

THIEVES AT HEART

the valley of ten crescents book one



TRISTAN J. TARWATER

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Published in the United States by
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Book Design: Christopher Tarwater
Cover Artist: Amy Clare Learmonth
Editor: Annetta Ribken

Print ISBN:978-0984008902
ePub ISBN:978-0984008933

A Note From Back That Elf Up and author Tristan J Tarwater

This edition of 'Thieves at Heart' that you currently hold is the version released March 2011.

Since then 'Thieves at Heart' has been edited for content and a new edition has become available as of October 2011 both in print and electronically.

In the interest of providing free ebooks we are still offering this first edition for free and are using this as the "free sample" of the new edition.

The second edition which is nearly double in size and fleshes out more of the adventures of Tavi and Derk is available to buy on <http://www.backthatelfup.com>, Amazon, Barnes and Noble and Smashwords.

We hope that you enjoy the story and thank you for taking the time and resources to download it.

Happy Reading!
Tristan J Tarwater
Author of Thieves at Heart

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It would be downright terrible of me to not acknowledge some of the amazing people who helped Thieves at Heart and The Valley of Ten Crescents get rolling.

First of all to my spouse and Admin, **Chris**. You put me in the situation where I came up with Tavi, Derk and all the other things in these stories. You put up with me rambling about histories and geographies and religions and topographies. You made the site, learned how to format e-books, web design...and you've supported my writing. I could write a book about how wonderful you are, basically.

SOPI. You can't read yet but if it weren't for you destroying a vast majority of my free time with your fiery personality I wouldn't have turned into a maniac, writing during the scant moments I had. A lot of this was written when you were asleep at night or taking a nap or (finally) playing quietly by yourself. In addition, I wanted to do the thing I most wanted to do so when you get older you feel like you can do the same. Do what you love.

Nathan. My first fan. *fistbump* You read the whole thing. All of it. And talked to me about it. It helped me want to finish the next bit, knowing you were waiting to find out what happened to Tavera. You helped get this all out. Thank you for waiting for all

this and always being there for fantasy fun.

Vas! You're such an inspiration and helped me out so much with your encouragement (and provided comics I could veg with when I needed a break). You're my unofficial mentor on how to be professional while still being myself. You are an amazing creator and an amazing person.

Lynn. Thank you for telling me that the story could be better. I really appreciate your honesty. Seriously. And thank you for introducing me to Annetta. You are a great ambassador and representative for the world of self-publishing. And thank you for introducing me to a genre of book I don't normally read!

Annetta, you make editing a total joy. You worked with our deadline and are totally awesome to work with. I honestly was not expecting to get an editor AND a friend but I did. Half this book would not be here if not for you. Literally. You rocked the Valley.

And to all our Lvl 4 Kickstarter Backers: **Jeron Richardson, Brittany McGuire, H. David** and **Nereida Brooks** and **Andrew W. Williams Jr.** Thank you so much for backing this elf up. We really appreciate it.

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 wide belt she wore under her bust in the full length mirror. A look of disappointment came over the woman’s highly painted face as she looked over the leather cords crisscrossing her back, brown threaded through pale pink matching the dress she was wearing. Her light eyes lit upon the tiny bit of the girl reflected in the mirror, a small brown hand crawling away once it was noticed. The woman sighed and laughed,

brushing out her skirts as she walked back to the bed and sat in front of the little girl, the hay and feathers settling with a rustle under her weight. “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. Skinny legs shifted under the girl’s small frame and she scratched at her greasy dark hair, what remained of her locks barely long enough to cover one slightly pointed ear. Her hand brushed against the other ear as her hands went to Prisca’s laces. Where there was supposed to be a point was instead a straight line, pink and tender where a knife had cut the cartilage away. It still sent a shiver through Tavi when she touched it. The loss of her hair meant she couldn’t hide the telltale signs of her blood or her past and her face grew hot even now, recalling Prisca’s announcement and remedy. Lice and a shave. “Can’t have bugs hopping about when I’m on business,” Prisca had said as she shaved off the girl’s knotty black locks. Dark eyes glanced towards the mirror and Tavi wondered if she could look at her own reflection without crying yet. The assurance that she

wasn't the only girl on the Row to have her head shaved didn't help. Slender, nimble fingers tugged at the cords 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," Tavi said, untying the tie at the top and placing her tiny foot on the woman's ample backside, leaning back with all of her weight and grunting as she did so, the woman holding onto the bed frame so hard her knuckles were white. The girl frowned with a mouth slightly too big for her face and she carefully tied a bow, making sure the cords 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.” Prisca dipped a finger into a pot of ground clay and vegetable juice, running the digit over her eyelids. The faint smoky color made her blue eyes seem even bluer in the light of the lantern.

Tavi watched with some interest as Prisca picked a heart-berry out of a bowl of fruit sitting on her nightstand, rubbing it against her teeth and lips before she ate the berry whole. “And,” the woman added, holding the fruit out towards Tavi. The little girl pressed her lips together before her dark fingers darted out, picking out a tart greenberry, her face screwing up as its sourness danced across her tongue. Prisca laughed, a sound like a cackle and a chuckle all in one. “You really must start eating more and eating the things I tell you. You’re far too thin! Can’t have men thinking they’ll snap you in two. Your Red Earth will never come if you don’t fill out, love.”

A bell above the door chimed, the dented metal causing it to ring strangely. Prisca clapped her hands with glee, reaching over for a vial of scented oil she had been gifted recently. The fragrance was of something Tavi had smelled before but couldn't place. Prisca said it was distilled moonflower and something the girl had never heard of that was supposed to 'tighten mens' trousers'. 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 they were going to slit someone's throat. She then placed the bottle back on the nightstand, as it had been a gift from the person she was expecting. Prisca had told Tavi it was good to display gifts the customers had given when they visited. Excitement made the woman bounce up and down on the mattress, her hands clasped over her heart. "This could be it!" Prisca squeaked lustily, blushing through her makeup. "I think it is. Make yourself scarce now and have at it, you know what to do." Before the Tart had finished giving her orders, the little girl had already ducked into the space between the walls as always, careful to place the upholstered chair

close enough to the secret hiding place so she could reach it easily but still remain hidden as she went about her side of the business.

When she originally started picking the pockets of customers for Prisca the Tart, the anticipation 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 stolen to the local brown cloaks 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 went down to the soothsayer to have their fortunes told. The soothsayer was a short, wizened woman, shrouded in a brown, thick cloak. She sat on a street corner, offering fortunes for coin or food. All that was exposed of the woman was her deeply creased face and her curled, spotted hands, gnarled from the twisting sickness some old people got. It made Tavi's skin crawl to look at it. The old woman scared Tavi and she told Prisca as much but her mam had shook her head and laughed in response. The old woman turned the cards over for Prisca and informed her that

from a secret place, a boon would be in her room before the moon set.

