

Lonely Caravan Sample

By Lifecharacter

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define t = Character("Tien")
define m = Character("Mana")
define d = Character("Desta")
define c = Character("Crowd")
define ma = Character("Man")
define w = Character("Woman")
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"Just a little bit longer."

"Just... a little bit... longer..."

"How many days have I spent repeating that to myself now?"

"And how many more days will I have to keep repeating it?"

Tien "Haaaah"

"I take the last step to reach the top of the hill and let loose a familiar, exhausted sigh."

"It doesn't matter how many times I climb it, it's always obnoxious and preposterous and frustrating and a thousand other things I'm too tired to think of right now."

"I mean, who builds their city next to the giant hill instead of on it?"

Tien "Crazy people."

"That's what I've found through all my traveling to and fro, here and there. The world is filled with crazy people doing crazy things that they probably shouldn't."

"But then, I'm a thousand miles from home right now, so maybe I've turned into one of those people?"

"It doesn't matter. What matters is that, finally, after an hour of crawling uphill with an awful burden weighing me down, I can finally start walking downhill."

"One of the great mercies of our world: hills go down as well as up."

"And, when I finally shake myself free of my relief and look towards the horizon, I see our destination."

"Lehran. City of the Great..."

"..."

"What was their name again?"

"..."

"The Great..."

"Was it the Great Kings? Queens? Masters?"

"All the words start to blend together after so much time not hearing it and not caring about it."

"Lehran. City."

"Good enough."

"It never really mattered who was ruling the city and having their name belted from every corner, Lehran was simply where the company had a nice dorm."

"An actual dorm, with a roof and rooms and beds and a bath."

"Most importantly, they had our money. My money. And they were more than able to handle my money the way I needed it handled."

"Climbing the hill might always be terrible, but seeing the city sprawled out in front of me and knowing what awaits always gives me enough motivation to push through to the end."

"At least, it's supposed to."

"I walk downhill for barely a minute before noticing that everyone else has abandoned their carts and horses on the side of the road to crowd around some ditch near the forest."

"And now I've lost the game. The game with no winner."

"For the past hour there's been a dark blob to my right, a mix of brown and black and green. And, until now, I've managed to avoid thinking about it."

"But now I've lost. I've looked at the Nameless Forest, so named because everyone is too afraid to name it."

"Dark and impenetrable, it's not hard to see why children might be afraid of a forest, but this one seems to have captured the minds of everyone in this country, leaving me to play my apathetic game alone."

"But I can kick myself for losing later, for now there's the issue in front of me to deal with."

"I try to see what my peers are doing from here, but there's no telling what it is. Whatever it is, I doubt it's worth all the fuss they seem to be making out of it."

"It never is."

"I set my bag down and start walking over to them."

Tien "Hey! The city's right there. Can't you wait another hour before drinking or burning something or having a scrap?"

"Normally I only need to sweep up one or two stragglers, not the entire caravan."

? "Tien."

"A taller man with darker skin than the rest addresses me as I approach, his shiny bald head freshly shaved and his face perpetually unhappy. It's surprising to see him caught up in the rabble."

Tien "What? Does Captain Desta need help to whip people back onto the road?"

Desta "Tien... be quiet."

"I reach the uncomfortably quiet crowd and push my way past all the taller people to see what on this world could be so..."

"I reach the front and immediately know."

"Lying there in the ditch is something no one ever wants to see."

"Short white hair. Strange, but you see enough to not be that surprised by something like that."

"Sunkissed skin. That's pretty much everyone around here."

"About my age, maybe a little younger. Tragic."

"Torn clothes. A waste."

"And blood. Far too much blood."

"We all just stand here, circled around a body of some young woman, not saying or doing anything. Any voice that breaks the silence is immediately hushed."

"After the moment of shock is gone, I move ever so slightly forward."

"So it looks bad. So what?"

"She could be fine, at least for the most part. She'll have to get some new clothes and stitch up a nasty cut, but she'll probably be fine."

"It's stupid and optimistic and not like me, but it seems better than just standing there staring. And sometimes good things happen."

"But before I can reach her—before I can give her a good shake and open her eyes to show everyone she's perfectly fine—someone grabs my arm."

"I look back to see that Desta's the one holding me."

Desta "We already checked."

Tien "I wasn't... I... Yeah..."

"Well, it was nice to hope for a few seconds there. But now I and everyone else here need to confront the reality in front of us."

Tien "What do we do now?"

Desta "We leave some people here to keep watch, and go inform the guards. Then they can take care of it."

Tien "What?"

"Memories of the last time something like this happened come to the front of my mind, followed shortly after by regret that I'm living a life where something like this has happened to me more than once."

Tien "We don't know who this is or what they were involved in or what we'll be involved in if we stick our nose where it doesn't need to be."

Tien "Remember what happened back in Jiram when we decided to get involved?"

Desta "I'd prefer not to... but still."

Tien "You'd probably prefer to still be able to go back there though."

Desta "Alright, so what? We just leave and say nothing about it to anyone? Let someone else find it?"

