

Waking up's harder than it's been in a while. I'm sore from the fighting, I figure, until I notice the debuff with the broken bed in it.

System Query: Improper sleep, Debuff(Physical/Mental)
You have not slept properly. The reasons could that be your bedding was not appropriate, that you were not protected from the environment, or were unable to sleep long enough to be fully rested.
You suffer a 13% penalty to all dexterity and intelligence based skills
System Note: the penalties can only be removed through getting proper sleep, the use of appropriate healing magic, or the use of buffs to counteract the debuff.
System Note: the debuff is cumulative for each day without proper sleep.

It's yellow, which in this case means it isn't all that bad, since there isn't a timer attached to it, but I hope I get to sleep in a bed tonight.

Brandon and Helen look better than I feel as they roll their bedroll, but Silver seems dazed as she takes her violin out of its case. She plucks the strings, adjusting their tension, then plays a quiet melody. Brandon frowns at her, but goes back to getting the fire going again.

I'm too out of it myself to question her; until I notice the debuff turning green. By the time it's gone, Brandon has a kettle on the fire, and she switches to something more upbeat. The icon is barely visible, but I still focus on it.

System Query: Energized, Type: Buff/physical
You feel energized. You are ready to take on the day.
13% increase to movement speed and physical skills

Silver catches me glancing at her and smiles. When she stops, the icon is yellow with a four-hour timer counting down.

"I didn't know bards had these kinds of spells," Brandon says, crushing dried leaves in three plain wooden cups. "You'd make of one hell of a travel companion."

"We travel a lot, so all the early spell songs we learn are geared toward making that easier."

Brandon's thoughtful as he adds hot water to them. "So you can replace lack of sleep?"

"Not yet. My Get Awake song only removes one night's bad sleep, and I can't stack the song. I need it to reach level thirteen before it will do two nights, and then it adds one for each tree. But there is a Don't Sleep song, which I don't know yet, and only starts having an effect at level thirteen."

"It takes away one night per tree?" Helen asks, then looks at the steaming cups. "Where's mine?"

"I don't know," Brandon replies. "Where ever you packed it, I'm guessing."

She snorts, and a carved cup is in her hand. I don't make out the details, but I see

inlaid metal. Then she had a mortar and pestle in which she places leaves and dried fruits. Brandon rolls his eyes as she mashes them together with an air of indifference. Then she puts the contents in her cup and pours water from the kettle over it.

“I figured you two didn’t have cups,” Brandon says as he hands us one each. “That’s something we’ll need to remedy.”

“You could have had them get one yesterday,” Helen says innocently.

“Was kind of busy thinking about getting us out of Toronto without getting caught by the police or Xander’s men.”

“I’m surprised it took so much thinking,” she replies. “Considering how often that how you leave the city.”

“Thank you,” I say before he can reply. “For the tea.”

He glares at his sister before looking in my direction. “You’re welcome. How are you for food? Even with your buff, Silver, I don’t want to spend anymore time than needed stopped.”

“I have enough jerky for everyone,” I say. “For a while, too. I stocked up on it before getting to the club.”

“I have a few days’s worth of travel cake,” she answers.

“Good. Both things that don’t go bad. Good thinking. Finish your teas and we’ll get moving. We can eat while we walk.” He pauses. “You did think to bring food, right Hel?”

“Why no, Brandon. I figured that you, as the strong man in the family, was going to insist on providing for poor little me.”

He rolls his eyes and drinks.

I exchange a look with Silver. How quickly is this going to take to get old?

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It takes just under an hour to walk out of the fields, then it’s maybe another one to reach West Road, with a caravan moving along it. I hurry ahead, then call out to them, only to skid to a stop as the closest guard turns, hand on her sword, and doesn’t look happy to see me.

“Hi,” I say as she looks beyond me.

She looks at the distance separating us, and I raise my hands.

“Hi,” she says, tone cautious.

“We’re heading in the same direction as you. I was wondering if we could travel together.”

“We don’t take passengers once we leave the market.”

“I was just thinking of walking next to—” I step back as she pulls her sword out a few centimeters.

“I told you, Dennis,” Brandon says. “Caravans don’t let people join them once they leave. Too dangerous.”

“We’re not dangerous,” I protest.

“I’m pretty sure every brigand on the road will claim the same thing,” he replies. “Come on, with the buff we have, we can make better time on our own, anyway.” He taps his forehead as he nods to her and heads alongside the carts, his pace faster than them. Each guard we encounter looks at us warily with a hand on their sword, and one on a pistol.

Helen pulls me when I end up staring at it long enough the man’s expression turns

suspicious.

“It isn’t polite to stare,” she tells me.

I know that, but it’s not everyday you see a pistol. I mean, the only places I’ve seen one before now are in Base’s movies. He has stories about them. They were more prevalent in the early days of the system, but over the years making them and the bullets became tougher without the machines of before, so they aren’t common anymore.

