

# INNKEEPERS & IMBECILES

STORY ONE

## A PARTY WALKS INTO A TAVERN



A.K. CAGGIANO

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A.K. Caggiano

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*For anyone who's rolled a Nat 1*  
*Nat 20s are coming*

# A Party Walks Into A Tavern

## Innkeepers & Imbeciles, Story One



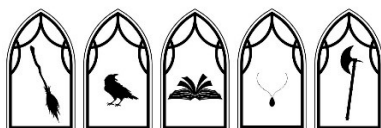
**A**t the crossroads of the King's Way and Hastrid's Pass, where the Whispering Woods thins and the Mortvale River bends stands a half-timbered, triple storied, cruck-framed structure. No other establishments are located within at least a mile in any direction, and that's exactly the way the building likes it—less competition and lower standards make for better-behaved guests. Its floorboards creak and its pipes groan, but its lantern is always lit.

The proprietor of this establishment is widely known as a witch of great renown, which is probably the only way one can be widely known. She's regionally known as Belladonna Fitzwright and more lovingly known as simply Bell. For the last thirty years, Belladonna has served as the cantankerous building's sole caretaker with the help of many well-crafted

spells. It's said the very walls breathe under her witchy will alone.

That is, they did until the morning came when Belladonna received an urgent letter, packed up the necessities, and left. Very few witches are irresponsible, though, and Belladonna was no exception. She wrote her own letter, sealed and sent on a spell to find its oblivious recipient, and made sure to give the building's sign a magical thump on her way out so that it would change to read:

*Fitzwright Inn*  
*Under New Management*



Fiorella slammed the door to the basement and fell against it, chest heaving, heart pounding, brain failing. She'd run out of shrieks as she ascended the stairs, so she bit down on her lip and listened. It felt for a moment as though the walls and floors and doorways were listening back, but that couldn't be the case: the Fitzwright Inn hadn't listened

to a gods damned thing Fiorella said since she arrived.

No, it was simply quiet, and quiet was...good? She took a leveling breath and then glanced quickly downward. Both slippered feet were underneath her and all her fingers gripped her broom. Now *that* was definitely good because if she properly recalled the jaws and claws and other pointy bits that had been snarling from the shadows, she was lucky to still have her arms and legs at all.

Fiorella had never seen a direrat before, but she'd heard stories all her life, and the things in the basement could be nothing else. Those stories often included low-level collusion, though, so maybe the quiet was actually ominous. Were the direrats convening about their next attack? Assessing the weaknesses they'd seen? Devising a recipe for when they finally got her? With heads the size of bread loaves, their brains were surely big too, so she shoved her broom through the basement door's handle, gave it a good tug for posterity, and scurried down the hall. She wanted access to the downstairs much less than she wanted to be turned into Fiorella Fitzwright Fondue, and she didn't really need the broom anyway: there was no one to sweep up after but herself.

Though the guestlessness was probably a blessing because the Fitzwright Inn was a *mess*. Fiorella had arrived a week prior to an empty building, and things had seemed fine at first, but the moment she'd attempted to open a window and clear out the must, the place went feral.

Nineteen grueling hours, seven increasingly pedantic spell books, three disastrously spilled potions, and one collapsed timber later, the window was finally open, and her aunt's letter made a whole lot more sense: the inn would only respond to magic, and supposedly Fiorella Fitzwright had that magic in her blood. Too bad she didn't have any of it in her brain.

She scurried herself back out to the tavern that made up the inn's ground floor. Golden light from the sun's last rays glowed in the high windows, the warm, herby smell of meals past clung to the beams, and familiarity tickled Fiorella's memories. She had been here just once before and sat in front of the big hearth nestled under the two sweeping staircases, the heat unlike any other fire she'd felt since. But that was long ago, back when she carried around a comforting stuffed animal and was small enough to be carried to bed herself without remembering it happening, and it was



before...before...the *spider*?

Fiorella squawked and swiped at the eight legs dangling from the rafters. Its silk broke and she dove behind the bar. A full minute later, she peeked out, spied nothing because, of course, it was only a tiny thing in a rather large tavern that she should never have been afraid of in the first place, and she dropped her head on the bartop and groaned.

The inn groaned back in mockery and warning both.

“I know, I shouldn’t be so jumpy, but I did almost get eaten downstairs.”

Wind whistled through the chimney flue, and as far as whistles went, this one could only be called farcical.

“Please,” she mumbled up against the wood grain with a mournful sting in the back of her throat, “for once can you just be helpful?”

There was a creak then, but it wasn’t one of the inn’s sarcastic sounds—this was purely functional.

Fiorella lifted her head with courage anew. There was something about the mockery of a building that tended to be inspiring in such a way, especially after suffering under it alone for so long.

The double doors at the inn’s front had opened, and

Fiorella sucked in a shocked breath. No one had come to stay since her arrival, as if somehow travelers knew she wasn't ready, but she wanted desperately to just get on with the being open thing. The inn was more than a handful, but if she had guests, Fiorella thought that would somehow even out all the other problems, or at least allow her to ignore some of them in trade for new ones. Cranky people were surely easier to deal with than creaky floorboards.

In the blinding evening light, the open doors let in, a silhouette appeared. One with four heads, a whole mess of arms, and a shambling gait. A silhouette some might call monstrous. But not Fiorella! Though her instinct was to run, she steeled herself instead—there were all sorts in the Whispering Woods, and she would absolutely take whatever guest she could get.

“Welcome to the Fitzwright Inn,” she chirped for the first time in her entire life, and the words felt like a spell, an ethereal comfort passed from her lips to her first ever guest's many, *many* ears.

“Uhhhhnnn,” the shambling mound groaned back.

“Oh dear,” wobbled quietly in her throat, but as the frightful figure stepped under the candlelight of the inn,

things started to make a whole lot more sense.

Three men worked as a team to prop up a fourth much larger one—at least, they were mostly men, though one had the pointed ears of an elf, and the largest one had the green skin and tusks of an orc. Of course, even without pointy ears or colorful skin, a person could be lots of unseen things, but morphology didn't matter because these beings were, above all else, *guests*.