Tavi could make out her benefactor from behind the false wall, seeing her large bosom rise and fall with each breath. She 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 association, Tavi would benefit as well. Her mouth felt dry and she licked her lips, waiting, her heart pounding as the sound of booted foot-steps came closer.

The door opened and for a few breaths, no one walked in. Then Prisca clapped her hands joyfully and the man entered, closing the door behind him with a low thud shaking the walls. Tavi narrowed her eyes as she looked through the peek-hole. 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 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 already rumpled sheets and well used mattress.

This was the part Tavi was interested in, though not for the reason most people would be. The little girl silently thanked the goddess that the man had come to collect, and quickly. Sometimes Prisca and her clients would talk for a while, the Tart pouring them a glass of beer or allowing them to read things they had written for her. The more time they spent doing this the longer Tavi had to sit in the crawl space, 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 fallen asleep. Prisca had to pry her out of the wall, laughing the whole time and apologizing while all Tavi could do was cry as the blood rushed back into her legs, drawing tears from her eyes and curses from her young mouth. But the man whose boots she liked and wondered at was making good and quick on his

money. She held her breath and listened to be sure that they were fully occupied with one another, the bed creaking and rustling with their movement before the little girl slid back the tiny panel in the wall.

Tavi examined the jacket tossed carelessly onto the high backed chair, the upholstery worn and faded after various types of use. The jacket was unremarkable. The pockets faced her, which would make her job even easier. Depending on whether the event was ‘quick and painless,’ as her mam told her most business transactions were, or ‘pleasure and leisure,’ 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, the woman laughing in response. Tavi smiled to herself, a small, excited smile within the dark between the walls. A deeper inspection would be made.

The little girl took a deep breath before creeping her hand forward, sliding it over the fabric and through the folds, searching for an inner pocket. 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. Tavi 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 black.

The sound of a match being struck and the smell of sulfur eased the girl's senses into consciousness. She managed to keep her body still, trying to make sense of where she was in the dark. Her head still throbbed with a dull pain. She felt loose, scratchy straw under her bare legs and tickling her neck. The smell of wet stones was close. Her good ear perked up as she heard someone walking around. The darkness turned to shadows and oranges and the stink of sulfur

made her wrinkle her nose. When the little girl finally summoned the energy to turn her head, she saw the man sitting on a chair in front of her. Tavi moved her hands, bound at the wrists and looked to him, the candlelight dancing before her. 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 splashed to the ground, sounding 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 suggesting that she had just told a joke. He leaned forward on his chair, pressing his fingertips together and looking directly at her. His slicked back hair and scruffy face looked menacing in the dancing light. Deep blue eyes and angled features were familiar to her, roughened by a lack of a shave and fatigue showing in his face but not his eyes. This man had been coming to her mam all through the last three seasons and was a favorite of Prisca. He was able to conjure up whatever the girls

needed and even brought Tavi something when she had pressed Prisca to ask him for it. It had been a pretty pin she had seen in the market, the head a shiny blue and white bead.

On occasion the girl had noticed the man 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 her not to answer any questions he put to 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. He brought the match to the pipe he held in his hands, pulling on it gently with a quiet breath. Tavi heard the tobacco crackling and the smoke tickled her nose when it reached her. He shook the match out before he flicked it to the floor. Even in the dark, his eyes were intense and he stared 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 do you 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 turned her in. Stories about the horrors of prison made her head hurt more. Loneliness, hunger, pain, the dangers of other prisoners. 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. In front of her was a man who had knocked her unconscious with a flick of his wrist. Tavi wanted to scream. Her face felt hot and her stomach felt sick and something dripped down her forehead that felt like sweat. Fear made her whole body quake, dislodging the panic rumbling in her belly. When her mouth opened to scream, a shock of cold water slapped her in the face, dripping over her and soaking into her worn clothing. It snapped her brain away from her terror and the man shook her gently, his laughter sounding more nervous than comic this time.

“Come on 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 remains of his bad joke drawing tears from her eyes. “It was only a joke,” he said. He tried to meet her gaze but she looked away, still trembling so hard her teeth chattered, tears running down her cheeks. A rough hand brushed a tear away. “Hey, get a hold of yourself,” he said, and it almost sounded gentle. “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 back down onto the pile of hay, the man walking back to his chair to sit. Tavi took a moment to catch her breath, the shock of the horrible joke still causing her to shake. She felt so tired after being so afraid. Her head throbbed but her childish curiosity kept her from yielding to the weariness in her young body. “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 and 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 round, the other hand pulling out a small knife, the blade glinting 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.” He looked to her again, as if he was accusing her of something but Tavi shook it off, pressing her lips together. “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. Her head itched from the hay but she couldn’t scratch it. The adrenaline surge that had come with her panic now sought to serve her in her assertion and she stood on her knees as tall as she could. “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 round object

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 segment out of the fruit, bringing the white crescent to his mouth and took a bite of it, his face pensive as he quietly chewed. 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 for 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?” Derk made a sound and Tavera cringed. “I’ve been on the streets longer than you’ve been alive, little one, and I can assure you, no mam 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 slowly, seeming to enjoy the

piece of fruit. Then Derk stood up, walking slowly towards Tavi. His figure loomed 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 for quite some time and I know what you can do and I know what you’ll be able to do.” He said it quietly. It made Tavera turn her head to look up at him. His eyes were big, as if he were excited. “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 old scraps of fabric or rinds of cheese. No more stealing sausages off the spits and burning your fingers 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 face. 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 onto his hand as she gobbled it down, the bit of food bracing her against her weariness. When the apple was done he threw the core away into a corner of the room and stood up, brushing his hands on his pants.

“Now, there’s a party upstairs I am expected at and I don’t want you there. It ain’t for little girls.” He wagged his finger at her as he said all this before he wiped his dagger on his pants, the blade disappearing within his clothes with the flick of a wrist. “I’m keeping you tied up for now but I’ll be back soon. We’ll leave tomorrow at the beginning of the first watch. Try to get some rest.” 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 and hat off the table.

“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 as she forced herself up again. Her heart thumped in her small chest and the corners of the room seemed somewhat darker and more menacing as the man made to leave. Derk reached up and grabbed hold of a rope that hung down from the

ceiling and pulled down a set of stairs, the light from above ground seeming warm and inviting. He turned towards her, putting the hat on his head and looked at her quizzically, a smirk on his mouth.

