

THE VALLEY OF
TEN CRESCENTS

Thieves at Heart



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Chapter 1

Out of The Dregs

"Tavi, I really wish you weighed more, girl. You can never pull these things tight enough!" Prisca the Tart stood up from the bed, examining the ties of the corset in the full length mirror. A look of disappointment came over the woman's highly painted face as she looked over the leather chords that criss-crossed her back. "Come now, sweets, use those tiny fingers of yours and fix what you've done."

"Yes, mam," came the quiet voice, the girl's head bowed as she went to work. The little girl was tall for what her face said her age was and skinny, her hair dark and greasy, barely long enough to cover her slightly pointed ears. One of them had been mutilated; where there was supposed to be a point was instead a straight line, pink and tender where a knife had cut the cartilage away. Her hair had been shaved a few weeks back to get rid of lice. "Can't have bugs

hopping about when I'm on business," Prisca had said as she had shaved the knotty black locks off. Tavi remembered how she looked in the mirror after the haircut and how she had cried so pitifully, her sunken in eyes becoming bloodshot and her face smudged with dirt and tears. Prisca had tried to comfort her by assuring her that she wasn't the only girl on the Row who had had to get her hair cut off before and that a dip in lice-kill would have been worse. Slender, nimble fingers tugged at the chords that were already warm from the woman's body heat, and the little girl coughed slightly as she worked, pulling back on the ties as hard as she could.

"You're not coming down with something now, are you?" Prisca asked, breathing in sharply as the little girl found a very loose spot and tugged hard. "The minute you start feeling ill, you must let me know so I can get you something for it. Can't have sickness about, you know."

"Just clearing my throat, mam" she said, untying the tie she had made at the top and placing her tiny foot on the woman's ample

backside, leaning back with all of what was her weight and grunting as she did so, the woman holding onto the bed frame as she did so. The girl frowned with a mouth that was slightly too big for her face though a pretty shape, and she carefully tied a bow at the bottom, making sure the chords were the same length at the ends. "I still don't understand why I have to do this if you're to take it off anyway?"

"Oh, Tavi dear." Satisfied with the tautness of the garment, the woman turned to look in the mirror again, tucking a blonde curl behind one ear while letting another fall across her face. "You're a bit young to understand, but I'll teach you in time. I don't know how you elfy ones grow, but I suspect sooner than later you'll be ready to answer calls, with the Priestess' blessing. But you really must start eating more and eating the things I tell you to. You're far too thin! Can't have men thinking they'll snap you in two."

A bell above the door chimed, the dented metal causing it to ring strangely as it did. Prisca clapped her hands merrily, reaching over for a vial

of scented oil she had been gifted recently. It smelled like something Tavi had smelled before but couldn't place. Prisca said it was distilled moonflower and something the girl had never heard of that made men wild. The woman turned the bottle over on her finger and dabbed between her breasts before running the still shining finger across her neck, the way someone might do to indicate that they were going to slit someone's throat. She placed the bottle back on the bed stand; it had been a gift from the person she was expecting and she had told Tavi it was good to have gifts out when the customers came. Excitement made the woman bounce up and down on the mattress, her hands clasped over her heart as she did. "This could be it! I think it is. Make yourself scarce now and have at it, you know what to do." Before the Tart was even done with her orders, the little girl had ducked into the space between the walls as always, careful to place the upholstered chair close enough to the secret hiding place so that she could reach it easily and to hide her as she did her task.

When she had originally started picking the pockets of customers for Prisca the Tart, the anticipation had always filled her with fear and excitement. After a few months of sliding back the hidden panel and rummaging around for coins, charms or other things the men would never report to the local authorities, it became mundane, almost easy. However, today was different. Tonight was the New Moon, and as Prisca the Tart had always done on the New Moon, she and Brass Sera and Kind Gia had gone down to the soothsayer to have their fortunes told for the month. The soothsayer, wizened with time, hands curled with the tightening sickness had turned over the cards for Prisca and informed her that from a secret place, a boon would be in her room before the moon went down. Dark, young eyes could make her benefactor out from behind the false wall, see her large bosom rise and fall with each breath. Tavi couldn't let her mam down. Her stomach fluttered as she considered what good fortune would come their way. What would the men have in their pockets? Maybe someone with

a good deal of money would take Prisca "into his pocket" and by default, Tavi would be lucky as well. Her mouth felt dry and she licked her lips, waiting, her heart pounding as the sound of booted feet came closer.

The door opened and for a moment, no one walked in. Then Prisca clapped her hands joyfully and the man entered, closing the door behind him. She thought she recognized the boots and strained her ear to listen to what the grown ups were saying.

"Ah, Prisca...beautiful as always," came the deep voice, muffled slightly by distance and wood. His boots were well worn but had once been fine, a deep mahogany brown color that was offset with tarnished, metal buckles. There was something funny about the heels of the boots and the sound they made whenever he walked in, but the girl could never quite place her finger on it. Prisca stood up from the bed, only to stop short, laughing raucously as the man rushed towards her and threw her down onto the straw filled mattress.

This was the part that Tavi was interested in, though not for the reason other people would have had a listen or peeped in. Sometimes Prisca and her clients would talk for a while, the Tart pouring them a glass of beer perhaps or allowing them to read her things they had written. The more time they spent doing this, the longer Tavi had to sit in the wall, waiting for an opportune time to get to work. On one occasion a fellow had talked to her mam for so long, Tavi's legs had both fallen asleep to the point that Prisca had to pry her out of the wall, laughing the whole time and apologizing to the crying thing. But this man whose boots she liked and wondered at was making good and quick on his money. She listened to be sure that they were fully occupied with one another, the bed squeaking and rustling with their movement before she slid back the tiny panel in the wall.

She had examined the jacket he had tossed carelessly onto the small couch. It was a typical jacket, with the pockets facing her which would make her job even easier. Depending on

whether the event was "quick and painless," as her Mother had told her most business transactions were, Tavi would decide if she should check for inner pockets, where most of the better items were hidden. Her hand was wrist deep in the left hand pocket when she heard Prisca squeal and the man say something that made the woman laugh. Tavi smiled to herself, a small, excited smile that happened within the dark between the walls. A deeper inspection would be made.

The little girl took a deep breath before sliding her hand out, sliding it over the fabric and through the folds, searching for the inner pocket that came standard in jackets. A lip of fabric brushed against her fingertips and she grinned, listening carefully before letting her fingers slip into the surprisingly silky soft lining and into the hidden pocket. She felt something cold and hard, her tongue slipping its way past her lips as she wondered what it could be, her fingers trailing over the length of the object...a dagger?

Before her question could be answered and

before she even realized what was happening, there was a loud thump and the shock of her wrist being grabbed firmly by a strong hand. She squeaked and tried to pull her hand back, horrified to have her hand not move at all and was then knocked unconscious when whoever was holding onto her pulled her with such force, she smashed her head into the wall and went blank.

The sound of a match being struck and the smell of sulfur eased the girl's senses into consciousness, though she stayed still as she tried to make sense of where she was. Her head still throbbed but she could tell it was still fairly dark where she was. Under her bare legs and scraping her neck was the scratchy feel of loose straw and the smell of wet stones was close. She could hear someone walking around and then the black turned to shadows and oranges, a man sitting on a chair in front of her. She moved her hands, bound at the wrists and looked to him, large dark eyes shining in the candlelight. Her mouth was dry and she felt like crying but she

swallowed and managed to speak, her voice sounding less brave than she had hoped it would. "Where...where am I?" The question bounced around the room in a way that made her feel small. A drip of water that splashed to the ground sounded louder than her question and she chewed her lip as she kept back her tears.

The man with the interesting boots chuckled, a low melodic laugh that suggested that she had just told a joke. He leaned forward on his chair, pressing his fingertips together and looking right at her, his dirty blond hair slicked back and his scruffy face looking menacing in the small dancing light. His deep blue eyes and angled features were familiar to her eyes, though they were roughened by a lack of a shave and fatigue that showed in his face but not his eyes. He had been coming to her mam all through the last three seasons and was a favorite of Prisca. Derk was able to conjure up whatever the girls needed and even brought her something when she had pressed on Prisca to ask him for it. On occasion the girl had noticed him watching her from time to

time but Prisca had always guarded her from him, never letting Tavi keep him company if she wasn't there and instructing him not to answer any questions he put on her. His name was Derk and Prisca said he was well known among certain circles though 'The Lurk' disappeared when he needed to. He was here now, though and he brought the match to the pipe he had in his hands, pulling on it gently with a quiet breath. She could hear the tobacco crackling and the smoke tickled her nose. He shook the match out before he flicked it to the floor. Even in the dark, his eyes were intense and he was staring at her, pinning her down to the hay with his gaze. He crossed his arms over his chest and smiled faintly, the smoke of the pipe drifting off to nowhere. "Where d'yah think you are...Tavi, is it? Where do the dregs always wind up?"

Tavi drew her breath in sharply, her eyes wide with fright. The Jugs? Panic set in and her chest heaved as she started hyperventilating, worry squeezing at her tiny heart and lungs. Prison. He had caught her stealing from him and

he had turned her in. She had heard stories about the horrors of prison, the solitude, the labor, the physical punishments. But she was just a little girl, wasn't she? Why would he turn her in? She hadn't taken anything, not really? But here she was, surrounded by stone and nothing but hay beneath her and the table before her and the form of a man who had knocked her unconscious with a flick of his wrist. Before she could scream as she so desperately needed to, a shock of cold water slapped her in the face, dripping over her and soaking into her worn clothing. The second shock snapped her brain away from her terror and the man shook he gently, his laughter sounding more nervous than comic this time.

"Come to, now, I was only playing," he said, jostling the girl and smacking her lightly across the cheeks. Her mouth popped open like a fish as she gasped for air and cried, the shock still running through her regardless of the man's words. "It was only a joke. Hey, get a hold of yourself, you're not in prison. Though you've a fear of the Jugs. Means you'll do your best to stay

out of 'em. Means you'll do."

She was dropped down onto the pile of hay, the man walking back to his chair to sit. Tavi took a moment to catch her breath and let the shock of the horrible joke melt away. Her mouth was dry and her head still ached but her childish curiosity kept her from passing out again. "Do what?" she managed to say and this time it almost sounded like a demand and not a cry for help, kneeling in the hay. "What'll I do? And what did you do with mam? Did you hurt her?" For the first time she remembered Prisca, barely remembering the shrill scream that was not her own before she went dark. "If you hurt her-"

"So, you've a bit of fire in your belly, as I thought." The man laughed again, reaching into his pack and pulling out something circular, the other hand pulling out a small knife, the blade glinting rather merrily in the scant light. "You'll do for me what you were doing for her, though more of it, and better eventually. No hiding behind walls and such. As for that woman you call 'mam, who ain't your mother, now...well, she's safe and

sound."

"She'll want me back, you know, she'll come and get me," Tavi declared, her back as straight as she could hold it through her weariness, the ropes starting to dig into her wrists. The adrenaline surge that had come with her panic now sought to serve her in her assertion. Her hair fell into her face but she couldn't brush it away. "Y'can't keep me here. I'm hers, fair and square, I'm her girl. You'll have to take me back."

"Except that she gave you up, dear... Tavera. Tavera is your full name, right?" He cocked his head to the side, the light making the angles of his face sharper, more angular and she would have cowered if she wasn't trying to be brave at the moment. Derk let the circle in his hand into the light to reveal an apple, red and green on the outside with a leaf still attached to the stem. He cut a piece of the apple off, bringing the white crescent to his mouth and taking a bite of it, crunching it as he seemed to be thinking and the smell of the apple mixed with the tobacco made her stomach rumble. He must have heard

because he looked towards her. "She won't be looking fer you, at least I don't suppose she shall, seeing as how she gave you up to save her business."

What? Tavi felt as if her joints had gone cold and then melted, though her face was hot with shame and anger. Her head fell towards the hay to hide her face and she hoped it was too dark for him to see. "It...it ain't true, what you say...' she spoke down, into the hay. 'She wouldn't do that. She...mam...."

"She loved you? Meh, I've been on the streets longer than you've been alive, little one, and I can assure you, no mum ever raised up her girl to lift her skirts for blueies and bits of ribbon. But I'm guessing you know nothing of proper mothers or fathers." He cut off another piece of the apple and ate it rather purposefully, chewing it carefully and swallowing it loudly, standing up from his chair and walking slowly towards Tavi, his figure looming in the balance between the light from the candle and the darkness of the room..