Tien "What? No! You can't just leave a body out to rot like that. Don't you have any respect?"

"He cradles his head in his hands."

Desta "You were just arguing that we not do anything about the body, and now you want us to be respectful?"

Tien "I meant that we don't get the guards and we don't tell anyone about it. Not that we just leave it here to be picked at by whatever comes along."

"He sighs, heavily, while those around us murmur to each other."

Desta "So what's your suggestion?"

Tien "We take care of the body."

"The crowd doesn't seem very happy with the suggestion."

Desta "So you think we should just bury it and go on our way?"

Tien "I was going to suggest we have a little more respect for it and cremate it, but yes, exactly that."

Crowd "We shouldn't touch it!"

Crowd "If it's this close to the forest who knows what might happen."

Crowd "Let's just go if we're gonna go."

Desta "They have a point. Good things don't happen when you mess with dead bodies near the forest."

Tien "Is... is that something that happens often?"

"How often do people find dead bodies that they have rules based on where they're found?"

Desta "No, but it's an extension of the rule that you don't mess with things near the forest."

"Oh."

Tien "Just because the people in Lehran are superstitious idiots doesn't mean you have to be too."

Desta "Tell you what..."

"I don't like where this is going..."

Desta "Why don't we all get back to the caravan and continue on to the city..."

"I {i}really{/i} don't like where this is going."

Desta "And you, with your higher sense of morality and decency, and fearlessness in the face of superstition, deal with the body?"

"This is why you don't get involved in things, Tien. Bad things happen. To you. Every time."

Tien "And what am I supposed to do by myself? Cut down a tree and drag the body around and hope no one comes down the road?"

Desta "Well, it's pretty late in the day, so you shouldn't have to worry about other people."

Tien "That doesn't—"

Desta "And I suppose we can leave you with whatever firewood we still have left to build the funeral pyre you wanted."

Tien "I don't—"

Desta "Which just means that you'll have to stack the wood and light it. Sounds simple enough for a trusted and respected member of this company like you."

"I stand there quietly as everyone else goes about getting ready to leave, and some of them start piling firewood by my feet."

"I could just walk away right now and just feel a little embarrassed about all this. We all act stupid every once in a while. It happens. They'll understand and get over it after they make fun of me a bit."

"Then they start moving on, and Desta puts a sturdy, reassuring hand on my shoulder."

Desta "We're counting on you Tien. Don't let us down."

"Then he leaves just as quickly as the rest."

"I just stand there watching them go, until I can no longer hear their chatter and they, hopefully, can't hear me when I start huffing and puffing."

Tien "Great idea, Tien. Mother would be proud of your respect, and father would laugh at you."

"I turn back to the woman, doing my best not to actually look at her... it. It takes some doing, but I eventually work myself up to touching it."

"I grab one of her... its wrists, flinching at the feel of the cold skin. It's a feeling I would be more than happy to never feel again in my life."

"But, for now, it's something I have to do."

"I need to drag her out of the small ditch someone left her in to somewhere more... respectable for something like this."

"It should only be a matter of a few feet, but I can already feel my skin crawling."

Tien "I hate this place."

Tien "I never found dead people by the side of the road back home. Why'd I ever leave?"

"No one else is around me, so I suppose I'm directing my question to the dead."

"..."

"Hopefully she doesn't answer me."

"..."

Tien "Please don't answer me."

"While she thankfully doesn't speak as I drag her, her body does make an unnerving sound as she moves."

"It's not the groaning of the undead or the whispers of a spirit, but the sound of something metal."

"And, whatever it is, it seems like it's anchoring her to the ground."

"So I set her arms down and crouch beside her, doing my best to look anywhere else but her face."

"I don't want to spend the next few days seeing it every time I close my eyes."

Tien "It doesn't matter what it is. Just get back up and pull her... it a little further."

Tien "Just..."

"I sigh."

"I don't seem to be very good at convincing myself. I don't think I've ever been very good at that."

"Still keeping my eyes trained on anything and everything else, I lift the body ever so slightly and reach under it."

"It's not hard to tell what was causing all the noise and all the trouble."

"I wrap my fingers around what seems to be a wooden handle that is slick and only slightly wet."

"After flinching in disgust at the visceral feel of it, then grabbing it again, then letting go again, then grabbing it again, I'm finally able to give it a hard pull and slowly bring it out from under her."

"With it in my hands, it's not hard to tell what happened."

"It's a tiny knife, not even a dagger, covered in dried blood and... what looks like rust."

"Apparently whoever killed her was cheap and couldn't even be bothered to kill someone with anything other than what they grabbed off their shack's table."

"The realization of what I'm holding comes far later than it should and I throw the knife well away from me and rigorously attempt to shake the memory of ever holding it."

"..."

"It's not working. I can still feel the cheap wood covered in partly dried blood. And that's just the physical parts of holding a murder weapon."

"I don't want to delve into the thoughts and fantasies trickling through my head imagining how it all happened."

