

Wish You Were Here

by Vincent M. Wales

CHAPTER ONE

Darella's heart pounded in anticipation as she stood at the rear of the cave, her gaze fixed intently upon the huge object before her. Embedded in the solid rock of the cave wall, as though it were a door to the other side of the hill, was an oval shape, nearly ten feet high and five in width. Its polished surface was the dull grey of slate, bordered by a stone trim, intricately carved to portray the intertwined branches of trees.

Darella's right hand flexed at her side, preparing to wield the awesome energies she was soon to unleash. Her left hand clasped the blue crystal amulet that hung around her neck. The round stone glowed faintly, a hint of the power it would focus for her. She breathed deeply, mentally preparing her spell.

After so many years, she'd finally divined a way to initiate the portal's actions. She knew one day she'd be able to actually control it, manipulate it to do her exact bidding. For now, though, it was enough that she could cause it to operate on her own schedule.

Her schedule was important, for she was presently ripe. She'd seen to that. Now was the time for the future sire of her child to be summoned.

Darella firmed her grip on the crystal in her hand, and began her spell. Whispers of witchspeak echoed ever so faintly in the cave as she chanted, and the glow from her amulet sent streams of blue light from between her fingers. Her right hand shimmered as she wove a complex pattern in the air, sending waves of energy toward the grey face of the monolith.

Soon the portal began to shine with its own light. Darella completed her spell, and stood back to watch. The portal's face shimmered with a kaleidoscope of colors. Random bursts of golden light shot out into the cave.

Shortly, a shape began to coalesce inside the oval, gradually becoming more and more solid. She sighed in relief. The figure was definitely male. A female would have ruined her plans. As the figure fell forward, sprawling in the dirt on the floor of the cave, Darella stepped into the shadows and studied him, her jaw dropping in shock.

He was a mere boy! Still in his teens, from the look of him, complete with the innocence and ignorance of youth. And fat, as well. Whatever forces guided the choices of the portal, she thought, they had certainly chosen wrong this time.

But as the boy struggled to rise, she suddenly realized this was not the fault of the portal or her gods or whatever forces were behind the workings of the thing. It was her own. Her magicks had caused the portal to operate by her own command, not its own initiative.

In the years since discovering this cave, with its portal, Darella had seen it bring forth a series of courageous, powerful heroes. She now realized that the mechanism must require time to locate such a type. But now, her manipulations had caused it to summon the first being it could locate, which was this sorry specimen before her.

No, she thought with a shake of her head. He would never do. She would wait for the next one to come naturally. And yet, she thought with a sigh, years could pass before the next one arrived. And she was ready to conceive now and might not be, next time. The spells she used to control her cycle took far more time than the portal's spontaneous activation would allow.

She watched the young man dust himself off. He wore trousers of an unfamiliar blue fabric and a thin, black tunic. Over this, he wore a strange vest with bulging pouches sewn in. He had spectacles upon his face, but of a sort she'd never seen before. Darella shook her head. This would be distasteful, but she had to do it. Her curiosity about the end result of her experiment was simply too strong to ignore.

Before he could wander out of the cave, she made her move. Summoning her strength, she probed his dazed mind, searching for the physical traits he would find most appealing in the opposite sex. Based on these insights, she altered her appearance from that of a plain, middle-aged woman to that of a budding young beauty barely the age of the boy himself. Her hair became long and lustrous, rather than its normal unkempt mess. Her face would be lovely to him, fair of skin and wistfully beautiful.

When the transformation was complete, she stepped from the shadows, shedding her clothing as she approached the boy. Her sudden appearance startled him, but her beauty mesmerized him. She nearly laughed at the way he stared at her, his face flushing with embarrassment and lust. Her seduction of him was virtually instantaneous.

The following act was unpleasant. Darella wondered if the boy had ever been with a female before, so hesitant was he, and so awkward. The event took longer than she expected, too. The boy seemed more interested in touching and kissing than in intercourse. He would gaze into her eyes with what she had to interpret as longing. It made her want to throw up. But finally, he finished.

Once spent, he slept. Darella erased the memory of the deed from his mind, then grimaced at his sleeping form as she moved to her more comfortable part of the cave, in her more comfortable body. There she meditated. By the time the boy had awakened, dressed, and stumbled from the cave, Darella was certain she was pregnant.

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The young man stopped in his tracks, closing his eyes against the wooziness that hit him suddenly. His mind was muddled, as though he couldn't quite come fully awake, and his body felt like he'd just walked into a wall of gelatin. He shook his head, opened his eyes, and resumed his walk up the street.

Then he froze again, as the bottom dropped from his stomach. This wasn't his street, he realized as he spun around, looking frantically in all directions. Gone were the single-family homes lining both sides of the cozy cul-de-sac where he'd lived his entire life. No asphalt lay beneath his sneakers. Instead, he stood in the middle of a narrow and muddy dirt road stretching to the horizon in either direction. "Holy shit," he croaked.

Panic surged inside him, driving away the muddled feeling. He looked down at his feet, soaking wet and mud-caked, then back down the road. There were puddles everywhere. But that was impossible! He hadn't been walking down this road! Where was he?