"But you've no need to worry, little Tavi. I've

been watching you fer quite some time and I know what you can do and I know what you'll be able to do. And, like a real father teaches his children, I intend to take it upon myself to teach you. No more picking pockets of poor saps and coming up with blue bits or rinds of cheese. No more stealing sausages off the spits and burning your hands for what you foolishly deem a feast. I've a plan and an interest in you. And I can assure you, I won't be giving you up to no one. You're my girl, now, and I'm your pa." He knelt down by the little girl, supporting her with one arm and bringing the apple up to her mouth. At first she didn't understand what he was doing but he pushed the apple towards her mouth. She could smell how sweet it was and finally she bit down into it, half expecting him to pull it away, but hoping he wouldn't. He fed her the apple, not minding when the juice dripped down onto his hand and she gobbled it down, the bit of food bracing her against her weariness. When the apple was done, he drew the core away, tossing it into a corner and standing up, brushing his hands on his pants.

"Now, there's a party upstairs I am expected and I don't want you there. It ain't for little girls and you look as if you could sleep fer a week and I expect you too. I'm keeping you tied up for now but I'll be back soon and then we'll be off." He bowed to her in a comical way but his jest didn't make the little girl any less frightened. He chuckled when she didn't and grabbed his pipe off the table before he grabbed a hat that had also been sitting there.

"Wait, what if the candle goes out? Where're we goin' after this? Why are you doing this?" She threw all these questions at him. The man had already reached up and grabbed hold of a rope that she just now realized was there and had pulled down a set of stairs halfway down, the light from above ground seeming warm and inviting. He turned around, still holding onto the rope, the expression on his face quizzical.

"You'll be out again before the light goes out and as to where we're goin', I'll know by the end of my party. And as to why...I don't feel like explaining now. You're a little girl, and I don't

have to. But by Her Tits, it's for your own good." He bowed again, more deeply, then pulled down the stairs, walking briskly up the steps, his boots making the same strange sound they had before.

For her own good? She trembled slightly as she laid herself down on the hay, trying to get comfortable with her hands behind her back. What he had said frightened her and excited her. Her own good? What did that mean? It didn't seem like it would be a bad thing. But Prisca had said cutting all her hair off was for 'her own good.' But what of Prisca? Hadn't she promised the girl to care for her, buying her toys and biscuits, keeping her safe from the men who had asked after her...had she given her up that easily? Tavi swallowed the lump that had formed her throat, sniffing to keep new tears from falling across her face. She'd been sold before, so why would a prostitute's silly promises count for anything? When had anything anyone said turned out to be true? The little girl felt her weariness well up suddenly, the candlelight fading slowly as her eyes fluttered closed, her thoughts making a final

circle as they started to fade into dreams. Maybe things with Derk would be different. Maybe this man would love her and she would finally have just a bit of good in her life. Maybe he wouldn't leave her somewhere for someone else to prey upon. Of all the times she had encountered him before he didn't seem malicious or cruel. Maybe he meant it what he said. A smile curled the corners of her mouth as she settled into the hay. It didn't seem nearly as scratchy as it had before and before the candle wobbled three times before her drooping eyes, she was fast asleep.

Chapter 2

A Contract of Emotion

Shortly after they arrived in the city of Southwick, the lessons began. The lessons were varied and were meant to teach different things. One of the first things The Lurk taught her was self defense.

“Now I'm sure you've noticed by now that ladies and men have different parts to them”, he said as he flicked the butt of his cigarette into the gutter, the acrid smell mixing with the stench of the open sewer. His shirt sleeves were rolled up and he set his booted feet firmly on the cobbled street, sniffing as he did. “Now this is where you've a bit of an advantage, Tavi dear. If any man grabs you for any reason and you want him off quick, just hit him betwixt and off he goes. Don't show any mercy or you're more likely to piss the man off. Grab, kick, bite if you have to but make it count and then run. If for some reason you can't reach 'em or you're up against a woman, a quick thump to the nose works as well.” He lightly boxed

her on the nose, tears welling up in her eyes, making the alley seem like a blur of browns and blacks for just a few breaths. "But much harder," he said, "try to draw more than tears."

They stayed in a room above an tavern, Tavi allowed to sleep in the bed and the Lurk taking a chair by the door. Whenever they walked down the creaky stairs to the bar, he was always very kind to the tender who he called Brags and introduced Tavi to him as Kiffer. This had made the old man cleaning glasses with a dirty rag laugh and he had offered her an apple from behind the bar every time he had seen her. She always took it and, as Derk had told her, thanked him.

"You must be careful not to shit where you eat, Tavi. Few people will truly deserve your kindness but if they do, give it to them. In the line of work we're in, few trust us, though many more falsely say they do. When you move about a lot a friendly face is worth more than a grip of blues."

It was from Derk that she had learned her numbers and her letters. After most lessons, Derk

would light his pipe, sit upon the nearest thing he could sit upon and say, "Now take care to recall this, as there'll be a test." This had distressed Tavera greatly and finally one afternoon, after another self defense bout that had actually left Derk with a bloody nose she admitted that she had no knowledge of cipher or script. "Tits of ivory, you can't write or do figures?" He had laughed incredulously, red blood still trickling from his nose as he did so that it dripped onto his shirt.

Only after a bit of time did he finish laughing and then he cleaned up properly and put his arm around her, grabbing his pack on the way out of the alley. "I shouldn't be surprised, not like whores need instructions to get it done. Toss a bottle down an alley, and it's over." Tavera had stiffened as he spoke. Her thoughts of Prisca resurfaced and a lump formed in her throat as she thought of the time she had spent with Prisca and how the woman had betrayed her. "Come now, don't think upon her, she can't hurt you anymore," he had said, knowing what she had been thinking. He had taken her to a small shop and

gotten her a tablet, some chalks and they used coins that the Lurk had won at gambling to study numbers.

Sometimes he wouldn't feed her for days, unleashing her onto the street, telling her she would subsist on what she could get. She would roam the markets, gazing sideways yet forlornly at the food, watching carefully, sighing heavily and at the most opportune moment, when her ears buzzed with excitement but when she was able to best control it, she would strike, small hands and wiry fingers darting out, skinny legs walking casually to where she would be able to enjoy her food in peace.

One day after acquiring a rather delicious piece of dried fish, she had turned the corner only to walk right into the Lurk, shouting out in surprise and falling back as she did. He had picked up the piece of fish and sniffed it rather thoughtfully, running it under his nose like a fine cigar.

"This is what you have going for you now, Tavera dear, and listen to me. You don't stand out. Many children are obnoxious and call attention to

themselves. They tug on skirts and caterwaul. I imagine misfortune has made this path unavailable to you as a way to get what you need, but you have turned necessity into a gift. When one looks upon you, they see a sad waif. Nothing special, even with your ear and that skin of yours that hints at something else. Floating about sadly, most likely to wind up adrift in the gutters some day, that's what people see, those that don't know any better. And then you strike and they're none the wiser.

This will work for now, while you're young and skinny and pathetic looking. But what happens when those years of change come? You're not much to look at now but I've seen plenty ugly little girls grow up to have looks that'd destroy men's egos and burn through purses. People will be watchin' you. Not now but once you've grown some, you will have eyes upon you. Please, keep this in mind"

"Which brings me to another point," he said, sniffing the fish again, the girl's mouth watering as she thought about how good it would

taste, the tender, smoky flesh tinged with just the right amount of salt, the crunchy bits she would save for last. He eyed the girl for a good minute before he went on, dangling the fish in front of her. "Watch your Ws. We're thieves, and fine ones. Well, I'm a fine one and you're only my student for now. Stupid thieves, sloppy thieves, lazy ones turn the same tricks all the time. In through the window, out the back door, blade to the purse strings. Do not let this get boring and always learn or be willing to do so. Change it all the time or the clackers will have a set of bracelets on you before the fun is over. To be unstoppable you must be unpredictable and un...well, when I think of the word, I'll tell you."

She stuck her tongue out at him and tried to grab the fish but he pulled it away at the last second and laughed, grinning at her. "And by her luminous breasts, get away from the guards before they have you by the wrists in metal. Not because you won't be able to get out of them but because it's better they think you're a common criminal than know who you really are or in your

case, what you're going to be.” At this, he had ripped the fish carefully in two and handed one of the pieces to Tavi, eating his portion gingerly and never speaking if his mouth was full of food. She gobbled hers up rather messily, considering his words as she chewed and gulped, not bothering to save any of it for later. When she was done eating, he gave her a handful of last years dried ground apples for a treat.

He introduced her to a variety of colorful figures, never calling them by their true names. Tavi soon learned that though he was acquainted with all the men he introduced her to (as Kiffer), he knew some men better than others, to the point where he actually knew their given names. These names were never spoken in public and rarely in private company. It was in Brags' bar that she met Snitch Bigguns, a man with a giant nose and an ego to match; Merl, a man handy with cards and called upon when a joke was in order; Vamp the Lilter a man whose fine, falsetto singing voice never hinted at the beatings the man could deliver when provoked. All these men and more knew the

Lurk and delighted in the Kiffer, plying her with treats and blues, giving her sips of their drinks and asking her when she would be kind enough to play snakesman for them.

“What's the Cup of Cream?” she asked the Lurk one afternoon as they sat in the bar. She had just taken a sip of the watered down stout that Brags served children and the dark brown foam fizzled above her lip. Derk quickly scanned the room before he turned his eyes back on her and taking out his pocket handkerchief, leaned over the table, wiping her mouth before setting the hanky on the table top and smiling.

“So, you do catch on,” he said, lacing his fingers around the mug of beer, turning in his seat slightly so that his body cheated away from the rest of Brags' clientèle. He took a long sip before he peered at Tavi, keen blue eyes staring straight into her. “Do you remember the little trick I played on you, when we first met? Remember what I said?”

Tavi frowned slightly, her large mouth still wet with beer. That hadn't been a funny trick, she

had thought but everything since then had been fine, better than her life before. The half elf girl enjoyed the instructions she received from Derk and the smile she got from him when she came back with something good had made her heart beat quickly in her chest and her cheeks warm with happiness. There was a wish to make him happy and so she tried to think of what he had told her, blinking her dark eyes. She pushed a dark streak of hair out of her face and shrugged. "The dregs...the dregs wind up in the Jugs."

"And what does cream do?" he asked, leaning over slightly, his voice low and even. Tavera leaned back in her seat, gulping slightly as she tried to think of the right thing to say.

"It...it rises to the top." She was fairly certain that this was the answer and the smile that played behind Derk's eyes told her that she was right. He nodded, leaning over the table again, this time to tussle her hair.

"Right you are, Tavi dear, The Cream always rises to the top. The Dregs fall to the bottom. And we, well I am part of the Cream. Me

and my mates and if you keep going the way you're going, you'll be up there with us. We're a small club, tight knit though some knots are tighter than others, if you catch my meaning. Not everyone I show you off to is in on it, but you'll soon be able to piece it out or you'll have to. Just ask me when we're alone, you and I, if you ain't sure. That's another thing you should learn, when to ask question, what kinds of questions to ask, things of that nature. By her heaving chest, I should be writing this all down and keeping track, now, shouldn't I?"

The most lasting lesson that Derk the Lurk taught Tavera was not meant to be a lesson at all. He had sent Tavera off with a few coins to the Fence to buy him some of the tobacco he liked so much, telling her to be quick as he was almost out. The little girl cut through the alleys, running over the cobbled streets as quickly as she could, trying to outrun the stench of decay and refuse that permeated the streets in this particular part of town. Turning a corner, an arm darted out and grabbed a hold of her, twisting her arm backwards

before she could react. The coins fell to the ground, clinking melodiously as a filthy hand covered her mouth, callouses rendering her teeth useless, her small frame lifted off the ground.

She tried to scream, twisting and writhing in her attacker's arms but her attempts to escape drew his sordid frame around her tighter, almost suffocating her. It was dark in the alley, the dim light of the main street seeming to back away from her as she kicked, one of her boots flying off of her feet as nails dug into her and horrible words hissed in her ear, words of prediction that drew muffled shrieks. Then there was a whistling sound, a jerk and suddenly she was released. Tavi fell to the ground, crying out as the sharp rocks pounded into her bare knees, gasping as she tried to breath.

