

## Journey to the West

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With a piercing howl, the locomotive belched smoke and steam that trailed out behind the train, swirling and flowing like a great mane around the head of the cast iron temple lion that formed the entire front of the engine. The trains of the Western Periphery & Frontier Rail were not the newest machines, nor in the best condition. The flags fluttering from the engine's wheelhouse were tattered by the wind and faded from perhaps too many runs in the Western sun, and the paint on the passenger and cargo cars was worn and dusty, but the engine was kept in top working order, and the temple lion figurehead on the prow of the locomotive was free of rust and polished to a dull sheen. The crews of the WP&F traditionally believed that the lion represented the guardian spirit of the train, and like all lions, it was a proud creature, so it was kept in good order, for luck on the journey.

The train barreled across the empty plains, stopping at the occasional outpost, where small settlements had sprung up around the supply depots where the locomotives would take on water. Over time, some of these small settlements would grow, becoming towns, drawing trade and commerce and population, all because of the presence of the iron rails that ran like a lifeline to the greater heart of the Empire to the east.

This far out, however, it would be a long while before the hard-scrabble settlements grew into anything an Imperial citizen would recognize as a town. A few clapboard homes, an inn which served as both a source of local entertainment and a hospice for the rare visitors (more coming to get on the train than off), and little else. Some of these little islands of humanity would wither and die, as Chartered House decisions made in the cities of the east adjusted rail stops to take advantage of better-stocked depots, or even abandoned unprofitable lines.

In the third passenger car of the Western Periphery & Frontier No. 6, Jennalore Akesti (Jen to her family and friends) watched as the rolling hills and seemingly endless horizons whipped past her dusty window. The tall prairie grass rippling in the wind made it look as though she traveled on a ship crossing a pale golden sea.

She shook her head at the romantic notion. It sounded like something out of *The Outlaw Prince of the Frontier*, the dime novel that sat, open, on the seat next to her. She had purchased the dog-eared pamphlet at the last stop the train had made, from a local child who had probably rescued it from a depot trash bin, left there by some previous traveler. She had stopped reading it hours ago. The picture it painted of the West, with its tales of the heroic honorable outlaw righting wrongs and rescuing fair maiden, was precisely the sort of image that had filled her head as a girl, and in no small way had most likely influenced her decision to take the position of schoolteacher in the intriguingly-named settlement of Prosperity.

She was fresh from University, and teaching positions were not easy to come by for a young woman, especially in a city like Parrume. It paled in comparison to the larger cities along the coast, but it was larger than any other city in the Periphery, and there were certainly more qualified applicants for any available opening. A posting as the sole teacher for a frontier settlement, though, was just the sort of adventure that appealed to the imagination of someone like Jennalore Akesti.

She accepted the offer, packed her bags, and boarded a train headed west. That was nearly two weeks and three trains ago. West and further west; at times she felt as though the rails would carry the entire train, passengers screaming, hurtling off the edge of the world. The distance between settlements grew longer and longer, and the landscape outside her window was largely unchanging – and certainly lacking in earnest, handsome Outlaw Princes.

“Tea, Miss?”

She looked away from the window, to find the old porter, in his dingy white coat, standing by a rickety tea cart. His bald head, portly frame and kindly face creased with wrinkles made him look, to Jen’s eyes, like the round little dog that her mother kept, back at home. She smiled up at him.

“Yes, thank you.” The tea would be welcome. The unending sameness of the view from her window was threatening to put her to sleep. The overwrought adventures of the Outlaw Prince had long since lost their thrill as well.

“The Engineer tells me that if we can keep this speed, we’ll reach Prosperity tomorrow morning, Miss,” the porter said, pouring the strong black tea into a cup.

“Have you been there before?” Jen asked, as the porter placed the cup on a slightly chipped saucer, and passed it over to her.

The old man gave a half-nod, half-shake movement of his head, which Jen could not decipher as yes, no, or perhaps something in between. “No vists, but been through, Miss. The ol’ six goes through there reg’lar, ‘fore we take the southern spur to the mines at Brogdon.”

Jen’s reply was drowned by the sound of shattering glass, as a massive multi-pronged hook swung in from above through the upper part of the window, digging deep into the wooden ceiling. Broken shards of glass fell into the passenger compartment, joined by shards of broken crockery as the cup and saucer slipped from Jen’s hands.

She could hear more crashes sounding throughout the train, the sound joined by the unmistakable thumps of people moving about on the roofs of the cars. The train shuddered on the tracks, slowing slightly. Cries of alarm rang in Jen’s ears – the panicked sound of distressed passengers, intermingled with shouts of warning sounding from the porters and other crew.

The old porter shoved his way past Jen to the broken window, mumbling a quick pardon as his surprisingly strong hands guided the young woman out of his way. He jutted his head out of the gaping frame and looked upward. His eyes narrowed, and he ducked back

in with a muttered curse.

Her curiosity shouting down her sense of safety, Jen replaced him at the window. The wind tore at her hair as she leaned out of the car. Strands pulled free from her carefully-pinned bun, and whipped around her face, stinging her skin slightly. She looked upward.