"I crouch down and vigorously rub my hands against the ground. I don't care if it gets covered in mud or stained green from the grass or covered in ants, anything's better than the lingering sensation of the knife and the blood."

"It's a laborious process. Cleaning blood off is one thing. Trying to stop thinking about it—obsessing over it—that takes time."

"..."

"A lot of time. And every second would be worth it if I could just manage to scrub everything from my mind."

"But I don't."

"I look at my hand to see that, if there was any trace of blood, it's gone now and replaced with splatterings of dirt."

Tien "It'll have to do."

"I can't stand around here forever trying to forget what I never will: I have an awful job to do."

"Piling the wood and placing her on top of it is easy enough—at least physically—which means that the only thing left to do is place some kindling and light it."

"And then run. Either from some ghost or a spirit or just so no one finds me by this makeshift funeral pyre."

Tien "You sure are causing a lot of trouble for someone putting no effort into this."

"I sit down next to what I've just built and, for the first time, actually look at who I'm ostensibly doing all of this work for."

"It only seems right, in a weird way that I suppose is fitting for this situation, to see the face of the person I'm holding a funeral for."

"She certainly doesn't look like someone who'd be found in a ditch with a rusty knife in her back."

"Her skin looks so smooth and clear, and her clothes, ripped and torn as they are, are soft to the touch and look expensive."

"She looks like someone I would have liked to meet and talk to."

"She also looks like someone who probably wouldn't be giving me the time of day, but it'd be hard to blame her."

"Her torn clothes were still probably worth more than mine, though stripping the dead of their blood-soaked clothes for a few coins is too much even for me."

"Still, it'd have been nice to have had the opportunity to try and fail to talk to her. Maybe I would have my moment of a lifetime, and she would still be alive..."

"No use fantasizing now though. I bring out the flint and start striking it against the tinder, hoping for a quick spark."

"And I find one. Soon enough, the kindling's burning and the sticks are starting to catch. It won't be long until the entire pyre is fully lit and she can have the sendoff everyone deserves."

Tien "It's a shame."

? "Nnnngh...?"

"..."

"That didn't just happen."

? "Mmmm, wha..."

"I don't want to look. Today has already been bad enough."

"I already managed to get myself stuck performing a cheap funeral for a body we found. I don't now want to be confronted with whatever it is that's talking."

"But it's not exactly easy to ignore the sudden voice when no one alive is supposed to be near me."

"And with a glance all of my fears are confirmed, though there is an odd mix of relief in there as well."

"This woman, whoever she is, has a confused look on her face. Her eyes are open. Her lips are parting. Her limbs are stretching."

"She looks like she just woke up after a particularly satisfying night's sleep, instead of rising from the dead on her own funeral pyre."

"I'm dumbstruck by the sight. Her unconcerned face. Her torn and bloody clothing. And the growing fire that's quickly approaching her."

"..."

"I leap forward and take her by the arm once more. This time, though, it's to pull her away from her pyre."

"I close my eyes and give a quick and desperate yank."

"She safely escapes her second death of the day but also lands directly on top of me. I tumble back from the force of her body."

"When I open my eyes, I see her staring down at me, a curious look in her eyes."

Tien "Uhhhhhh..."

"Turns out it's hard to find the words for a situation like this."

"I open my mouth to say something, anything, to break the growing silence that comes with a strange woman being on top of me."

? "Ahhh..."

"Ah?"

? "Achoo!"

"But then she sneezes. It's the sort of sneeze that you have late at night when you've put off getting dressed after a bath. No sickness, just the body complaining that it's cold."

"And, now that I think of it, the sun's almost gone and it's not exactly summer anymore."

"Lying on the ground for who knows how long with barely any clothes on probably makes you pretty cold."

"So I squirm out from under her."

Tien "Stay there."

"The fire's starting to get pretty strong, so that should keep her relatively warm for now. More importantly I don't want her coming up behind me with fangs or claws out."

"But that still means I need to find her something to wear other than torn rags."

"..."

"I've already decided on helping her..."

"I don't know whether to be proud or annoyed with myself."

"While I rifle through my bag, I settle on both for now. We'll see how I feel in a day or two about my decision."

"I finally find what I'm looking for. A pair of trousers and a somewhat matching tunic. A splash of color here and there, but nothing daring or fancy. I don't have much in the way of fancy."

"They're not the nicest set of clothes. Nothing compared to what she was wearing, but they'll have to do."

"When I turn around, I see her curled up by the brightest part of the fire, hands outstretched and the tatters of her clothes covering her as best they can."

"Walking up behind her, I ask what seems like a dumb question."

Tien "Are you okay?"

? "I'm cold."

Tien "Here."

"I hold out the folded set of clothes for her. With these and the fire, she'll hopefully warm up quickly."

Tien "Put this on. I'll stoke the fire some more."

? "Okay..."

"A timid hand reaches out and grabs the clothes, the other desperate to keep what's left of her old clothes covering her."

"She stands and moves a bit to the side while I poke at the embers and turn the young woman-sized fire into something more concentrated."

"It seems like only a few minutes ago I was complaining about a hill, but here I am, giving my clothes to some woman."

