

I found the cart behind Mr. Finch's house, just as he said it would be. It was quite large, being as long as I was tall and a little over half as wide. Its solid wooden bed rested upon a single iron axle and spoked wheels. As large as it seemed, I was slightly worried about the difficulty I would have moving it. However, after tugging it out of the indents its wheels had created in the grass, it proved to be quite easy to pull across the dry ground. Holding on lightly to its handles, I pulled it around to the front of Mr. Finch's house, where I met back up with Ruth.

"Ready to earn some pants?" she asked with a smile, swishing her tail lightheartedly beneath the frills of her dress.

"I suppose," I chuckled. Her light and airy mood amused me; either that, or it was infectious.

"Good, because I would like to have my own back before I begin working. It's rather difficult to rid silken dresses of dirt and grime."

"Makes sense," I nodded, even though this was new knowledge to me. "So, where is the square we're supposed to be going to?"

"You're supposed to be going to it," she corrected me. "But I'll lead you all the same. Follow me; it's in the center of Templis."

She began leading the way and I trailed behind, making a mental note. *"Alright then, so this place is called 'Templis,' it seems. Templis, Templis, Templis..."*

We made our way back towards the main road, then continued further into Templis. Several other people passed us as we walked, some carrying tools or materials, others paired up and pulling along cart-loads of various items. Looking around at everyone, I couldn't help but feel as though Ruth and I stuck out—she in her bright green dress and near-white fur (she was the only one I'd seen so far who had such a pelt), and I pulling an empty cart, bare-chested and wearing what were apparently women's pants. But aside from the odd wave or tired sounding greeting, there really wasn't much attention paid to us.

We reached the center of the village soon enough, and I knew without having to be told; the road widened out by two-fold, another important-seeming path ran perpendicular to the one we walked, and a large, open space rested between them, with a large well dug into the middle of it. There was a general hustle and bustle occurring in the area, as it appeared to be a central hub for all the repairs that were taking place; water was being hauled from the well and transferred to barrels, tools were being doled out here and there, and to our right were stacked large bundles of dried hay and grass. Ruth pointed at this stack, then leaned against the wall of a nearby house.

I looked at the materials, then back at her, slightly unsure of what it was she expected of me. "What?" I asked her.

"That's what you're looking for; go get some."

"Just take it?"

Ruth chuckled pityingly. "You could, but just to be safe you may want to talk to that man standing nearby; he's probably in charge of distributing the thatch."

I looked back and forth between her and the black, muscular wolf-creature she referred to. I took a long, low breath, then pulled the cart forward. "*Can't expect everything to be done for you, Jason,*" I told myself.

Walking up to the buff guy, I lowered the cart's handles to the dirt. "Uh, sir?" I said, dragging his attention away from whatever it was he had been staring at.

He looked me up and down, a mildly displeased look on his face. "What manner of dress is that?"

I sighed, rolling my eyes. "They're borrowed."

"What, don't have any male friends to help ye'?"

"No, it's just... it's a long story."

A large four-wheeled wagon rolled into the square, guided by four workers and filled to the brim with bundles of roofing material. It stopped nearby and the strong guy walked up to it, helping to unload the materials onto his pile. "I never did like old wife's tales," he grumbled in reply, tossing two bundles into place with impressive accuracy.

"Yeah, neither do I," I replied, irked by his insulting demeanor. "Anyways, I'm just here gather some thatch for Mr. Finch; that okay?"

"The old coot, or the weaver?"

"The weaver, I suppose."

"Catch."

I looked up just in time to sidestep a flying bale of grass. It hit the ground where I had been and bounced over to Mr. Finch's cart, stopping against one of the handles.

"Aw, come now; you weren't supposed to let it fall!" the black dude said in a teasing tone.

I walked over to the bundle and grabbed it off the ground, placing it in the cart. "Well, now that I have a chance to think," I said, quite perturbed by now, "I understand that; though I doubt many people can react within the fraction of a second you gave me."

"Oh, forgive me; I didn't know the little girl was that slow." This remark was followed by some snickers from the other workers.

I straightened up, back still turned to the jerk, and stood motionless. I made eye contact with Ruth, who simply raised her eyebrows at me as if to ask, "What would you have me do?" I felt my ears laying back against my head slightly, and my fists clenching and unclenching at my sides; neither action was consciously ordained. Taking a deep breath, I fought against any urges to pick up a dense bundle of dried grass and chuck it at this douchebag.

I turned around and stared into his deep blue eyes. "Not exactly sure what your problem is, but I'd like to carry on with my job; can I get the thatch or not?"

"Of course ye' can, little girl."

I almost said an exasperated “thank you,” but decided against it, instead proceeding to fill up Mr. Finch’s cart in resentful silence. The time spent doing this is remembered as a blur of anger, filled with scathing remarks that never got past my thoughts. Picking up the cart’s handles, I dug my toes in and managed to get it rolling, though it was now several times heavier. Circling around to where Ruth waited, I continued walking as she fell in by my side. I felt like punching something, but the wood and stone walls of the Templis’ buildings looked like they would hurt me more than help me, so I simply trudged instead. I think Ruth was aware of my inner rage, because she remained silent as she led me back to Mr. Finch’s place.