She turned around to see what had happened, a filthy man with green rotten teeth and calloused hands lying on his back, blood gurgling from his mouth. Out of the shadows stepped two figures: one hooded and wearing a long, green scarf, his gloved hands wielding a

crossbow. The other was Derk, his eyes two points of blue fire set in a face of stone. The fingers on his right hand moved and a dagger produced itself out of thin air, the two men walking past her and circling around her assailant.

Derk said something that she couldn't make out but the air seemed to burn with his words of intense, concentrated hatred. He spat to the side, the man in the hood matching his gait, cocking the crossbow back loudly. The man on the ground arched his back and Tavera could see the remnants of a bolt in his back, his blood mingling with the slick wetness of the cobblestones, the man blubbering something about a misunderstanding, that he was only playing and that the little girl was overreacting to a joke.

The man on the ground gasped in pain, the milky whites of his eyes shining as Derk and the stranger stood over him, the dagger glinting, its light seeming to whisper a prophecy in the dark. Tavera drew in her breath as the light of the dagger disappeared and then glowed once more,

darker, redder, dripping with a slowing tempo as the man on the ground wheezed and then stopped moving.

“Worthless,” Derk said, looking up to his comrade, nodding to him quickly. “Many thanks, Jezlen,” he said, turning his attention to the little girl. The dagger was still dirty with the dead man's blood, but his eyes had softened, his empty hand outstretched towards her. “Tavera,” he said quietly, not sure if the girl was in shock or not. “Tavera, are you alright? Did he hurt you?”

She managed to shake her head but found her legs unable to work. She couldn't cry, she told herself, holding back the whimpers that threatened to erupt into tears. Derk walked up to her and scooped her up, stepping lightly over the body.

“I'm sorry, Derk,” she said, crying into his shoulder, wrapping her arms around his neck. “I tried to do what you told me but he picked me up so fast, I couldn't do nothing, I'm sorry.” He shushed her gently, bending down to pick her up and shushing her, telling her it wasn't her fault and

that he understood.

“What now, Dershik?” For a moment , Tavera wondered who the hooded man was talking about, her eyes setting upon Derk as she realized that the hooded man was talking to him. Dershik must be his real name and Jezlen must in the Cup. Dershik, or Derk the Lurk shrugged, wiping his blade on the dead man's clothes, clutching the girl to him tightly.

“I doubt anyone will miss this sorry bastard. Find her boot.” he said. Still holding Tavera to him with one arm, he pulled out his flask, unscrewed the lid with his teeth and poured it over the already stinking body. “We're off to Portstown, if you need us.”

Tavera could swear she could see a smile gleam from within the hood, the hooded fellow uncocking his crossbow and holstering it within his cloak. The other man walked a few steps down the alley and bent down, picking her boot up off the ground and handing it over to the other. “Portstown, eh?” he said, his voice having a strange accent to it, mirth in the stranger's voice.

"I hear Celeel is there."

"Old Gam? Yah don't say? Well maybe I'll pop by for a smoke and a bit to show off little Tavi. What say you?" Tavera looked up, her large dark eyes meeting his, her large mouth still in a rather pathetic pout but her eyes void of tears. He kissed her soundly on the forehead, the first time he had done so, before he slipped her boot back onto her foot. Holding into her firmly as he stepped over the body, free arm stretched towards his friend.

"Take care of yourself and the little one," the man called Jezlen said and the two men embraced, the man careful not to touch Tavera as they did. "And tell Old Gam I still dislike her."

"She still dislikes you, I'm sure of it." Derk turned and they left. When Tavera looked down the alley, Jezlen was gone, but the body was still there, lifeless, the rats already scurrying out of the shadows to claim their share.

Derk, Dershik, her adopted father, had killed a man to protect her. There was something frightening about knowing this but something comforting, a kind of peace that seemed to

envelope them both as they walked down alleys she had never been through before and mounted a horse that was soon directed out of the city. Derk was her father and she knew it now. He had done something heroic to save her, been there in her time of need. Isn't that what a father was? Someone to protect her when she needed protecting? Someone to be there for her? Someone to love her enough to do so.

The steady rhythm of the horses motion was soothing and she could feel Derk's heart beating in his chest. She smiled as she cuddled up to the man who wrapped his cloak around her protectively and Tavera felt warm and comfortable, both inside and out. "I love you poppa," she said quietly. Whether he heard it or returned the sentiment was unknown to her. The words said, the little girl closed her eyes and fell into a deep, happy sleep.

Chapter 3

Misconceptions & Miscommunications

“By her paps, girl, what in the hells are you doing?” Derk placed a hand over his eyes and entered the room, closing the door firmly behind him. Tavera stopped mid motion, looking over her shoulder at her pa, then to the onion in her hand, her face void of shame but instead painted with the annoyance most adolescents had. She took a deep breath and resumed what she was doing, not caring if the man was in the room or not.

“What's it look like I'm doing?” she asked incredulously. “I'm rubbing an onion on my tits to make 'em grow bigger.”

Derk half succeeded in stifling a laugh, almost dropping the cigarette he was starting to roll. He finally didn't bother to hold back but instead let out a highly amused laugh, crossing the small room they were sharing as he did. “You mean to say to make 'em grow at all,” he chuckled, avoiding the evil look he knew she was giving him. The man laid on the bed and brought

the end of the cigarette to his lips, not bothering to light it but letting it dangle there as he spoke to her, enjoying the comfort of the unmade bed.

Tavera had grown quite a bit since he had taken her under his wing. Her limbs which had once been gangly and too long for her body were now better proportioned and muscled lightly. Her mouth had lost its pathetic drooping and now was pert and full, more apt to be quick with a quip or joke than a sigh or a whimper. She'd be beautiful in a few more years, he thought, though more than likely she would lack in the womanly endowments she so desperately wanted. He put his free hand behind his head and stared at her bare back, watching as she continued to rub the onion on her chest. "That's as big a load of shit I've ever heard," he offered at last, blond eyebrows raising on his face. "Who told you that?"

"Old Gam did, last time I sawed her," she said, her voice rich with false wisdom. The sound of Derk's laughter made her purse her lips in anger and her face grew hot with annoyance with him.

“Old Gam? I've seen what she's got 'tween her neck and belly and I wouldn't put any stock in what she's got to say.” He tried to stifle his laughter as the girl slammed the onion onto the table and hurriedly pulled her blouse back in, fumbling with the ties as she knotted them. Derk took a deep breath, trying to push all the amusement from his voice before speaking to his adopted daughter again. “Sides, why're you so keen on growing before your meant to? You're still young, I think, you've time enough.”

Tavera didn't say anything but kept his back to him, staring at the wall in front of her. Derk narrowed his eyes and took the cigarette out of his mouth, the one end getting too wet with his spit. “What, is there some boy you're looking after?”

Tavera whipped around, her short, dark hair flying into her face and the look on her face told him that he was right although she was already protesting loudly. Derk shook his head and made an exasperated sound, looking around the room for something to light his smoke with.

"No, no, no, no, no. I don't want you running round with boys or doing stupid things just so they like you. It'll end badly, take my word."

"Take your word?" she half shouted, her voice squeaking as she did. "I ain't never seen you with any women ever, save ma and Old Gam. What d'you know 'bout relations?"

"Relations?" He found a match in a pocket of his pack and struck it on the table, lighting the lamp first and then his cigarette. Derk took a deep drag, holding the acrid smoke in his lungs as he spoke to the girl, hoping the activity would relax him. "This ain't about relations, this is about young people acting foolish and getting into shit they shouldn't be." He exhaled quickly, almost choking on the last bit of smoke and pointing a finger at her. "You start liftin' yer skirts fer boys who like big tits, you'll get into the kind of trouble I won't be able to help you with. You'll wind up like Daffy Helk."

Tavera blinked her dark eyes and leaned back a bit. She didn't understand what her father was implying. "What d'ya mean? He's crazy

'cause he's old. That's what the priestess said."

"She just said that 'cause she thought you was too little to know," he said taking another drag, sitting back in his chair and propping his still booted feet on the bed. "But obviously, the truth would serve better in this case. He's like that 'cause he's ploughed too many women."

Was he telling the truth? Tavera kept her dark eyes narrowed, her arms crossed over her flat chest as she looked over her father's face, trying to read him. Sometimes he did just say things in jest with her but this time he looked sincere, his blue eyes shining with earnestness. Tavera thought about the old man who wandered the town. He was disgusting and seemed to be wasting away, sores on his fingers and face a clear sign that he was to be kept away from. He was always mumbling to himself and falling over things, the people in the alleys he frequented staying away from him. How could that be caused by women? She shook her head no. "You're just saying that to scare me."

"I ain't lying. Every body knows when you

sleep with too many people, you give away too much of yerself and you fall apart. His brain ain't right 'cause he's got too many women in there and not enough of him to keep himself together."

"That don't make no sense," she said. "Why don't faithful folk go mad then? Wouldn't they be giving themselves too?"

"They give themselves to the same person though, so themselves is already there. They're just changing it back and forth and coming home to it every night."

"What are they giving?" she asked, her voice more filled with curiosity than disbelief. Derk took another drag, his face tranquil as he exchanged what he knew to be correct, glad to have changed the tone of their conversation.

"Their humors, their personality, themselves. Why d'yah think children look and act like their parents? Even if they've never been around them, they always act like 'em, or at least one of em."

"Why ain't the brass crazy, then? They sleep with men all the time and most of them have

more sense than most.” At this, she saw Derk stiffen, sitting up in his chair more; whenever she mentioned prostitutes he behaved this way, growing graver and always speaking poorly of their profession and behaviors.

“They don't give themselves to anyone,” he said quickly, flicking the cigarette with such agitation, the bit that held the flame popped out, rolling across the table with its menacing glow. He reached over for the pitcher, pouring more than enough water on it to put it out, the excess dripping off the table and onto the floor. “They don't put any emotions into it, only desire for gain. But I've seen men driven mad by 'em.”

“Well, maybe I can do the same,” she shot, flouncing her way to her pack, kneeling down to look for the long, blue ribbon Derk had bought her for her hair. She tied it carefully, feeling the top of her head to be sure it was in the right place. “Maybe you got me too late and I'm like them after all.

He laughed out loud and Tavera cringed inwardly. She could hear the melancholy in his laugh and

finally she felt ashamed, having made her father think on something sad and maybe causing him grief with his words. She walked over to Derk and sat on his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck and laying her smooth cheek on his rough one."

"You're like me, Tavi," he said finally, kissing her on the forehead like he always did. You feel things, though you hide it well. You must mind your humors or they may lead you astray. They're good things to have, as they make life richer but you must temper them with prudence. Do you understand?"

"It's bad enough when you're all serious, now you go using big words and such. I hate it!" She grinned at him, her tanned face filled with light but Derk's eyes lit up and he stood up quickly, pushing her off of him.

"Shit, Kiff, you side tracked me so, I forgot. Shamsee's outside, a block towards the temple and needing you for a take. By her ivory tits, seeing you and that onion made me forget! Go to it, now, it's the one on the left!"

Tavera ran out the door of the room and

ran down the hall, making it to the stairs and jetting down into the tavern proper. The tender raised an eyebrow as she zipped past the bar and darted through the door, almost running into two large guards as she did. They paid no mind to the scraggly girl who shot past them into the busy streets outside.

It was crowded on the street but it was easy to find him. The tall, hawk nosed man called Shamsee was right where Derk had said, a block away from the bar, his small table set up on the tiny sidewalk. Tavera breathed a sigh of relief, seeing she wasn't too late for the take. The man laid a single brown eye upon her and in a loud, nasal voice began his tirade.

It went as planned. He broke out the walnut cups and the pea, placing the pea under one of them and shifting them as he spoke in his hypnotizing voice, the crowd gathering around for a look and a chance to play. To prove his legitimacy and the game's simplicity, he would ask Tavera, a simple child, to play. He would give the cups a few turns, she would say she couldn't play,

as she only had a half piece that her father had given her for an offering at the temple. He would entice the girl, telling her she could make a much bigger offering if she played and won. Tavera would pretend to feign disinterest but play the naughty, poor child and play. First she would guess incorrectly. This would cause the crowd to feel bad for her so that when Shamsee offered to double her money if she guessed right the second time, the crowd would become endeared to him for having pity on the poor girl. She would then guess correctly, much to her feigned delight and the pleasure of the crowd. Shamsee will have saved the day and presented himself as a man of honor when in reality he was neither a savior nor an honorable person. She would take the coin and get a bit more of the take later in the day, when he had played what he thought was enough or until a disgruntled and taken patron would turn over his table and try to beat the shit out of him. It was an easy way to help someone out and make a bit on the side.

