

As we drew nearer to the village, we passed by several fields, some fenced off, others with stones and boulders on their outer edges, and nearly all of them seeming to have some form of damage. The ones on the outer rings seemed to be empty and pillaged, while many of the fields that were closer to the village were scorched, their ashy ground telling of the fire that had burned through them. A few patches of grain remained, though they were few and far between; I saw some canine figures among these patches, beating out the ash from them and stripping off any wilted leaves, throwing them aside as refuse.

Between these fields and the town stood the charred entryway I had seen from the hill. The two logs jutted out of the ground, one of them tilted at an odd angle, their darkened wood scarred by darker cracks that had been split into the timbers by the heat of fire. Their tops were shriveled, and charcoal lay scattered on the ground all around, suggesting that much of the now stumpy logs had been burned away,

We entered the village from its tainted side, where the ground was sooty and the houses were in disrepair. Some of the damaged dwellings had scaffolding and ladders set up next to them, and a good portion of them were being tended to. Some structures got away with simple wounds, such as broken windows or split doors, while others seemed to have drawn the short straw, having received massive gaps in their thatched roofs or having large portions of their timber walls burned away; one cluster of ruins were but stone sections of walls and ovens, everything that was wooden having been eaten by the flames. As we walked further in, however, the damages became less serious and less frequent, giving way to a more pleasant setting, even if by only a little bit.

As we walked along, a few of the town's residents turned from their work to nod our way; some even raised their paw in a friendly gesture. Oftentimes, however, these actions would be coupled with a confused stare, causing me to become self-conscious again.

"So, what are we doing here?" I asked Ruth, trying to divert my attention.

"Well," she began, "I am here to assist in the rebuilding and rehabilitation process; *you*, meanwhile, are going to get your own set of clothes. Now, if I my memory is correct," she mumbled, "the weaver's store lies in this direction."

She veered off the main road, turning right onto a path that wound back and forth between the scattered cottages. Up ahead, I could make out more damaged dwellings, for we were now heading back towards the burnt section of the village.

"As for getting you back to where you came from, I'm unsure of what can be done about that," Ruth told me.

I winced. "*Great!*" I thought. "*I literally disappeared off of Earth's face! Mom and Dad are gonna' freak out worrying about me, and I'm gonna' freak out worrying about them worrying about me!*"

"However," Ruth continued, stopping my freak-out train from getting very far from the station, "there may be somebody in a larger city who can help you; I won't make any

guaranties, for I'm only speculating, but there is a possibility." This provided me with a bit of consolation, and a good deal of hope.

We stopped at a house that had a large hole in its roof, covered only by interspaced wooden poles; underneath this hole, the leftmost portion of the dwelling was enveloped in rough stonework. Above the iron-bound door, a wooden poll protruded outwards, but stopped short at a splintered breaking point; another splinter-tipped poll leaned against the house's wall, a sideways sign on its top end displaying the faded image of a shirt with a needle and thread working through it. Ruth grabbed the door's handle, pulling it open to the sound of a ringing shop bell on the other side.

Inside it was cozy, despite the collapsed roof and its lingering strands and clusters of thatch that were pushed against the walls. The wooden floorboards were smooth, worn down by sand and the many customers that had walked over them in years past. A counter in front of us divided the room in half, and behind it hung fabrics of various types and colors. To our right was a dividing wall, its homely brown timbers sectioning off the house's different rooms; to our left was the cobblestone section of wall that was visible from the exterior, a smoldering fireplace embedded inside it; close by this fireplace was a set of chairs and a table, its close-knit boards appearing to be clean and well polished. Despite the candlesticks that stood on the table and counter, the only light in the room was provided by the sun, though even this was dimmed by the overcast sky.