His feet ached, too, as though he'd been walking for miles. But that wasn't possible, either! He'd just left his house. That much was clear to him. He'd said goodbye to his dad, stepped out the door, descended the steps of their tiny front porch, cut across the lawn, and headed up the street. He'd been going to the pizza shop for a slice or two, and to play some pinball and video games with the gang. Maybe shoot a game of pool. Not the height of excitement, but it was a small town.

It couldn't have been more than a minute ago that he'd left the house.

"This can't be real," he said.

He looked around again. The land itself wasn't much different than the area around his home. Trees and hills were everywhere, and the air was fragrant and fresh. But there the similarities ended. He drew in deep breaths to calm himself. His heartbeat was finally slowing, but the sense of panic was still ringing in his head. He fought down the urge to yell. Obviously, no one was around. He'd be wasting his breath. The road must lead somewhere, though, he told himself. So he began walking again.

The sky was mostly clear and blue, with few clouds. The sun was low on the horizon, fitting the time of day when he'd left his house. Why, then, did his feet feel as though he'd been on them for hours? He cursed as he stepped into another puddle in the road, frowning as he stamped his foot to shake out as much water as he could. When he looked up again, he blinked. In the distance, he saw a small house. "Finally," he muttered, and began to run.

Being overweight and out of shape, he was soon too tired to keep up his pace. The wooziness had returned, too, so he slowed to a walk. He was close enough now to determine the house was a very small log structure, looking more like a tiny camping lodge than a residence. The only word that sprang to mind was "cottage."

The cottage, he saw, was shadowed by a large willow tree, under which were a table and two chairs. To his great relief, both seats were occupied. As he neared, he could see one figure was a tall man with black hair. Across from him sat a much shorter figure, possibly a child.

He came to a stop in the road, breathing heavily. “Hey,” he managed to say before the world began to spin and he collapsed in the mud.

The next thing he heard was a gentle voice cutting through the fog inside his head. “Is he all right?”

“Yes,” came a deeper reply. “Just exhaustion, I believe.”

He came around slowly. With a shock, he realized he must have passed out. He felt the hardness of a chair under him as he tried to open his eyes. They wouldn’t cooperate.

The slosh of pouring liquid made him suddenly aware of his thirst. A drink would be wonderful, he thought, just before the splash hit him in the face.

“Ghaa!” he blurted, eyes popping open. He wiped angrily at his face, sputtering and blowing water from his nose. Then he stopped, his attention captured by the tall man who stood before him. He was an intimidating figure, with a severe expression on his face. He estimated the man was about four inches taller than himself, making him probably six feet three or so. His clothing, however, was what really drew his attention. The man wore lace-up leather boots of a primitive design. His simple pants were dark brown and loose, tied with a drawstring. The pullover shirt was also loose, and of a natural hue. The clothes had the rough look of being hand-made, not mass-produced. A sheathed knife was at his waist, tied with a rope.

“That’s better,” he heard the other stranger say, and turned to look at the squat form standing near him. His eyes widened in surprise. This was no child, he realized. The figure stood less than four feet tall, had a wizened countenance, bright eyes that seemed slightly too large for his face, and long, silvery-gray hair. His nose was a bit on the bulbous side, but seemed to fit his face perfectly. He stood barely more than half the height of the other man. Despite the man’s odd appearance, the boy couldn’t shake the feeling that this was how he was supposed to look, rather than being the result of an unfortunate birth defect. The clothing he wore was similar to the tall man’s, but in very bright shades of yellow and blue.

The young man shook his head. He removed his dripping glasses and placed them on what he now saw was a gaming table. It appeared the two had been playing chess before he’d interrupted them.

“Are you well?” asked the dark-haired man.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath before opening them again. When the scene refused to change back to something more familiar, he sighed. “Not even remotely,” he said.

“More water?” asked the other, proffering an earthen mug.

“No,” he said slowly, his thirst now far from his mind. “Thanks.” He blinked at the man. “I’m sorry. You are...?”

“Gnorrin,” the little man said. “And yes, I’m a gnome.” He reached out and lifted the eyeglasses from the table. “Why do you wear spectacles when not reading?”

“Because I need to,” he said, too stunned to worry about getting them back. A gnome? No, he thought. He must have heard him wrong.

Gnorrin placed the glasses on his face, then looked up at his friend. His eyes crossed. “You *need* to wear them? But they make you blind!” He slid the glasses across the table.

The boy scooped them up and began drying the lenses on his pants. “Look,” he said, trying to put the strangeness of the situation out of his head. “I’m hoping you can help me.” He smiled sheepishly as he put on the glasses. “I seem to have gotten lost. Where am I, exactly?”

The tall man answered. “You are near the town of Glenmarsh. You would continue in the direction you were traveling,” he said. “If you leave now, you would be there before sunset.”

But the young man shook his head. “I’m sorry. I’ve never heard of Glenmarsh. What else is in the area?”

“Dynsa is to the southeast of here, but it is many leagues,” the man said.