"A woman I found at the side of the road... with a knife in her back... near the forest."

"I shake my head."

"Superstition is for those idiots. And there's nothing superstitious about dead bodies coming back to life..."

"Nothing at all."

? "Hey..."

"I turn around to see what it is. Thankfully, she's mostly dressed this time."

Tien "Is something wrong?"

? "Do you... know who I am?"

"That doesn't seem good."

Tien "No. I don't."

? "Oh..."

Tien "Sorry."

"There's not many things that come to mind in a situation like this. There aren't situations like this" in the first place."

? "Umm..."

Tien "What?"

? "Can you... help me? I can't..."

"Her hands look like they're shaking, and she hasn't managed to finish putting the tunic on."

Tien "Oh. I can help fasten it."

"I shouldn't be surprised. Just being out here would give anyone shaky hands, I can't imagine what having a knife in the back and not knowing who you are does to you."

"So I walk over and take hold of the edges of the tunic and begin fastening it."

"I do my best to not look at the brief glimpses of skin, but it's hard to miss."

"And each new glimpse shows another scar."

"It's best not to say anything."

Tien "Annnnd... there!"

"With one last tug, I've finished securing it to her, and take a look at what I've put together today."

"It's not often I get to see other people in my clothes. She certainly fills out the normally loose outfit better than I do."

"But then I remember the situation I'm in right now."

"She meets my scrutinizing gaze with a hesitant one of her own."

Tien "Alright, it should be set now."

"She looks down to check on everything and seems satisfied by what she sees."

"Then she immediately returns to the fire, trying her best to burn the last of her shivers out."

"I grab my canteen from my bag and follow her there."

"When I hold it out to her, she doesn't even wait for a word before snatching it and drowning herself in its water."

"She was almost burned alive, so I guess it makes sense to be a bit thirsty."

? "Thank you."

"She hands the empty thing back to me, and I set it aside."

"It might be nice to sit by the fireside with someone like this, but that's not what I should be doing right now."

Tien "So... you don't know who you are?"

"Might as well be sure."

? "No... I don't. I'm trying to remember but nothing's coming."

"She looks as if she's straining herself searching for a memory."

Tien "No, it's okay. It'll probably come to you eventually."

? "It will?"

Tien "Yeah..."

"I have no idea, but the conversation dies anyway and we sit there quietly. Her warming herself up, and me stealing glances her way."

"She seems to be fine, cold and memories aside. All those wounds and you couldn't even tell by the look of her now."

"Everyone else must have been an idiot to not have noticed that she was alive. And I was an idiot for just believing them like that."

"Yeah. That's it. Just a bunch of idiots."

"No cold, lifeless body. No knife in the back. No body of cuts. No blood."

"Just idiots. It's better to just be idiots."

"I look over once more to see her lean back, satisfied with her newfound heat, and stare up at the clear sky."

Tien "Are you okay?"

? "I think so."

"A soft laugh escapes her."

? "Which seems weird, right?"

Tien "A little bit. You weren't like that when we found you."

? "How was I when you found me?"

Tien "They said you were dead. And you looked it. You were cold, and stiff."

"She doesn't need to know about the knife."

? "Huh..."

Tien "You seem to be taking this awfully well."

? "Am I? It's hard to tell. How should I be taking it?"

Tien "..."

"It's a difficult question. Things like this don't exactly happen all the time, so maybe a dull surprise and a little relief are appropriate?"

Tien "I'm not sure."

? "Then I'm going to take it well. I'm alive, after all."

Tien "I suppose that's reason enough."

"We share a little laugh together."

Tien "So I know you don't remember anything, but what about a name?"

Tien "Do you remember that at all?"

"She leans forward and brings her hand to her chin. She looks to be thinking hard on it, which doesn't seem good."

"Then, she straightens herself and turns to me."

? "Mana."

Tien "Mana?"

Mana "Yeah, Mana. I think that's what my name should be until I remember something."

"I've never heard that name before, but I've also never heard of a woman actually rising from the dead so I suppose it's fitting."

Tien "I like it."

Mana "You do?"

Tien "It has a nice sound to it. Where'd you come up with it."

Mana "It just, sort of, came to me while I was sitting here. Not sure why."

Tien "Well it doesn't matter then. It's a nice name."

Mana "Thanks. What's your name?"

Tien "Oh! I haven't told you yet, sorry."

Tien "It's Tien. I'm Tien."

Mana "Tien, huh?"

Mana "I like your name too."

Tien "Thanks, but I didn't have to come up with it by myself."

Mana "Oh right, parents are usually the ones to name you."

Mana "..."

Mana "Maybe I should have you pick a name for me?"

Tien "What? Why? That's a terrible idea."

Mana "Why? You're the person who found me and stayed with me and took care of me. Sounds like the closest thing to a parent I have right now."

Tien "Sure, but I'm terrible at coming up with names."

Mana "It's not that—"

"The wind picks up and tears through us, forcing away every last bit of warmth we'd managed to hold onto."