“You’ll be asleep before the light goes out. As to where we’re going, I’ll know by the end of my party. And as to why...I don’t feel like explaining now. I don’t have to explain right now. But I swear by Her tits, it’s for your own good.” He bowed again, more deeply than before, so deep his hat fell off. Derk smiled as he picked it up, smacking it against his leg before he set it back on his head. Then he walked 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? What one person called ‘good’ sometimes meant a different thing altogether. Prisca had said cutting all her hair off was for ‘her own good.’ Tavera’s face grew hot again as she thought of Prisca. Hadn’t she promised the girl she would take care of her?

The woman had shared her bed with her, kept her warm, keeping her safe from the men who had asked after her, promised to teach her what she would need to know to make a man or a woman happy. Tavi swallowed the lump in 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? Besides, Tavera told herself, her tongue darting out to lick up a salty tear, she didn't want to be a prostitute anyway. The dressing up, the make up, the bells, the peddling on the corners and steps of the temple...Tavera didn't like any of it. She didn't want to sell anything, let alone trade purses. She liked watching the people go by, trying to figure out where they were going, not trying to get them to come home with her. And though she did like taking from people and Prisca had encouraged it, Tavera felt like it was just another trick. Tavera was just another way for Prisca to get more out of her clients. When she asked questions, Prisca had always laughed at her.

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. He said he would be her pa. Would it be any different from Prisca wanting to be her mam? She wouldn't know until he whisked her away from this life into the next and she remembered the way he had looked at her as he fed her the apple, the way he had bowed to her. Maybe he would love her and she would finally have just a bit of good in her life. Maybe he wouldn't use her and laugh at her. All the times she had encountered him before he didn't seem malicious or cruel. He smiled a lot and tried to help Prisca and the rest of the ladies. And he had gotten Tavi that pin. 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, Tavera 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."

In Greyhollow they stayed in a room above a tavern. Tavi was given the bed with the warm blankets and if Derk ever minded sleeping in the chair by the door, he never complained. The stairs leading down to the tavern creaked no matter how lightly they stepped and the Lurk was always very kind to the tender he called Brags. Derk introduced Tavi to him as Kiffer. This had made the old man cleaning glasses with a dirty rag laugh and he offered her an apple from behind the bar every time he saw her. Tavi always took it and as Derk had instructed her, thanked him, trying her best to answer to

the new name her father had bestowed upon her.

“You must be careful not to shit where you eat, Tavi,” he said one day as he was rolling a cigarette. He had acquired a lock from somewhere and Tavera was trying to pick it, inserting the pin he bought her all those phases ago and a filed nail into the keyhole, fiddling them around, her tongue sticking out the side of her mouth as she tried to feel with metal fingers. Derk licked the paper and gazed over to gauge her progress, reaching over to light the cigarette in the lantern as he finished his thought. “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.” He took a pull of the smoke just as Tavera’s mouth and the lock popped open. Derk smiled at her while Tavera beamed, her small, skinny hands shaking with excitement. “Very good, Tavi,” he said.

It was from Derk that she 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 distressed Tavera greatly and finally one afternoon, after another self-defense bout that actually left Derk with a bloody nose, she admitted she had no knowledge of cipher or script. “Tits of ivory, you can’t write or do figures?” He laughed incredulously, bright red blood trickling from his nose 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 stiffened at his words. 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. It still stung, raw in her memory like a scab that had been pulled off. Derk squeezed her shoulder reassuringly and led her down the street, holding her to him in something like a hug. “Come now, don’t think upon her, she can’t hurt you anymore,” he said in an attempt to comfort her, somehow knowing what she was

thinking. “You’re with me now.” He carried her to a small shop and bought her a tablet and some chinks to learn letters. They used coins the Lurk had won at gambling to study numbers and values, learning the conversions of half blueies to blueies to fullies. Tavera was much better at the numbers than the letters, much to Derk’s delight and chagrin.

Some of the lessons were harder, closer to Tavera’s old life but necessary. One morning he announced that he wouldn’t buy her any food for a phase and unleashed her on the streets. Tavera roamed the markets for an entire watch, looking over her shoulder for the blond thief that was supposed to be training her. Food danced out in the corner of her eye, taunting her. The little girl watched carefully, sniffing the air, dark eyes set not on the food making her mouth water but on those manning the food carts and stalls. Her stomach gurgled, not to the point of distraction but sharp enough to make her senses keen, honing the movements that drew her closer to her target, conserving her energy for both stealth and speed. At the most opportune moment, when her ears buzzed with excitement but when able to best control it, she

struck, small hands and wiry fingers darting out, skinny legs walking casually to where she would be able to enjoy her food in peace. Her heart thumped in her chest as she walked, faster than her normal pace and Tavi tried her best to keep from giggling with excitement.

One day after acquiring a rather delicious piece of fish, she turned the corner only to walk right into the Lurk, smashing into him so that she shouted in surprise and fell back. The ground was hard and Tavi winced as she fell onto her backside, tears springing to her eyes with pain. Derk picked up the piece of fish and sniffed it rather thoughtfully, running it under his nose like one of the cigarettes he was always rolling. Tavera narrowed her eyes at him for once while she pressed her lips together, arms crossed over her belly meant to dampen the sound of her growling stomach.

“This is what you have going for you now, Tavera dear, and listen to me,” he started, and she recognized the tone he always used when he was going to point something out. “You don’t stand out. Many children are obnoxious and call attention to themselves. They tug on skirts and caterwaul. They cry for food, as if they deserve it.

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." Derk was smiling though his words weren't kind. They made Tavera's face hot and she bit her lip, wondering what he was getting at. She knew better than to interrupt him and waited as he gestured, completing his speech, her ear perking up to take it all in. "This will work for now," he continued, "while you're young and skinny and pathetic looking. But what happens when those years of change come?" Blue eyes looked her over and Tavera made a face at him, trying to shoo his gaze away, which made him laugh. "You're not much to look at now but I've seen plenty ugly little girls grow up to have looks that destroy men's egos and burn through purses. People will be watching 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,” Derk 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 few breaths 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 seat-and-sworders 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.” Tavi 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 rather

than know who you really are. Or in your case, what you're going to be." At this, he 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, 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 year's dried ground apples for a treat.

