legs short and stumpy. It looked like it was sculpted from clay, its features lumpy and misshapen. Bracken might

almost feel sorry for it—if it wasn't running at her with preternatural speed.

She didn't wait to find out if the gnome was friendly. She ran.

She didn't stop to think when a door appeared to her right. It was sturdy and weatherworn, inviting. It slammed shut behind her, and she slunk down onto the wooden floor, which creaked and moved beneath her.

Bracken looked up at her new surroundings. It appeared to be a ship, rocking back and forth as if it was at sea. She stumbled to her feet and went to peer over the side. Below her was water. Waves. She was very much a land-dwelling creature and had never set foot upon a boat of any sort. Not even down the river. Her stomach lurched.

High above her head, a flag fluttered in the breeze. It was black, with white shapes that she couldn't make out but knew for certain made a skull and crossbones. Despite the groans of the ship and the crash of the waves, it was peaceful—not a pirate in sight. Maybe the gnome had scared them all off.

At least there were doors here. Not that she had any desire to go back to the monster section. Magical shops were the worst.

She wanted to wake herself up from this dream—because that's all it could be, right? This sort of magic didn't exist in Kirkhyrst; it was the stuff of fairy tales. Of the Faidhean and Ratatoskr. Species that wouldn't set foot in this gods forsaken city. The magic here was logical, tamed. It did not conjure up gnomes when you needed one.

If only it had conjured up a nice static gnome with books on its head. Behind her, something fell to the ground with a thud. She whipped around, and there on the ground was a gnome. Ceramic and glossy. An exact replica of the one she had broken that morning.

She reached out tentatively, half expecting it to jump up and bite her fingers off. It remained still.

“Um, thanks...” Bracken said to thin air, wondering if the shop could hear her. “Where do I pay?”

A door creaked open. It looked as if it would lead down into the hull of the ship, but Bracken knew better than that. At least it wasn’t the same door she’d come through, and she didn’t have much choice other than to trust it. It was a shop; it must want her to buy things.

On the other side of the door was a normal looking counter with a till and a display of bookmarks. Bracken turned the gnome upside down looking for a price while she waited for someone to appear. She hoped she didn’t have to pay with anything like a favour. She’d read enough books to understand that never went well.

No one arrived to serve her. Had the bookseller got lost among their own shelves? It wouldn’t surprise her one bit. She looked down at the gnome—it was perfect. She couldn’t not buy it. What would a magic shop want?

Magic. But Bracken had no idea how the humans at the Grid took magic and turned it into a thing to be traded with. All she could do was shift. Even though she knew no one else was here, she checked the coast was clear before undressing. A warm breeze caressed her skin. She took that as a sign and shifted.

The shop sighed with pleasure, the breeze ruffling Bracken’s fur. She stood there a moment longer, taking in the strange but not unpleasant atmosphere, before shifting back to human.

A scratching of pen on paper drew her attention to the map on the wall. A new location appeared between *The Crossroads* and *Hero’s Journey: The Wolf Den*.

“OK, then...” Bracken said as she collected the gnome off the floor. It can’t have been much magic. Just a little by-

product of shifting. Nothing to worry about... With one last look at the map, she waved goodbye and headed home.

The shop rolled the taste of the wolf's magic around their rooms. It had been so long since they'd had a visitor, and a magic one at that. They hadn't understood what she'd wanted at first, had scared her with the gnome. For that, they were sorry. They would do better next time. A book—no, a series—had been rattling around the little wolf's mind. The shop would track it down, make sure it left *The Icy Wastes of Waiting for the Next Book*. Maybe then, the little wolf would come back.

This story was inspired by Ari's map for *Wyrd and Wonder* 2024. Bracken is a very minor character in *Paws and Portals*, but there is no shop named *Wyrd & Wonder* in the book. What else would you expect from a magical shop? For it to stay in one place? Don't be silly!

If you enjoyed this story and would like to read more, please consider buying *Paws and Portals*. Out on 23rd May in paperback and ebook editions.

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