"It's probably not the best idea to stay out here for too much longer."

"The sun is completely gone, and the fire has eaten up most of the firewood."

"And everyone else was pretty scared of the forest that's mere feet away from us, so that's something to take into consideration."

"I stand and hold my hand out to her."

Tien "We should go. It'll only get colder out here."

"She takes it and pulls herself to her feet."

Mana "Where am I supposed to go?"

Tien "For now, you can stay with me. The company I work for has dorms prepared with food and beds and more than enough space for the strange woman we found by the side of the road."

"She pinches my hand."

Mana "Strange woman, huh?"

Tien "There's worse things to be called."

Mana "Doesn't mean it's a good thing to be called."

Tien "Take it as a compliment. If you weren't strange you wouldn't get to wear my clothes or look forward to sleeping in the lovely bed I'm offering."

"She stops pinching, but starts grumbling under her breathe."

Tien "Maybe you'll find something to help jog your memory."

Mana "Alright, lead the way."

"I gather my bag and set off with her in tow, only to immediately run back to the fire to start stamping it out and kicking dirt onto it."

Tien "Desta'd kill me..."

"Also, being responsible for a massive forest fire seems like a good way to not only have a few angry people, but also make whatever might live in there angry as well."

"Mana just stands off to the side giggling at me."

"Then the two of us head to the city."

"I was expecting there to be some issue with the gate guards, but apparently they were told to expect us. Or, well, me. But Desta probably didn't feel the need to get too specific in the event that I bring the dead woman back with me."

"So we enter Lehran and make our way through the streets. Tall stone buildings flank us as we go, each one taller and more marked by age than the last."

"Thankfully, I've been here enough to know the way to the dorms. And, as we make our way, Mana looks around."

Tien "Anything?"

"She shakes her head."

Mana "Nothing."

"I look around as well; there's not much to see."

"At this time of night not many people are out and about, and nighttime hides most everything from sight."

"You can usually see the large temple and the palace from here, but now there's only the far-off glow of a few torches and the occasional gleam of their gold."

"For now, it's best to just get to a nice bed and rest. It's been a long day for one of us and a longer day for the other."

"Round the next corner I see it."

"While it's not the biggest building in the area, it's still rather sizeable and well-managed with no broken windows or rotted planks or even a door barely kept on its hinges."

"It looks like it's stood the test of time and come out dignified rather than ruined."

"When I open the door and peer inside, I'm happy to find no one, not even Desta, out and about."

"I'll eventually have to explain Mana to everyone, but I don't think I have the energy to do it tonight. And I doubt she wants to round off her day by being surrounded by a bunch of fascinated idiots."

Tien "Stay quiet until we reach the room."

Mana "Why? Is everyone already asleep?"

Tien "... Yeah. And I don't want to wake them up and cause a fuss."

"She nods her head and carefully follows behind me as I creep through the halls to my room."

"I'll try to lie less starting tomorrow. For now, sleep calls."

"As soon as I open the door, I see that nothing's changed since the last time I was here."

"The bed still sits in the middle of the room with a set of sheets and blankets piled on top of it, wooden tables flanking its sides with cups and jugs on them."

"And, just off to the side of the bed, stands a cheap stone plinth holding a large brass bowl filled with water."

"It's not home, but it's better than any other place I've slept since leaving home."

"Hurrying inside, I don't even bother to unpack my things. I just throw the bag in the corner and start taking clothes off to get ready for bed."

Tien "Are you hungry or anything?"

Mana "..."

"She doesn't stop watching me even as I turn to look at her."

Tien "Mana."

Mana "No. No, I'm fine."

Tien "Are you sure? You seemed pretty thirsty before."

Mana "No, I shouldn't impose on you anymore. I'm already wearing your clothes and sleeping in your room and—"

Tien "It's fine. All I'd need to do is walk down the hall to grab something for you to eat."

Tien "If you want me to."

"She considers it for a moment before nodding."

Tien "Alright. While I'm gone you can wash your face over in the basin and get ready for bed."

"She nods again and moves over to it as I leave the room and make my way for the main hall."

"I'm still careful about my footfalls—a much easier thing to do now that I'm not wearing boots—but being quiet's not going to matter if someone else is already in there getting food."

"Thankfully, people tend to be pretty tired the first night back, at least once they're done celebrating."

"As I turn the corner and can see the most abused door in this entire building at the other end of the hall, I stop."

"There's a light flickering behind it."

"As the seconds tick down until my inevitable confrontation, I come up with as many different excuses as I can for why I need to return to my room immediately."

"Long day."

"Feeling pretty tired."

"Funerals take a lot out of a person."

"I need to appease an angry spirit that I've left in my room. Haha, yeah, it's funny because we found a dead body earlier today."

"And then the tried and true method of just awkwardly leaving without saying a word and hoping they don't follow."

"I prepare each one of these in my arsenal as the hinges creak open to reveal who might be complicating my night even more."

"..."

"No one."

"My eyes scan the larder to find not a single other soul in it. Just a flickering candle on one of the shelves."