Derk introduced her to a variety of colorful figures, calling them by names that couldn't possibly be their real ones. Tavi soon learned 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 was handy with cards and often called upon when a joke was in order, an expert in diffusing a tense situation. Vamp the Lipper possessed a fine, falsetto singing voice that never hinted at the beatings the man could deliver when provoked. All these men and

more knew the Lurk and delighted in the Kiffer. They plied her with treats and blueies, gave her sips of their drinks and asked 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. The taste of the watered down stout Brags served children still danced on her tongue and the dark brown foam fizzled above her mouth. Derk quickly scanned the room before he turned his eyes back on her and took out his pocket handkerchief, leaning over the table and 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. He turned in his seat slightly so that his body cheated away from the rest of Brags’ clientèle before he took a long sip and peered at Tavi, keen blue eyes staring 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. It hadn’t been a funny trick, she thought, remembering how she had been tied

up, the pain in her head, the fright. But it had been a trick, part of it. Everything since that night had been fine, better than her life before. The soothsayers words had been meant for Tavera, not Prisca. Tavi knew that now. The half elf girl enjoyed the instructions she received from Derk and the smiles she received from him when she succeeded made her smile more often than not. There was a wish to make him happy and so she tried to think of what he had told her that night, blinking. She pushed a 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 playing behind Derk’s eyes told her 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. 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." He drummed his fingers on the tabletop and looked around, a bit of nervousness showing in his face for the very first time. As soon as Tavera saw it the look was gone and his eyes were on her again, the tone of a teacher back in his words. "That's another thing you should learn, when to ask questions, 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 important of the early lessons Derk the Lurk taught Tavera was not meant to be a lesson at all. One cold evening he 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 this particular part of town. Her

footsteps echoed in the barren streets, making the city at night seem bigger than it actually was. 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.

Tavera tried to scream, twisting and writhing in her attacker's arms but her attempts to escape drew his sordid frame around her tighter, almost crushing. It was dark in the alley, the dim lantern light of the main street seeming to back away from her as she kicked, one of her boots flying off of her feet. Nails dug into her and horrible words hissed in her ear. The words were terrible and drew muffled shrieks from her throat, hot tears of protest forming in her eyes. 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 breathe. She turned around to see what happened and saw 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 words of intense, concentrated hatred. He spat to the side, the man in the hood matching his gait, cocking the crossbow back so loudly it made her jump. 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 blubbered something about a misunderstanding, that he was only playing and the little girl was overreacting to a joke. He gasped in pain, the milky whites of his eyes shining as Derk and the stranger stood over him, the dagger glinting and 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 reached out towards her. “Tavera,” he said quietly. “Tavera, are you alright? Did he hurt you?”

Tavi managed to shake her head but found her legs unable to work. She wouldn’t cry, she told herself, holding back the whimpers that threatened to erupt into tears. Derk stepped over the body and walked up to her, scooping her up into his arms.

“I’m sorry, Derk,” she said, crying into his shoulder, wrapping her arms around his neck. She buried her face into his coat and cloak, the tears coming anyway and soaking them through as she sobbed. “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 telling her it wasn’t her fault and he understood.

“What now, Dershek?” For a moment

Tavera wondered who the hooded man was talking to, 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, she thought. 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 hem-chewer. Find her boot, will you?" 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 Portsmouth, if you need us."

Tavera could swear she could see a smile gleam from within the hood, the 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 Derk. "Portsmouth, eh?" he said. His voice had a strange accent to it, though there was also mirth in his words. Tavera wondered where he was from. "I hear Celeel is there."

"Old Gam? Yah don't say?" The way Derk said it made Tavera think that he knew this woman was there and she saw the other man

narrow his eyes at Derk while Derk just wagged his eyebrows at him. “Well maybe I’ll pop by for a smoke and a bit to show off little Tavi. What say you?” Tavera looked up, large eyes meeting Derk’s, 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 onto her firmly he stretched his free arm towards his friend.

“Take care of yourself and the little one,” Jezlen said and the two men shook hands, finally falling into something like an embrace. The man was careful not to touch Tavera. “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 were already scurrying out of the shadows to claim their share.

Derk, Dershik, her adopted father. He 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, coming to a stable. The danger was gone but the

ordeal had made Tavera tired, the words Derk exchanged with the stableman lost to her. They both mounted a single horse, Derk setting Tavera on the saddle in front of him and taking the reins himself. Her mind wandered as the horse walked quietly out of the city through the night, taking the man and little girl with him. 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 horse's motion was soothing and she could feel Derk's heart beating in his chest. She smiled as she cuddled closer 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. The moon peeked out from behind some trees, lighting their way and Tavera wrapped her small hands around the reins as well, wondering what the next town held for them.

Chapter 3 ✂

First Impressions

This chapter was added as part of the second edition and is not available in the free preview.

Chapter 4 ✂

Cruel as a Child

This chapter was added as part of the second edition and is not available in the free preview.

Chapter 5 ✂

Misconceptions & Miscommunications

“By Her paps, girl, what in the hems 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 of most adolescents. She took a deep breath and resumed what she was doing, not caring if Derk was in the room or not.

“What’s it look like I’m doing?” she asked.

“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 guffaw, 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 that Tavera gave him. Her pa laid on the bed and brought the end of the cigarette to his mouth, not bothering to light it but letting it dangle there as he spoke to her, a look of contentment on his face.

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. Derk had told her she’d be beautiful in a few more years, though more than likely she would lack in the womanly endowments she so desperately wanted. Tavera was doing everything in her limited power to prove him wrong and she continued to rub the onion on her chest, turning

her bare back towards him. “That’s as big a load of shit I’ve ever heard,” he offered her at last, and she could see his blond eyebrows raising on his face in her head. “Who told you that?”

“Old Gam did, last time I seen 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 at 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.” Tavera heard him try not to laugh and she slammed the onion onto the table and hurriedly pulled her blouse back in, fumbling with the ties as she knotted them. She could see he was trying to take her concern seriously but the smile threatening the corners of his mouth just made her angrier. Derk sighed, loudly. “Besides, 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 her back to him, staring at the wall. She could feel his eyes set on her and all the humor draining from his voice “What, is there some boy you’re looking after?”

Tavera whipped around, her short, dark

hair flying and the look on her face betraying her, 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?” Her father 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 Tavera. “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 pointed a finger at her, ignoring the face she made at him. “You start liftin’ yer skirts for 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 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 because she thought you was too little to know," he said taking another drag, laying back in the bed once more. "But obviously, the truth would serve better in this case. He's like that because he's plowed 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 to her but this time he looked sincere, his blue eyes shining with earnestness. Tavera thought about the old man who wandered the town of Greenmire. He was disgusting and seemed to be wasting away, sores on his fingers and face a clear sign that he was to be avoided. Helk 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. Everybody knows when you sleep with too many people, you give away too

much of yerself and you fall apart. His brain ain't right because 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 and looking rather pleased with himself.

