

Settling by Elyse Lemoine

The crackling of the hearth and the laughter from the table in the back of the room lit up the small town inn. In the corner, a bard strummed idly at a lute, his feet kicked up near the fire to keep them warm. Behind him, a man stuck a dagger into the wood of the table and laughed over a haunch of meat, his companions bellowing with him. The innkeeper stood behind the bar, polishing pewter pints with an old cloth and a warm smile. Seated in front of him was a young ranger, short and hooded and nursing ale of his own.

“So, what happened next?” he asked.

The ranger laughed, short and quick, as his fingers danced across the hilt of an ornamental dirk. “Seven of the High Palace’s guards stood between me and freedom, and with a Berserker at my back, my chances of escape were slim.” He took a sip from his mug. “Luckily, the guards weren’t expecting the Berserker.”

It was the innkeeper’s turn to laugh. “Caused quite a mess, I’m sure.”

“I was told they were cleaning up debris for weeks. It smashed up the Lord’s stables before they could bring it down.”

The innkeeper took his mug from him and smiled. “Now, the real question is, what were you doing with a ‘serker in a palace in Fell?”

The ranger snorted and leaned back in his chair, but just as he was about to answer, the door to the inn burst open with a gust of air and snow. The torches outside cast long shadows of a traveler on the warm floor near the hearth. A young woman stood in the doorway, holding a soiled, stained sack in her scaled hand, her face hidden beneath a hooded cowl. She closed the door with her free hand and walked toward the bar, each step ringing with the clinking of armor and mail.

She dropped the sack onto the bar and it landed with a sickening squelch that made both the ranger and the innkeeper wince. It sat upon the bar like a sack of raw, wet meat, and the stench of dried blood was enough to give them pause. She shook off the cowl and dusted the snow from her shoulders before turning a slitted yellow eye upon the innkeeper; the other scarred and clouded, the colour of goat’s milk. “I’m here about the bounty.”

The ranger hid his dirk within his coat and looked up at the young woman, her jade scales glimmering by the dim light of the hearth. Her armor shone in the light as well, silver and ivory, trimmed in crimson. “You’re late, Ts’reen,” he said with a smirk.

She smiled, flashing a row of sharp teeth, just enough to put the innkeeper on edge. “Did not think you cared, Findel,” she said, taking a seat next to him.

The innkeeper reached into the bag and wrapped his fingers around a tuft of greasy, unwashed hair. He tugged and the bag came loose, falling to the bar as the decapitated head of a cave troll emerged. Its tongue hung out of its mouth, swollen and purple, and its eyes bulging gazed up at him. He set it down on the sack. “This is Mee’gar all right,” he said, rubbing at the scruff on his chin. He slid a small bag across the bar and the woman caught it. “One hundred gold pieces, as promised.” He wrapped the sack around the head again and carried it to the back.

She took five coins out of the bag and slid them across the table. “Two pints and two of your best rooms, if you will.”

Findel scoffed. “I thought we were leaving tonight. I’d rather not stay here longer than intended. Again.”

She smiled again and leaned back in her chair, removing her broadsword and leaning it against the wood of the bar. Her cloak came next before she loosened the plating of her armor, enough to sit comfortably. “Yes, but that was before you left me alone with that troll and the snow blew in.” The innkeeper set two mugs of ale in front of them. She gripped hers and took a large swig.

“I prefer not to deal with things that dwell in caves,” Findel said, turning his nose up at her.

She laughed. “And you call yourself a ranger.” She set her mug down, long nails scratching at the cold pewter surface. Perhaps it was better weather for mulled wine, but there was nothing more satisfying than fresh brewed ale from a small trading village after a long fight. “I could have used you out there, you know.” She turned her head toward her companion. “It is a hard battle fought when you have something that size swinging a club at your blind spot.”

He rolled his eyes at her and turned away. “Aye, but you’re the fool who accepted the quest in the first place. I’ll take a bandit raid any day over a cave troll.”

She finished off her mug and slid it across the bar to the innkeeper. “Well, I had intended on sharing the pot with you,” she started, picking up the bag of coins, “but perhaps that would be too *generous* of me.” She pocketed them, making sure to jingle the coins once for added emphasis.

“Perhaps this is where we part ways then,” he said, but that was what he always said after

Ts'reen went running off into the woods, slaying beasts for helpless villagers and collecting rewards. He did his fair share of the work, of course, and quite often acted as her eyes, but the longer he stayed with her, the further she took him from the path he preferred to tread. Still, he couldn't find it in himself to leave her side yet.

"Perhaps," was all she could say, "Another ale, please?"

The innkeeper nodded and went to pour some from the tap. "So, travelers, are you? We see quite a few of those passing by on their way through to Highwind," he said. "I had a few interested in the bounty on Mee'gar. I didn't think I'd be seeing that head for a while." His eyes were downcast when he handed the mug back to her.