“Dynsa,” he repeated. “I’ve never heard of a town called Dynsa in Pennsylvania.” He saw the confused expressions on the faces of the men. “Don’t say it,” he whispered.

“Pennsylvania?” asked Gnorrin. “In what kingdom is that?”

He felt the blood drain from his face. Kingdom? He began to shake his head. “This can’t be happening. You mean you’ve never heard of Pennsylvania?”

The gnome shrugged. “Sorry.” He frowned. “You don’t look well. Would you like to go inside? It is more comfortable there.”

He didn’t feel well, that was certain. The others escorted him inside, where he settled into a large, odd-looking armchair made of small logs and covered in soft leather. The tall man seated himself in another of similar construction, while Gnorrin climbed into an identical one in miniature, perfectly suited for his diminutive size.

The young man took a deep breath and licked his dry lips. "I don't know what to say. I have no idea where I am, and now you tell me you've never heard of Pennsylvania. It's like I'm in a different country or something, except we're speaking the same language."

"What is your name?" Gnorrrin asked. "We'll start there."

"Vincent," he said.

The gnome raised an eyebrow. "An unusual name. Well, I'm Gnorrrin, as I said." He indicated the taller man. "And this is—"

"You may call me Blade," the man interrupted.

Vincent saw Gnorrrin give his friend a surprised look, then shrug. "Blade?" Vincent repeated. He was about to chuckle at the corny name, but thought better of it when he saw the man's stern gaze. "Okay."

He rubbed his forehead. This was all too much to handle, too much to process. So he decided to address things in chronological order. The first item on his mental agenda was Gnorrrin's reference to himself as a gnome. Vincent looked at the man, studying his face and stature. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to stare."

Gnorrrin waved him off. "I gather you've never met a gnome before."

Shaking off thoughts of ruby slippers and a yellow brick road, Vincent merely nodded. "You gather correctly." He shivered slightly.

"Are you cold?" Gnorrrin asked. "Let me light a fire."

"That would be great," Vincent said as the gnome moved over to the fireplace beside Vincent's chair. He was acutely aware of Blade studying him intently. The man made him uncomfortable, so Vincent watched as Gnorrrin adjusted the logs. Then, to his amazement, the gnome mumbled a few words, held out his hand, and the logs burst into flame. Vincent gasped and jumped backward.

"Gnorrrin!" Blade said harshly.

"Oh, hush," said the gnome.

"How did you...?" Vincent stammered.

Gnorrrin turned, blinking innocently. "I'm a mage, obviously."

"You take unnecessary risks," Blade said under his breath.

The gnome moved closer to Vincent. "You've never heard of mages either, have you?"

Vincent's mental overload was now firmly established. "Not outside of story books," he said.

Blade stroked his chin, his dark eyes drilling into Vincent. "If the truth be told, you are as strange in your appearance to us as we seem to you."

"Yes," Gnorrrin agreed. "Why don't you tell us a bit about yourself?"

Vincent nodded, thinking this was probably a good idea. If he kept trying to figure things out, he was likely to go crazy. Talking would help. "Well," he began, "I'm seventeen. I'm in my first year of college, planning on becoming an astronomer." Seeing the puzzled looks this elicited, he explained. "Someone who studies the stars."

"Ah," said Blade. "An astrologer."

Vincent sighed. "No, that's someone who claims to divine different things based on the stars, like your future or something."

"And what else would you study of the stars?" Gnorrrin asked.

Vincent didn't try to explain. Instead, he shook his head. The panic was rising again. "Look, I can tell you about my background any old time. Are you guys just joking with me? Because this is really freaking me out."

Blade shifted slightly in his seat. "I do not know the expression, though your meaning is clear."

"Yes," Gnorrrin agreed. "And I imagine we would be equally as disturbed to find ourselves in your world."

"Gnorrrin!" Blade spat. "Don't be ridiculous."

The gnome frowned and faced his friend. "Your skepticism, I'm sure, has served you well in many an instance. But for once in your life, will you accept what is obviously true?"

The words sent a chill through Vincent. There he had it—a plainly spoken confirmation of the irrational thoughts he'd been denying. He was in a different world. It was impossible. But it seemed almost to be the only possible explanation. Unless he really was just dreaming.

Now there was a thought, he had to admit. A thought that made him a bit less frightened. If he were only dreaming, it would do no harm to play things out. Soon enough, he'd wake and be in his own room back home. He'd heard of lucid dreaming, in which the dreamer is aware of his dreaming state. That would certainly explain a lot. Gnomes. Magic. He nearly chuckled. Of course he was dreaming. And that would also explain how people from different worlds could communicate and understand each other, and how he could be transported here and still have his own clothes, not to mention his cassette player, which he felt in his vest pocket. "Yes," he said, less

dependently, now that he knew he wasn't going insane. "I imagine you would be disturbed by that. So tell me about where I am. What's the name of this world?"

Gnorrin looked at him, a peculiar expression on his face. "Name?"

"Yeah. You know. Like, my world is called Earth. What about this one?" He smiled. This could be a fun dream.