"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 them, or at least one of them."

"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 holding 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 them.”

“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 heard 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 dark face filled with light. Derk's eyes lit up and he stood up quickly, pushing her off of him.

"Tits, Kiff, you sidetracked 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 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 who she was looking for. 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 shifted his brown eyes towards her ever so briefly before focusing on the crowd and in a loud, nasal voice he 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 take part in the game.

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 decided to sit on, pointing at the man who staggered towards her. Apparently the game had been taken too far today and a patron decided to appease his embarrassment by punching Shamsee in the face. He had the beginnings of 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 snorted 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.

“Chew Her hems,” she cursed, 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 bleeder for that, Sham. He’s gonna put a nice, fat blood worm on your eye for the swelling. Maybe he’ll pick one that’s starving and the sucker’ll pop your eye clean out your white box.”

“Do shut up,” he said, his face changing colors from a worked over pink to a sickened green, his eyes wincing at her words. “All this and you were late to boot? What’s that? I sent that fapper of a pa of yours after you? You too busy puttin’ on frocks to keep yer word?”

Tavera turned her head and glared at Shamsee, her one pointed ear twitching slightly under her hair 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. 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 she could 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 unrelated.

“Wait a minute,” he said, frowning slightly, eying 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 you’re talking about,” she shot, her arms covering her chest protectively and giving herself away. Shamsee laughed out loud, almost falling off the crate.

“Oh, this is lovely,” he said, clapping his hands and slapping his knee, finally straightening his hat on his head. “I can’t 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 holding the purse up, the coins jingling merrily. If she changed the subject and left, maybe she could still save face. “Thanks for 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 should, 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 swatted her hands away.

“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 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?

“Mams 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 telling me to do, that I should go out and have people touching 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 chested 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 knowl-

edge. 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 resting where her hips should have been. Shamsee put up both hands in mock supplication. It made her mad and so she punched him anyway, a sharp, tight blow that made him wince and rub his shoulder as he frowned at her.

"The ripe age of 13? Pardon me, I ain't used to yer kind, little Miss One Ear. You're lucky your pa 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, 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 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. Tavera 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 bosomy 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 the girl's chest 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 over-protective 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 fapper and ran the bit too long. But I might run it again with him, just for something to do."

"You didn't hit him, did you?"

"I did, but not for 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 they would be staying a while. Her one good ear perked up slightly. “Tea? That bitter shit you try to get me to drink when my nose is plugged up?”

“Language, Tavi,” he said, wagging his finger. “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, 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, rolling out of the bed with a thump. Tavera sighed as she sat

down by the window, staring out onto the busy streets that she would get to know better, 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 what she wanted, even if it did mean that she could have a bit more happiness. It was too early to go to bed but Derk would nap before supper so he could stay up all night, leaving the next few hours free for the girl. Tavi set her chin on her hand and watched the men and women go by, wondering who they were and if any of the women had ever done something so silly as rub an onion on their chest. Tavera smiled at the thought of seeing the boy again. Maybe he would be willing to test Shamsee's trick with her.

Chapter 6 ✂

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 typically sang just as the sun was coming up were sending out their calls. The only other noise was the sound of Derk snoring behind her. His arm was draped around her middle, pinning her down. He seemed 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 pinning 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 lay there and waited, feeling the pressure on her side lessen as he gained control of his limbs.

"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 be easier to think of what she hadn't eaten. She'd been ravenous the last phase, 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 campsite but that Derk wasn’t looking, spinning around to make sure no one else was, either.

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 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 humored her with a bag of charred nuts on the way out of town. She 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 around 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, 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 but catching herself. He looked her over. "Everything alright?"

Hesitant sounds came out of her mouth 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 chewed on the side of her mouth, 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 his waist, 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, buck-

ling 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. Her gaze wandered towards the fire pit, 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 came 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 started, some of the water splashing up onto her. She glared at Derk, still holding the twigs in her hand. He just looked at 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 prayer bracelet he wore around his wrist. 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 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 and she huffed, blowing her hair out of her face. She wasn’t really 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 mentioned Tavera would start seeing men after her first time came. In all honesty, she hadn’t really understood all of what Prisca had said regarding her Red Earth. She would have to start doing what Prisca did and she would get money for it. That had been a long time ago and hadn’t come to be. Derk took 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 shuffled over to his pack, picking out the two fire stones 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 of 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 wish 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 seedbarley 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 her eyes big. 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 fire. “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 its points 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 making 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 wanted to get there by mid-meal,” Tavera said.

“I know, I know,” he muttered, fumbling around inside his pack. Tavera yawned and laid back on both of the bedrolls. 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. “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 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 girl didn’t think she’d be up to it today. Tavera rolled over again so 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 supposed 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 could nod off, a cramp would roll through her stomach and wake her up. She fi-

nally 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 other worshipers had departed for drinks or home and the two of them had lagged behind for Tavera to receive first rites. The priestess 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 temple's chalice for herself but she knew such a wish was bordering on blasphemy. She had mentioned it once 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 al-

abaster, 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 plainer ones set in the house somewhere. Gam's was set over her door, for protection. The priestess waited as Tavi 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, shooing 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 its way 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 serene 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 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 who was Derk's closest female friend. She

helped Tavera get situated with the rags so 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 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 girl 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 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,” Tavi 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 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 and continued walking. Spring clouds loomed up ahead, darkening the sky and hinting at 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 it, 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. Tavera had tears in her eyes and Gam was holding her stomach as their laughs settled down to chuckles and then sighs.

“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 somewhere 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 to her apartment 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 once the door swung open. 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 already ordered another pitcher even, but still, I couldn’t keep him from leaving.”

“Where’d he go?” Tavera asked. She’d seen Jezlen several times but never seen his face, which added 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 them. “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 fighting now?” Tavera said, confused. Derk made a motion 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, her 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 who 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. Old Gam reappeared from the back room 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. 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 short-sword 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. Tavi yawned loudly as she settled into bed, laying the weapon by her head. 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.

The next day was the same as any other day waking up at Old Gam's except that Derk had a black eye. Tavera lay in bed until Old Gam came out and chided her for being lazy, the girl scrunching up her face at the woman as her hostess started breakfast. Then Derk came out of the backroom, the hollow of his left eye discolored. It looked like it hurt. Tavera narrowed her eyes at him but he shook his head ever so slightly and then smiled. "Good morning, everyone!" he said, smacking Gam on the backside playfully. Gam swatted him away and

he stumbled over to a seat at the table, resting his chin in his hand. He looked tired. Tavera got out of bed and pushed her blankets and roll into a pile, setting her pack and new sword on top before she sat down beside him.