Fiorella sprinted across the tavern and pulled out the nearest chair, and the three unloaded the massive orc. The seat objected, but Fiorella held its back steady, feeling for the magic that Belladonna left behind. In her week at the Fitzwright, she'd tried to acquaint herself with the bevy of spells holding up beams and tending fires. A panicked scramble of words in her head and ether under her hands eventually found the chair's joints and fortified them just in time.

With a relieved exhale, she poked her head out from behind the green giant and beamed at the other three road-weary men. "Hi!"

There were a lot of noises then, and they all happened at once. The orc yelped as if just discovering her under his arm,

the elf cheerfully returned her greeting, the shorter of the two humans scoffed as the black bird on his shoulder squawked, and the scruffy-jawed man gave her a bow which turned into a crick in his back, and he cried out.

“Oh, you guys are kind of a mess, huh?” She took in the fading bruises and torn clothing and tried not to take in the smell, but then she saw the bolt sticking out of the orc’s thigh. “Oh goodness, you’re bleeding!”

Fiorella ran to the basin behind the bar, collected clean rags and her stiffest spirit to clean the wound, and returned in a heartbeat. The crow that had come in with the men cried out as if in warning, and the bottle was unceremoniously tugged out of her hand.

“What do you think you’re doing, Drex?” the bearded man hissed.

The shorter man pulled out the cork with his teeth then tossed his messy black hair out of his face. “You said Korthak would be fine once we found a place, and it’s been a gods damned long couple of days.” Drex took a swig.

“Madam, please allow me,” said the first man, and it wasn’t until he took the rags from her hands that Fiorella realized he was speaking to her.

No one had ever called Fiorella *madam* before, and never with a voice like *that*.

Her lips lifted of their own accord, but then she squinted down at herself, unsure. Her skirt and bodice were still neat, though the apron was a little smudged, but that was what it was for. The long fall of her wheat-colored hair had bits of detritus stuck in the strands, though, and as that wasn't what hair was for, she plucked them out. Maybe that made her look a little more the part, but then again, the last person she'd heard called *madam* was Damaris back in Crossglen who ran the...well, people called it a *massage parlor*, but she wasn't so sure...

Fiorella shook her head. There were more pressing things going on than how a guest—and he was *a guest*, regardless of the voice he used—referred to her. There was another guest, in fact, and he was injured, bleeding, trembling.

Trembling?

An orc had come through Crossglen once with a ragtag group of heavily armored and magical strangers, and Fiorella would have bet her life savings—seven copper, two silver, a gold piece with a bent edge, and a shiny stone she was sure

was a precious gem in disguise—that he had never trembled once in his life. But then her father had a lot of nasty things to say about orcs in general, and she figured even good assumptions about an entire kind of being might actually end up being bad, so maybe unshakable bravery wasn’t an attribute of every single orc in the realm. Frankly, she supposed she would be trembling too if she had a bolt sticking out of her thigh. In fact, she’d probably just be dead.

Fiorella might have extrapolated more out of those musings if a flash of yellow light didn’t obliterate every thought she’d been having. When her eyes adjusted, the light was only a gentle pulse under the hand of the man who had called her madam.

Now *that* was magic.

He wiggled the arrow, and it slid out of the orc with a sickening noise and a gush of blood all over the floor—Fiorella didn’t point out the mess despite the impulse—and the wound closed itself up as if a bolt hadn’t pierced him at all.

“Oh, wow,” Fiorella breathed, recognizing then the blue lily on the healer’s surcoat. The man—no, the *paladin* of the goddess Nuala stood, and she opened her mouth to heap

praise on him until she saw how his dark eyes narrowed. Hadn't those eyes been blue a moment ago?

The bolt splintered in his hand, and Fiorella's stomach flipped. A base instinct told her to run from the darkness creeping into the stranger's features, but a learned trait insisted she stay rooted to the spot and smile like an idiot. Dread sloshed beneath the urge to mollify until the other human man called Drex swung the bottle of spirits and connected with the holy man's head.

A table was flipped as the two attacked each other, and Fiorella finally shrieked as a scuffle ensued right there on her tavern floor. There was muffled swearing, fists hitting flesh, and a slender-fingered hand shoved right in Fiorella's face.

"Hello, miss," the elf said as he took a step over the two trading blows. "I am Sylvir Ia'olas of the Malagate Thicket Starweavers."

She slid her hand into his but only because she thought shaking might make the fracas feel normal. It did not. "What on earth is happening?"

"Hmm?" The elf called Sylvir raised golden brows nestled into skin the same color as the dark walnut beams

overhead, emerald gaze flicking down to the two like he was just noticing them. “Oh, they do that.”

Fiorella yelped as a rogue boot went flying. “Shouldn’t we stop them?”

But then a cry of surrender split the tavern, and both men fell away from one another.

“It’s fine,” coughed the paladin from the floor. “No need to be alarmed, madam.”

Fiorella looked to each of them in turn, the grinning elf with a gentle hand wrapped around her own, the wary orc picking at the place the bolt had been, and the two men who would be sporting black eyes in the morning sprawled out on the floor taking heaving breaths. She supposed it was normal for men to brawl in taverns—back in Crossglen her father was part of a brawl at least once a week, but he was usually drunk first.

The crow swooped down from the rafters to land on Drex’s chest and caw in his face. The lithe, dark-haired man grumbled but got to his feet, offering the paladin a helping hand as if he had not been the one to put him on the ground in the first place. He surveyed the other’s face then flashed half a grin at Fiorella. “Think we could get a bite to eat,



sweetheart?”

It was probably pointless to say since they already had, but she sputtered, “Please make yourselves comfortable,” and scurried to the kitchen to put on the stew. They were, after all, *guests*.

The table had been righted when Fiorella returned, and all four were sitting around it deep in whispered conversation. It was perhaps impolite not to announce herself, but the inn saw to correcting that, an otherwise perfectly silent floorboard creaking under her next step. They clamped their mouths shut then, and four pairs of eyes met her.

She would have hesitated under their collective gaze if she wasn’t painfully aware that the creak was the inn’s first rebellion since the travelers stepped foot inside, and a quarter of an hour of good behavior was its best record yet.

“Four leek and potato stews, and an extra piece of rye for our feathered friend,” she called and swept across the dining room, massive tray in hand.