Gnorrin shook his head. "We give names to different lands. Different kingdoms and such. But the world is simply...the world."

"Fair enough," Vincent said. "Do you mind if I take off my shoes? My feet are killing me." When there was no opposition, he removed his sneakers and socks, all still damp from puddles on the road. He turned his feet toward the fire.

"You have been walking for some distance, judging by the blisters," said Blade.

Vincent looked at the sole of one foot and touched the blisters tenderly. "Yeah," he said quietly. Blisters didn't seem right for a dream. He wondered if he could make them disappear. He concentrated, imagined them shrinking, but nothing happened. He frowned. So maybe it wasn't a lucid dream, just a plain old dream he couldn't control. His cassette player was digging into his ribs, so he removed it from his pocket, and adjusted his vest.

"What is that?" Gnorrin asked.

"This is a tape player," he replied, pulling out the earphones as well.

"What does it do?" The gnome leaned forward.

Continuing to go along with the dream, Vincent opened the machine and pulled out the cassette. "It plays these," he said. "It has some music on it." He inserted the tape.

"How lovely!" said Gnorrin as Vincent reached over and put the headset on him, adjusting the earphones to fit properly. "And what is this?" Gnorrin fingered the earphones.

Vincent checked, then lowered, the volume setting. "This sends the sound right into your ears. Blade and I will barely hear a thing."

"How is the music made to come from such a thing?" asked Blade.

"Beats me. Something to do with magnetic encoding. I don't understand it," he said. "It's very technical."

Blade raised an eyebrow. "And you were amazed by Gnorrin's little fire spell?"

Vincent merely nodded. "Good point." He turned to Gnorrin. "Ready?" When the gnome nodded, Vincent pressed the "play" button. He smiled as Gnorrin's eyes grew wide and his mouth dropped open. After a few moments, Vincent stopped the tape. "Well?"

Gnorrin removed the earphones. "Incredible! I've never heard such sounds! You see, Blade? How would you explain this?"

"The same way I would explain any other magical device, of course."

"Oh, rubbish," said the gnome.

Vincent smiled feebly as Gnorrin described the experience to his friend, having Blade listen as well. As the two marveled and argued over the device, Vincent rose from his seat. Was this a dream or not? He wanted it to be a dream, but the sickening feeling was returning. He moved to a window, and gazed out at the setting sun. It looked like the sun he remembered, but if what he feared were true, it was a different sun than was setting on Earth. A lump formed in his throat.

"Are you hungry? I'll warm us up some dinner," Gnorrin said. "Blade, would you mind?" He turned back to Vincent. "I hope the remains of last night's stew will be acceptable."

Vincent nodded, noting Blade's frown as the man walked across the room. He obviously wasn't happy about Vincent's presence here.

"I have heard of others," Gnorrin said, "people from other worlds, so rumor holds, who find themselves here."

Vincent turned to look at him. "Really?"

The gnome nodded as Blade returned with a pot and hung it over the fire. Gnorrin began to stir the stew. "Yes. But I have never known any of them to have discovered the method of their arrival. Nor how to return."

"Wonderful," muttered Vincent.

"Tomorrow Blade will try to find some clue to your arrival."

"I'll do nothing of the sort," the taller man said gruffly.

Gnorrin ignored him and continued. "Perhaps he will learn something."

Vincent wasn't sure whether to thank Blade or not, given the man's reaction. "Okay," he said quietly.

"You will stay here with me, in the meantime." He turned to Blade. "He has been through enough, don't you think? You can sleep in front of the fire for one night, my friend."

Vincent protested. "I don't want to put anyone out," he said. "I can sleep on the floor."

Blade shook his head. "No. If that is Gnorrin's wish, I will abide by it."

"Thank you," Gnorrin said to him. Then, to Vincent, "While he goes about his quest, I will take you into town. We need to provide you with more suitable clothing, I think." He stepped over to Vincent and held open the boy's vest, studying his outfit. He indicated the breast pocket. "Of what possible use is such a tiny pouch? And in such an odd location?"

"Obviously," said Blade, "it is to keep one's gold closest to one's heart." He smiled at his wit.

Vincent drew the vest closed again. He was ashamed of his weight problem and wore vests to help conceal his body. "That's as good an explanation as any," he said.

Gnorrin shrugged and returned to the pot, announcing momentarily that the stew was ready.

Vincent wasn't sure he could eat, given the knots in his stomach. Blade carried the stew to the small kitchen and dining area, while Gnorrin laid out utensils and bowls. As he sat, Vincent noted the bowls and spoons were wooden. He picked up a mug made of very stiff leather. The seam appeared to be nailed together, with a wooden base similarly fastened. The inside was sealed with wax.

Gnorrin ladled out thick stew full of vegetables and meat unfamiliar to Vincent, though not too dissimilar to Earth counterparts. Dark bread served to sop up the gravy. Gnorrin produced a small cask of ale, which Vincent eyed dubiously.

"Does ale not appeal to you?" the gnome asked. "I have wine, if that is more to your liking."