"Someone's lucky that I got here before something caught fire or Desta found it."

"By the light of someone's mistake, I fill a bowl with some dried fruits and nuts and quickly make my escape."

"My door creaks, but I don't care. I've reached safety."

Tien "Alright, I..."

"When I look to find her waiting for my return, I trail off at what I see."

"Lying there on the bed, hidden beneath the sheets, she's barely making a sound."

"I move to the side of the bed and set the bowl down. She might wake up hungry later."

"Her face is hidden under it, and by the looks of the lump she's practically curled up into a ball."

"If she's asleep I don't want to wake her, but I still feel some need to look under all of this."

"Maybe it's to make sure that she hasn't turned back into a corpse."

"Maybe it's to give me another reminder that this is all indeed happening."

"Maybe it's just to look at her face again before collapsing."

"I grab the corners of the sheet just besides the tufts of her hair that are sticking out and get ready to slowly reveal what's lying beneath."

"..."

"I stop."

"This seems a bit wrong."

"Sure, my day has been filled with some strange magical nonsense that has resulted in me being here, standing over a woman who was lying dead in a ditch not too long ago."

"Sure, I have no idea what said strange magical nonsense might do or have already done."

"For all I know there's some local legend about exactly the thing I'm doing where the lesson is don't bring people that stopped being dead home."

"But this person sleeping here still trusted me enough to not only follow a stranger home, but fall asleep in my bed."

"And now I'm going to watch her sleep like some creep with a bunch of excuses prepared."

"I move to the opposite side of the bed and slide under the sheet."

"Here's hoping I'm not about to be another instance of some folk story."

"..."

"At least I have more than enough insurance to cover anything."

"Before I have time to fret about whether I should have checked or not or what I should do tomorrow, sleep takes me."

"I don't put up much of a fight."

"When I wake up, I'm greeted by the dim light of the morning, a dry mouth, and an unfamiliar weight on my body."

"I try to bring up a pair of fists to rub the last remnants of sleep from my eyes, but I find only one is able to escape whatever's under the sheet."

"I'm confused."

"Did I wind up sleeping on my other arm and making it numb? If I did it's not tingling like it usually does, and I can feel it moving around."

"It's just... stuck."

"I look down, half-blurred vision still able to make out the odd lump in the sheets."

Tien "..."

Tien "What is that?"

"I squint to see better, but that doesn't help. And, with all the will and effort the morning has gifted me, I am unable to wriggle free of whatever's holding me."

"So, after a few blinks to truly contemplate my situation with the wisdom of a sage, I understand how I must discover the truth of this."

"With my free hand, I pull away the sheets covering my body, and reveal what lies beneath..."

"Lying there, with as little space between her and me as possible and her arms wrapped tightly around me, was the true visage of the mystery lump."

"As far as I can tell, Mana looks the same as she did yesterday. Same hair. Same skin.

Presumably the same eyes. She doesn't seem to have grown or shrunk."

"The only differences are that she's much warmer to the touch."

"My face is probably a bit too flushed at just how close she is, but I push past it and give her a few light shakes."

Tien "Mana. It's morning."

Mana "Mmmm..."

"She barely budes and gives nothing but the most instinctual grumbling."

"I go to shake her again, this time with greater energy, but stop myself."

"I feel tired. I {i}am{/i} tired. And all I did yesterday was walk around and move some things around..."

"We'll ignore that one of those things was a dead body."

"Anyway, that was all I did yesterday. And I was pretty tired. I practically collapsed onto the bed the second I didn't need to take care of something for Mana."

"I can't say for sure, but I imagine coming back from the dead might be a bit more exhausting than that. Not to mention that she needed to die sometime before that as well."

"Maybe it'd be best just to let her sleep a little longer?"

"She seems like she could need it. And I do have a few things I need to take care of that might be a little easier without having to drag her along with me."

"And now I feel that tiny sting of guilt of imagining what'll happen when she wakes up to find the one person she knows gone."

"..."

"I decide to let her choose what happens, at least in a roundabout way."

"Because regardless of what happens I need to escape her inhuman grip."

"So I squirm and I pull and I stretch until, finally, I'm free from her. Though my defenseless pillow falls victim to her almost immediately."

Tien "Mana."

Mana "..."

Tien "Mana?"

Mana "..."

Tien "I'm going to leave for a little bit, okay? Wait for me here and we can take care of everything."

"I doubt something like my voice is going to do that much to wake her up."

"I put on my clothes and move for the door."

"With it half open I stop."

"I close it and dig some paper and a pen out of bags."

"My ability to write this language is comparable to a child's, but it should be good enough to get something as simple as this across."

"I secure my scribbled note on the nightstand with the half-empty bowl of food, and quietly get ready to leave."

"The door creaks the loudest it ever has. The slower I open it, the louder and more agonizing the sound becomes until there's enough space for me to squeeze through." [[Creaking sound]]

"The halls are mercifully empty, as is the main room. Never have I been so glad to know how lazy my coworkers are."