Breakfast was toast and hot milk sweetened with honey and berries to dunk it in. Tavera found her appetite returned and she ate her bread and half of Derk's portion. When her eyes searched around for more food, Old Gam offered her some sausage saying it would be good for her Red Earth time and Tavera felt all the food in her stomach threaten to boil out of her. Derk refused the sausage for her and asked for some tea.

This time Old Gam had a cloth bundle of pastries for Derk on their departure but she had a belt for Tavera, a woman's belt. It was grey with green leaves embroidered into it and meant to tie under her bust, or where a bust should be. There was something there but Tavera didn't think a belt would help. It was however very pretty, as all things that Old Gam crafted were. "Don't wear it now," Old Gam said, playing with Tavera's hair. "Be sure to take it easy today and eat some meat if you can." Old Gam kissed

Derk before they left and he winced, her fingers brushing his bruised face.

“Did you go out after I fell asleep?” Tavera asked as they walked down the road. Her sword was in her pack, the hilt sticking out of the top but wrapped with a skirt to hide its true form. Derk took a bite out of a piece of charred meat before he handed the stick over to Tavera, licking his fingers clean of the grease.

“No,” he said simply after he was done chewing.

“Well, did you fall into something? It’s dark back there,” she offered, mouth full of food. Tavera pressed her lips together as Derk gave her a look. She swallowed as quickly as she could without choking. “Did a spirit punch you in the face while you slept? Did you steal something bad? I heard a story once where a man stole from an old shrine and in the night, a spirit pulled down his pants and-”

The look Derk gave her made her stop talking. Tavera gulped as they walked down the street, turning her attention to the goings on of the town this early morning. Her stomach didn’t hurt as much as it had yesterday so the smells weren’t as offensive to her nose. She took an-

other bite of the food and chewed it thoughtfully, trying not to anger Derk again with messy habits. Tavera heard Derk sigh beside her.

“It was just Gam, Kiff,” he said, loud enough for her to hear. “We got into a fight after you passed out. It happens.” They both walked quietly down the noisy streets. Tavera finished her food and threw the stick to the ground, trying to think of what to say next.

“Well, did you hit her back?” she asked. It seemed like a good question.

“What? No! Why would I hit Old Gam back?”

“She hit you, didn’t she?”

“Kiff, I would never hit Old Gam,” he insisted.

“That’s probably why she hit you, then.” Tavera jumped up on a curb and stepped with one foot in front of the other, feeling the weight of her pack starting to make the straps dig into her shoulders. She hoped they would be taking a cart somewhere. They were supposed to be heading north according to what Derk told Old Gam but that could be a town or the next barony. Tavera looked to Derk again and he was wincing, although Tavi felt it was not from the

pain but from a thought in his head. He reached over and yanked her off the curb, hugging her close to him and pulling her hair over her ear. “What did you fight over?” she asked.

“What we always fight over. Friends, money. Connections.” Tavera felt like he was going to say ‘you’ but he held the word back and just squeezed her shoulder. Tavera frowned. Who did Old Gam think she was, hitting her pa like that? She regretted not bringing it up at breakfast despite Derk’s silent insistence that she keep quiet. With Tavera watching maybe she could have found something out, get to the heart of the matter between Old Gam and Derk. Years of history was the basis of the relationship of the two adults but maybe a fresh set of eyes could see something they were blind to. Then again Old Gam did just see her as a child, despite the physical change. They came to the gate, the departing carts lined up according to their destinations. Derk led her not towards the northern bound carts but the ones headed east, across the Freewild. Tavi looked up to him and grinned, Derk returning her grin with a wink.

“Just you and the girl?” the woman asked. Her brown hair was very short and her arms

were thick with muscles. She even had a tattoo on her forearm that made Tavera's eyes big, a naked woman dancing under the moon. The man behind her was loading bags onto the cart, lashing them down with ropes. Among the provisions were a few weapons, probably meant more for dealing with issues in the Freewild than for trade. Tavera felt her heart thump with excitement, wanting to leap up onto the cart.

"Aye, to the first eastern village," Derk said, setting his pack on the ground. He pulled out the bundle of pastries Old Gam had made them and a few handfuls of coins. He looked at the provisions on the cart and smiled. "This is headed to Reedwood, ain't it?"

"Right you are," the woman said and she smiled broadly at them. "Lucky for them Portsmouth temple owes them for the manuscripts that burned a few phases ago. Reedwoods crops have been faring poorly these past seasons."

"I've done temple work before, before the library of Reedwood got the annex. We got the Everlight Chalice back from those sunny hem-chewers years ago," Derk said which made Tavera raise her brows. Derk had worked for the

church before? This was news to her. Apparently it was good news to the cart driver since she grinned widely.

“Oh, another fellow used to knocking heads in the Green, eh? Well, you’re welcome on board, a fellow hand to the temple, past or present.” She set her brown eyes on Tavera and looked to her. “And you, can you hold your own if we get into trouble in the Green? You look too young to have helped anyone but yourself.”

“I gave him that black eye!” Tavera exclaimed, which made the large woman laugh so raucously Tavera thought she would never stop. Tears streamed down her face and the woman smacked her on the shoulder, which hurt. She hit hard and Tavera was glad the woman seemed so jovial.

“I like you, little one,” the woman proclaimed, crossing her arms over her muscled breasts. She smiled when she said it and Tavera smiled back, deciding she liked her too. The woman gave them a discount on their fare but said they had to acquire their own food and keep watch. Any disobedience meant being left in the Freewild. Derk gave her coin but not the pastries, much to Tavera’s delight before they

climbed into the cart, settling in among the beans, barley and dried fish.

“You never told me you worked for the church,” Tavera said, eating a pastry. Derk just shrugged and pulled out his cards, shuffling them against his knee. Tavera crammed the rest of the food into her mouth and ignored Derk’s disapproval, waiting for him to deal her a hand. Excitement, not pain rumbled her stomach now. The Freewild and then the Eastern Valley. She had never been there before. Derk told Old Gam they were heading north. Tavera picked up her cards and didn’t care that she had a bad hand. The discomfort of her Red Earth time was stamped out by the prospect of new towns to explore and Derk getting away from Old Gam. Tavera smiled at her pa and laid down a card. The ring around Derk’s eye was starting to get more purple and he winced when he smiled back but he seemed in good spirits. There would be plenty of time to win at cards on the journey, Tavera told herself and she set down another card, too happy to care that she would probably lose.

Chapter 7 ✂

Something For Nothing

This chapter was added as part of the second edition and is not available in the free preview.