"Actually," Vincent said, "I don't think either is quite what I had in mind. Maybe some of the water you offered before?"

Gnorrin shrugged and fetched him a pitcher.

After dinner, Vincent excused himself and put on his shoes before stepping outside to find a handy tree. He raised an eyebrow as he saw what was clearly an outhouse off behind the cottage. Resigned, he made his way toward it.

He took a tentative sniff upon entering, and was surprised to find his fears unwarranted. In fact, it wasn't any worse than some of the public restrooms he'd used. He frowned, though, when he saw what was obviously meant to be the toilet paper equivalent: large, broad leaves. Soft to the touch, he found, but still not anything he looked forward to using. "This has *got* to be a nightmare," he muttered.

Before entering the cottage again, he looked to the sky. The night was beautiful, clear and speckled with stars. There was no moon out, yet. He took a deep breath of the crisp air, enjoying the refreshing sensation. His pleasure was replaced by despair as he looked more carefully at the sky. There were no familiar constellations. No Big Dipper, no Cassiopeia. No Southern Cross, for that matter, which discounted the likelihood of him somehow being south of the equator. Could he truly be on a different world? He should be enthralled by the very concept, he told himself, but couldn't manage to summon that particular emotion.

Upon returning, he apologized to his hosts and voiced his desire for sleep. Gnorrin showed him to a tiny room, giving him a lit lantern, should he need light during the night. He wished Vincent a good night and left for the outer rooms.

He was pleased to see a window on the wall above the fluffy mattress. He enjoyed fresh air during the night. Vincent placed the lantern on a small table beside the bed. The tape player joined it. He removed his wristwatch, glancing at its face. Probably won't need this anymore, he thought. The watch was an old, spring-wound thing he'd owned for many years. It always stopped at a few minutes past midnight due to some kink in the spring. Absently, he tossed the watch onto the table. He pulled out his wallet. More useless junk. United States paper currency certainly wouldn't be worth anything here. He removed the rings from his fingers: his high school class ring and one of cheap silver plate and turquoise bought during a trip to the beach one summer. A plastic comb clattered to the tabletop beside his wallet. A few coins, also worthless. And last, his keys and glasses. He looked at the keys. At least he hadn't been driving when he was somehow sucked into this world. He was thankful for that. If the car had gotten wrecked, his dad would kill him.

Thoughts of possibly never seeing his father again sent a wave of grief through him, but he fought it down.

From the outer rooms, he heard Gnorrin and Blade arguing. He couldn't make out everything of what was said, but it was clear that Blade didn't put much stock in the idea of Vincent being from another world. Gnorrin wasn't able to convince the man of this, but was able to achieve a small victory. Blade agreed to retrace Vincent's path of arrival, to see if it would be possible to find where he came from.

Vincent sighed and finished undressing, dropping his clothes in a heap on the floor beside the bed. He lay down, throwing an arm across his eyes and yawning. He imagined the events of the day would not help his insomnia any. All he needed was to lie awake with his brain in overdrive all night. Then again, he thought, what was there to get up early for anyway? Only to wake from the dream. He chuckled nervously. By the time the smile left his face, he was asleep.

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Morning brought an end to Vincent's slumber. As sleep slowly faded, he yawned, adjusted his pillow, and rolled onto his side. Since he hadn't woken to an alarm, he knew he didn't have classes today. Funny how he couldn't think of what day it was. He sighed happily, content to stay snuggled in the blankets. He loved the feeling of being not-quite-awake, but aware enough to appreciate the warmth of the bed and maybe mull over some of the weirder dreams of the night. And did he have a whopper, he thought with a faint smile touching his lips.

Then his eyes snapped open. The dream! It had been so real! Absolutely unbelievable! His heart began to pound, and his eyes gradually focused on the lantern on the table beside his bed.

Vincent's stomach bunched up. Every nerve in his body was suddenly hypersensitive. He was aware that the bed he occupied was nowhere near as comfortable as the one he was used to sleeping in. And this wasn't his bedroom. He closed his eyes again, then opened them, but nothing changed. He was awake. And no matter how improbable it seemed, he knew he hadn't been dreaming at all.

Against his better judgement, he crawled out of the cot. The blisters on his feet hurt, reinforcing the idea that he hadn't been dreaming. He began to pick up his clothes from the floor, but noticed other clothing was draped across the foot of the bed for him. From the look of them, they must belong to Blade, he thought. With a sigh, he put them on, then left the room.

The cottage seemed to be empty. He spied his shoes, propped in front of the fire. Gnorrrin must have put them there for him. They were quite dry now, and he put them on, frowning at their stiffness. Walking would not be pleasant, he thought. He finished just as Gnorrrin entered from outdoors.

"Ah, you're awake. Did you sleep well?"

Vincent stared at him, managing to nod.

The gnome tilted his head, his face taking on a sad expression. "You had hoped to find this all a dream, hadn't you?"

Vincent let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Gnorrrin's words seemed to snap him out of his state of shock. "You can't blame me, can you?"

Gnorrrin shook his head. "Not a bit. Are you hungry?"

"No," he replied. "Thanks."