Tavera laughed out loud, rocking back and

forth on the old crate she had decided to sit on, pointing at the man who staggered towards her. Apparently the game had been taken too far today and a patron had decided to appease his embarrassment by punching Shamsee in the face. He had a black eye and was holding up a dirty handkerchief to his bleeding nose, his hat skewed on his head and making him look even more bedraggled than he already was. He sat down next to the girl and plopped a small pouch on her lap.

“Sure I couldn’t pay you in dollies and sweets?” he asked, his voice muffled by the injury and the pain. Tavera rolled her eyes at him as she tucked the small pouch of coins away, still wondering how someone who had been doing the walnut bit for so long could still not tell when he was about to get his jaw kicked in.

“Dodge ‘em all,” she said, cocking her head to the side and looking over his face. It wasn’t as bad as it could have been and he was most certainly acting as if it was worse, his mouth twisted in pain and one eye tearing as it swelled

before her eyes. "You're gonna have to go to a tonsor fer that, Sham. He's gonna put a nice, fat blood worm on yer eye for the swelling. Maybe he'll get caught up and the sucker'll pop your eye clean out yer white box."

"Do shut up," he said, his face changing colors from a worked over pink to a sickened green, his eyes wincing as he thought about it. "All this and you were late to boot? What's that? I sent that sparkler of a pa of yours after yah? You too busy puttin' on frocks and shit to keep yer word?"

Tavera turned her head and glared at Shamsee, her one pointed ear twitching under her hair slightly with anger. She hated when the thugs, the common street hustlers called her father that. She had thrown herself at a man twice her size in Westbrook for saying as much and only her father's forbidding kept her from trying to give Shamsee a black eye to match the other. "I don't come when you call. I's busy doing something when he told me and I came when I was ready."

"Well, it's bogged to keep a partner waiting.

Yer pa knows it and I don't think he'd a left you dodging 'round the room if he knew you were 'spected somewheres. And If I told him to get you straightaway, I know he'd a done it.” Shamsee paused for a second, his one good eye narrowing for a moment, a trickle of blood shining under his nostril as he did. “He caught you doin' somefin, didn't he?”

Tavera's pride drained from her face as he asked, her eyes looking to the end of the alley for a split second, wishing something would happen so they would have to leave. That was the problem with some of the streetsmen she worked with. Even if they lacked common sense, they generally weren't idiots. She didn't have to answer his stupid questions, even if they had worked together. This subject matter was non related.

“Wait a minute,” he said, frowning slightly, eyeing her once again. “My nose may be busted but I believe I smell...onions.” He reached over as if to pull back her blouse but Tavera fell back, screaming as she swung out at him, her closed

fist connecting with his cheek. He grabbed her wrist with his free hand, somehow able to laugh and he pulled her back onto the crate. "Hold on now," he said, his smile revealing a few missing teeth and a half decent smile. "I've sisters enough to know what you were doin' and I have to tell yeh, it don't work."

"I don't know what yer talking about," she shot, her arms covering her chest protectively and giving herself away. Shamsee laughed out loud, almost falling off the crate, trying to push away the pain that shot through his face as he did.

"Oh, this is lovely," he said, clapping his hands and slapping his knee, finally straightening his hat on his head. "I cant believe people still believe that it works. I've got no less than four flat chested sisters prove it don't"

Tavera pressed her lips together, feeling a little embarrassed but somehow less so, knowing that multiple women before her had also tried the fruitless remedy. "Well, she said, hopping off the crate and pulling the pouch out of somewhere on her person, the coins jingling merrily as she did. If

she changed the subject and left, maybe she could still save face. "Thanks fer the work. I'll maybe see you later."

"Hold up," he said, hopping off the crate and walking towards her. "Donchu want to know how you can get 'em to grow?"

Tavera stopped in her tracks. She tried not to care, she really did but she spun around faster than she knew she could, walking back to the beaten man. "You better not be tellin' me lies, Shamsee."

"Honest to the goddess, and I've proof as well. Listen to me Kiff, the way to get yer tits to grow is by...touching."

"Oh, well that's just lying and you swore!" she said, pushing him with her hands and only managing to move him an inch. He shook his head and called after her.

"It's true, touching 'em makes 'em bigger. And I ain't talkin' 'bout touchin' em yerself. I'm talkin' 'bout havin' other folks touchin' em. Think on this, what types of womens got the biggest ones?"

Tavera thought about this. The woman she knew with the biggest breasts had been Prisca; they had been large and milky white because she kept them covered when the sun was out. When Tavera had been living with her, she had tried to pick one up and had needed both hands to do so. The other woman was a mother with five children, all of them young and still nursing for food. What was he getting at?

"Mums and the brass, I suppose," she offered, trying to guess what his logic was. He nodded, blowing his nose and looking into the grimy handkerchief, grimacing as he did.

"Aye, and who gets their goods touched more than those ladies? Brass by their men and mothers by their children, day and night."

"What're you tellin' me to do, that I go out and have people touchin' me so as to make 'em grow?" she asked incredulously. Even if what he said was true, she didn't see how the plan could be carried out, especially because her father had just said she should stay away from men. It seemed ridiculous and like she would be flat

chedsted all her life.

"I ain't tellin' you to do nuffin," he said, sitting back on the crate. "As an observer, a brother and a man who has actually had quite a few tits in hand, I'm just offerin' a bit of knowledge. You're prolly too young fer men anyways."

"Too young? I'm prolly 13, I'll have you know!" She turned her chin up at him, her fists wresting where her waist should have been. Shamsee put up both hands in mock supplication, hoping the girl wouldn't try to hit him again.

"The ripe age of 13? Pardon me, I ain't use to your kind, little miss one ear.. You're lucky your dad is who he is, I bet I could make a bit, selling you to someone who wants to be around your kind. Also, well, I don't really dislike you. And I don't know where to find any of those people." He narrowed his eyes at her and the look she gave him made him take a half step back. "Anyways, I'm sure yer pa is waitin' on you back at the Silver. You was a big help to me today, though Kiff... wouldja be willin' to have another go? As a fave? I did give you some good advice, after all?"

Tavera narrowed her eyes. Shamsee was a bit of an idiot and not completely trustworthy but this was more due to his lack of common sense, not actual malice. She could make a few coins for just a few minutes work. And as much as she didn't want to believe what he had said about touching, it did make a bit of sense. If what Derk wished for her happened, she would never have the bosom she hoped for. Tavera shrugged, nodding soon after.

“Fine, yeah...you know where I am. Though you call my pa names again, and I'll make you regret it.” And with that, she turned around, her skirts swishing as they did, her straight frame disappearing around the corner, not bothering to look back at Shamsee once as she left the alley.

Touching...she thought about what Shamsee had said the whole way back. Could it be true? Why would he lie to her about this? And though Shamsee wasn't smart as thieves come, she did see him around women frequently. Derk hadn't offered any help, just made her feel stupid and gotten on her about boys. Boys. She didn't

even really like this particular one that much anyway. She had seen him carrying something in a basket into a shop and thought he was handsome, though not as handsome as her pa. He had curly hair and freckles and apparently liked girls with big tits, since after his shift all he did was stand around some big bosomed girl and talk about stuff that made them put their hands over their mouths and laugh. She couldn't make out what he was saying, but she could see him staring at their chests when he thought she wasn't looking.

It wasn't fair. Why did some girls get to be pretty and have big tits while others looked strange and were flat chested and had overprotective fathers? She sighed and let herself into the room where Derk was laying on the bed once more.

"How'd it go?" he asked warmly, sitting up in the bed. Tavera shrugged and pulled her boots off, climbing into the small bed with her dad, snuggling close to him. He smelled like tobacco and sweat and the oil he used for his skin. It

comforted her and she looked down towards the foot of the bed, wiggling her toes.

“Sham called you a sparkler and ran the bit too long. But I might run it again with him, just fer something to do.”

“You didn't hit him, did you?”

“I did, but not fer what he called you.” They laid there for a moment, her father's body shaking as he chuckled, playing with her short hair.

“I talked to someone I know who's opening a tea mercantile. Said he can use some help, someone with quick hands. Interested?”

Help at a store? If Tavera was helping at a business, it meant that they would be staying a while. Her one good ear perked up slightly. “Tea? That fancy shit you try to get me to drink when my nose is plugged up?”

“Language, Tavi,” he said, wagging his finger and meaning what he said. “Yes, tea. I'm thinking you're getting a bit older and it might be good for us to sit for a bit. Winter'll be here soon. It'd be good to learn something new and there ain't shame in work for pay, long as you do keep

doing what you do best. What d'you say?"

If they stayed in town, the boy with the curly hair might notice her. She pretended to think it over for a few seconds and then shrugged believably, hugging her father. "If you think it's a good idea, it might be nice to stick around for a bit."

"Good then, it's settled. Though I suggest you don't do too many jobs with Sham, he's an idiot."

"Yeah, she said, laughing. Tavera laid her head down on her father, thinking about what Shamsee, the idiot had said. Touching. Maybe she could have a beautiful body, or at least something to fill out her blouse a little. Derk would disapprove if he knew, even if it did mean that she could have a bit more happiness. She sighed as she closed her eyes. It was too early to go to bed but Derk would nap before supper so he could stay up all night. The thought of a bosom that would turn men's heads lulled the girl to sleep unintentionally and she dreamed of much the same thing, the boy with the brown curly hair

staring at her as she spoke about wonderful, meaningless things.

Chapter 4

Trial By Blood

Tavera woke up and grimaced. Her stomach hurt and the feeling of pain creeping through her belly had woken her. It was still early in the morning. The birds that sang just as the sun was coming up were sending out their calls, the only other noise the sound of Derk snoring behind her. His arm was draped around her middle heavily as if he was deep in sleep but she knew if she spoke he would wake up. They weren't usually early risers but her stomach did hurt, as if someone was squeezing her guts, twisting them gently and she felt a bit nauseous. The heavy arm that pinned her to the ground didn't help and so she wiggled a bit under the blankets, hoping to wake him up before she spoke.

"I don't feel good," she said quietly. The change in his breathing told her he was awake though he didn't move yet. She laid there and waited, feeling the pressure on her side lessen as

he gained control of his limbs again.

"How d'you mean?" he mumbled. A bird tweeted, closer than before. Tavera looked towards the campfire, or what was left of it and tried to think of how to describe it.

"I dunno," she said, wiggling in her bedroll. "I've a stomach ache."

"What did you eat last night?" he asked. He didn't sound annoyed or angry, just tired. The half elf girl tried to think of what she had eaten last night and realized it would have been better to think of what she hadn't eaten. She'd been ravenous the last few phases, eating everything in sight. Derk had chided her on eating too quickly last night, saying it would give her stomach problems. Maybe that was it.

"Same as you," she said, squirming again as another squeeze pushed in her stomach. "Same as always." Derk sat up and she stayed lying on the bedroll, not wanting to get up in the cold air. But he tickled her on the side and she grimaced and laughed at the same time, slapping his hand away as she did her best to keep the

blankets around her. Derk reached over and pulled her eyelids up and then down, feeling where her neck met her head and pressing there with his thumb and middle finger. He placed a hand on her forehead and frowned, his blue eyes still weary with sleep and he shook his head.

“You seem well enough. Go make toilet and see if that doesn't help.” Derk kissed her on the forehead before he slumped back towards the ground, eyes fluttering closed as his head disappeared within the blankets. Tavera pouted and got up as slowly as she could. It was cold and she shivered as she unwrapped herself from blankets. Twigs and pebbles pressed into her socked feet as she picked her way around the remainders of the fire, walking far enough away from their small camp for privacy. Little ferns and bushes snapped at her legs as she meandered, looking back over her shoulder to make sure she could see the camp site but that Derk wasn't looking, spinning around to make sure no one else was.

