

The inn was a large building, standing an impressive two stories tall and filling all of one corner of the square with its great “L” shape. Despite its larger size, the building stayed in theme with the rest of the town; the cobble stone walls that made up the small side of the L were likely enclosing a kitchen, and the various oak-walled rooms on the upper floor were topped with a thatch roof.

I put my shirt on, then stepped into a porch-like extension. Peering in through a nearby window, I felt a bit hesitant. Nonetheless, I shook any worries out of my head, then pushed the door open.

Inside, there was a tavern. Several tables were laid out, and most if not all of them had at least one occupant. Along the back wall was a bar, behind which was what I could only assume to be a variety of beers and ales—hopefully some water as well, because I wasn’t exactly looking to get drunk tonight, or even tipsy. A constant hubbub filled the room, keeping the atmosphere energized, and warm, savory scents mingled with those of pipe smoke.

Navigating through the crowd, I worked my way towards the bar at the back of the building; I spotted a figure shuffling around behind it, their body just barely visible as they worked at something below the countertop. Even as neared them, eventually standing right at the counter, they still remained stooped over. I gave a light rap on the smooth wooden surface, which was followed by a loud thump that shook the whole thing.

The bartender straightened up, rubbing the back of their head. “Yes?” he grunted, laying a couple tankards down between us. “Can I help you?”

I did my best to ignore the strips of cotton that covered the man’s right eye, as well as the fact that he was missing half an ear. “Uh, yes, please...” *“Now, what is it I want, exactly?”* I asked myself. “Can I get a, uh— Sorry; what’s the price of a room here?”

“Well, considering the price drops for all these relief groups, it’s only about four copper bits a night. And if you’re looking for an evening or morning meal, it’s two coppers for each.”

“Okay, okay...” I nodded. “Let me think on it; can I just have some water for now?” He nodded, taking one of the mugs and dipping it into a nearby barrel before handing it back to me. I stepped away from the counter and the man returned to his work.

“I really don’t have a whole lot of money to spend,” I thought, sipping on the bitter water. *“So maybe I should just go for the room. That being the case, though, where would I get something to eat?... Well, supposing I can find the market place or something and buy some bread, I’m still down six copper bits. But at the same time, I could probably save some of that food for later, if the size of Bradley’s loaf was anything to go by; come to think of it...”* I felt down over my pocket, feeling a large lump inside of it—I still had that barley bread from earlier.

I took it out and looked at it, noticing the odd, stiff feeling it had. Having been left alone all day, the chunk of bread had gone stale, probably making it even worse than before; however, this was something that I knew how to fix.

Glancing around the room, I soon found what I was hoping for: a fireplace, already lit and filling the tavern with an inviting glow. My tail stirred slightly. Walking over to the hearth, I found an unobtrusive spot off to the side, where I wouldn't be disturbing the conversation of those few who were already gathered around it.

To my great fortune, there was bucket nearby filled with long sticks, which I could only assume were meant to be tools for roasting various food items, like hot dogs and marshmallows during a camp-out. Taking one of them, I pierced the bread clean through, allowing its stiff crust to hold it in place; I then proceeded to hold the bread close to the open flame.

It was a treacherous process—too close to the fire, and I risked burning the loaf; too far, and I wouldn't accomplish anything, thus leaving the bread stale and practically inedible. But after much patience and steady rotation of the roasting stick, the bread acquired a golden-brown hue, and upon breaking it open, a pleasing aroma rose forth from it.

I had made toast!

But the true test was yet to come. Biting into one of the halves, I was pleased by what I tasted—it wasn't the best thing ever, but it was better than before. Whether my current hunger had anything to do with the taste, I wasn't sure; neither could I be certain of the possible effects of being prepared for the earthy flavor, something I wasn't ready for the first time I tried it. One way or another, there was no doubt in my mind that toasting the bread had given it a better appeal, one that was much more suited to my modern American tastes.

The bread was still quite dense. I wasn't filled upon first finishing it, but I figured I'd give it some time; perhaps it would loosen up and expand within my gut. I sat down on the smoothened floor, trying to ignore my current longing for more. In the meantime, I stared into the flames, calculating various figures inside my head.

"Okay, assuming I can avoid buying dinner, I'll probably be spending four copper bits tonight... and I only have ten. Ah, geez." I rubbed my face uneasily and yawned. *"And all that's assuming I decide to buy a room tonight. Which I'd most certainly prefer to nearly anything else, aside from staying at Bradley's place; he didn't offer though, and he's already done so much. That being the case, I'll probably stay here for... well, the ten coppers will only carry me through two nights—maybe."*

"Maybe..." I repeated, pushing myself to my feet.

"All that considered, I'm gonna' have to earn more money; or get back that book, which would put an end to all of this, with any luck." I looked around the room, earnestly hoping that the bandits would be somewhere within the building. Naturally, however, things weren't that easy. As I walked towards the bar, it became apparent that the hard load wasn't about to ease up any time soon.

"Well, well, well—if it isn't the little girl. Fancy seeing you here."

Halting, feeling a scowl fill my face. I had drilled that voice into my memory all morning, and I knew only one person who called me that. "You know, I'm not sure whether or not I should respond to that," I said, looking over my shoulder, "considering how inaccurate it is."

The buff, black-furred jerk-off stood behind me, a smug look smeared all over his face. "Ye' just did."

"True," I nodded, my voice deepened by irritation. "Now is that all? I've got better things to do right now than argue the finer points of discussions."

"Oh, no need to get feisty," he said with mock-defensiveness. "I only wanted to admire yer new trousers." He stepped closer, keeping his voice low. "They are quite nice, though mayhaps a bit too manly for a lass such as yerself; 'tis almost indecent."