Gnorrrin eyed Vincent's outfit. "Blade's garments are a bit long on you."

"Not to mention snug," Vincent agreed.

"He had no spare boots, however," the gnome concluded. "If you're ready, we can walk into town. We'll go to the market and get you some things."

Vincent followed him out the door. They walked in silence for a time, Vincent trying to make sense of this strange, new reality. "Blade went looking for a clue as to how I got here, didn't he?"

"Yes. He left at first light. With luck, he'll turn up something and before long, you can be home and just pretend it all really was a dream."

Vincent tried to hang on to that possibility without getting his hopes too high. He looked down at Gnorrrin. "Thanks for talking him into it."

"My pleasure."

"So where does Blade live?" Vincent asked, though he wondered why he even bothered. He didn't know anything about this world. Blade's residence would be meaningless to him.

"In fact, he has no permanent home. Blade wanders here and there, taking root nowhere. He frequently stays with me, however. We've been friends for several years." Gnorrrin smiled up at him. "Would you be so kind as to tell me about your world? If it makes you uncomfortable, I understand. But I am very curious."

Vincent nodded. Why not? If he couldn't be there, he might as well talk about it. At least he'd have something familiar to think of. So he told Gnorrrin of Earth, of Pennsylvania, of his small town. He spoke of his family and friends until such thoughts began to depress him. Gnorrrin absorbed it all and, true to his word, didn't pry anything further from Vincent once he stopped.

Eventually, they reached the edge of town. They passed first through a residential area, and Vincent noticed hints of unpleasant smells. Naturally, he thought, spying familiar mounds in the road. Horses don't care where they do their business. For that matter, he wondered about the human waste that must accumulate. He didn't see outhouses behind every home. He was glad the town was a small one, for the stink would likely be much worse.

They reached the market after only a few blocks. It wasn't quite what Vincent had expected. He'd thought of how his social studies classes had described old European town market days, with people selling produce and other edibles from carts and baskets, all to pack up and leave when the day was done, reappearing the same day the

following week. This market, however, was a permanent part of the town. The buildings, though not made of concrete and steel, were there to stay. There were a few street vendors, but not many. Most of them sold confections to people on the streets. It was not crowded at all.

“What shops would you like to visit?” Gnorrrin asked.

“I don’t know.” Vincent felt awkward. “I figured you were just bringing me here to pass the time.”

“Well, partly. But we really should get you some proper clothing.”

“Why?” Vincent stopped in the middle of the street. “Blade will find a way to get me home, won’t he?”

Gnorrrin looked up at him, then at the dirty street. “Possibly.”

“Then why would I need clothes? I have clothes.”

“You certainly do.” He looked up again. “Just think of them as mementos of your brief stay here.”

Vincent tried to fight off the panic that was growing. Gnorrrin obviously didn’t believe Blade would find a way to get him back to Earth. “Okay,” he said. “I suppose that would be all right.”

“Good. Let’s go, then.” Gnorrrin led him to a nearby shop.

Vincent looked at the sign above the door. The characters weren’t those of any alphabet he knew, but somehow, he could read it. It said, “*Tarel’s Apparel.*”

The man behind the counter looked up as they pushed through the door. He smiled. “Gnorrrin. Pleasant morning.”

The gnome nodded at the man. “Yes it is, Tarel. Come to outfit my friend here in some decent garb. Thought you might be able to help us.”

The man moved around the counter to face them. “Good day to you and welcome to my shop. What sort of apparel were you looking for?”

Vincent turned to Gnorrrin with a shrug. The gnome smirked. “Everything. From tunics to breeches. Undergarments. The whole bundle.”

Tarel looked at Vincent, then at Gnorrrin. “Someone leave him naked on your doorstep, old friend?” Gnorrrin smiled, but did not reply. “Well, let us take your measure.” Tarel produced a cloth tape and proceeded to do just that. After a few moments, he turned to his counter and made notations on a slip of paper with a quill pen. “Now, what fabrics would you like?”

Again Vincent turned to Gnorrrin. The gnome smiled and led him to a wall stacked with bolt upon bolt of cloth. Vincent chose several, all in earth tones: browns, dark greens, and gold. “I like all of these. How about you, Gnorrrin?”

“You’re the one to be wearing them, not me. Though I’d be choosing something a bit more colorful.”

Vincent looked at the gnome’s outfit: bright red trousers with a blue tunic and a purple belt. “So it seems,” he said.

Tarel interrupted. “Pay him no mind. All are handsome choices.” The shopkeeper went over the color schemes with Vincent, then announced they could pick up the items in two days. Gnorrrin negotiated with him over a price, leaving him a portion of the agreed amount as a deposit. They left the shop and entered the streets again.

“Two days?” Vincent blurted. “Won’t I be home in two days?”

“You never know,” Gnorrrin replied. “If so, then you have nothing to take home with you.”

Their next stop was the leatherworker. Gnorrrin commissioned the craftsman to make several items, including boots and a belt. Vincent paid attention as they dickered over prices, noting how Gnorrrin seemed to know just when the merchant would go no lower.