Derk had probably passed back out. He

only bothered her if he thought she was taking too long and right now, it felt like everything she had eaten last night was about to fall out of her. They had had lunch in town, and she had gorged herself on roasted barley soup, as many rolls as Derk would buy her, a piece of roasted ground fowl and all the fish they had brought. A few pilfered fruit satisfied her desire for sweets and Derk had humored her with a bag of charred nuts on the way out of town. She had finished off the bag before he could think to ask for some. Tavera burped. She wasn't hungry at all now. Food sounded horrible.

Fumbling hands pulled down her trousers and she squatted down after she kicked around to make sure no snakes or spiders were hiding anywhere. The birds still chirped and twittered above and about, a little red breasted bird hopping about just a few paces away. The girl made a face at it when it cocked its head at her and she hissed at it when it flew a few widths closer. She finally put her head down to try and block out the little bird, feeling her stomach pains

ache lower. When she looked up the little bird was gone. Her stomach was still cramped but at least some of the pressure was gone. She pulled out the rag she had tucked in her pocket to wipe herself, wrinkling her nose as she did and her mouth falling open when she looked at the scrap of cloth.

Blood.

Was it really blood? The girl cursed under her breath. It was pinkish. If the fabric had been darker, she wouldn't have noticed but there was a pink and red smear on the fabric. She finished wiping and left it there, left it there, pulling her pants back up and wiping her palms on her thighs as she walked back towards the campsite. Derk was sitting up on his bedroll now, looking in her direction. His eyes were narrowed, watching her carefully as she walked back, tripping over her own feet as she did but catching herself. He looked her over. "Everything alright?"

Hesitant sounds came out of her mouth only and she made a few faces as she looked into the embers of the fire, scratching her head. "I...

yeah. I just think... maybe... it started?" She bit her lip and chewed on it, not sure what else to say. Tavera knew what was happening, she was fairly certain. Prisca had told her about it and Old Gam had mentioned it. Derk just looked at her blankly, strangely alert.

"What started, Tavi? Are you sick?" He coughed into his fist, squinting at her. Tavera put her hands under her stomach and felt tired.

"It's... it's my Red Earth time," she said, quietly. In the early morning stillness it still seemed loud and Derk's eyes went wide as they stared at each other for several breaths. Eventually Derk seemed to snap on it and a paranoid smile came across his face as he scrambled up from his bedroll.

"I've got to boil some water," he said, picking his belt up and buckling it around, grabbing his vest off the pile of things that belonged to him. "This couldn't have come at a better time, with Gam being in town. This is your first, right? Tavi? Tavi? Are you okay?" He grabbed the pot and then set it down again, going

into his pack and pulling out a pair of pants. "Tavi, come sit down, dear."

Tavi walked over to where the beds were and sat down watching as he pulled off his pants. He put on the pair he had removed from the pack. "Derk, what are you doing?" she finally asked, slightly exasperated by his sudden increase in activity.

"I'm changing into my good pants so we can tear up my old ones for you," he said, buckling his belt again and having some trouble as he had the kettle in one of his hands. "But I've to get water to boil the rags in. Then we have to go into town to the temple so you can have first rites."

"First rites?!" Tavera squeaked. Her stomach was still tying and unraveling, and she squirmed in her seat, wishing she had something to make the pain go away "Like what? Is it like a holiday?"

"I guess I haven't kept you round girls your age, have I? Otherwise you'd know. Hasn't Old Gam told you about this?" Derk put a hand up to

stop the both of them from talking, his blond hair still mussed atop his head and his shirt half tucked into his trousers. "Let me get this water. If you're up to it, rip these old things into strips. I needed a new pair anyway." He fumbled around in his bedroll, pulling out his dagger and handing it to her. "You'll be alright?"

"It's blood, not brain," Tavera snorted, taking the dagger from him. "What, like for wounds?"

"I don't know!" Derk said and he blushed, avoiding her eyes. "Just think about... what you think you need! But I should boil them first, some of them at least. I'm going!" he shouted, walking away. "Scream if you need me!"

"Fine!" she shouted after him, watching him go. There was a little spring not too far away from where they had set up camp. Tavera ripped off a rectangle of fabric and looked at it, wondering how big it should be. Dark eyes wondered towards the fire pit, and seeing the pile of sticks that lay close at hand to feed it. She set the pants and dagger aside; Derk couldn't boil water if there wasn't a

fire. She stirred the ashes with one of the sticks, seeing if any embers lay underneath. A handful of dried grass fed the remains of the night's fire, going from yellow to brown, then black and glowing orange as they caught on fire. Twigs would come next. A low, long yawn was stifled as she heard Derk shout and saw him rush forward, throwing the kettle of water onto the fire she was building.

"What the tits are you doing?!" Tavera shouted, some of the water splashing up onto her. She glared at Derk, still holding the twigs in her hand. He just looked to her sheepishly, putting the kettle under his arm. "I know how to make a fire, you know it! Why'd you do that!?"

"You can't build a fire-

"Yes I can, I do it-

"NOT... now," he said, finally lowering his voice. He rubbed his eye with the palm of his hand and sighed heavily, looking into the empty kettle. "Now... it's not good. You can't build a fire. When you're on your Red Earth time. It's... ."

"That don't make no sense," Tavera said

and her good ear twitched as she said it. It didn't. Why couldn't she build a fire? She still knew how to build a fire and she had done it countless times. Whatever had been left of the fire was gone now, a pile of soggy ash and grass. "No ladies build fire in their red time? How do they cook then?!"

"It's just... it's one of those things, Tavera," Derk said and when he said it, he sounded unsure about it. "I'm sorry I splashed you. But it's supposed to be... bad. A taboo."

"What like... like plowing children?" She asked it hushed and after she said it, they both looked around worriedly. Derk mumbled something under his breath and set the kettle down, mechanically tugging at the bracelet he wore around his wrist, a holy symbol and he shook his head at her, his lips a thin line that cut across his face.

"Not that bad, no," he said, still looking around. "It's an old... like I said. It's bad luck." He picked up the kettle again and looked her over again, cocking his head to the side like that bird had done. "You look pale."

"I'm more dark than you."

"Eat something, if you can manage. I'll fetch more water. And do those rags if you can, you'll need them."

"What food is there?"

"Whatever you didn't cram yesterday. I might have something sweet in my pack." Tavera watched him leave again and she huffed, blowing her hair out of her face. She wasn't hungry. Her stomach still hurt, her body trying to squeeze the unused earth out of her, to make space for new earth, new life. That's what she had been taught happened at this time. Prisca had mentioned that she would have Tavera start seeing men after her first time came. In all honesty, she hadn't really understood all of what Prisca had said, just that one day, she would have to do what Prisca did and she would get money for it. That had been a long time ago and hadn't come to be. Derk had taken her in and cared for her whereas Prisca... the sound of Derk's footsteps on the leaves and twigs brought her back to her cramps and her task, ripping a few more rags off of the old pants.

The man set the kettle down carefully so as not to spill any of the water and went about rearranging the stones next to the old fire pit, trying to rescue what he could.

“What else can't I do?” she asked, ripping off another strip, using the knife to turn it into two, hand sized rags. Derk shrugged and scuffled over to his pack, picking out the two fire stones that were wrapped in their special bag. He wrinkled his nose at her as he rolled them out, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand before he crouched into the wind.

“Depends on who you ask,” he said, striking a stone against the other. “Some would say you can't drink milk. No kissing babies. I'd say no kissing boys.”

“That can't be one of them,” she said, ripping off another ring of fabric. The dagger tugged at the seam and she pulled it with a jerk, loosening the piece from the rest. “I know it ain't true.”

“You could, I just would prefer you wouldn't,” he said, striking the stones again, his

back towards her so that his words were muffled. "Or rather, I should say, I would you would stop kissing boys."

"Oh, pa, you know I only kissed that last one because his mam worked at the Wren! There was a whole bag of seed-corn to get!"

"And just last week it was that red headed one for a bolt of fabric and then before that the dark haired lad with the big ears. I don't even remember what that was about."

"I liked his ears, I thought they were cute."

"Tavi!" Derk said, looking back at her finally. Tavera tried her best to stifle her laugh, making her face long and pressing her lips together. Her attempt just wiped Derk's stern expression from his face and he sighed, turning back to the fire that he had barely started. "Tavi, just... be careful. If that red headed one and the blond one find out about one another, they could get in a row and then the parents come looking for me?"

"Fine, I'll just kiss boys that got no parents."

"That's not what I'm... or what about this?"

he offered, The sparks had been transformed into a happy little flame and he grabbed a piece of bigger kindling, snapping it in two before he placed it carefully over the flame. "What about women? You're just hitting men up! That's half the people in the Valley you can't use your tricks on!"

"Some ladies like other ladies, you know that," Tavera chided, forgetting about the rags for the moment. "Don't you remember when we went to-"

"But you shouldn't lie about who you like or want to kiss" Derk finally said. He put another piece of kindling on and got the frame to hang the kettle over, digging the points of the frame into the earth. "It's not good to do, to garner ills from thwarted lovers. People don't like to be kissed and left. And besides, I've warned you against being a dog of one use. I don't want you to get lazy."

Tavera kept her thoughts to herself, feeling another cramp twist inside of her so that it made her queasy. She put the torn up pants on her lap and blinked, watching as Derk set the kettle of water over the fire finally. "So..." she said slowly,

looking over the dagger in her hand. "We're going to wait for the water to boil, and then boil the fabric and then wait for the rags to dry?"

Derk looked at the water quizzically and then to Tavera. After a breath he shook his head and put his hands up. "You got me," he admitted, feeling around for his pipe. "I ain't done this before, Tavi. I don't know what's going on."

"We're supposed to meet Gam and you had wanted to get there by mid-meal," Tavera said.

"I know, I know," he muttered, fumbling around his pack for what he was looking for. Tavera yawned and laid back on the bedrolls, laying on both of them. Her father nudged her out of the way, finding the pipe but lacking the tobacco. "Just... ."

"Hang them over the fire when they're done," Tavera said, curling up into a ball. Her stomach didn't feel well. Derk looked to her and his eyes softened, sighing as he put a hand on her cheek. A rough hand brushed her hair out of her face.

"I'll take care of it, Tavi dear." He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, which made her smack at him. He growled at her and laughed, somehow remembering not to tickle her. "You just rest and I'll do these up as quick as I can. They're small, they should dry fast. I'm sure we can find something else for you in town to help. Gam'll have something for sure." Derk looked into the kettle and started to pack his pipe, smirking at his daughter. "One good thing about this, most girls start growing in the shirt after they start their red times. Sure you're not crying about that."

Tavera nodded and rolled over onto her side, feeling tired but the sensations in her body and the slight excitement kept her eyes from closing. If it was any other day they would probably would still be asleep, waking up when the sun had warmed everything it touched and eating on the road. She was supposed to be practicing her fighting but the half elf didn't think she'd be up to it today. Tavera rolled over again so that she could see Derk, smoking peacefully on his pipe, sitting by the fire and watching her.

“Can I get some tea in town?” she asked. “We used to sell a lot of purple cup to ladies on their Red Earth time. It's 'upposed to help.”

“Whatever you want,” Derk said. He peeked into the fire again and they sat there, waiting for the water to boil. Tavera rolled over again and stared off into space, watching the little birds hop and flit about. Every time she thought she would nod off, a cramp would roll through her stomach and wake her up. She finally gave up altogether and sat up and started mending clothes with Derk, being sure to jokingly ask him if it was okay to do so. He made a face at her and they quietly mended clothes as they waited for the water to boil.

The wine was sweet and spiced. Tavera didn't really like it but she was supposed to drink the whole bowl of it. Old Gam smiled at her and brushed her hair out of her face, hazel eyes sparkling at the girl who was now a woman. “How is it?” Old Gam asked, her curly hair framing her round face. They were standing at the altar after

vespers. All the others had departed for drinks or home and the two of them had lagged behind to receive first rites.

The priestess had poured the bowl of wine and gave it to Tavera, saying a prayer over the girl and anointing her with water from the sacred chalice. Tavera always wanted the temples' chalice for herself but she knew such a wish was bordering on blasphemy. She had mentioned it to Derk and all joviality had drained from his face, and she had spent all of their meal apologizing. She still wanted them, one of them. This one was made out of some white stone, probably alabaster and it had been carved to be perfectly round and smooth, the phases of the moon and inscriptions raised on the luxurious surface. Different temples had different styles of bowls and chalices, all of them beautiful. Most households had one set in the house somewhere. Gam's was set over her door, for protection.

