

The Unravelling Thread

by Amanda Sun

Fantasy Novel Excerpt

The sun is nearly setting by the time Thorn descends on Shadowfen. She passed a small ferry bobbing along the river about an hour ago, but when she and Grilda dipped down from the sky, they found it was a trading vessel loaded with supplies, with only a surprised captain and first mate onboard. She'd nodded at their startled faces as Grilda flapped upward again, the draft spinning their boat in circles.

After a long and aching journey, that moment has already lost its charm. She's tired, hungry, and sore. Grilda slams down at the fountain in the center of town, the only space large enough for her to land without smashing any buildings. The houses are packed together like dragon scales, shack crammed against flimsy shack, pushing and shoving their way into the city centre as though there isn't enough room for any of them to stand upright. The marshland surrounding the town that gives way to the river probably leaves little viable land for its inhabitants to share. They do say much of Shadowfen is raised up on stilts.

She asks directions from a girl who's climbing a rickety ladder to light the candles in the lampposts along the main street. In thanks, she leaves Grilda to help the wide-eyed girl. The dragon lifts her snout up to an entire row of lamps, one by one, letting out little snorts that light the candles and blacken the glass behind them.

Thorn finds the tavern she was looking for two streets over. *The Siren's Whelp*. She pushes the door in with both hands. The smell of onions and searing meat curls into the street. She searches the dim room inside, but she doesn't see who she's looking for. In fact, it's deserted.

"Evening, miss," says the bartender, wiping his palms on his apron. "Are you here for the roast? We'll be serving any moment."

“I’m looking for Commander Verun,” Thorn says. “This is the tavern the king’s men frequent, isn’t it?”

“It is,” the man says. “But can’t say I’ve seen him. I wasn’t aware he was coming this way. I better put on some more potatoes.”

Thorn curses in her head. Has she beaten the caravan here? Even on dragonback, it seems unlikely.

The bartender has put a basket of potatoes on the counter and he’s peeling them, wiping the edge of the knife on his apron. When he sees her staring at him, he hesitates. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Are there any king’s men here at all?”

“I had one arrive just yesterday,” the bartender says. “Had a prisoner with him. He’s coming shortly to collect dinners for the boat ride. Said they were shipping out tonight for the outposts.”

Only one? And with a prisoner. “What rank was he? Whose garrison?”

The bartender narrows his eyes as he studies her. He continues to peel the potatoes without looking, which, Thorn has to admit, is rather impressive. “Are you one of the king’s men—er, women—yourself?”

She doesn’t have time for this. “I am. I flew here on behalf of His Majesty.”

“Flew, hmm? You must be that fancy dragon rider everyone’s been on about. Is it outside, then?”

“She,” Thorn says. “And yes, she is.”

The man’s eyes are round as dinner plates. He goes to the window to peer out. “Big dragon, is she? Never seen one in my life. It won’t eat people, will it?”

“Generally, no. Unless they’re terribly unpleasant.”

“Ah. I can’t see her.”

“I left her with the lamp girl.”

“And it won’t eat her?”

Thorn crosses her arms. She’s not sure whether she’s amused or annoyed. “No. She likes children.”

“No dragons in these parts. Only up in the mountains they say, and the Rift. ‘Course those are the monstrous type. Not fit for riding, those. Fangs as long as your leg, mean as manticores and behemoths put together.”

Thorn smirks. “Is that so?”

“Can’t say I’ve seen you about Shadowfen on business before. Probably not somewhere I’d fly to if I had my own set of wings.”

The room is musty, smelling of overcooked carrots and too-soft onions. Thorn finds herself lowering the capelet from her head. “I’m mainly in the business of rounding up the bounties requested of me. Which is why I’m here to talk to Commander Verun.”

“If I see him come in, you’ll be the first to know,” the bartender says. He glances at her ears, the tattoos that curl down her neck. *Great, she thinks. Here come some more thoughts plucked from his noisy head.* But in the end he says nothing. He probably sees all kinds in his line of work, anyway. Not everyone is as wary of the Aelfynn as those she’s come across in the capital. “Will you be needing a room as well?” he asks.

“That depends on when the king’s man arrives.”

The man laughs. “On a mission, eh? All right. Take a seat. They’ll fill up quick once the town gets wind of this roast I’m taking out of the oven. I’ll keep a room ready in case you need it. It’s off-season anyway.”

“All right,” Thorn says. After a moment, she adds a gruff, “Thanks.” Small talk and courtesy have never been her strong suit. She sidles awkwardly through the too-close tables, her curved

blade clanking as it hits the backs of the chairs. Is everything in Shadowfen so claustrophobically squashed together? She takes a seat by the unlit fireplace. It's a touch drafty, but it allows her to watch the entire room while she waits.

He's not joking about the roast. Within half an hour the room fills completely, and the scent of the crisped, browned meat floods the musty air. He serves it to her on a wooden platter swimming with greasy gravy, so much that she can't even make out what the meat and other vegetables are. It tastes gamey, like venison, but they are near marshlands and the river, not the forest. It might be better not to know what it is.

She's starting into a mug of dark chocolate coffee and a piece of soufflé (*on the house*, the bartender says, *for the dragon rider who appreciates a bit of air*), when she sees the soldier come in. He's one of King Caephan's men, no doubt. His blue cape is pinned at the front with a brooch of two winged deer leaping. The cape itself is ripped to shreds, the pauldrons badly dented. But the roughest, most worn-looking of all is his face. Thorn has seen faces like that on the battlefield; something has frightened him, destroyed him. Though he sits at a table, his mind runs far away. The bartender talks to him for a moment, then puts a mug of ale in front of him. When he looks up again he catches Thorn's eye and nods.

Thorn pushes her chair back, leaving her half-finished dessert to go cold. She strides over to the table, clinking and bumping into the other diners all the way. They say nothing; she's certain the curved blade on her back gives them pause. "You," she says, and the man looks up. "You're one of Commander Verun's men?"

The man looks uncertain, putting down his mug with a clatter.

"I've been sent in reply to your commander's message," she says. "I need to speak with Verun."

The man doesn't make eye contact. Instead he stares into his ale, running a finger along the rim of the cup.

"Did you hear me?" Thorn snaps. She can see he's afraid, but she doesn't have time for theatrics. "I need to speak to Verun immediately."

"He's dead," the soldier says.