Chapter 8 ✂

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 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 breathe 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 allowing a slightly pointed ear to poke its way through the shorn tresses. Her other ear was a distinguishing feature that was best kept hidden. The pink flesh running completely straight was testament to an injury sustained quite some time ago but was now at least physically healed. Instead of the skirts 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 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 whispered, not wishing to break the sanctity of the quiet bar in the morning, rubbing her elbow with her hand. The man who sat beside 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

bitches in public? It ain't lady like and it'll attract attention, it will."

"I like wearing pants when I'm about, Pa," she said, glad the conversation turned away from the previous topic. She saw the smug look on her father's face as he brought it 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 them wait at least as long as it takes to get them around your ankles." Tavera couldn't believe he had just said that to her and for a moment her mouth just popped open and shut, 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. The young woman looked away from him. She knew he had already seen the tears 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, knowing 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, pissing 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 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. "You 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, is it? Chew Her hems, I'm leaving."

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 who 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. Tavera relished in the careful planning of the procedure, the consideration of time and place. She 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 contrived go well. Tavera 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 to be a thief, like Derk and in truth, her heart said, why was the fear of the Jugs pushed upon her as a deterrent? Derk 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 came 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 always went 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 directly 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 was 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 young men 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 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, 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 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 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 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 at 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 im-

pressed 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 a quarter 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 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 altar and looked towards the priestess. The priestess' face was calm to the point of seeming unnatural, her grey 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, grey sand, not bothering to wipe the odd powder from her fingers as she returned to her seat. The rest of the congregation filed through, performing the same ritual. When the last worshiper had performed the rite, the priestess spoke the words 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 be-

fore going to bed for the day, coming in from the street after a night of performing things that warranted covering up. The 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 saw 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. Tavera 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.

The fortune teller was easy to find. There were several of them in the town but the closest one happened to be the most trusted and was outside a store that sold lamp oil and lamps. The old woman sat directly under the sign bearing the image of an oil jar and a flame. The owner of the store was a thin man who supposedly owed part of his success to the woman and so she was allowed to keep her small operation located there, boasting an awning and an actual low table to display her fortune telling tools. The faded brown cloak that hid the old woman's form was meant to add mystery but Tavera was old enough and had been around enough fortunetellers to know better. She wouldn't fall for any act. However, it didn't mean this woman couldn't read signs pointing at what tomorrow held.

Tavera set two blueies on the low table and sat down on the ground before the woman, smiling as broadly as she could manage while tucking her legs under her. The time at the temple had cleared most of her hangover away but there was still a cloud in her head that she was

hoping the fortuneteller could dispel. “I’d like to have my fortune told,” she said simply.

The old woman looked up from her tools. Tavera saw bright red blood in one of her eyes and she tried not to react to the strange sight, though she felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up. Other than the strange eye, the woman was unremarkable. Her brown hair streaked with grey, the wrinkles around her eyes and mouth telling Tavera she was not old but not young, either. The woman’s hands were steady as she gestured towards her tools, her eyes setting on her client. Tavera thought eventually the blood would pool in her eye and drip like a tear but it didn’t. It just clung, bright red in the woman’s grey-blue eyes. “What tools shall I use, what guide rings true for you, seeker?” the woman asked, her voice low but strong.

“Cards, please,” Tavera said. The fortune teller removed the sticks, seedpods and stones from the table and picked the cards up in her long, skinny fingers. The cards looked to be new, shuffling crisply in her hands, the circles falling back into a pile. “And before you ask,” Tavera offered, “I don’t know what season I was born. I just want a reading for what lies

ahead of me.” The woman shuffled the cards one more time in a rather business-like manner, with an air of understanding.

Tavera knew some people had to be coaxed into believing with poems or little tricks, even after they had already paid. Some fortunetellers used such acts to hide the fact they had no skill in reading signs. But the girl knew sometimes the goddess could be reasoned with on the street corners more than in her own temples so she did business with the fortune tellers from time to time. This one was a professional. It made Tavera anxious to see what the cards held.

The cards shuffled, the fortune teller held them out towards Tavi and she gestured towards three, the woman pulling them out from the company of the others and setting them on the table. The woman then pulled out another three, setting them under the ones Tavi had picked before she pulled out one card to play the part of the goddess card, setting it over the others from where Tavera was sitting.

“The seen thing is the people come and work together for gain,” the woman said, pointing to the cards. Each card did have at least one

person on it, Tavera saw. Each deck of fortune cards was different from one another though the symbols were generally the same. All of the cards in the 'seen' row were waxing. Waxing had to do with gain, fruition and abundance. "However," the woman continued, pointing to the cards she had drawn. "The unseen thing is this. The secret blade comes in the night to cut the cord of love."

Tavera frowned. Love. She hated when that word came up in fortunes. The focus of the love itself could have been many different things, according to many tellers but this woman seemed more straight-forward. Tavera looked at the goddess card, the holy one's emotions regarding the reading and saw the waxing half moon. Tavera knew the card.

"Distress and hope," the woman said, pointing to the goddess card. "There is a lot of waxing energy in this pull, you should be careful not to get swept up into anything. You are bound to get in over your head." The fortune teller let Tavera look over the cards for a few breaths before she gathered them up again, shuffling them once before putting them back in their wooden box.

“Is that what the cards say, or what you say?” Tavera chided, seeing a smile form behind the woman’s eyes. The woman pulled out her other tools and set them on the table for the next customer to choose from but not shooing Tavera away just yet.

“From me, of course,” the fortune teller said, the bright red blood shining in her gaze. “I’ve been doing this a while. It’s my input as someone who had been reading cards for a long time. Been doing it since I was younger than you.” The woman looked her over and made a sound that was half a huff and half a laugh. “Though from the looks of you, you’re very confident. You’ll pull yourself up if you find yourself down, won’t you?”

Tavera just smirked and brought her leg up, feeling the hard ground under her. She had another blueie in her pocket. What did she want to know about more? The group of people? The cord of love? The sword? Tavera pulled the coin out of her pocket and set it down on the table. “Could you tell me anything about this blade?” The blade was the most dangerous thing in the fortune and anything about it could identify the wielder. “Use whatever tool is best for that sort of thing.”

Tavera watched as the woman pulled out a strip of cloth and a black stick, sketching the image of a sword onto it. She then pulled out a small vial of some liquid and dripped it onto the fabric, watching as the ink or chalk bled into the fabric. The fortune teller picked it up in her hands and squinted, the blood in her eye seeming to take up all the white as she did.