In the next few hours, Gnorrrin covered almost everything Vincent could think of. In two days, providing he was still here, he would be outfitted with a complete wardrobe. Then they set off for Gnorrrin’s home.

But just before they left the market area, Vincent caught sight of another shop. “Whoa,” he said. “Can we look here for a moment?”

Gnorrrin nodded and followed him to *The Nib and Quill*. It was a small shop, with the front porch of the building being the sales area. Upon arrival, they were greeted by the proprietor, a middle-aged human by the name of Mepis. Vincent looked over the wide selection of papers, bound and loose, and an assortment of pens and inkwells. He picked up a thick book of plain pages bound by lacquered vines, with a cover made of a collage of autumn leaves preserved by a clear varnish.

“This is beautiful,” he said.

“Aye,” Gnorrrin agreed. “You know your letters?”

“Um, I can write, if that’s what you mean.”

“Wonderful. Select whatever else you like, then.”

Vincent smiled and added a simple quill pen and a single inkwell. Gnorrrin paid for the items, and they bade farewell to the shop’s owner.

“Thank you,” Vincent said as they began the journey home.

“My pleasure, lad.”

“Maybe, but I still feel guilty. You’ve given me so much, and I have no way to repay you.”

“And you have no need to.” He paused. “I know it isn’t something you wish to think about, but if Blade is unsuccessful, you will need money to get by.” Vincent certainly didn’t wish to think about it, and made no comment. Gnorrrin continued. “You said you know your letters. Another scribe would be more than welcome in town.”

“Yes, I know my letters. But I doubt I know *your* letters. Somehow we are able to communicate verbally, but I have this feeling we’re really not speaking the same language. I’m able to read what I see written here, but I don’t know you’d be able to read what I write.”

“How do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Don’t you find it odd that two people from different worlds are able to comprehend each other?”

Gnorrrin thought a moment. “Lad, whatever force brought you here was a powerful magic. I don’t imagine it would be beyond its power to impart the ability to comprehend, or even alter, languages. Alter them in some way as to be understood.”

Vincent’s brow knit. “You sound like you know something you’re not telling me. Do you?”

The gnome shrugged. “There are rumors I’ve heard in the past. Stories of some who might know. We would need to find a druid.”

“A druid? In my world, there are stories of druids. The druids and the witches were of the oldest religions, supposedly.”

“And here. Ah, Vincent, our world has changed so much. The old legends tell of magic so powerful that the magic of today is pale by comparison. It used to be said one supreme mage could wield power enough to affect half the world. Dragons abounded in the old tales. There are few today, and even the most powerful mages cannot do anything like what the legends hold.”

“Dragons?” Vincent breathed.

“Aye. Oh, I see. Your world has no such creature?”

“Only in mythology.” He shook his head. “So do you believe the stories?”

Gnorrrin raised an eyebrow. “Why shouldn’t I?”

Vincent shrugged. “Well, legends sometimes grow into something bearing almost no resemblance to the truth,” Vincent said. Both walked in silence for a time before Vincent spoke again. “My country is very young. Our history as a civilization reaches back only a couple hundred years. Our documents of our past are fairly intact, so our history should be very accurate.” He frowned. “Yet, in our elementary schools, the children are taught lies. When I was young, I was taught the reason our country fought its civil war was because of slavery.”

Gnorrrin interrupted. “What is so civil about war?”

Vincent smiled. “A civil war is a war in which one nation is divided against itself.”

“Ah. A revolution, then.”

“Well, you’d call it a revolution if those doing the rebelling win. If they lose, it’s called a civil war, I guess.” He shrugged. “In our case, it was the established Union of the north against the rebel Confederacy of the south. Anyway, we were taught the North fought the South in order to free the slaves. But in truth, that was only a side issue. It was fought primarily for economic and political reasons. The children are taught, essentially, a legend. A noble one, perhaps, but still not the truth.” Vincent suddenly laughed nervously. “I’m sorry. I’m rambling. I tend to do that.”

Gnorrrin looked up at him. “The truth is important. You should not feel ashamed to believe that.” The gnome was silent a moment. “Still, I think you might enjoy having work.” Gnorrrin rubbed his chin. “Though you’d have to be especially careful not to let too many people know about your origins.”

“Why?”

“This is a small town, Vincent. Many of the people here have never been past its borders and never will be. Their beliefs are very shallow. Talk of other worlds would most likely get you branded heretic or some such, and you’d find yourself with plenty of crazed townspeople blaming you as the cause of all their ills.”

“I’m guessing you’re not one of those who’s never been outside the town.”

Gnorrrin smiled. “You’ve seen my magic. Displaying it in public here would alarm most people. I’ve learned most of my craft during travels. Blade and I have been companions on many a trip.”

“Do you really think Blade can find some clue as to my arrival here?”

“I don’t know. I’m sorry, but I wouldn’t get my hopes up.”

Vincent stared dejectedly at the dirt road as they walked along. Gnorrin remained silent, and Vincent was grateful for that.