The crow cawed, feathers on the back of his neck puffing up as he hopped from one foot to the other.

Drex snorted at the bird on his shoulder. “Yeah, you’re

real charming.”

Fiorella agreed wholeheartedly. “I have plenty of rooms available,” she said as she placed the bowls before each of them. “And there are private baths upstairs as well as—”

“We don’t have any coin,” blurted the elf, wide apologetic grin plastered on his angular face.

“Fucking hells, Syl.” Drex lobbed a chunk of potato at him. “That wasn’t the plan.”

Fiorella shook her head and continued to smile because that was something she was unequivocally good at. “The Fitzwright Inn doesn’t turn away weary travelers.” That was what her aunt wrote in the letter she’d sent summoning Fiorella anyway, and she managed to stay in business even through that plague when royal orders had deemed nonessential questing illegal, so a coinless party was probably a much easier obstacle to overcome.

“We must apologize, madam.” The paladin sat himself pin straight and locked his gaze onto hers. That made Fiorella’s stomach go a little wobbly and not just because she wasn’t very good at maintaining eye contact. Even with the bruises and the dirt, he was rather nice to look at, and his eyes were a striking shade of blue again—well, they had

probably always been, light was just tricky and bewilderment did all sorts of things to one's perception. "We should have made our circumstances clear when we entered your fine establishment and imposed on your precious time."

The faucet chose just that moment to leak into the basin, a tiny sound that echoed loudly and hollowly in the otherwise empty tavern.

The paladin's russet brows knit over those dreamy blue eyes. "We will, of course, find a way to repay your kindness and hospitality."

There was a tickle of magic at the back of Fiorella's head, and she knew then it was true—he *would* make things right, she was sure because she had met paladins before, and they always tried very hard to right wrongs even if there was very little that could be done. And also...gods, that face of his was just *so nice*. But then the magic tugged at her ponytail and knocked away the passive thought for a slightly more profitable one.

"Actually," she said, sucking in an excitable breath. "There *are* ways to pay other than coin."

The elf froze mid bite, spoon hovering just before his lips, and so did the orc, bowl tipped up against his mouth.

Drex cocked a single black brow, and the holy man cleared his throat.

“What, uh...what did you have in mind, madam?”

The idea swirled through her head like the lines of a difficult-to-recall spell. It was a good idea, maybe even a great one, but it couldn't just be blurted out: it needed *finessing*. “So I've been getting by here on my own for a little while now, but there are some things I just can't do all by myself, and it seems rather fortuitous that four strapping, capable, *handsome* warriors just strolled through my front door.” She grinned extra wide at that, hoping the flattery would be endearing.

Drex elbowed the paladin. “So fortuitous it might be ordained by the gods, eh?”

“Nuala does ask her disciples to answer the calls of those in need,” he murmured. “Does this task require just *one* of us?”

The elf pointed at the others immediately, and the orc gave Fiorella a look she would have called terrified if she thought someone so big could be fearful of someone like her.

“Oh, this should be fun.” Drex leaned back with a wry smile, arms crossed over his chest. “So, which of us do you

like best?”

“The thing is,” Fiorella went on as shame crept into her words. “I think I might need all four of you.”

Drex snorted. “At the same time?”

“I don’t know how else you’d do it.” She swallowed and bit her lip. “My entire basement needs to be cleaned out.”

The holy man hadn’t yet touched his stew, but he choked anyway.

“It’s really quite embarrassing.” She lifted the serving tray to hide the reddening of her cheeks and peeked over the rim. “But it’s just full of *direrats* down there.”

“You have *direrats* in your *basement*?” The elf pursed his lips. “I’m not sure I’ve ever heard that one before, have I?”

Drex deflated. “I don’t think this is a euphemism anymore.”

Fiorella’s brow pinched, unsure what he meant, but she had to go on before she lost her nerve. “So the truth is that I’ve only been at the Fitzwright Inn for a week, and before that it sat empty for an entire moon because Aunt Belladonna was called to go on a quest—don’t ask me for what, she was purposefully unspecific—but she had to leave the Fitzwright

to another Fitzwright so that the magic in the inn would listen, and apparently I'm the only other Fitzwright who fits, which seems not at all right to me, but who am I to argue with ether?"

The inn creaked like a strong gust was blowing over its roof, but the trees outside didn't sway.

"Exactly," she sighed. "I came all the way from Crossglen, but I never left home on my own before, and I had to sneak out in the middle of the night, so I got a little lost at first, and then I got a *lot* lost at second, but then I met this nice old man from Crossport who was selling vitality potions out of a colorful wagon—oh, you should of seen it, it was purple and red with these beautiful yellow awnings—and I asked him, 'Oh, is Crossport named after an old set of intersecting roads like Crossglen is?' And he said, 'No, I think it's called Crossport because everyone there is cranky all the time,' and we laughed and laughed, and he was so kind to take me all the way to the widest part of the Mortvale River. Did you know a river can be so wide that a whole boat carrying an entire crew *and* passengers can travel down it and pass *another* boat going the other way? I didn't until I got on one, but it turns out I'm probably meant to stay on dry

land despite that most of my dreams are about flying because my stomach did *not* enjoy one second of it, and I ended up at the wrong port because it also turns out throwing up for three days straight makes it really hard to understand a captain who already has a thick Brincarian accent. But then these really nice nuns let me join their caravan—oh, you might know them! Sister Hestia and Sister Felicity?”

The paladin gave a single shake of his head.

“Oh, well, makes sense—they weren’t Nuala’s disciples. In fact, I don’t think they said who their god was, but they wore these flowy veils and pretty white necklaces and were so kind and helpful, and they finally got me to Hastrid’s Pass only about a mile from here, so I just hoofed it the rest of the way, but by the time I arrived, the direrats had beaten me to it, not that I could get the basement door open at first on account of the magic not listening to me since I’m not very good at it, but to be fair, I wasn’t allowed to practice at home because my father doesn’t like—”

Fiorella felt as though she ran out of breath then. She hadn’t—she was capable of going on much longer rambles since she was so practiced in speaking solely to herself—but the magic of the inn decided to stop her. Importantly, it

didn't intervene because it cared about revealing too much backstory right away, but rather because it was sick of listening.