I didn’t realize when we arrived at the weaver’s shop, and only stopped pulling the cart when Ruth called me back. Stepping inside, I called out to the tradesman, who wasn’t to be seen in the main room. “Mr. Finch?” I said, trying to keep a neutral tone, “I got the thatch.”

The side door opened and the weaver stepped out, a pair of baggy cotton pants in his paw. “I told you my name was Bradley; don’t bother with all this fancy ‘Mister’ stuff.” He glanced outside, tail swishing contently at the sight of the full cart. “Seems a decent amount. Take these,” he said, handing me the pants, “put them on, and then return here.”

He showed me to a back room where I could change in privacy, warning me not to touch anything. I removed the old, girly pants and exchanged them for a pair that was apparently much manlier. They were very loose, sliding easily over the new digitigrade form of my legs, and may have been a bit large on me; either that, or they were meant to droop down around my toes and brush along the ground. I decided to roll them up a little bit, just to keep them out of the dust. My attire and mood slightly improved, I stepped back outside, where Ruth and Bradley were waiting.

Ruth extended a paw. “I’ll go ahead and take those back now.”

I returned her pants, at which point she went inside to change as well, leaving me alone with Bradley. “Come here,” he told me, motioning with his uninjured paw. Walking over to the cart, he stopped and pointed at the thatch bundles. “Grab a pawful.”

“*Pawful?*” I repeated, momentarily confused by the slight difference in the otherwise familiar term. “*Oh, right; duh.*” I knelt down and grasped several strands of grass, yanking the tough, fibrous materials free of their bundle. Turning to the weaver, I awaited his next word.

“Go ahead and lay it against this pole here, then fold it over,” he commanded, nudging one of the wooden cart handles with his toes. “You’ll want more thatch on the top side than on the bottom side; and be sure to keep everything tight as you do this.” I did as he told me, feeling the grass crack and snap as I bent the fibers around the pole. “Good,” Bradley nodded, his tail twitching in what seemed like a happy manner. “Now, grab the bottom portion, the smaller one, and bring it up and over the top portion so that it points towards the cart.” After a short bit of thought, I figured out what he meant, ending up with what looked like the beginnings of a knot. “Just fine,” he told me. “All that’s left to do is to shove the smaller top portion underneath the bed of the cart; make sure the whole lot is pushed snugly against it.” I bent the

small end downwards, fitting it underneath the barrow as he told me, then moved the whole handful firmly against the wooden frame.

"That's it?" I asked, my paws still holding the thatch in place.

"Aye. Go ahead and let go; if you did it correctly, it should hold itself." I hesitated, but released my hold—sure enough, the thatchwork stayed put. "Excellent!" Bradley exclaimed, slapping me heavily on the back. "And you said you've never done this before."

"I haven't," I replied.

"Well, one way or another," my instructor shrugged, "go ahead and repeat that same process a few more times, for a bit of practice. Each time, stick your short end underneath the unit next to it, like you did for the first one when you stuck it beneath the cart."

I complied, and upon finishing the practice there lay before me a whole row of thatch. I couldn't help but notice that I had used up a decent amount of the bundle I had been pulling grass from. Looking up at the damage done to the roof, I felt a pang of despair. *"I'm gonna' have to get more at some point, aren't I?"*

"Seems like you did a fine job," Bradley said.

"And I'm inclined to agree!" I looked up and saw Ruth emerging from the house, once again dressed in humbler garb. "Jason, I'm off to other parts of town, though we'll likely see each other at the inn tonight; right?"

"Huh? Oh, uh... yeah, I guess." It was a confirmation of sorts.

Ruth's violet eyes twinkled. "Good. In that case, I'll see you later this evening."

"Take care," Bradley nodded.

I must admit, it was a bit unsettling to see Ruth go. I hadn't been with her for much more than, what, an hour? All the same, she had been my guide in this foreign world, and as she trotted off through the village, it pained me to think that I would be left on my own; I had little idea of what to do next, and very little idea of how to even begin getting home.

"You'll notice," the weaver began, oblivious to my worries, "that the cross poles have already been replaced." He motioned towards the damaged roof, pointing out the several thin rods of wood that ran horizontally across it. "A couple of relief carpenters saw to that; all that's left for you to do is the thatchwork. So, climb on up there and get to it! I'll be right beneath you if you need anything."

Bradley started heading inside again, but something still confused me. "Wait, I'm getting on the roof itself? No ladder or anything?"

He stopped in the doorway, and I saw him shake his head back and forth ever so slightly. He mumbled something about a lack of common knowledge before turning around and replying. "The roof will hold; just climb on up there and do what you did down here."

He closed the door, leaving me outside with a cartful of dried grasses and a mind full of questions. Trying to ignore the latter, I grabbed one of the bundles and shoved it up on top of

the low-hanging roof, then managed to clamber up after it myself. “Okay,” I whispered, observing the task ahead of me. “Let’s thatch a roof.”