We take a break when the buff expires, just long enough to have more tea, then Silver applies it again, and we’re on the move. We need another one before we reach the rest point and the inn there.

“This doesn’t look good,” Brandon grumbles at the carts on the vast expanse of terrain between the inn and the road.

“Maybe they’re staying with their carts,” I offer.

“Some definitely will, but that’s two caravans’ worth of carts. You might be stuck sleeping in the barn, Hel.”

“I’m okay with sleeping there,” I say, so she won’t feel pushed out.

“I’d prefer a bed,” Silver says, “but I’ll take anything that isn’t the ground.”

I look at Brandon, and he gives me this bewildered expression in return.

Helen snickers, then laughed. “Yes, Brandon, why don’t you also do the gallant thing and make sure we aren’t the only ones suffering?”

“I rough it as much as anyone else,” he replied.

“But only when there’s no one there for you to sweet talk into sharing their bed with you, right?” she asks, tone mocking.

“How about we start by asking the innkeeper?” I offer. “Maybe we’ll get lucky and there’s still a room available.”

Brandon glares at his sister, then turns and heads for the inn.

The building is big. I mean, larger than any I’ve seen, and the construction is all brick. It’s three stories tall, and the roof isn’t wood or clay shingles. It’s metal, and I realize the building might be from before the system. If it is, I’m impressed at the work that went into maintaining it. From the story Base told me, the buildings back then had a lot of parts that needed machines that no longer exist to be repaired.

As soon as Brandon pulls the door open, I can’t hear myself think. There’s a song going on and a lot of people are singing. Something about going home, by the snippets I make out. Silver winces a lot as people go off key more often than not.

The room is large. I can barely make out the back wall, but it’s so crowded Brandon has to push people out of the way for us to make it to the counter, where the singing is suddenly a lot quieter.

“Before you ask,” the woman behind the bar says, “no, you can’t hang out here. This is just for getting service. They should quiet down soon enough.”

“My dear lady,” Brandon says, smiling. “I had no intention of interfering with your business. Although you are making offering to help you highly difficult to resist.”

She snorts good naturedly. “Buddy, do you have any idea how many try a line like that on me, just so they won’t have their eardrums burst.”

He puts his elbows on the counter and leans forward, lowering his voice slightly. “Tell me what to do, and I shall.”

“How about I have you scrub the plates?”

“Once we’ve settled if you have rooms my companions and I can rent, point me to them.”

“You’re serious?” she asks, stunned.

“My lady, I am a great many things. What I am not, is in the habit of disappointing a fine lady such as yourself.”

“He’s got himself a room,” Helen mutters softly, annoyed, “even if we don’t.”

The woman looks us over, then at Brandon. “I can’t spare much. Had a runner get here not long before you letting me know there’s another caravan that’s going to be here after dark.”

“Then, if it’s the barn for us, so be—”

“It’s not going to be the barn. I can spare you a room, but it only has one bed. There is floor space.”

“I’m okay with the floor,” I say.

“What about it, Hel?” Brandon asks. “Will you cede the bed to Silver, considering she’s responsible for us making it here before the caravan?”

“I’m okay sharing,” Silver hurries to say.

“Will I even fit?” Helen asks.

“We get enough tall folks that we have beds for them,” the innkeeper answers. “It’s long enough for you. It’ll be a hundred and fifty.”

“My lady,” Brandon says, but she has a finger on his lips.

“That’s already contingent on you scrubbing plates. When the caravan gets here, I’ll be able to ask double that for it. So don’t push your luck.”

He moves the hand away gently, then kisses the top of it. “As my lady says.”

I’m surprised it took this long, considering how forward Brandon’s been, but she blushes.

There is a system exchange between them, then he leads us to stairs and up them. From there, I see that the entire ground floor is one room, with columns among tables that there are all occupied. I can’t imagine more people fitting in there.

The room is at the end of the hall, and, as the innkeeper said, there’s plenty of floor space. With only a bed, the length of the left wall taking some of it. The singing’s stopped, but the din of conversation makes it through the floor.

“Okay,” Brandon says, slapping his hands together. “You get comfortable. I have an appointment with plates.”

“Is it okay if I mingle in the dining room?” Silver asks. “I’m sure they’ll have stories to tell.”

Brandon considers her, then me. “Okay, just so we’re clear. I don’t expect you to stay locked in the room. The door will only open for us, so you can come and go as you please. Inns are safe places, so nothing bad should happen. Don’t get careless, because that’s not system enforced. It’s just that people know better than to piss off the rare place where they can get out from the wild. But there are still idiots out there. Leave valuables in here, and if you need to leave the inn, let me or Hel know. Otherwise, enjoy the evening.” He grins. “I certainly will.”

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