Magic didn't, however, take into account the fact that not a single one of her guests would know what the fuck to say in the lull she left.

So Fiorella continued. "Anyway, I finally got the door unlocked after a few tips from Millie, the delivery woman. Millie's just wonderful—she's so strong and tall, and she says she doesn't have magic, but she told me where to look for the right spells and suggested substituting mirksage for marshwort because of the season, and it actually worked! But turns out I wasn't supposed to get through that door because, you know, *direrats*. I'm pretty sure I only made it out by yelling words that sounded like Thryndalian curses, and now they're down there and I'm up here, which is better than the alternative I guess, but I can't get rid of them on my own which is why I need, well, *all* of you."

The four stared at her unblinking, and her heart raced, breath finally running out. Gods, she hadn't sold that well at all, had she? She had the unfortunate opportunity in the silence left after to really look at them then and feel even



more pathetic about what she requested.

The orc they had called Korthak was the largest being on two legs she'd ever seen, broad and muscled green chest bare save for a leather pauldron on one shoulder. No one likely ever said a word to him about dressing, though, with that gigantic battle axe strapped to his back and those tusks that gave him a permanent grimace. The elf was in stark contrast, completely covered with a bright teal vest over his lantern-sleeved shirt and a short cape over that, finely detailed with golden trim. He was so well put together, his long fall of golden hair brushed back and straight, and delicate jewels dangling off his pointed ears. Beside him sat the thinner man who had been called Drex, every stitch of his clothes black as midnight from the leather dagger holders lining his chest to the fingerless gloves he'd yet to remove. His skin was exceptionally pale in comparison, but his thin cloak and hood would see to covering that, and he could be naught but a shadow then. Finally, just to her left sat the paladin, neat like the elf, but his modest white surcoat and deep blue undershirt had both been patched at one time. His baldric was also plain, but the leather had the oily shine of someone who cared for it, and the sword was...well, she didn't make

a habit of gaping at men's swords, but gods this one was *huge*.

Perhaps it should have been reassuring, the impressive weapons strapped to their sides and backs, the armor meant for true battle, the muscles and scars that said they had conquered multiple hells, but it only made Fiorella's insides go watery. Would they even deign to lower themselves to slay a few pathetic direrats?

"They were really big." Her voice wobbled as she gripped the edge of the table and leaned in. "Their front teeth were extra pointy, and, um...I'm pretty sure one of them was carrying a mace in its tail, and—"

"Do not fret, madam." A hand laid itself atop hers, and warmth spread out from under the holy man's palm. "We will rid you of this trouble."

"We will?" asked the orc through a mouthful of stew.

"We will. On my honor, by the light of Nuala, Valen Trueheart is at your service."

Tears sprang to Fiorella's eyes as hope bloomed in her chest—and not just the hope that someday the hearth would be cooperative or that the rest of the windowsills might unstick, but honest-to-the-gods faith. How many nights

would she have spent agonizing over what would become of the inn and her familial name? *Exactly none now*, answered the ether that swirled somewhere inaccessibly in her veins.

“Great!” She slapped the serving tray on the table and began collecting their bowls. “I’ll show you the way. It’s just down the hall—don’t mind the empty ale barrels, I haven’t figured out how to fit them out the door yet, but do avoid the floorboard six paces in: it trips you on purpose. And then—”

“Ah, actually madam, would it be too much of a bother to allow us this meal and a single night’s rest first?”

Fiorella froze, half-eaten stew sloshing in her grip. “Oh, of course! I’ve been looking forward to the hosting part of being a hostess anyway. I’ll make sure my four best rooms are in perfect order.”

“We only require two doubles,” said Valen, and when Drex grunted, the paladin glared at him. “We *do not* wish to impose.”

“Direrats are weakest at dawn.” Sylvir the elf was flipping through a book that he’d produced from inside his coat, bright eyes darting over the page as his finger traced the lines.

“A few hours after dawn, actually,” Drex corrected.

“But it says here—”

“In fact, noon is probably best.” Drex flipped the book shut on the elf’s hand, and the crow promptly chomped on his ear with vengeance.

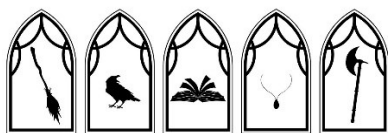
“Oh, yes, of course, up with the, uh, lunchtime bell? Not that I have one of those, but I’ll get one!” Fiorella couldn’t hide her big beaming smile, eyes flicking to Valen—oh, good gods the perfect name to match his perfect eyes and perfect teeth and—well, she couldn’t mind about any of his parts, perfect or otherwise, because she had linens to refresh.

There were two rooms with two beds each at the end of the upstairs east wing, and Fiorella got them as close to perfect as possible. She only fretted a little over the orc fitting until she gathered a load of extra pillows to pad things out, but then the other beds looked sad in comparison, so she scattered a few frilly ones on those too. After lighting the wall sconces, placing pots of cedar shavings on the nightstands, and a warm honey cake on each headboard, she made up a spell on the spot for restful sleep and pleasant dreams to cast on the rooms.

Nothing happened, but Fiorella was satisfied well

enough when the windows didn't shatter.

It took only a little fussing, but eventually the party of four was settled, and their hostess scurried off to tend to other evening duties. The Fitzwright Inn finally fell quiet for the night, Fiorella nestling into her own room for the first time with a sense of accomplishment, and all of her guests lodged too far away from the basement door to hear any scratching.



Despite the exhaustion from the road and the achy eye from Drex's fist, Valen Trueheart could only stare at the ceiling and do his own fretting. He plucked an excess pillow out from under his back, but the removal of the awkward lump didn't relieve his tension. Cloying candle smoke and potpourri were thick in the air, and something sticky had gotten into his hair, but none of those things were really what kept him in a state of anxious wakefulness. The real problem was the lying.

Paladins didn't lie. They weren't supposed to anyway. But they weren't supposed to be susceptible to dark magic either...