I rolled my eyes, long and slow, then turned to walk away. "Like I said, better things to do. Now if you please, I'm very tired and would like to—"

"Are you running away, you little sissy?" He said it a bit louder than I would have preferred.

I stopped dead, muttering something indiscernible before replying in a voice that was just as loud as his. "No, I'm walking away, because there's no point in standing around talking to thick-skulled idiots; now unless you're blind and deaf, stop calling me a girl." I made to continue onward again, only to be stopped by a weight on my shoulder.

"I don't take kindly to being called an idiot," the man growled threateningly, tightening his grip on me. Perhaps I had gone a bit far... Not that I had time to think about that in the moment, of course.

"And I don't take kindly to being called a sissy. Now if you'll excuse me, this day has given me enough crap without your contribution." Shoving his paw away, I turned to face him head on. "So budge off, ya' dingus!"

I stared him in the eye, my gaze daring him to carry this further.

Though the man's nostrils flared and a snarl pulled at the corner of his mouth, his lips never parted, and he spoke not a sound. When he continued his silence, I walked away, turning slowly with my first few steps as I kept an eye on him.

I stepped up to the counter, taking one last look behind me and seeing the man lumbering off towards the exit. Knocking on the counter again, I heard a bump as the clumsy bartender bruised his skull again. "Made up your mind?" he muttered, massaging his head.

"Yeah," I grumbled, still perturbed. "I'll get a room for the night."

"Very well; that'll be four coppers," he replied. At the same time, a voice called from the nearby stairwell.

"Jason? Hey, nice to see you here!" It was Ruth, her cheerful, familiar face a welcome sight to my wearied body.

"Oh, hey," I replied, turning away from the barman. "What's up?"

Her ear dropped backwards. "The ceiling," Ruth said. "Though I assume that phrase has a different meaning to you?"

"Yeah..." I grimaced. "Lemme' rephrase that—what's going on?"

"Ah; nothing much," she said, walking over to me. "But I did have a thought—there are many people here as of late, both those from Templis without any other shelter, and those who are here to repair said shelters; as such, many of the rooms are already taken. To get to my point: would you like to share a room tonight? Doing so would free up space for others, and," she leaned in and lowered her voice, "it would mean that we could split the cost between us and save coppers."

"I did hear that, you know," the bartender butted in.

Ruth giggled. "How about it?"

"I see no problems," I shrugged. Turning back to the man across the counter, I changed my order. "Actually, I think I'll just come back tomorrow for breakfast."

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"Now, there is only one bed, so I'll understand if you change your decision and decide to get your own room; but I think something can be arranged, considering how many blankets this room has."

Ruth turned her room key, sending off an audible *click* before swinging the door open. A candle already burned in the room, illuminating everything within—not that there was much to see. A low bed squatted in the far corner, with what seemed to be three or four sheets weighing down on it; a rickety-looking chair rested next to it, and a small, faded and tattered rug was thrown out in the middle of the room. Not much of a looker, but I suppose the room wasn't designed for much more than sleeping, and anyone who's sleeping can't very well pay attention to their dingy room.

Stepping in behind Ruth, I stumbled over a fold in the floor mat. "So what do you have in mind?" I asked, smoothing out the rug with my foot. "Making a soft spot on the floor with the extra blankets?"

"In essence, yes," Ruth said, pulling most of the sheets off the mattress. "Like I said, if you'd prefer to have your own room tonight, I understand completely."

"No, it's alright; in all honesty, I could probably crash out just about anywhere right now." A yawn compounded this statement.

Ruth handed me the sheets with a shrug. "Very well."

With my bedding set up, and both of us settling down, Ruth found time for further conversation. "So what do you enjoy doing?"

"What?" I straightened upright away from the wall I was leaning on, taking a moment to process the sudden question. "Well, I uh..." Video games and watching YouTube videos were off the list of possible responses. "...Exercising is kinda' fun."

"You have enough energy to spare for such a thing?" Ruth inquired. "What's your trade?"

"Well, no trade as of yet; I'm just studying right now."

"Studying what?"

"General facts and theories." At this point a suitable answer came to mind. "I'm working towards becoming a scholar."

"Interesting; you must come from a large city, then."

"Yep," I drawled. "What about you?" I asked, anxious to change the focus of conversation. "What do you do?"

"Well, nothing as special as you do," she chuckled wryly, "but I farm produce—squash and carrots, mainly, with a few pumpkins here and there. The practice brings in good coins, but it's not particularly glamorous."

I nodded. "I gotcha'. How's that doing for you? Do you like farming?"

Ruth gave a little shrug. "I do enjoy it, to a degree. It's just that it used to be more enjoyable, back before my brother left to Kirlios in order to learn a new trade."

"Oh..." I sympathized. Though I did have a question, I waited a moment before speaking again. "So, what's Kirlios?"

"It's a nearby city; one of the largest the area."

"Ah, okay."

Another inquiry piqued my mind, but something kept me from blurting it out; I opened my mouth a couple times, only to produce no sound and promptly close it again. Ruth must have noticed, however.

She tilted her head. "Is something on your mind?"

"Well, yeah," I replied. "Do you, uh... do you think that a— what did you call them? Weavers?" She nodded. "Do you think a weaver will be there?"

"I wouldn't doubt it," she said. "Whether or not they'll be of any help to you, I can't guarantee. Do you think you'll go there?"

"Maybe," I shrugged. Rubbing my eyes, my chest heaved out a yawn. "I dunno'..."

Ruth let out a sleepy sigh also. "Well, it can be decided tomorrow. But right now, I think we should both lay down for the night and rest."

"Yeah," I chuckled dryly. "Sounds like a plan."