A massive airship floated high above, tethered to the speeding train by multiple grappling lines. The vessel was a patchwork design – what was obviously once a traditional sea-going junk lashed beneath a large gas bag, enhanced by additional construction. What looked like two windmills jutted from either side of the wooden vessel like outriggers, their canvas-covered vanes spinning in the wind. Jen could see men pouring from the ship down to the captured train below, some climbing down rope ladders and others sliding down the tether ropes like firemen on a brass pole. The men were dressed in a mismatched collection of rugged working clothes and outlandish finery, silk brocades alongside faded denim and heavy roughspun.

The doorway on the far end of the passenger car smashed open and two bandits entered, each waving pistols in the air and shouting for the passengers to turn over their valuables. As an unescorted young lady, Jen feared that perhaps the bandits might consider her value to be of a non-monetary sort, and so she turned and ran.

She threw open the door at the opposite end of the compartment, and ran out onto the small platform between cars. The platform was a small walking space chained in place between the rocking cars, empty aside from a utility ladder bolted to one of the cars leading to the roof. The train, although dragging the added weight of the airship, was still hurtling along the tracks, and the platform jerked and shook alarmingly, making Jen all too aware of the possibility of falling. At this speed, even if she fell alongside the train, she would be just as dead as if she had fallen beneath its wheels.

Through the window in the door to the next compartment, Jen could see another group of bandits terrorizing the passengers there as well, along with what looked like one of the baggage handlers putting up a valiant fight. Faced with the choice of pandemonium ahead or pandemonium behind, Jen took the only option available to her. Thankful that she had worn her sensible riding boots rather than the more fashionable heels in her luggage, she grabbed the steel rungs of the utility ladder, and started to carefully climb.

She reached the roof, and crawled out onto it, unable to bring herself to stand as the surface swayed and bucked beneath her. Above her, she could see the bandit junk. No further men emerged – she guessed that the boarding parties were all aboard the train by now. Her frantic mind clung to one thought, as tightly as she herself clung to the roof – that she might come out of this unscathed, if she could manage to remain unnoticed until the bandits returned to their waiting vessel.

That hope died an early death when she saw the three bandits climb up onto the car from the opposite side. Spotting her, they ran down the length of the car at an alarming pace – the calm part of Jen's mind supposing that crewing aboard an airship probably made for a certain level of sure-footedness in any situation.

She scrambled to her feet, her instinct to run overwhelming her fear of falling. The first of the bandits reached her, grabbing at her arm as she turned away. She twisted violently

away from him, and he followed, trying to maintain his grip. The pair of them lurched to one side of the car, and Jen dropped to her knees to avoid falling. She felt the man's legs hit her as she dropped, and he lost his footing, tripping over her and pitching over the side of the roof edge with a brief scream, carried away by the gusting wind.

Another of the bandits grabbed her and pulled her to her feet. "You're going to regret that, girl."

"HOLD!"

Jen and her captors turned to see the old porter climb up onto the rooftop. His white coat was unbuttoned, the tails of it flapping out to his sides like the wings of a crane. Beneath the coat he wore a dingy undershirt, barely covering his round stomach which protruded over his belt. In each hand, however, he gripped a two-foot rod of polished metal. He held one baton before him like a ward, with the other cocked over his head as he stepped forward with a grace that belied his shape.

"This train is under the protection of the Iron Dragon Clan," the old porter shouted. "Withdraw."

"Go to hell, old man!" The second bandit yelled, drawing a long machete from a sheath on his back and charging forward.

The two combatants met at the center of the car. The old porter leapt and spun, his clothes fluttering in the wind, and the sound of metal striking against metal rang out like chimes. When they came apart, the porter had reversed his stance – the opposite baton was now held above his head, and he held the other weapon before him, rotating the tip in a tight circle. To Jen's amazement, around the end of the leading baton twirled the machete, stripped from the bandit's grip.

The porter flicked his wrist, and the machete flew off, to land in some unknown patch of prairie grass along the tracks. He turned to the bandit who held Jen.

"Your crew needs to learn respect, Anstable."

The bandit captain released his grip on Jen. "He's new. We didn't know your clan rode these rails. The last thing we want is to cause insult."

The old porter lowered his batons. "By now, my brothers have regained control of the train. I hope none of your other men were foolish enough to fight. Their blood will not be on our hands."

"If they were dumb enough to turn a simple robbery into a war with one of the Clans, then I'm better off without them. You'll get no complaints from me."

By now, other bandits were climbing onto the roofs of the cars along the entire length of the train, escorted by porters, cooks, brakemen and conductors, each of whom were armed with twin batons. Jen watched as the bandits climbed back up the rope ladders to the waiting airship, and released the lines tethering them to the train.

Anstable wrapped his arm in several coils of the last remaining line, which Jen noticed happened to be the one that had crashed into the window by her seat. He kicked the

grapple hook free of the wood, and stood one foot in the curve of the metal as the line swung free and carried him upward toward his ship.

With his free hand, he grabbed his hat and raised it slightly on his forehead. He winked broadly as he lifted away from the train.

“Welcome to the Far West, Ma’am.”