Yet Valen had lied, even if that lie was only the omission of a truth that hadn't been asked after, and the weight of it sat heavily on his chest. The hefty lie wasn't alone, though, a second weight just atop it if not attached by his conscience but by a chain. Tomorrow would be unpleasant at best and abominable at worst. Perhaps another failure or an accidental success but no closer to a resolution.

Through a small window, he could make out tree branches swaying in the moonlight. The Whispering Woods lay just beyond this inn's back door, the only structure so close to the infamous forest and seemingly sound...save for the basement direrats and the walls' antagonistic communication and the curious innkeeper.

Oh, the *innkeeper*.

Valen met all sorts on the road, but rarely did they speak of the realm the way she did. Of course, rarely did anyone use as many words as she did either, so maybe they just never got the chance, but it wasn't only the cheerful way she described a wagon or a boat, but the genuine, fiery wonder

that filled up her features like there really was some good left in the world after all.

And the look of her didn't hurt either, eyes the color of warm honey, loads of flaxen hair that trailed down her back and swayed with each of her quick movements, rosy pink lips that framed an earnest, inviting smile...

*I like her too.*

"Don't start," he hissed under his breath and shut his eyes, willing himself to sleep.

The innkeeper did not have a bell to rouse her guests, but she did have a copper pan and wooden spoon, which was unfortunate for a plethora of reasons but especially because Valen had a splitting headache.

Paladins were used to aching heads as they were a frequent result of battle. They were used to silvery scars and sloppy joints and twingy backs too, but those were more than a fair trade off for their lack of lopped off limbs and general impalement, a blessing from their gods. He could heal the wounds of others with minimal effort, and his own wounds closed up on their own, but the pain remained. Valen assumed the unseen misery was left behind because gods suffered none of it, so they only deigned to protect against

what they could see, and a whole lot of blood was rather unambiguous even to divine eyes.

But this afternoon's headache was special because it came with a voice.

*That's her*, it said sinisterly at the sound ringing through the halls, and because Valen had an ominous feeling about what would come next, he resolved to ignore it. Sinister and ominous had taken up far too much of Valen's vocabulary as of late, but there was no appropriate alternative, which was unfortunate because the voice liked those words.

Valen preferred to commiserate with Korthak over the innkeeper's interpretation of a morning greeting, so he swung his legs over the bed's edge with more effort than someone his age probably should have needed. Instead of the floor, though, his feet found an orc.

Both jolted, and then Korthak began apologizing.

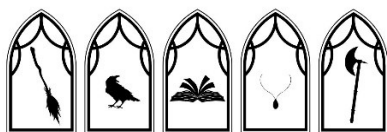
"No, no, friend, it's all right." More carefully, Valen leaned down and offered a hand.

"It's just..." Korthak looked about the small chamber from his spot on the floor where he had slept as close as possible without being a nuisance. "It's just a new place."

"I know." The human hauled the orc to his feet, or rather



leaned slightly back as the giant of a man made himself upright. And yup, there was one of those unseen and unblessed twinges, though the second twinge, the one in his chest when he looked at his friend's face, was unrelated to injury. "You needn't explain to me. If we all have to keep apologizing, we'll never speak of anything else." And as true as he knew that was, Valen heaved a sigh because he had a feeling—sinister and ominous both—he would be explaining and apologizing very soon regardless.



Fiorella gripped the broom and peered wide-eyed over her shoulder. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, madam, we are."

Fiorella was not the most discerning woman. That is, she observed just fine, but she didn't always extrapolate. She could observe, for instance, Sylvir the elf's firm grip on his magical tome and the wild look to Korthak the orc's black eyes, but she believed wholeheartedly that they were echoes

of the paladin's stalwart words.

Yet she did have a teeny, tiny inkling that something was wrong. It wasn't the normal everyday wrongness that she'd been carrying around since before she even knew she could carry around things that didn't fit into buckets. Nor was it the kind of wrongness one detected from the nervous fiddling a man might do with his dagger. This was a magical wrongness.

But Fiorella yanked the makeshift barricade from the basement door's handle anyway because she really did need the cellar cleared of direrats, and also because she missed her broom.

Darkness gaped up at the lot like the cavernous maw of a dragon. Well, a fangless dragon with stairs for a throat and very little chance of fire at its end, so not really like a dragon at all, but to Fiorella the fear was all the same on account of nearly being eaten the last time she ventured cellar-ward. Direrats did not immediately storm the hall with their gnashing teeth and claws, though, and somehow that made things a little worse.

"Well?" She gestured weakly toward what she hoped would not be doom.

“Close the door behind us,” said the paladin, and he strode into the dark.

The others followed, and Fiorella wouldn’t have noticed that the orc was being pushed along by Drex if the black-haired man hadn’t turned to her just before descending and snapped, “Don’t you dare lock this fucking door.”

Fiorella watched the torch carried by Sylvir bob with each descending step, then eased the basement door shut behind them. She hugged her broom to her chest and decided to say a prayer. There were fifty-two gods to choose from, all of which she knew by heart including their domains, but the goddess of spring, Lyensia, popped into her mind first. She was powerful, holding court over a quarter of the pantheon, but nothing about her particular dominion applied: no one was being born, it was well past dawn, and spring was two seasons off. But Fiorella had just sent her brave heroes down into the earth, which was Lyensia’s favored element, so she figured some unraveled thread in her mind had made an unexpected knot and set to praying.

“Blessed morn, Mother of the Breaking Sky—er, I mean, it’s afternoon, but let’s just pretend. Hear my plea and deliver these men—well, they’re not all strictly men, I guess,

and I didn't even ask if that's what they consider themselves, but I think you know I mean the warriors I sent into the basement. Um, deliver them from the earth whence they've gone on the safety of your wings, which I'm not certain you have, but I do like to think of you that way if it's all right." She grinned to herself at the vision of leathery appendages stretched across the stars with the sun trailing after. "Oh, and if it's not too much to ask, please help me figure out the magic for the fireplace before it gets too cold. Let it be so."

Fiorella remained still, eyes closed, broom gripped tight, and waited for a sign.

A scream echoed from beneath her.

"Actually, the fireplace thing isn't that important—I'm sure I can come up with something on my own."