"I'm almost at the front door, hand desperate to throw it open and escape having to explain how things went last night, when I hear a voice."

Desta "Tien!"

"Of course he's up. He might as well not even sleep."

"I stop in my tracks and turn awkwardly to my captain."

Tien "Yeah?"

Desta "You're up early."

Tien "We can't all be lazy."

Desta "From the looks of it we can..."

Tien "It could be worse, but was there something you needed? I have some errands I need to run."

"The longer I'm here talking to him the longer Mana has to wake up, ignore my note, and make everything more complicated than I want it to be."

Desta "I don't really need anything, just thought I should ask how it went. That whole... thing."

Tien "Went great."

Desta "Really?"

"I see the skepticism on his face."

Tien "Yeah. Piled some wood, lit a fire, said a prayer."

Desta "Did—"

Tien "Made sure it was out before I left!"

Desta "That's good to hear, but I was going to ask if there were any problems. Evil forest spirits. Dutiful guards. A conscience."

Tien "No spirits. No guards. Enough of a conscience to feel insulted at the implication that I don't have one."

Desta "Alright. Was worried about leaving you behind like that."

Tien "Clearly you need to trust me more."

Desta "Clearly..."

Tien "If that was it, then..."

"I begin to turn around to make my escape."

Desta "Oh, one more thing."

Desta "Are you {i}sure{/i} you want the money to go where it always goes?"

Tien "Yes. Where it always goes."

Desta "But, there's already—"

Tien "Where. It. Always. Goes."

"He sighs."

Desta "Fine. No need to get angry, I just wanted to make sure. Again."

Tien "Is that it?"

Desta "Yeah. Go run whatever errands you need to. I'll send the thirty silver."

"I leave without another word, and hope the fresh air does something to alleviate the frustration I've suddenly found myself with."

"I mumble to myself as I move through the streets, hoping it might help."

Tien "I wonder if the money's going to go someplace other than the same place it always goes. Better question her about it again. Like the last fifty times."

"It doesn't."

"Maybe the people of this fine city will alleviate my troubled mind by assisting me in my quest for knowledge."

"Like this fine gentleman. Standing here not doing anything and ripe for the soliciting."

Tien "Excuse me, sir."

"He turns and looks at me. He already looks annoyed that I exist."

"I've never liked the way some people look at me the first time they see me. That eye up and down and then making sure that I'm not just a really pale local with really dark hair."

"It's a nice way to make you feel barely welcomed."

"But I'll just have to put up with it for now."

Man "..."

Man "No."

Tien "What?"

Man "No."

Tien "I haven't... asked you anything yet."

Man "Yes, you have. And I don't care what else you want to ask."

"Time to tap into that inner pesky saleswoman that you've never tapped into before."

Tien "I just need a moment of your time—"

Man "No!"

Tien "I'm just trying to find my friend."

Man "I don't care, I'm busy and you're bothering me."

Tien "I just want to know if you've seen her."

Man "I haven't."

Tien "She's about my age, has a fair tan, was wearing white robes..."

"He seems to at least be paying attention, even if he's not acknowledging anything I say."

Tien "And she has short white hair, which would probably make her stand out a bit."

Man "..."

Man "White hair?"

Tien "Yes, it's cut somewhat short..."

"I try to measure out Mana's hair for the man as he just looks, attentively."

"And he doesn't stop looking after I stop."

Tien "Sir?"

"I barely restrain myself from waving my hand in front of his face."

Tien "Have you seen her?"

Man "No. I haven't."

Tien "Are you—"

Man "I said I haven't seen her."

Tien "But—"

Man "Look, some of us are actually busy and can't run around looking for your girlfriend. Now get out of the way."

"He shoves his way past me and disappears into the crowd."

"A fine city filled with helpful people..."

"After that, I lose track of the people I've spoken to about a young woman in an expensive white robe with white hair and everything else."

"Everyone gives the exact same set of answers."

"Really, white hair? How old are you?"

"Sorry."

"Haven't seen or heard anything about it."

"I saw your wife last night... or husband. Whichever. I'm not picky, just feel insulted."

"Who are you?"

"How much are you paying?"

"Go away."

"It's a wonderfully productive morning. So much so that, before long, it turns into an afternoon."

"I sit slouched over on a bench, sighing with every breath."

Tien "Let's do one more."

"My fortune's bound to turn around. And, if it doesn't, it's not like it can get any worse."

"So I look around for my final opportunity. Busy people are too annoyed to want to be helpful and lazy people always want you to pay them for it."

"So I find someone who looks like neither."

"Sitting on a bench a few yards away is an older woman who looks as though she could crush my head in her hands."

"..."

"Sure, why not?"

Tien "Excuse me."

Woman "Hmm?"

"It's a surprisingly gentle tone from a body that looks so rough."

Tien "Sorry to bother you, but I was just wondering if you might be able to help me."

Woman "..."

"She places a hand over her purse. Which makes her the third person who immediately assumed I was a thief or a beggar."

Woman "With what?"

Tien "I don't need money or anything, I'm just looking for anyone who might have heard about one of my friends."

