

A Different Kind of Armor

Every day in Hetherfordshire was exactly the same.

"Welcome to the Mournful Lion," Magda would say, dusting weathered hands on an apron as she collected gold coins from weary travelers. "Our special today is roasted boar and honey mead. May I ask how long you are staying?"

The travelers would mutter to themselves, pull their hoods over their hair - sometimes curly, sometimes blue, and occasionally with horns - and explain that they were merely passing through town, but in the meantime, yes, they did have a craving for some mead.

No one ever expressed interest in staying in town, but Magda did not mind. Inns were not for people who wanted to stay, and Hetherfordshire was not for people who wanted to do much at all. So every day, she would don the apron, greet the latest band of heroes, and pretend not to notice when they snuck away at dawn the next morning. Every day exactly like the one before.

Until the mage arrived.

The woman arrived alone, head held high despite her low, squat stature. Her hair, light brown with grey streaks, was not covered by a hood, nor did she glance furtively around the room. But Magda did not mention such things because it was not her place to mention such things. Instead, the innkeeper delivered her usual polite smile. "Welcome to the Mournful Lion," she greeted. "May I ask how long you are staying?"

The woman chuckled, light wrinkles creasing the corners of her eyes. "Oh, no, my dear," she said. "I'm not staying here at all. I've got my own means of providing shelter." She wiggled her fingers, and blue sparks danced among her red-polished nails.

Magda bowed her head. "Of course, mage," she said quickly, lowering her eyes to the wooden floorboards. "If you're hungry, I'd recommend the roasted boar and honey mead."

"None of that," the mage said, and an invisible force brought Magda's head up so she was eye-level with the newcomer. "You can call me Hestia. And I was actually hoping you could help me - my former traveling companion was recently indisposed by a cyclops, and I'm looking for someone new to join my company."

"Oh!" Magda cast her gaze across the dimly lit tavern. "We have plenty of heroes here. A group came by earlier with a magically enhanced sword."

"Actually," Hestia said, "I was looking for someone with a head for business. Yourself, for example."

The innkeeper blinked, frowned, and then blinked again. "Oh, I'm not an adventurer," she clarified with a polite smile. "I run the inn." Her gaze slid to the myriad of cloaked, armored, and disguised beings seated at her tables. "You'll want one of them."

"Hm." The invisible force pulled Magda's head back to the mage, who was pondering her with narrowed brown eyes. "Is this what you want? To run the inn?"

Magda's smile faltered. "Sorry?"

"The inn. Does it make you happy? Or have you ever dreamed of more?"

"Oh." The innkeeper glanced down at her dusty apron, the pouch of gold at her waist, the light stain of mead on the edge of her skirt. "I don't see that it matters. This is what I do."

Hestia leaned forward, her voice dropping to barely above a whisper. "What if I told you that you could do more? That you could ride horseback through an open field, with the wind in

your hair and a sword at your side? That you could camp in a forest with stars in your eyes and a fire in your heart? That you could travel to faraway countries where people called you swordswoman, archer, or even mage?" She tilted her head. "What would you say then?"

Magda closed her eyes, and she could almost imagine it, the weight of a sword in her hand or a bow slung across her back. Always passing through, never staying, but occasionally stopping for a warm bed and some mead. She opened her eyes. "But I can't be a mage," she whispered. "I don't have magic."

The woman chuckled. "My dear, who ever told you that magic was something you had to be born with?" Hestia wiggled her fingers again, and a blue spark rested lightly upon Magda's forearm. "Magic, like everything else, is something you make for yourself. If you're willing to try." She smiled. "What do you say, innkeeper?"

Magda smiled. "Actually," she said, "you can call me adventurer."