The priestess waited as she drank from the bowl, her grey eyes smiling as she gazed down at the newest woman of the Valley. The wine was

thick on Tavera's tongue, warm on the back of her throat and hot in her belly, snaking around where there was a slight ache. What she really wanted to do was sleep but Old Gam had insisted on prying Tavera away from Derk, shoos him away to see Jezlen and taking her out for food and gifts.

Tavera finally drained the bowl and she could swear some of it had made it to her head. Her brain felt as if it were swimming in her skull and she swayed slightly on her feet, holding the bowl out for Old Gam to take. The priestess smiled with her mouth though her words were cool as ever, like cool water in summer. "Now you have imbibed the Wine of the Beloved Woman. May the desire that grows in you now lead you to happiness. May you grow in strength, wisdom and beauty so that you may be a help to yourself and those that may call upon you. May the Goddess shine upon you always, Her glory illuminating your successes and comforting you in your troubles. May you wield your womanhood with the pride and power that it deserves." The priestess anointed her again, splashing the holy water onto

the girl before she nodded to Gam and soundlessly took her leave of them, Old Gam saying her thanks before they both turned and left, their footsteps echoing in the empty temple.

Tavera looked down at the bracelet Gam had given her to wear; it was a cord of three strands, red, white and black with a goddess bead threaded and knotted at the middle. Gam hugged her around the shoulders as they walked, and Tavera didn't think it would be right to push her away so she didn't. "Well, women's work has been done," Gam laughed, continuing down the emptying street.

Tavera kept up with her easily enough though she was still a bit shorter than the curly haired woman that was Derk's closest female friend. She had helped Tavera get situated with the rags so that the girl didn't feel like she had a load of laundry in her britches. Gam wasn't so much a mother figure as an aunt figure, though in this case her pa slept with her aunt whenever they could. Tavera liked Gam well enough and looked forward to the times they crossed paths but she

was always glad to have her pa back to herself when they parted ways. Tavera was still young but she felt that Gam was jealous of Tavera for some reason and she could never figure out why. Tonight, however, Old Gam was all smiles and happiness. "You've any questions for me, Kiff? Anything you want to know? Derk don't know about this kind of thing after all."

The half elf chewed the side of her mouth and shrugged. She could hear music playing inside of the taverns and some children were playing a game of kick the ball farther down the street. If it had been any other night she probably would have joined them but probably not now. Her stomach didn't hurt as much but the pain had tired her out and she wanted to lie in bed. "I guess... am I going to be tired all the time this happens? I don't really like it."

"Oh, no one does," Old Gam laughed, showing where a tooth was missing. She had a pretty laugh, though it was a little brash. Gam turned a corner and Tavera followed, waiting to hear the answer. "Everyone's different is the truth

of it. You might be tired now, you might be tired before it comes or a phase after. Every woman is different.”

“I know, and every woman is as aspect of the goddess,” she said, trying not to sound too exasperated. She normally enjoyed going to temple and hearing the teachings of the priestess and hearing about the attributes of the Blessed Mother. That had been before she was supposed to be like the goddess. Was every woman like the goddess? Some of the women she had known in her childhood came to mind and she tried to push those thoughts away and what they might have meant. Tavera hopped off of the curb, puzzling over something the priestess had talked about. “What was all the 'desire' talk? I don't understand that part. What does having blood pour out of my twixt have to do with wanting?”

Old Gam laughed again and Tavera thought this time, maybe, the older woman thought her a bit silly. Maybe it had been a silly question but she had wanted to know. Old Gam turned another corner, looking around it before

she motioned for Tavera to follow, this street quieter than the last.

"It has to do with wanting to bed," Old Gam explained. The sound of something squeaking ran across their path but neither one of them seemed to care but continued down their path, clouds that loomed up ahead making it darker and telling of rain to come. "Once your Red Earth comes, you start wanting to bed men."

"But I already like men, or boys at least," Tavera said. She hopped over a crate, standing there for a breath before she strode after Gam, seeing the smirk on the woman's mouth. "I do, Derk's always getting on me about, saying I shouldn't be hanging round boys like I do."

"He does, does he?" Old Gam's voice was dry and she put her hands behind her back, casting Tavera a sideways glance. "I am both shocked and not shocked, Kiffer. He's your man, of course he says that. Tell me, girl, what kind of boys do you like?"

"Oh, usually ones that have nice things, or if their mams are bakers." Now Old Gam laughed

loud, so loud that someone threw something at them and they had to run down the street to escape, the both of them laughing and yelling back by the time they got to the door that led up to where Gam stayed. Tavera had tears in her eyes and Gam was holding her stomach as their laughs settled down to chuckles and then sighs, the two of them standing outside the door still.

“That ain’t what I mean, love,” Gam said, a grin plastered on her round, amused face. “Not for things, though there is that. I mean desire, wanting like... wanting to tell someone about you, wanting them to know you, all of it. Wanting them to love it, to grab it and press it against them hard, till it melts like snow in the sun. Or even just... .” Old Gam’s eyes were someone else but she fastened them back on Tavera, the far away look quickly disappearing. “You’re bleeding but you’re still young.” She opened the door and went through it.

“I never said I was old,” Tavera mumbled after her, following her up the stairs. Old Gam had kind of explained it, in a way. Desire. The way

Derk and Gam looked at one another when they thought she wasn't looking. There wasn't anyone she wanted to look at like that but supposedly, it was on its way. They made their way up to the landing and Gam opened the door with her key, making an amused sound at the table. Tavera looked over her shoulder, surprised to see Derk sitting at the table, drinking by himself as he played with a handful of dice by the candle light. Old Gam walked past him towards the bedroom, chuckling.

"I thought you was with Jezlen," Tavera said, sitting down at the table with him. Derk made a face and threw a die at the table, spinning it so that it skipped across the rough surface.

"They got into a fight, like always," Old Gam said. Tavera could see her pulling off her outdoor clothes and slipping down to her shift. She stood in the doorway, arms over her chest as she looked at them both, eyes narrowed but glinting with merriment.

"We don't always fight, Gam," he said, not looking back at her. He spun all the dice on the

table, picking them up and throwing them again, pursing his lips as he did. "I just thought we'd be out later but after a bit he just up and said he had to go somewhere. I had already ordered another pitcher even, but still, I couldn't keep him out."

"Where'd he go?" Tavera asked. She had only seen Jezlen several times but she had never seen his face, much attributed to his oddity. Gam just sighed and went deeper into the bedroom, fumbling around with her jars of things.

"Who cares, good riddance."

"Oh, Gam, really now!" Derk said, spinning the dice without looking at her. "I still don't know why, after all these years, you STILL don't like him!"

"He doesn't like me!" she retaliated, laughing as she appeared in the doorway again. "I try to be good about it, you've seen."

"You both are horrible at getting on with one another and it's a shame. To think I can't have my two best friends in the same room together without them fighting."

"Aren't you and Gam the ones that are

fighting now?" Tavera said, confused. Derk motioned to pick up all the dice again but his hand hovered in mid air and he looked to her. A smile cracked his face and he did pick up the dice, tucking them into his belt pouch as he leaned back in his chair.

"Oh, before I forget, Jezlen sent this... for you." He pulled out something from his pack, something long and wrapped in fabric . The fabric itself was nice; a dark green with brown threads sewn into it so that it changed color if you moved it a certain way. Tavera took it and unwrapped the present slowly, dark eyes growing big as she realized it was a shortsword. Even Derk whistled upon seeing it, sitting up in his chair to get a closer look.

Tavera looked it over. It wasn't the nicest sword she had seen but it was definitely the nicest one she had ever touched. It was obviously not from the Valley; the slight bend in the scabbard told her that much and the designs on the hilt were not like those of the guards that kept watch on the roads and at the gates. She wrapped her

hand around the hilt and pulled gently, sliding it out against her lap. It shone as if it were new and it felt good in her hand, the metal and inlay warming to her touch.

“Tits, Jezlen just got me a new pipe for my last name day and I’ve saved his life countless times!” Derk said, laughing as he did. Old Gam reappeared from wherever she had come from and scoffed, walking into the kitchen to see what Tavera had gotten.

“It’s nice but it’s hardly fitting for the occasion,” Old Gam said. Tavera let the shortsword fall back into the scabbard, the metal sliding swiftly in with a satisfying sound. Derk rubbed his face with his hand and stood up from the table, gathering his things and making his way to Gam’s room.

“He said it was perfect for this occasion,” he called, throwing his things about the bedroom. “He said she can use it for beating back the men that will want her, now that she’s of age.”

Gam just made a sound and walked after Derk into the room, the blond thief promptly

popping out of the room to check on Tavera again. "You'll be alright out here in the kitchen, right" He looked hopeful and in good spirits, despite his disappointment at his friend having abandoned him for an unsaid purpose.

"Yeah, just go away already, I've been tired since I woke this morning!" she urged, gesturing for him to leave already. He didn't go into the room. Derk stepped into the kitchen and walked up to Tavera, looking her over again. He kissed her on the forehead and this time, Tavera rolled her eyes, laughing before she kissed him back on the neck, hugging him where she sat. He said his good nights and ducked into the room, pulling the curtain that separated the rooms across the doorway.

Tavera sighed. The bedroll still had to be put out but at least it would be warmer in Gam's house than out in the woods. The shortsword clinked as she picked it up, the weight of it feeling good in her hands. Still holding the blade in one hand, she got her bed ready, not bothering to be quiet. She knew Old Gam and Derk would be

listening in the next room, waiting for her to fall asleep. The half elf yawned loudly as she settled into bed, laying the weapon by her head as she did. Before she could even think to strain her ears to hear what Derk and Gam were whispering in the other room, she had fallen asleep.

Chapter 5

Growing Pains

As the tavern door creaked open, her body barely filled half of the frame, the light from the street having no trouble getting past her as she entered. It was early but the tavern was open for first meal, the smell of yeast and coals filling her nostrils as she inhaled deeply. It was obvious that she was tired. The slender framed girl walked over to the closest bar stool and promptly set herself on it, laying her head down on the bar top and closing her eyes as she waited for someone to notice she was there so she could ask for some food.

The onset of adolescence had seemed to breath life into the exotic features of the elves, though it was tempered by the human blood that also ran in her veins. Her hair was dark and cut short, its length barely able to cover her face and carelessness allowed a slightly pointed ear to poke its way through the shorn tresses.

Instinctively a hand ran her fingers through her hair so that it was hidden, her other ear a distinguishing feature that was also best kept hidden.

The pink flesh that ran completely straight was testament to an injury sustained quite some time ago but was now at least physically healed. Instead of the skirts that most women wore, she wore dark britches, cuffed at the ends to keep them out of the muck, her other clothes seeming to be men's clothes that had been altered slightly to better suit her body. In truth, from afar she was often mistaken for a man but her face was pretty and definitely feminine. Her large, full mouth parted slightly, a low snore emitting from her nose.

The sound of booted feet didn't disturb her, nor was she woken by the stool next to her being dragged so that someone could sit on it. Only when the same booted foot hooked itself on her seat and pulled it out from under her did she notice and even then, she was too late to make a graceful recovery. She cursed out loud, her dark angry eyes tinged with sleep as well as a touch of

fear. No one in the bar looked or paid any mind, the few scant patrons too tired or drunk from last night's endeavors to care.

"You coulda broke my neck", she said quietly, not wishing to break the sanctity of the quiet bar in the morning, rubbing her elbow with her hand. The man who sat besides her took a breath as if to speak but caught himself, pressing his thin lips together and rubbing his temples with his hands. His sandy blond hair was now streaked with lines of silver and creases had taken their places in the corners of his blue eyes. He took another deep breath, laying his hands primly on the bar top before he spoke, his words even in tone and volume, though his voice shook with what she knew to be anger.

"You should not have stayed out all night by yourself," was what he said, though she knew he desperately wanted to say more. "I..."he lowered his voice, turning his head slightly towards her, his words coming slightly faster. "I know that I had a bit too much to drink, but you shouldn't take advantage of that. We were the

guests of honor and it was rude of you to go.”

“You were the guest of honor and I didn't want to sit about, hearing you all rehash the same old bullshit stories I've heard too many times to count. I wanted to have some fun.”

“Fun, eh? Did you have your fun with the same playmate as you did two nights ago? Or was it your old pally from last week?” So this was it. The girl turned her head sharply towards him, still keeping her voice down though the air around them seemed hot with their anger.