“The blade is not the sword of the Baron’s seat. And it is an old blade. That is all I can tell.” There was a bit of confusion on the fortune teller’s face and the woman shrugged. Tavera was out of money anyway so she stood up and thanked the woman before she set off down the street back towards the inn. If anything started to keep her up at night, she would just have a go in the marketplace or try her hand at cards at the tavern and come back.

Well, the blade didn’t belong to the sword and seat, that was good. It meant no one she knew would come under threat from the brown cloaks. And there hadn’t been any mention of blood or death. Some fortune tellers liked to default to ‘love’ when she asked, falsely assuming that because she was a young woman, she was there to find out about a future husband or a

lover. Tavera had been interested in shedding a bit of light on her situation with Lori but 'love' was a bit too heavy for that part to be about him. She liked him and maybe wanted to get some information from him. He was handsome and sweet. That was all there was to that. As for the rest of it, while it hadn't exactly cleared anything up it did give her a bit to look forward to. All the waxing cards meant growth and as for the secret blade, Tavera was good at finding out secrets. There was a chance she could find the unseen bit before its ominousness ruined anything. Her stomach growled and she remembered Derk's insistence upon her having breakfast and she smirked, knowing he had at least been right about that. Cruel about everything else but kind about that. Tavera laughed realizing she had just spent all her money at the fortune teller's, falling back upon the fact that she could just grab something on the way back towards their room.

Tavera walked, almost bumping into a young woman who was too busy ordering some men around to notice the thief, too engrossed in the task of pointing with a stick at the various items on a large cart. Tavera heard the young woman shriek as a trunk fell off the cart and

spilled open, yards of fabric spilling onto the dirty ground. The man at fault shouted in protest as she raised the stick to hit him and people started to crowd and push, trying to see what the commotion was about. Tavera used the diversion to pull a bun off of a tray and she turned the corner and pulled it apart to see what it was stuffed with. Just honey and nuts. No phantom weapons whatsoever. She took a bite and tucked the rest away to give to Derk when she inevitably went back to the room. He would be hungry.

Chapter 9 ✂

A Cord, Cut

Tavera stopped dead in the street, suddenly remembering that she was in a different town and 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. She needed sleep. 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 leading 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 night's celebration, one 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 wracking than she would have liked. The goods were got and loaded as she herself had dictated but someone dropped a crossbow which discharged itself into the leg of the other thief. He 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.

Tavera hadn't planned for it to be Lori, she really hadn't. She knew his schedule and had chosen a day when she 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 shortsword

into his shoulder, pushing him back till his mouth opened with pain and surprise. She hadn't stuck around long enough to see if he would survive. 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 rushed with the cart for what seemed like forever, no light to guide their way save the stars. When they stopped, she jumped over the side and vomited in the bushes. Later as they rode away, she wondered if that was what the fortuneteller had meant. The old woman had said a secret blade would come in the night and cut the cord of love. She didn't love Lori. Did she?

Upon their arrival in Southpoint they divvied up the contents of the chest and 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 quickly and fetch a good grip of money. 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 asked, his voice trembling with pride. Tavera had been dumbstruck. She had laid out the details of the Dowry Take, talked 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 said was, “Plan it out and let me know if you need anything. I’ll see what I can do.” She planned the take for the better part of the season, biding her time and patiently awaiting the day. It was only a fitting reason to leave the town with 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 Derk gave 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 heard people breathing around her in a circle.

“Who stands as witness to the initiate’s worthiness to join our circle?” the voice said, its nearness startling her, making her jump in her seat. Her hands were bound and she was 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 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 was a tall elf 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. Tavera swore 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 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 given the name 'Point,' for her one intact ear and her blade that helped her fellows in what could have been a desperate situation.

Derk and she performed a ritual where their wrists were bound with a gold colored ribbon that was then cut, symbolizing 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 repeated with everyone in the circle and a slew of riddles and their answers were recited, each meant to be a sign post to others of the order so they might recognize her as one of their own. Someone sang the song of how the goddess stole light from her brother the sun, sanctifying the act of taking what wasn't rightfully your own. 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 she was allowed to dress the initiation took on a more festive note. They moved things out of the building and into the bar below the room Derk was staying. Tavera and Derk al-

ready hadn't been sharing a bed for a good spell but upon their arrival to this town Derk told his adopted daughter they could not stay together anymore since she was getting old enough to not be mistaken for his child and 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 was 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 just heard. She dreamed fitfully of the young man she 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 this was because she recognized his clothing strewn across the floor, the tunic hanging

halfway out the window. He wasn't in the room and she dressed and left the inn without running into him. If he saw her slip out, he hadn't called for her and she hadn't imagined he would have. It had been a relief.

That was why she had gone to the temple in the 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 hems 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 where Derk was staying, 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 grey of the cobblestones and bricks blurring as she stum-

bled, 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 was dead they would have called a cart; if he was 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 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 left on someone's back doorstep. Tavera 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 made her promise in the temple, before the Goddess. Derk was alive but said if she wound up in the Jugs besides him, it would kill him. He told her time and time

again she must be true to what she was, and what she was was a thief. Tavi must strive to be the best she could be and part of that striving was to stay out of jail so she could continue to do what she did best. But Derk couldn't go to prison. He 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 came from, not caring 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 she had just come from 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 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 him. 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 a Forester here, tall, older than me, grey 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 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. Tavera 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. Her eyes watered as they 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 he had been kind enough to drop into the bottom of it. She waved goodbye to the tender and left the bar, heading down the street that would get her to the eastern road the quickest.

Tavera wouldn't have to go back to her room. She had paid for the week and if she didn't show 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 she needed. Not all 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 growing 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. 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.

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, 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 sad 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 were to start fresh like Derk wanted her to, she would have to go somewhere else.

Friends were easily made and connections 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 had her fill of bad luck. Someone owed her a bit of good and she was more than obliging to accept it. Tavera was too good to just wind up in prison or cry herself away. As she wiped her tears the gold ribbon brushed against her cheek. She stepped past the gate towards the Freewild and the Eastern Valley, knowing she was more than capable to meet whatever came her way.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tristan J Tarwater is the author of The Valley of Ten Crescents series, as well as several other stories that hope to see the light of day. Born and raised in New York City she remembers reading a lot, visiting Museums and the Aquarium frequently and wanting to be a writer from a very early age. Her love of fantasy and sci-fi spills over into what she reads and watches in her free time as well as the collection of dice, books and small metal figurines that reside in her home. She currently lives in Central California with her Admin, Small Boss, a cat that knows it's a multipass and Azrael.



COMING WINTER 2011

SELF-MADE SCOUNDREL

The valley of ten crescents book two