

The Strider

Levistrum walked along the old road, oak boards dotting every few steps for “structural support” even if the condition of the road suggested anything but support. The midday sun beat down and the humid air felt like she was breathing through a wet blanket. Her lightweight traveler's dress was suitable for this weather, but she could feel herself sweating as she trudged down the road. She had hoped for some clouds but knew that any shade they would provide would most likely lead to a summer downpour. It had been hours since the last proper town and she could only motivate herself with the promise of a soft bed for so long.

Hoofbeats made her turn and Levistrum readied to defend herself from guards or highwaymen. Instead, an old greying mare pulled a wagon with an old man at the reins. The driver slowed the mare with a gentle word and pulled on the reins to bring her to the side of the road. He looked down at Levistrum, dark eyes looking her up and down with a mix of curiosity and scrutiny. He had wrinkled skin, rough with crinkles around his eyes, and a straw hat covering his thinning hair. Looking down, he kept his expression neutral. “You need a hand?”

“I wouldn’t say no to a ride for a few leagues if you’re going very far,” Levistrum said. “I can trade for it?”

“Nothing I need,” the farmer scratched his chin, “but it wouldn’t be right leaving you on the road alone. Come on, then. If we wait too long, it’ll be hard to get Old Daisy going again.”

Levistrum bowed her head, looked at the old mare as she passed around the front, and clamored into the seat next to the driver. He clicked his tongue twice and the mare started her slow progression again.

“Name’s Strogel.”

“Levistrum. Thank you for the assistance.”

“Well, it’d be against the Tenet of Hospitality to leave you without offering a ride or something to eat. And—seeing as how I got nothing to feed ya—it was the only way to be hospitable. What are you doing out here on the road anyhow?”

“I’m a Strider,” Levistrum said. “I live my life one road to the next.”

“Strider, huh?” Strogel nodded. “So you’re one of them who travel around and stick your nose into other people’s business?”

“Only with their permission,” Levistrum nodded. “We have a reputation for being too nose-y, but we only engage with people who ask for our help.”

Stroge-l nodded, idly processing the information as the cart rolled along. “Not a real job though, is it? Roaming about from place to place and doing things that other people didn’t ask for help with?”

“Well, not exactly,” Levistrum said. “But I learn a great many things, should I ever decide to settle down somewhere and hang up my traveling boots. I’ve done everything from planting crops to shoeing horses. I can soothe crying children and wash clothes. I even know how to play a little bit of lyre.”

“But you don’t have a roof over your head at the end of the day,” Stroge-l grumbled. “No place to...hang your boots, as you say.”

“Not especially no, but I find the people I meet and the places I go to be more rewarding than materials. I have a great many stories to tell around a cooking fire and most folks are willing to let a Strider stay in their home.”

“Fools, you mean. I don’t mind someone getting some grit under their fingernails, but I’ve always found the Strider types to be...well, you hear stories, of course.”

“About bandits and murderers posing as Striders? I have as well, but I’ve heard more stories about ordinary people doing those things without the mask of a Strider.”

“Suppose that’s true,” Stroge-l said, focusing ahead. “Still, you should know I ain’t afraid to fight for my life if it comes to it. I doubt you would, but I don’t think I’d sleep with one close by.”

With his begrudging acceptance of her, Levistrum leaned back and looked up at the cloudless sky. The mare snorted and tossed her head as flies buzzed around her ears, punctuating her steady steps with a sharp clatter of her tack when the insects became unbearable. Levistrum didn’t mind the quiet. She was born to it.

“I’m a farmer by trade,” Stroge-l said, clearly uneasy with the quiet. “Hauling a fresh crop to the Citadel for a fair price. Rumor has it they pay double for fresh vegetables in the bigger cities that don’t have their own farms. Not the prettiest crop, but it’ll sell to some cook who could whip it into a soup or something.”

“I’ve never met an ugly vegetable that didn’t have the same taste...save for one very troubled carrot that was barely food by the time I got to it.”

Strogl coughed out a chuckle, one grunt with the barest hint of good humor. “Are you headed to the Citadel?”

“For a spell,” Levistrum said. “I’m visiting an old friend there.”

“Striders have friends?”

“A fellow Strider I roamed with for some time. She found a husband and decided to marry. Now, she’s found need of a nanny for a few months.”

“How did you know? Strider Speak?”

“Strider Speak is a myth,” Levistrum said. “It’s a good rule of the road to tell someone where you’re heading as soon as you leave. That way, if you go missing, someone knows where you were last meant to be.”

“Clever,” Strogl said, “and, uh...congratulations to your friend, I suppose. Always nice when people settle down.”

“If they choose,” Levistrum shrugged. “I don’t think I could for more than a few months.”

“Well, how can you take care of yourself?” Strogl said, irritated. “I mean, all this traveling can’t be cheap and you need to feed yourself!”

“I only take what’s offered. Hospitality takes you far in this world if you find the people who are generous enough to offer.”

“Mmm, so freeloading off of hardworking folk?”

“If you were on the side of the road,” Levistrum offered, “Daisy gone lame in her hoof and your wagon axel split, would you rather someone give you their aid? Even if it was only fresh water and the promise of more aid when they reached town?”

“Well, I’d like them to fix my axel.”

“But they only offer what they can provide,” Levistrum said. “It’s better to be gracious for what is available than hunger for what could be.”

“I suppose Gratitude is a tenet, but so is hard work.”

“And Striders are both grateful and hard workers.”

“Then why are there so many stories about Striders who steal and murder in the dark of night, huh?”

“If there are a handful who would take advantage of the tenets, does that mean we should expect everyone to break them?”

Stroger crinkled his brow in thought. Levistrum let him consider it for a while and enjoyed the ride, watching butterflies flutter around as a hawk looped lazy circles above their heads. A cool breeze passed over the cart and Levistrum closed her eyes and pretended she was flying like the hawk.

“I got half a mind to kick you off and let you walk the rest of the way,” Stroger said, curtly. “But then I suppose you’d tell all your Strider friends of that all crotchety, old farmers make you walk alone one miserably hot days.”

“Not until the next farmer threw me off his cart. I haven’t angered every farmer in the land, so I can’t say for certain that you’d all throw me out.”

Stroger grunted and shook his head. “Well, best keep some of our reputation in check. After all, I’d hate to break a tenet just because you get on my nerves.”

“Hospitality is only offered,” Levistrum said. “It isn’t revoked with one action.”

Stroger nodded. “How old is the child?”

“A little girl, only three months.”

“My wife and I had a son. He’s got a farm of his own now.”

“Must take after his father. Well-versed practitioner of the tenets.”

“So it shall be,” Stroger said. Levistrum wasn’t sure, but she thought she caught the glimmer of approval on the farmer’s face.