“So now it's out”, she said, almost hissing, the sleep snapped away from her eyes by her ire. “You know what I've been up to and you're mad as piss about it. You're just mad cause you thought coming here would keep me from doing it and it didn't work.”

“We came here 'cause a third of the town burned to the ground and the pickings were slim”, he said, disbelief at the girl's logic ringing in his voice. “Granted, I thought you'd wait to know the local idiots at least a month before your pants

came flying off but I see I was mistaken. And what have I told you about wearing britches in public? It ain't ladylike and it'll attract attention, it will.'

"I like wearing pants when I'm about, pa", she said, glad the conversation had turned away from the previous topic. Her father got a smug look on his face, bringing his face close to hers, his eyes hard and his breath hot and sour.

"Yes, you must have at least a bit of a challenge for them, make 'em wait at least as long as it takes to get 'em around yer ankles." She couldn't believe he had just said that to her and for a moment her mouth just popped open and shut stupidly, like a fish out of water. She wanted to hit him, she wanted to curse at him and cause a scene but all their arguments were like this: quiet and keen and close. She looked away from him but he had already seen the tears that had sprung up in her eyes and she knew he was sorry for what he said, as good a jab as it had been.

"Look at you, judging me,"she said quietly. "You've got a set on you, ain't yah? And here I am,

knowin' when Hale the jeweler's gonna be out of town on business. What've you got? The shits and an hangover from too much dark ale. You've some nerve, pushing the morals you've picked and chosen on me, pissin' all over me when you're the one who dragged me through the streets. Y'know, I ain't stupid. I could've taken up a different profession and maybe done well at it."

"Maybe you could've, but you've the heart of a thief, girl. Anything you would have put your hand to, you'd have wound up taking wrongfully and been on your way. Don't you see that? You're lucky I got you when I did or you'd be in the clacks." He took in a deep breath, resting his head in his hand as he looked over the girl, her back straight and her eyes avoiding his. "Come now," he said softly, lowering his head as he spoke. "Yeh say you know when Hale'll be out, do you?"

"Oh well this is dovey," she hissed, getting up from her chair. "It ain't right to pick up loose change, 'cept when it adds up to a fullie, don't it? Wag yer ears, I'm leavin'."

Her father sat up straight in his chair, neither anger nor greed in his voice, "What about breakfast? You need to eat."

"Toss off," she called back, not bothering to turn around. Tavera strode out of the bar and onto the street, the road considerably more busy that it had been just a while ago. Her face felt hot and her own angry thoughts muffled the sounds of the city waking up. Just who did he think he was, telling her what to do and then making it okay if it suited his purposes? It was worse than prostitution! A thief she was, or rather a "thiefling," according to the others they mostly dealt with. She'd been running around in Derk's shadow for almost seven years now and still, she was "Derk's Kiffer." She got more respect from the no-talented hacks that preyed upon the sick, poor and stupid than the people that practiced thievery as an art form, the people she was supposedly being taught to emulate, the ones she sided with most.

How she felt after a "take" proved that she was one of them and not a thug. She relished in the careful planning of the procedure, the

consideration of time and place and looked over and cared for her tools more lovingly than a surgeon cared for his saws and scalpels. The feel of coin or a pretty token in her hand was magnified by the pride she felt by having something she had contrived go well. She was in her element when something that did not belong to her was in her hands.

But she didn't understand why it was wrong to be herself, why there were laws meant to bar her from expressing herself in the way she best saw fit. If people had destinies as the temple folk always said and if her destiny was a thief, like Derk and in truth, her heart said, why was the fear of the Jugs pushed upon her as a deterrent? Derk had said the fear of the Jugs would keep her good at what she did, and it did; she hadn't been apprehended once though she had been chased a few times, all that running Derk made her do when they were in the country coming in handy. If people should fulfill their destinies, who decided if one destiny was good and left to unfold while another should be snuffed out or punished?

Her boots stopped as they found themselves in front of the Temple of the Full Moon. Her adopted mother had always gone to the temple when she had had a bad day and needed to collect her thoughts while Derk tended to turn his eyes towards the altar for blessings before carrying out larger plans. The temple was open, though the front doors were closed presently, the front steps empty of beggars and children at the moment. Tavera pushed a stray lock of hair out of her face before starting towards the temple.

“Velida?” Tavera looked around to see who was calling out, her eyes widening as they fell upon a blond, handsome young man who was looking right at her. Velida was the name she was giving in this town, her real name and handle not an option if she wanted to make good on an escape. She tried to remember his name quickly and anything she might have told him, seeming to remember that he was a new recruit to the town guard and that his name was Loren. His name would be important but his occupation would

probably prove more fruitful in the near future.

“Lori!” she cried, using a more familiar form of his name, laughing inwardly as he actually blushed. Now she remembered him. He had been standing with a few other boys around his age and they were all snickering as they pointed and talked, too far for her to listen unless she tried. Tavera focused her attention on the young man, smiling primly once he had reached her, dodging a cart full of chickens to get across the street. “Nice t’see you. What are you doing on this end of town?”

“Oh, I’m just here with a few of the boys after morning training,” he said, pointing over his shoulder. He had hair the color of corn and faint freckles that Tavera remembered, his face as honest as a child and his eyes as bright. He was new to the guard and the city, having joined to save money for a home of his own in whatever backwoods farming village he was from. Tavera knew that he liked her and while he wasn’t stupid, he was as naive as they came. The young man was very handsome and as he smiled helplessly

at her, she almost felt guilty for standing as close as she was to him. He put his hands in his pockets, looking her up and down, his hazel eyes filled with curiosity as they fell upon her legs. "Why're you wearing britches?"

"Oh, both my dresses got dirty, one after the other and as they're both in the wash, I had to make do with these. Pardon my shabby appearance!" she said, trying to seem ashamed of her clothes. Boys like him were quick to pay compliments when fished for and if she could endear herself to him and stroke her ego at the same time, why not?

"You look fine in britches, Velida, really. It's just a strange thing to see a woman in 'em and a stranger thing to see a woman look good in 'em." He smiled, proud of himself that he had managed to come up with such a phrase and was rewarded with another smile from the half-elf girl. He relaxed slightly, ignoring the hoots his fellows were making behind him, looking at the temple that stood just a few yards away. "You goin' in for worship? I didn't know you were a regular"

“Ah, yeah, well, it's something I do when I've had a rough bit, though it's smoothed out considerably since I got here.” Now she was going to stroke his ego, smiling as his cheeks reddened again and he stood up straight, his hands crossing over his chest, his hair flowing behind him in the breeze. For a moment Tavera almost felt embarrassed by how handsome he was, how intently his eyes were fixed on her eyes and not her pants...did he actually like her? He couldn't like her, Tavera; he didn't know Tavera at all and if he did, as a guard and as good as he was, he would most likely arrest her. For the first time in a long while she actually felt uncomfortable in front of someone and her browned face reddened, breaking the intense gaze they had locked.

“Look, I've got to be getting' inside... morning prayers are about to start,” she said, looking everywhere but on him, taking steps backwards and hoping he wouldn't follow.

“Of course,” he said, putting his hands up, seeming embarrassed that he had kept her from her devotions. Her heart was beating hard in her

chest, her stomach feeling as if it had a hundred fish swimming inside of it. Was he just going to go? Why did it matter? She knew where he kept guard and knew when he was most likely to be there. Why had seeing him on the street like this flustered her so? She felt like she was going to throw up, spinning on her heel and heading as quickly as she could towards the temple.

“Hold on,” she heard, her ear pricking up, finding herself facing him once more. He turned his head to the side as something had suddenly caught his eye before saying, “D’yah think perhaps I could see you another time...like, in the evening? If you were thirsty?”

Tavera thought of a few snotty ways to brush him off and a few coy ways to tell him yes, but none of them seemed right. The bell that signaled morning prayers rang in the Temple of the Full Moon, several other people on the street starting to make their way into the white washed building. “Look, I’ve gotta...I’ll...I’ll find you later, right? You have third watch? At the Sheep Gate?”

“Right” he said, his eyebrows raised as if impressed that she remembered, nodding and smiling to himself. “Right, well...see you then.”

“Right, yeah....” She couldn't think of anything to say so she turned around and ran up the steps, weaving between other would be worshipers to get into the temple as quickly as possible. The priestess was already at the dais, silver chalice in hand, her face calm and as round as the full moon, her silver dress tightly laced so that her breasts seemed to almost spill out of the garment.

It wasn't fair, she couldn't help but think as she bowed her head staring down at her own chest. If she had breasts like those she could use half as many words and quarter of as many promises to get men to pay her mind. At least you'll know it's not just their eyes that like you, Derk would say. She didn't want them to like her, she wanted them to want her so she could get information quicker than the others so she could get the take before they did.

A fine rack would have come in handy but that she lacked so she made up for it with a pretty face, slick words and promises of things to come. But that boy outside...the priestess had raised the chalice now and was speaking the prayer, invoking the goddess to turn her eyes towards her people, her pale hands gripping the silver cup, the scant sunlight that came in through the windows glinting off of it...was it really made of pure silver? Tavera cursed herself, pushing thoughts of taking the sacred cup aside, reminding herself of its role, of what might befall the temple and the worshipers if the consecrated item was missing. She really was a thief through and through, more than she was a worshiper of the goddess of the moon or a girl to take out for beers or someone to spend an evening with, or at least a few moments.

Should she go out with that boy who watched the gates? The priestess lowered the chalice, beckoning the worshipers to come forward, the bodies shuffling out of the pews and queuing in the main aisle. Tavera bit her lip as she approached, keeping her head down and her eyes

closed as she moved forward, trying to keep her mind focused on her prayers and the task to come. Should she go out with Lori?

After what seemed like an eternity, she reached the alter, dark eyes opening and looking upon the priestess. The priestess' face was calm to the point of seeming unnatural, her gray eyes emotionless, her face as steady as a bust of marble. Tavera kept her eyes locked with the priestess, the goddess' avatar on earth, dipping her fingers into the chalice, bringing it to her forehead and then placing her wet fingers into the bowl that lay on the altar.

She knew the goddess answered in riddles so she didn't think of any questions as she placed the tips of her fingers in the bowl, the fingers that had stolen many things over the last few years. She instead laid to rest that which she wanted to strike from herself, as she was supposed to do. Her strange new emotions for Loren, she left in the bowl. Her contempt for the other members of the Cup who didn't yet accept her as one of their own. And her wanton ways that made her father

give her looks that distressed her...she lifted her fingers from the bowl, which was full of strange , gray sand, not bothering to wipe the strange powder from her fingers as she returned to her seat.

The rest of the congregation filed through, performing the same ritual as she had. When the last worshiper had performed the rite, the priestess spoke the words that Tavera was glad to hear, raising the chalice above her head and tipping it, the liquid contents of the chalice streaming down in a silver ribbon, the contents of the bowl inundated with the libation. A bell rang from somewhere within the building and the priestess spoke, her voice low and even.

“Now are our secrets hidden in the bosom of our goddess, swept up in her watery arm and brought close to her heart that we may be free of their burden. Go forth, knowing your secrets are safe, knowing you are free to change if that is what is in your destiny. Go in grace, unburdened by your troubles. Go with love, knowing the goddess delights in the workings of our hearts.”

The bell rang again and the priestess bowed her head, signaling that the worshipers were now free to leave as they saw fit.

Morning prayers were the best, Tavera thought as she exited the building. She always felt lighter after morning prayers and liked the crowd that typically showed up at the first worship. Vespers were full of the more devoted individuals who came to pay tribute to the goddess of the moon, the White Lady who opened the Valley for them all those generations ago, keeper of secrets, bringer of change, reveler in love. The mornings were full of those who came for penance, most of them coming to service before going to bed for the day, coming in from the street after a night of performing things that warranted covering up. The half elf girl scanned the street for the boy she was considering having a drink with. Maybe it was for the best he was gone. Maybe she wouldn't pass by the Sheep Gate during his watch but instead avoid him for the rest of their stint in this city. It was doable. But was it what she wanted? Did he only have freckles on his nose?

Both hands were brought to her head and she ruffled her hair as she mumbled to herself, trying to push her thoughts on the farm boy away. Sleep would help. If her mind was fresh she could keep her thoughts from wandering. The bed above the inn sounded wonderful. But wasn't the fortune teller on the way home?