Woman "Did you lose them?"

Tien "I don't know if that's the best way to..."

Tien "Yes."

Woman "How old is she?"

Tien "About my age..."

Woman "Isn't she a little old to be getting lost?"

Tien "Heh, yeah..."

"I rub the back of my head awkwardly."

Tien "We're both kind of new to the city so neither of us really knows where anything is."

Tien "And I haven't seen her since yesterday."

Woman "What's she look like?"

Tien "She has short white hair, skin a little lighter than yours, and she was wearing a white robe the last time I saw her."

"The woman takes a moment to think it over. Did I do it? Did I find someone who might know something about Mana?"

Woman "White hair?"

Tien "It's pretty odd, so I was hoping someone would have seen or heard something about her."

"She spends a few more moments thinking."

Woman "Sorry, can't say I've seen or heard anything about someone like that. And I would probably remember a younger girl with white hair."

"It seemed so promising too..."

Tien "Oh, that's okay. Thanks anyway."

Woman "Good luck though."

Tien "Yeah..."

"I slink away, defeated."

"Though it may be for the best, since I should probably be getting back about now."

"Hopefully Mana managed to decipher my note and stay where she was and wait for me."

"Better yet, maybe she was even still sleeping and I could hide my scribbles before she had the chance to see them?"

"Regardless, I hurry back home and find the main hall a lot noisier than it was when I left. Everyone's up, it seems."

"I wave to them and thankfully manage to slip past them all without getting dragged into someone's conversation, until I reach the door."

Desta "Tien, can I talk to you for a second."

"Desta seems to make a habit of stopping me just as I'm about to escape."

Tien "Can it wait a minute? I just need to check on something."

Desta "I know you do. That's what this is about."

"..."

"I turn to him."

Tien "You do? It is?"

Desta "Yes."

Tien "Just so I'm clear: we're not talking about money or anything like that, but something that happened yesterday?"

Desta "Yes. We're talking about what woke up in your room and came storming down looking for you."

"Well, hopes dashed."

Tien "I was hoping she wouldn't do that."

Desta "I bet you were."

Desta "So... uhhh... what in three hells is she doing here?"

Tien "I can explain it."

Desta "Can you?"

"Can I?"

Tien "Yeah. Turns out, she was fine. Well, not fine. Just not dead. She looked pretty beat up, but after you all left and I started putting everything together she just sort of woke up."

Desta "She 'woke up'?"

Tien "Yep."

Desta "We checked her before you got there. She was covered in cuts. She wasn't breathing. Her heart stopped. There was blood everywhere."

Desta "You don't just wake up from that."

Tien "I don't know, I'm not a doctor. Maybe it wasn't as bad as you all made it out to be?"

Desta "It's not that hard to figure out that something's dead."

Tien "Why're you looking at me like that? What do you think I did?"

Desta "I have no idea what you did, just that it resulted in a dead woman walking around your room."

Tien "Maybe it was magic. You have that here, right? Shiny lights and priests with face clothes and all that? Maybe that's what it was."

Desta "I don't see how since this is the first time I've heard of someone coming back from the dead."

Tien "Look, I can't say what happened. I'm not a priest or a doctor or shaman or whatever you think I might be, but I've got an evil spirit haunting my room that I need to go appease."

Desta "Things like that don—"

"I hurry out of the room before he has a chance to prolong the conversation."

"That's going to be a problem though. I never planned on keeping her hidden in my room forever, but that doesn't mean that I've come up with something to tell people."

"And I don't want to find out what happens when I show up with her with no explanation."

"For now, though, I have someone else to contend with. And they're right behind this door."

"..."

"Should I knock?"

"It's my room, but someone else is in there now..."

"My knuckles wrap twice against the wood. Better to be safe."

"I don't hear anything from behind the door, so I reach for the handle and slowly push the door open."

"Until it flies open and I'm pulled into the room by the sheer force of it."

"After I finish stumbling in, I look up to see Mana gripping the other side of the door, fully clothed in what I had given her yesterday."

"She slowly closes the door behind me."

Mana "You're back."

Tien "I am."

"I scratch the back of my head awkwardly and give my best attempt at a laugh."

Mana "Why weren't you here when I woke up? I went looking for you and met that one guy who told me I should wait for you here."

Tien "Yeah, he told me about that..."

Mana "I've been waiting for a while..."

Mana "So why weren't you here?"

Tien "Did you read my note? It should have said where—"

Mana "What note?"

"Her head swivels as she looks around the room for it."

"I walk over to the nightstand and retrieve it from under the bowl. Apparently it had been too well secured to be found."

Tien "Here."

"I'm about to hand it over when I decide it might be best to just say where I went and not show off my calligraphy."

"But it's too late, and she's snatched it from my hands."

"It's almost funny watching her head twist as she reads it, until I remember the reason why she's having so much difficulty."

Mana "I think I understand it?"

Tien "It's not that bad!"

"She looks at it again."

Mana "It is."

"She sits down on the bed and throws the note aside."

Mana "Can you just tell me?"