"Did you lose someone precious to you?" she asked, wrapping a scaled hand around the mug, sharp nails tapping at the surface.

"Aye," he said with a long sigh. "My beautiful Nyala."

"Your wife?"

He shook his head. "My horse."

Findel choked back a laugh and Ts'reen kicked him under the table. "I am sorry for your loss." The innkeeper hummed and moved to polish the bar. "We are travelers, in a sense. I am Ts'reen, from the Trade Winds, and this is Findel of Tamren."

The innkeeper smiled. "Ah, the Trade Winds, home of the Company. My youngest brother left to train with them four years ago."

This seemed to pique Ts'reen's interest, as she let out a throaty laugh. "Did he? Then I am afraid I would not know of him. I hope he is well-ranked by now."

"You ran with the Company?" The innkeeper looked surprised, but this hardly surprised the two of them. Very few of her kind left their country of Boglift, and the few that did never took up arms as warriors.

She didn't hold it against him, however. "I did, for a time," she said, sipping at her mug. "Eight years exactly, before I left."

"She was next to succeed the Master at Arms," Findel cut in.

The innkeeper hummed. "Why did you leave?"

"We have our reasons." She set her mug down, empty, and leaned in on guarded arms. "Not all make interesting stories, I am afraid."

The innkeeper looked perplexed and opened his mouth to speak, but a rowdy call from

the table in the back summoned him away from the bar. Ts'reen nursed her mug as Findel finished off his own. Finally, she drew a fistful of coins from the pouch at her side and dropped them in front of him. "Here. For safe passage, if you plan to leave."

He looked up at her, eyebrows drawn together under the shadow of his hood. "I wasn't actually planning on leaving."

She laughed. "I know, but perhaps it would be best if you did. We have been traveling together for three years, Fin, and I am not headed to the White City. I do not plan to go where you do."

"So, *what* then? Are you going to keep trawling small towns for petty quests, slaying beasts as you go to earn your keep? What of your incessant talk of joining the White Cloaks, of finding glory at the tip of your sword? What of that?"

Ts'reen hummed, tapping her nails against the wood of the bar. "That was a dream once, but dreams change."

He scoffed, shoving his mug away from him. "So, I left my home, my woods, and my post to help a warrior waste away in a town like this, chasing cave trolls away from a shepherd's flock? You've slain hundreds of beasts. Imagine the kind of power you could wield with the Cloaks at your back."

"If I wanted that glory, I could just return to the Company." She frowned. "I thought you disapproved. I thought you loathed the White City."

"I wouldn't have traveled with you if I disapproved. My feelings on the City lie only in my experience, but I'm a *ranger*. My home is the woods, my people are everywhere." He laughed, biting and callous. "And the Company was no place for you then, and it is no place for you now. Petty mercenary jobs and paid protection. I have seen the things you're capable of, the kind of person you are."

She held a hand up before placing it on his shoulder. "I appreciate the concern." She took another swig of ale. Mulled wine sounded better as the chill crept in from the outside. "But I am old, Findel, and my sword is not as sharp as it once was. I can polish and shine my armor as much as I want, but it will not change the fact that twenty-five years is too long a time spent on foot."

Findel let out a barking laugh. "So, you would settle in a town and live out the rest of your days doing petty quests for paltry peasants?"

She gritted her teeth and slammed her mug on the table. The tavern fell silent, and even the idle strumming of the lute died down. “There will always be young men and women ready to put down their lives to serve a city guard,” she hissed, her good eye narrowed and turned on her companion.

“And there will always be travelers and mercenaries ready to slay dragons for a quick sack of gold,” he quipped.

“But what if one day, there are not? What if one day, when this town or the next town needs someone most, they are off fighting dragons or resting their feet in the city when some town needs them most? What then?”

Findel pushed himself up. “There will always be people looking for work.”

“Then let me be one of them,” she said, her good eye locked on his. They had set out on a quest together that should have taken mere months. But months turned to years as she stopped in every small town to lend their services to those whom she believed needed it most. Perhaps it was finally time they parted ways, if she had taken him so far from his own path in pursuit of her own.

Findel scooped the coins off of the table and pocketed them, before setting his dirk down in front of her. “Perhaps,” he whispered, “perhaps we’ll see each other again someday.” He wrapped his cloak tighter around himself and pushed his chair in. “...You could’ve been someone.”

“I am someone,” she said to his back as he walked away. She picked the dirk up and turned it over in her hands, admiring the detail etched into the sheath. With a flare of her nostrils and a slow exhale of breath, she tucked it into her leather belt and closed her eyes.

The innkeeper returned, his eyebrows drawn, fingers fiddling with empty mugs. “Shall I prepare your rooms?” he asked.

She stood and grabbed her broadsword and cloak. “Just the one room, if you will.” She sighed and smiled at him sadly. Three years was a long time; it would be an empty journey without him. “I will be staying here a while.”