The noise of the street had grown to its early morning levels and she could see the teller's booth in the distance. A quick stop there and then to home she would go, barring any unforeseen events. She'd ask just a few questions and those answered, she would go from there. It would work out in the end. Sleepily, she plodded through the streets, her thick boots keeping her feet stable on the slick streets, hoping a glimpse of what was to come would help her decide what to do before it came.

Chapter 6

A Cord, Cut

Tavera stopped dead in the street she was walking down, suddenly remembering that she was in a different town and that she was supposed to have turned left outside of the temple, gone down three streets before making a right and...she brought a hand to her head, rubbing her eye with the palm of her hand. Tired. Sleep was needed.. Now.

Praying hadn't helped her sort through the mess of action that had taken place within the last few days. Once again she ran through the chain of events that had led up to her wandering the streets of yet another town...what was this one even called? A burp popped out of her mouth, remnants of last nights celebration, one that she had been glad to be a part of but whose joy hadn't quite rubbed off on her. She found herself in front of the temple and ran over the directions once more before continuing on towards the inn.

The Dowry Take had ended well though bumps along the way had made it more nerve racking than she would have liked. The goods were got and loaded as she herself had dictated but someone had dropped a crossbow which had discharged itself into the leg of the other thief. He had screamed which brought attention and that is where the plan could have fallen apart. Tavera kept her cool and covered for the others as they escaped but had been found by the guard on duty who demanded that she give herself up for arrest.

She hadn't planned for it to be Lori, she really hadn't. She knew his schedule and had chosen a day when she had thought he would be off and miles away from the take. He must have switched watches. She didn't want to be taken in and he was going to do just that so she fought back and she sunk the point of her short sword into his shoulder, pushing him back till his mouth popped open with pain and surprise. She hadn't stuck around long enough to see if he would survive it. All she remembered was running without sheathing her sword, getting to the wall

and somehow getting over it. How she hadn't fallen on her own blade was beyond her. The party had rushed with the cart for what seemed like forever, no light to guide their way save the stars. When they had stopped, she jumped over the side and vomited in the bushes.

Upon their arrival back in Portsmouth, they had divvied up the contents of the chest and had found more than they had prayed for, much to their delight. The girl's dowry included many yards of beautiful fabric that could be sold easily and fetch a pretty penny. There were spices and linens with easily removed monograms. Above the Inn they had divided the goods, Derk about to hand her her pile when he suddenly held back, a twinkle in his eye. He was smiling and the other men seemed pleased themselves as he spoke.

“Do you forfeit your share of the take as payment into the Cup of Cream?” he had asked, his voice trembling with pride. Tavera had been dumbstruck. She knew that Derk was in it and that one day she might be considered good enough to join their ranks. She had laid out the details of the

Dowry Take, talking to the right people just enough, watching the home and help to get an idea of their movements; when she had mentioned the job to Derk all he had said was, "Plan it out and let me know if you need anything. I'll see what I can do." She had planned the take for the better part of the season, biding her time and patiently awaiting the day. It was only to be a fitting reason to leave the town and a good score. It turned out to be a test of her skill.

Her initiation took place in an abandoned building somewhere in town. Blindfolded and wet from the bath that Derk had given her money for, she let them lead her to what sounded like a room underground. She was seated in a chair and given something unctuous and milky to drink, the warm liquid making her feel strangely alert. A torch was lit, the sound of it crackling crisp and clean and she could hear people breathing around her in a circle.

"Who stands as witness to the initiate's worthiness to join our circle?" the voice had said, its nearness startling her, making her jump in her

seat. Her hands were bound and she had been in her shift, the ropes starting to dig into her skin. Three voices rang out, one she recognized as Derk, one was Old Gam and the third may have been one of the fellows Derk had rounded up for the take, possibly the one who had been shot. The rest of the circle was asked if anyone disputed her worth, to which no one replied.

She was given another cup of something to drink, this one heavily spiced and sweet. Her blindfold was removed, her eyes adjusting quickly to the light, surprised at the number of people in the circle and even amused at some she found there, people she knew not to be thieves at all. The person who had spoken first, a tall, elvish fellow with black hair, his grey eyes narrowing at her as he took her hands, placing them on a set of thieves tools, a pouch and a small painting of the moon goddess, making her swear to always practice the art of thievery, to carry herself as one who carried out the holy and ancient art form and to never betray her fellows, always watching for signs that they were around her. She swore on the

objects, one of the other attendees ringing a silver gong.

Tavera was stripped of the name “Kiffer” and instead to be called “Point,” for her one intact ear and her blade that had helped her fellows in what could have been a desperate situation. Derk and she performed a ritual where he bound their wrists with a gold colored ribbon, and then cut it down the middle, recognizing that her apprenticeship was now over and that she now must answer for herself and to her fellows in the Cup. They taught her a handshake that was to be repeated with everyone in the circle and then a slew of riddles and their answers were recited, each meant to be a sign post to others of the order so that they might recognize her as one of their own. Someone sang the song of how the goddess stole light from the sun, her brother, sanctifying the act of taking what wasn't yours. Then a communal cup was shared by the circle, this drink being sweet wine, served from a decorated goblet, probably stolen before the order had been started.

After being allowed to dress the initiation took on a more festive note. They moved things out of the building and into the bar that Derk had been staying at. They already hadn't been sharing a bed for a good spell but upon their arrival to this town Derk had told his adopted daughter that they could not stay together anymore since she was getting old enough to not be mistaken for his child and that it was safer for both of them if they were apart. Any anxiety he had shown those first few days were drowned in ales and spirits, happy to see his daughter initiated, Tavera being ordered to drink anything they set in front of her and after a few drinks, unable to refuse anything set in front of her.

Everyone laughed and drank, some sharing stories of trickster spirits, others telling graphic stories of exploits with members of the opposite or same gender, others told jokes or sang or danced...after a while it seemed like everyone was doing everything and Tavera blacked out while laughing heartily at a joke she thought she had just heard. She dreamed fitfully of the man

she had stabbed and an elven woman with long, black hair, her hands stretched out towards her but always keeping away.

She woke up in the bed of the elven man who had run the initiation. The only reason she knew it was his was because she recognized his clothing strewn across the floor, the tunic hanging halfway out the window. He wasn't in the room itself and somehow she managed to get dressed and out of the inn without running into him. If he had seen her slip out, he hadn't called for her and she hadn't imagined that he would have.

That was why she had gone to the temple that morning. To sober up and sort through her thoughts but the solemn atmosphere hadn't been enough to shake the girl clean. Tavera rubbed her eyes again, feeling the heaviness of them both, her head cloudy from deprivation and harried thoughts. Where the hell was she? Had she made a wrong turn again? Her eyes widened as far as they would as she spotted a landmark she recognized. All she would have to do is turn left at the shoemaker's and....

Tavera kept on walking down the street though her eyes had seen what they had seen and her heart was telling her not to do what she was supposed to do. She walked down the street, past the inn that Derk had been staying at, counting the two guards that still stood outside the door, the innkeeper gesturing wildly and swearing at them. At the nearest alley she turned, heading down the narrow street, the dingy gray of the cobblestones and bricks blurring as she stumbled, keeling over and vomiting onto the ground.

They had Derk. She had walked by two guards who held his limp body between them, his head bowed and blood matting his hair to his head. He wasn't dead. If he had been dead they would have called a cart; if he had been dead, she would not have been able to keep it together. She had to keep it together. Is this why there had been a vein of nervousness throughout the week of festive yet furtive preparation? He had almost pulled out of the take, she knew he was thinking about it but at the last minute said he was back in, adamantly so. Why had they taken him? What

had he done? What did they say he had done?

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, stepping away from the puddle of mess she had left on someone's back doorstep. Dark eyes peered around the corner, looking towards the inn and then down the street. They had taken him from her. She wanted to go after them and get him back, rescue him. But Derk had said, "If they come for us, Tavi, get away. Don't worry about me, just go. I haven't put this much time and energy into an apprentice just to have you rot besides me in the Jugs." He told her time and time again that she must be true to what she was and what she was was a thief. She must strive to be the best that she could be and part of that striving was to stay of jail so she could continue to do what she did best. But Derk couldn't go to prison. He had told her not to get caught. Maybe she could get him away from the guards before they put him in lock up. How could she do it?

The Cup. Her feet were already flying back to where she thought she had come from, not caring that people were staring at her as she ran

through the strange streets, her skirts fluttering behind her as she dodged between people and objects. A few wrong turns and some backtracking led her to the inn they had celebrated at and the stairs to the rooms. Tavera cursed as she tripped on the stairs, running up the rest on her hands and knees and throwing open the door to the room she had been in just a few hours before.

It was empty.

Empty. The bed was made, the window was closed, and the table and chair were in their proper place. Maybe she had the wrong room, she thought. But there was a crack in the mirror on the table that she vaguely recalled...had he left already?

As quickly but more carefully than before, she rushed down the stairs, rushing into the main area where the tender was waiting on a few early patrons. Her finger tips tapped the bar top rhythmically, her anxiety apparent as she tried to make eye contact with the tender. After what seemed like an eternity the tender came by, an

older man with a scar that ran over where his right eye should have been. "What'll it be?"

"There was an elf here, tall, older, gray eyes, dark hair. He's checked out, I believe but I need to know where he went." She hoped he would sense the urgency of her situation, prayed that he knew the answer to her question. The old man shook his dark, sullen head, taking a bottle out from behind the bar and setting a glass in front of her.

"I ain't seen him this morn, but yer father was here, asking about ye. Ye best be on yer way now, miss, he's looking fer ye." He poured her a drink and went back about his business, leaving her there staring at her glass.

Milk. The guards were looking for her or at least asking about her. She had visited Derk enough times during the last few days, someone must have placed them together and now the guards thought she knew something. Nervously she rubbed her wrists, anticipating the feeling of shackles around them, surprised to find the

remnants of the gold ribbon, festively tied in a decorative bow by some other person last night. Dark eyes fixed themselves on the frayed edges, ceremoniously cut by a simple dagger just last night.

They were looking for her and if the tender was in the Cup, she wouldn't endanger him by sticking around. She lifted the glass to her lips, gulping the milk down, careful not to swallow the coin that the tender had been kind enough to drop into the bottom of it. She waved goodbye to the tender and then left the bar, heading down the road that would get her to the eastern road the quickest.

She wouldn't have to go back to her room. She had paid for the week and if she hadn't shown up by the end of the day the innkeeper would be glad for the extra income and rent it out to someone else. There was nothing left to fence and she carried a few changes of clothes and her tools on her, all that she needed. Not all that she needed, she thought, keeping her eyes focused on her feet as they carried her out of town. Tavera

had been through what most children that grew up in cities had. She'd been sold and beaten and sold again, overworked and underpaid, abused verbally, physically and mentally. Hunger, thirst and loneliness were things she knew all too well and fear and pain had visited her often growing up. But she felt as if her heart were breaking, ripped out of her chest and carried farther and farther from her the closer she got to the edge of town.

Long, thin fingers touched the golden ribbon around her wrist and she set her teeth against each other, forcing herself to walk away. She would leave the city and do what she was supposed to do, what Derk wanted her to do above all other things and what she was supposed to do. Tavera would be Tavera, would be Point, would be what she was supposed to be. By herself and with the support of the Cup whenever she truly needed it. At least she'd have someone to brag to when she pulled something off.

The thought of Derk's blue eyes not filling

with pride almost made her cry and she felt like she was young again and alone with no one to love her anymore. Her arms crept up and she hugged herself as she pushed past people. Numbness trickled through her as she tried to brace herself against the emotions that wanted to well up again.

Why did everything have to happen at once, she thought to herself rather sardonically, managing a smirk as she fingered the frayed edge of the ribbon, First the take, the boy, the initiation and now this...what was next? The sun was a few fingers over the horizon, yellow now and calling to her as more of the city fell behind her. People, the wrong people were probably looking for her and she didn't want to be here anymore. If she was to start fresh like Derk had wanted her to, she would have to go somewhere else.

Friends were easily made and connections were established out of necessity. Family would have to be left behind. Fighting the urge to scream, cry or run, Tavera walked alone

wondering what would come her way. She'd had her fill of bad luck. Someone owed her a bit of good and she was more than obliging to accept it to work with it what she could.

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