Another horrified shout found her ears, and Fiorella began apologizing to Lyensia immediately. The basement ruckus only grew, as did the woman's voice, adding increasingly substantial adverbs to her sorries as she paced slowly away from the door. She flinched at the next crash and listed off how she might make it up to Lyensia and all her minor deities. She thought of begging for the party's lives, but didn't want to give the goddess any ideas, then

realized her thoughts probably weren't as private as she hoped and tried to shut off her brain completely.

The door to the basement crashed open, and the orc came barreling down the hall. Fiorella plastered herself to the wall, narrowly missing a battle axe to the face and the door itself as it flew off the hinges, then blinked mindlessly into the gust he left behind. That mindlessness continued as she stepped back in front of the opening to stare into the inn's depths and at the snarling, gnashing beast that launched itself up at her.

Fiorella screamed, and then there was blood. So much blood. Hot and thick and everywhere. But there wasn't pain. Surely there was also supposed to be pain when a direrat sank its teeth into one's...wait, where exactly had Fiorella been bitten?

She eased open her eyes, a droplet suspended from her lashes, but enough sight was unobscured to see the two furry halves of the thing that had been a direrat twitching at her feet, the leavings of its rending splattered all over her front.

There was a paladin too, bloodied sword in hand and breathing hard, face twisted into terror. "Oh, madam, I very much hope I didn't get you."

Fiorella snorted, and a stringy something that had once

belonged to the dead creature flicked off the end of her nose. “I think if you *got me*, I’d look a lot more like that.” She let her gaze dart down once to the thing that had been got and then back up at the getter.

“Apologies for saying, but...” He didn’t say, but he did gesture to the blood and direrat detritus all over her front to suggest maybe she did look a little gotten.

“At least I still have on my apron.”

The footsteps that came from the basement stairs then weren’t of the frantic or rodent variety but were of two upright trudgers. Drex was scowling, Sylvir was smiling, and they both were spattered in direrat innards.

“Well, Syl burnt the nest to a—” Drex sucked in a pained breath when he reached the top of the stairs. “Did you get her?”

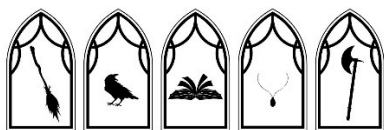
Fiorella wasn’t sure if she should be offended by the repeated question or by its nonchalance, but when she lifted a hand to her face, it trembled so much she forgot all about offense. Apparently, it took much less than a bolt to her thigh to get her whole body to shake uncontrollably.

Valen made a quiet grunting noise of dissatisfaction. “She’s not injured, but that doesn’t mean damage wasn’t

done. Can you two do something about the door?"

Sylvir immediately began flicking through his book as Drex ran a hand over where the hinges had been. "Korthak's work?" the dark-haired man asked.

"Unfortunately." Valen sheathed his sword and gestured down the hall. "If you would allow me to assist, madam, let's find a place to clean you up."



Drex picked up a hinge and weighed its heft in hand. It was one of the bulkier ones Korthak had conquered, old and well-made, though the orc probably wouldn't revel in his triumph this time. He sighed—there was very little triumph-reveling lately. Spirits were meant to be consumed in celebration not in sorrow, and yet...

A familiar weight landed on his shoulder, a flicker of black feathers filling up his periphery. "Returned just in time to be lauded, eh?" he muttered to the bird.

The crow bobbed his head up and down.

“At least you didn’t make it worse. Though you could have made it better by getting eaten.”

There was a peck at the side of his head.

Drex swore and slapped at the bird, but his hand shifted right through its feathers as if the crow was an illusion. If only he was always so incorporeal.

“I don’t know how we’re going to reattach this.” Drex turned back to the broken basement entry. “Not without a whole new—what the *fuck*?”

Sylvir was sitting on the ground, legs crossed, book open in his lap. His long fingers danced through the air drawing unseen shapes, wisps of light trailing after. Bits of wood floated before him, tiny slivers and chunks as big as his hand, each shifting about and slowly fitting back together. It was magic—damn good magic—but it hardly compared to the serenity on his face.

The elf’s skin wasn’t pulled taut in deep concentration, his eyes weren’t glassy with frustration, and sweat wasn’t beading on his forehead. In fact, his thin lips were drawn into a subtle smile, and he was humming. The fucker was actually *humming*. And that song...

Green eyes shifted to Drex, and his heart pounded a little



harder. Was that a flicker of recognition?

“Oh, there it is,” the elf said in an unstrained but also unaffected way, and the hinge slipped out of Drex’s grasp of its own accord to join the amalgam of floating wooden pieces. Without tools, the metal locked itself into place, and Sylvir laid his hands flat to receive what he had made with ether alone.

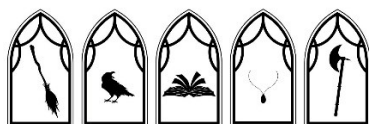
“How...” Drex heard his own voice like it was far away, felt his mouth fall open, and even the crow’s head twitched ponderously.

“Spell,” said Sylvir simply, wiggling the reformed hunk of the door. He flipped to the next page in his book, then back, and finally frowned. “I don’t know what comes next though.”

Drex brushed black strands out of his face to survey what was left scattered in the hall but didn’t really see the pieces. Sylvir’s last spell had been cast by a messy wave and garbled words and had blown up a stack of crates in the basement. The spell had also taken out the direrat nest, which was helpful and probably Syl’s intention, but it was luck that had kept them all alive in that closed-in space with conjured fire. Luck they had never needed before.

But this suddenly composed Sylvir, this was an elven mage who didn't need luck.

Drex picked up another piece of splintered wood. "Think you can do that one again?"



Fiorella sat on a stool at the bar. She'd yet to sit on one—here at the Fitzwright Inn or in any tavern for that matter—and though it had never occurred to her to do so, she could see the usefulness in it then, observing through the eyes of a guest. There was a table that should be moved a few inches to the right, a window that needed a curtain to block the sun at exactly this time of day, and the taxidermied wolpertinger over the door could use a good fluffing. Also, all of that helped to distract from the direrat blood covering her arms and chest and face.

"Again, madam, I am so terribly sorry." The paladin moved in front of her, blocking the bothersome ray and much more handsome than a curtain, even with the leavings

of the minor war he'd won in the basement worn on his features. He placed a tankard on the bar and a bowl filled with wet linens beside it. He wrung one out, but before she could take it with her shaking hand, he brought the linen directly to her face.