I heard a deep sigh from the next room over, and a muffled voice followed. "Understand, Mrs. Pierce, I told you already: window drapes are not high on the town's priority list." A door to the right opened up, and a grey-furred, black-stripped figure backed out into the sunlight, lengths of fabric draped over his shoulder. Back turned to us, he walked behind a counter at the back of the room and began draping the materials on an overhead rack; this he did with a single paw, due to his left arm being wrapped up in a sling. "Many people still need a set of clothes to call their own," he continued, "and with this arm of mine, production will be—" He finally turned to face us, stopping himself mid-sentence when he did. His orange eyes shot up and down, seeming to size me up. "Oh, well that's a right bloody shame!" he scoffed. "I assume you're here to get some proper clothes for a lad such as yourself?"

When I didn't speak, Ruth gave me a little nudge from behind, signaling that it was my turn to do something. "Um, y- yes please," I stuttered.

"That's good." He reached over the counter, extending a paw towards me. Stepping forward, I accepted it, feeling my joints crunch beneath the man's powerful grip. "The name's Bradly; Bradly Finch," he told me. "And you are?"

"Jason," I grunted, making subtle attempts to pull my paw free. Mr. Finch finally allowed me to do so, turning to Ruth and taking her paw in a visibly lighter grasp. "And if I can remember, your name is Ruth; correct?"

"Yes," Ruth smiled. "Pleasure to meet you again, Bradly."

"Always," the store manager grinned. Turning his gaze back to me, he continued speaking. "Now, what manner of clothing are you looking for? What's your price-range?"

"Well, I, uh... I don't exactly have any money..." I explained shamefacedly.

The store manager grunted. "Understandable, given the current state of things; I suppose it was only be a matter of time before somebody drew up enough courage to come here, though having lost their earnings. Thing is," he muttered, "I'm not just *giving* my work away for free...." He sighed, looking through the hole in his ceiling thoughtfully. A moment later, however, he slapped a paw to his forehead, muttering something about being an oblivious fool.

"Tell you what," he said, leaning in. "You seem to be a strong lad, and that gaping hole in my roof couldn't have escaped your notice. I'd fix it myself, but—" he tapped his bandaged arm "—that won't be happening any time soon; and apparently the repair crew still has higher priorities. However, if you can fix that roof, I'll give you a set of clothes, and..." He took a moment to bob his head back and forth in thought. "...ten copper bits to boot; how's that sound?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed Ruth nod and heard her make a pleased "Hmm." Had she not done this, I would have had no idea as to whether the deal was a good one or not. "Sounds fair enough," I said, though still slightly unsure. "Just one thing: I'm not exactly sure how to go about fixing a roof." I looked down at my feet, then corrected myself. "Not sure at all, actually."

Mr. Finch raised his eyebrows, then shrugged. "Well, go get some thatch from the village square, bring it back here, and I'll show you. You'll be needing a large quantity, so grab the cart behind my house and take it along with you." That said, he turned back to his work, hanging up the various fabrics he still held.

"Okay," I nodded, though I continued to stand at the counter for an unnecessarily long amount of time; I had a question, but felt as though it would be a bit impolite to ask. All the same, it was a question that would be most applicable in the current moment. "So..." I began, awkwardly drawing out the word, "am I allowed to get those clothes now? Or, I assume I have to do a certain amount of work first?"

Mr. Finch looked over his shoulder at me, then laughed, long and loud.

"*Dumb question*," I berated myself. "*Of course I have to do the work first!*"

Finally calming down enough to speak, Mr. Finch turned to Ruth, grinning. "I love this lad! He's got the mind of a businessman." Taking one last calming breath, he answered my question. "How about this: bring back the thatch, and I'll lend you a pair of trousers; work until noon, and I'll provide you with the shirt, and even a meal; finish the job, and I'll pay you the money, and the clothes will become your own."

I went back over what he explained in my head, then shrugged. "Sounds good."

"Good!" he exclaimed, extending his paw once again. I hesitated, but took it one more time, allowing him to crush my digits in his vice grip. He leaned in, lowering his voice slightly.

“Just be sure to complete the job, and complete it in full—if you hold up your end of the deal, then I’ll hold up my end.”

“Of course,” I grimaced through clenched teeth, sealing the deal.