* * *

Blade returned just after sunset. All afternoon, Vincent had thought of Blade's quest, anticipation growing within him. And when the man walked through the door, Vincent's heart began to race. But when he saw the man's face, his hopes fell.

"I was unsuccessful," Blade said as he sat in front of the fire.

"I sort of guessed that from your expression," said Vincent, trying not to succumb to the sense of doom growing inside him.

"I was easily able to follow your trail on the road north for approximately two leagues. There, the road intersects another, and at the crossroads, your trail disappeared."

Vincent blinked. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I could find absolutely no trace of your passage further north on the road, nor on the road running east and west. Not even off the road anywhere surrounding the intersection."

Gnorrin spoke up. "Could the crossroads be the point of his entrance into this world?"

Blade smiled grimly. "It could easily be the spot at which his magic deposited him."

"My what?" Vincent said.

"Pay him no mind, Vincent," said Gnorrin. "He's being his normal suspicious self." He turned to his friend. "You know as well as I that this boy is no more a mage than you are."

Vincent ignored their words, too caught up in his own emotions. He'd thought he was finally heeding the oft-repeated advice of his father by not getting his hopes up. But he realized now that he'd done just that, unconsciously. He shook his head, staring at the floor. "No. No, there has to have been something." He looked up, urgency filling his voice. "Blade, you have to take me there tomorrow."

"For what purpose? I told you nothing was to be found."

"Then you missed something!" Vincent regretted the words as soon as they were uttered. Blade's eyes widened in what Vincent could only interpret as indignation. "I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded. But maybe I'd recognize the surroundings or something." Even to himself, the notion seemed improbable.

"I very much doubt it," Blade said. "There is no point in returning."

As Gnorrin cleared his throat, Vincent noticed the subtle glare the mage cast at Blade. "If you like," Gnorrin said to Vincent, "I'll go with you. Perhaps there is some residue of magic I can detect and possibly trace. It's worth a try," he said.

Vincent nodded. "Thank you. I'd really appreciate that." He rubbed his forehead, then said, "Look, I'm pretty wiped out. I think I'll just go to bed early." The others bade him good night as he rose and left the room.

In the bedroom, Vincent turned up the oil lamp and lay on the bed. He opened the notebook Gnorrin had purchased for him and uncapped the inkwell. Earlier in the day, he had written a summation of all that had happened since his arrival in this new world. He scratched his chin with the tip of the quill, dipped the nib into the inkwell, and continued where he'd left off.

As I feared, Blade returned with no results. He says he was able to follow my trail easily for two leagues, which is about six miles, if my memory serves me right. But then it disappeared, at some crossroads.

I don't know what's up with Blade. He obviously doesn't like me. First he accused me, essentially, of being a liar about being from Earth, and now he's accusing me of being a wizard or something. A mage, they call it here. I don't know if Blade really believes this, or if he's just really upset about losing my trail. He seems to be a very proud guy, very sure of his abilities as a tracker. I'm pretty upset, too. I mean, I guess I didn't really think he'd find a way for me to get home. Still, it would have been nice.

Tomorrow, Gnorrin and I will go to that intersection. I don't know why. It's not as if I expect to find anything Blade missed.

I suppose I should be thankful for one thing, anyway. If I were going to get popped to another world, I could have done much worse than to be taken in by someone like Gnorrin. I could just as easily have wandered off in the direction of someplace unpopulated. I could have starved to death or been eaten by any one of a thousand different nasties.

Still, I'm sure this calm façade of mine will crack pretty soon, especially after I see what Blade saw. Or didn't see. Right now I'm just going with the flow, trying not to go completely nuts. But I want to go home.

Vincent stopped writing, fighting down the lump in his throat. His emotions cycled through anxiety, frustration, despair, and resentment, leaving him drained. With a sigh, he set the book aside so the ink would dry. Then he capped the inkwell, undressed, and turned the wick of the lamp down to its lowest setting. Sleep was not as easy coming, this night.

* * *

Darella sat thinking of the boy as she warmed herself in front of a crackling fire. The portal's luck certainly appeared to be working well for him. He'd fallen into the company of a mage and a man who was, at the very least, an accomplished tracker.

How fortuitous, she realized, that she'd maintained her watch over him. The tracker might just have been able to trace the boy's steps to the cave, had she not made certain such a trace was impossible. She rarely roamed very far from the cave, but in this instance, she'd gone forth with haste. Her magic easily swept any evidence of the boy's passing from the road. No tracker in the world could locate her cave now.

And to make doubly sure she was not discovered, she had cast a very potent spell, one which would eradicate any trace of her magic. Now, even if the tracker brought his mage friend to the intersection where the boy's tracks vanished, he would not be able to detect the magic used to erase them.

A rumble in her stomach reminded her that other things were also important to think about, and she turned her attention to feeding herself and the children in her womb. Her divinations had revealed she carried twins, a boy and a girl. They would be the latest in her line, and hopefully the last. Darella found child-rearing to be a nuisance. This time, at least, the experience should prove to be interesting.

Wish You Were Here is available in trade paperback or electronic PDF file at
<http://vincentmwales.com>