Gentle warmth pressed to Fiorella's cheek, wiping so very carefully from just beside her nose all the way to her ear.

*Oh. Soft. Nice. Wow.*

Then Fiorella gasped and pulled back because she knew so very little of kind gestures and intimate moments that they were even scarier than being attacked by a homicidal rodent.

"Sorry," he said again, but this time his voice fell to a whisper and his gaze to the floor.

"Oh, it's all right!" She stuck her still-trembling hand into the bowl, sloshing the water but managing to grab another linen with only a small amount of spillage. "Being covered in direrat insides is better than being inside one of them." She squished the linen up against her face to cover it completely with just enough pressure to make it leak into her lap. At least she hadn't abandoned her apron yet, and it could catch a multitude of sins.

He snorted, a pleasant, humored sound. “That is a cheerful way to look at things.”

“Thanks!” She rubbed at her eyes and blinked them open, lashes no longer encumbered. “It’s sort of necessary what with”—she gestured at the emptiness around them and sullied water flicked off the rag—“everything. And also, I really am grateful for your help. I couldn’t have ever taken on those direrats, especially not the one coming right at me, so a little blood is a very small price to pay to still have all my fingers, and really I’ve never seen someone cut through anything with a sword like that—not that I’m totally sure I saw you do it either because I closed my eyes when I thought I was going to die, but I can imagine how heroic and brave it was when I saw you standing there, all sweaty and breathing hard and...”

Rarely did Fiorella slow her speech or lose her runaway carriage of thought, but she became exceptionally aware of what she was saying just then and how it was turning her face redder than when it had been spattered with blood.

“Speaking of your basement,” he said, saving her once again. “It is not...as it was.”

“That’s good! I don’t want to run an inn for rabid

monsters unless they can keep their rabidness under control and can communicate without biting me or any other guests. Regular monsters are okay, is what I'm trying to say, and really *monster* is such a loaded term, I probably shouldn't have even said it at all." She moved to dip her linen into the tankard, but it was quickly pulled away.

"This one was meant for you to drink." The paladin hesitated then offered her the cup.

Fiorella hesitated too but not because she was afraid she might contaminate its contents. It was just that...he was handing her a drink, one he had poured specifically for her, and that felt...odd. But eventually she did curl her fingers around the tankard's handle and bring it to her lips for a fruity sip.

"Thank you," she whispered into the ale's froth.

"Perhaps don't. What I meant to say about your basement is that we may have blown it up. A little."

"Oh." Fiorella placed the tankard back on the bar and rubbed absently at her arm with the wet cloth, gaze trailing over the shelves of intact goblets and bottles. "I'm sure it's fine."

"It's not." Valen huffed as he ran a hand through the

short length of his russet hair and then down to his beard where he plucked out a piece of something pink and gooey. “We shouldn’t have cursed this place with our presence.”

“You think *you* cursed this place?” Fiorella laughed and scrubbed harder at her arm. “*I* have to *beg* the windows to open every morning, my pies keep coming out of the oven with spooky sigils burnt into them, I can’t get the mirror in my bathing chamber to stop insulting me, I swept a storm cloud into existence in one of the bed chambers—don’t ask how, it’s a spell probably, but it’s still there—and I haven’t had a single guest until you.”

The paladin gave her a sympathetic look then, even more intense than his usual bent brow and sincere eyes.

She thought she should be embarrassed, but that familiar feeling didn’t come. Instead, she let her shoulders sag and took a moment to truly feel sorry for herself. “My aunt said I had to come here because the Fitzwright Inn needs my magic to function, but I’m not one hundredth the witch she is—I’m barely a witch at all. She did it all on her own, but I’m so unskilled, I would need a whole staff to keep this place running. I was so excited when I got her letter. I thought I would have a purpose and maybe even some

answers, but it hasn't been like that at all. Even though this place has my name—or I have its name—I still don't fit in.”

Valen reached out a hand and placed it gently on her shoulder. Fiorella might have pulled away, or she might have stayed under it to experience what kindness felt like, but she would never know because a great snuffle broke into the air and made them both jump.

“Korthak?” The paladin leaned over the bar, and a green hand rose just into view. “I was wondering where you'd gotten to.”

Fiorella knelt on her stool and gripped the bartop's edge so she could hang her head over the other side. Korthak had his knees tucked into his massive chest, and his whole body squashed under the bar. How he fit, she didn't know, but it looked rather uncomfortable with his head bent and his bulky arms squeezing his shins.

“I didn't mean to eavesdrop,” he said miserably, and there was nothing menacing about the tusks jutting out of his trembling bottom lip. “But that was so...sad.”

“Oh, no, it's all right,” Fiorella offered the orc her linen as he began to sob. He took it and blew his nose, and she supposed it didn't really matter that she hadn't disclosed

what the smears on it already were. “Can I get you anything? A piece of black plum pie maybe? It’s got creepy runes all over the crust, but it only gave me a little tummy ache, and I’m pretty sure that was because I ate half of it in one sitting and not because the magic in the oven hexed the filling.”

“That sounds marvelous, sweetheart,” came a voice from across the room, and Drex and Sylvir sauntered in, both looking much more pleased than anyone else. “The basement door is serviceable again even if the basement itself is perhaps not.” The crow cawed in agreement.

Despite that she was unsure how marvelous it might be, pie did sound rather good, so Fiorella hurried off into the kitchen. She dug up five forks and some clean linens as well because the place was already a mess and there was no need to make it worse. When she returned with everything piled on a serving tray, she once again came upon the four of them trading heated whispers as they stood in a tight circle at the end of the bar.

“I just think we should be honest if this is the road we’re choosing to take,” the paladin said all paladiny.

“Well, here’s your chance,” said Drex, arms crossed over his chest and lip twisted in annoyance.



Valen turned, blue eyes wide and almost the exact color of the lily on his blood-spattered surcoat. “Madam.”

“Please,” she said, placing the serving tray on the bar. “It’s Fiorella.”

“Fiorella,” he repeated, and she was tickled to find she liked hearing him say her name even more than the polite designation. “We have a proposition to make, but first we must be forthright with you. We are not your average party of traveling warriors.”

As established, Fiorella was not the most discerning woman, but she had gathered as much even though the four were actually designed to be as classically average as possible.

“Not so long ago, we traveled the realm, we investigated aberrations and defeated monsters—actual monsters, the kind that don’t reason and thrive on death and destruction. We collected rewards but only after jobs well done from those who could truly spare the coin, and—”

“And then we were fucking cursed.” Drex already looked bored by the idea, but Fiorella sucked in a sharp gasp, climbing up onto the nearest stool to listen.

Valen swallowed, tenting his fingers. “Yes, that is

accurate—each of us were saddled with our own twisted *gift*. Korthak was cursed with a deep and unrelenting fear of...basically everything, quite the contrast to the barbarous warrior who would lead us into any battle with jubilation.”

The orc had crept out from under the bar, but he was still making himself small—or as small as a seven foot, green-skinned man could. Half hidden behind Valen, he kept his head down and worried the fox pelt that hung from his belt.

Fiorella made a sad sound and pushed the pie toward the orc with an encouraging nod.

“Drex’s feathered fiend is his personal curse.”

The crow squawked, and Drex glared at it. “Yes, he means you, fucker.”

Fiorella covered her mouth. “That’s not a very nice way to talk to your pet.”

“Pet?” Drex punched over his shoulder and his fist went right through the bird. “This thing is a spectral menace. I haven’t had a moment of peace since it was manifested.”

Valen rubbed his forehead as if he’d long suffered bickering between the two. “Drex was our stealthiest, most nimble member, but now the crow won’t allow him to go anywhere unseen, and it’s taken a particular shine to Drex’s

tools.”

“Where do all my lockpicks go?” the man said, scowling at the bird. “You steal them and swallow them, but you never shit them back out!”

“Consider that a blessing,” Valen mumbled, then took a breath. “And compared to Sylvir, a bit more tolerable. Our elven friend’s knowledge, magical and otherwise, was almost completely wiped from his memory. He was one of the most gifted mages I’ve ever met, but now he struggles with his own writings, which unfortunately he had the habit of recording in a language only he knew.”

Drex snorted. “He only remembers his name now because we repeated it to him hourly for a fortnight.”

“Sylvir Ia’olas,” the elf began, and the rest of them joined in, “of the Malagate Thicket Starweavers.”

“At least when Quorinax took his memory, he left some basic abilities like how to speak and wipe his own ass.” Drex’s dark eyes went round then, and his already pallid features went paler. “Wait, we never checked: you *do* know how to wipe your own ass, don’t you?”

The elf reached over and grabbed Drex’s chin. “With my hand. And I’m not supposed to wash it, right?”

Drex smacked his hand away, warmer color coming into his cheeks. “Apparently he’s recovering his sense of humor too.”

“Recovering?” Fiorella straightened. “You mean he’s getting better? You can all get better?”

Valen shrugged. “Drex says Sylvir cast a spell out of his tome to reassemble the door, and he didn’t start a fire or turn anyone into a toad.”

“You were actually a frog that one time.” Sylvir grinned and the tips of his pointed ears wiggled. “And only for half an hour.”

“Might be this place,” Drex said off handedly. “Or it’s the Whispering Woods, but this inn is as close as we can get without being offed by the things that lurk deeper within. Things we wouldn’t have had trouble with a few months ago.”

Fiorella nibbled her lip, the sorry looks on each of their faces weighing heavily on her heart. The inn even creaked with something like sympathy. “What about you, Valen?”

The paladin touched his chest, throat bobbing. “I cannot use my gods-blessed magic without succumbing to grave danger.”

She squinted at him. “That’s why Drex punched you yesterday?” It didn’t seem entirely right.

“It’s the most proficient way to knock me back into my own mind,” the paladin said, then he cleared his throat. “We’re useless on the road now, but we came to the Whispering Woods because we were told our collective cure might be found within. We aren’t strong enough yet to go searching, but this place could be the perfect base from which to start.”

“I like it here too,” said Korthak around a mouthful of black plum pie. The others shot him a bewildered look, and the orc shrugged his great big shoulders. “She’s nice.”

Fiorella preened a bit at that then quickly composed herself. Nice was good, but humble was better.

“We would offer our services in trade for room and board,” Valen offered quickly as if trying to convince her away from the no he expected. “You said yourself you need staff, and I can tell you that Korthak never made a meal on the road that the lot of us didn’t inhale, and he can chop vegetables as good as he used to chop off heads. There are stables outside as well, and while Sylvir lost his magic, he’s still got all his innate elven abilities.”

“Animals love me.” Sylvir spread his fingers wide, and the crow chomped down on the nearest digit. “Except that one, but he’s not real, so I don’t think it counts.”

“And Drex and I can clean, we can serve, we can carry heavy things, and if anyone ever dared bother you out here in the woods all alone, it might be helpful to have multiple armed men on standby.”

Fiorella hadn’t thought of what might happen if someone arrived at the inn who meant her harm. In fact, she had sort of forgotten that was a thing. What with all the other magical problems she’d been dealing with, the very human problem of *men* had slipped her mind.

“You want to work here?” she said, simplifying the idea to one that made more sense. “And live here too?”

The four gave slightly conflicting reactions, ranging from Korthak’s vigorous nod to Drex’s ambivalent shrug. But none of them corrected her.

Fiorella gave the tavern a good look then, and she saw past the emptiness to a time long ago. How much of it was a memory and how much a dream, she wasn’t sure, but she could hear the din of voices and smell the meals and feel the warmth and even a little of the magic too. Not chaotic magic

but magic she connected with that night she'd been placed in front of the fire. Magic that reminded her of her mother.

“Yes, that would be wonderful!” she said, meeting their eyes again and grinning ear to ear. Sure, they were a mess, but what were a few more curses hanging around the place? “Welcome to the Fitzwright Inn.”

“Oh, Fitzwright Inn,” said Sylvir, nudging Drex with his elbow. “I get it!”

The others groaned, but Fiorella giggled, and there was a telltale creak up in the rafters that told her the inn found it absolutely hilarious too.



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