

More female protagonists who feel vulnerable or silenced, more uncertain and unhappy teenagers, but this time in a fantasy setting. I had plans to do a whole big roleplaying game built around tribes where the leaders rode on these stadium-sized migratory beasts. But it never caught fire.

Unripe Fruit

Jawhool's mother told her to be nice to Tirk, the new Foster, and being a pretty girl of seventeen summers, Jawhool took this to mean that she should take Tirk somewhere that Jawhool would like and do something that Jawhool would enjoy. Tirk, being younger and away from anyone she knew and a Foster besides, followed along when Jawhool said they were going into the woods to see "a nice surprise." Tirk's people were Walkers, and she was instinctively deferential to Jawhool and her family, who were Above.

As they set out into the forest, Tirk and Jawhool didn't know they were being followed. Instead, the girls talked (mostly Jawhool) and followed a set of landmarks farther and farther from the broad plains occupied by the Longstrider tribe, Jawhool's massive nomadic community.

When they'd come over the low hills in the south, days before, it had been evening. The valley had been tan and brown in the setting sun's light, speckled here and there with the fires of outriders and Walkers who'd hurried ahead to cut trees or gather grains before the greater bulk of the tribe could enter the river basin. The Longstriders moved in a broader front than Tirk's own people, the Storm-Eyed. The two tribes had passed each other along the Great Green River, and Tirk had been fostered to Jawhool's parents. Tirk didn't know why, though she had her suspicions.

Jawhool was the only daughter of Tanty and Gypel. Between them, the couple saw to the wounds and illnesses of their neighbors on the suterrap, and attended the most grievous injuries or fevers of the nearly two thousand souls who accompanied Gry's suterrap on the Longstriders' unending pilgrimage.

"Ooh, my namesake!" Jawhool said, stopping in the middle of a meadow to bend and finger aside a slightly shorter patch of sedge grass. "See? They like the shade when it's not too deep." The jawhool blossoms were tiny, delicate and a faded, rosy pink. The herbalist's daughter parted the grass gently, the way she'd combed Tirk's hair the first night, when the new girl was crying.

"Remember what they're good for?"

"The disposition," Tirk mumbled.

"Just so. No, pick down at the base, leave the roots and they'll regrow, it's only the stems and leaves that bring cheer."

Once they'd filled the pockets of their baggy linen skirts with the herb, they continued on towards Jawhool's special place. A muddy rill that fed a boggy swamp was, deeper in and closer to the hills, a tight clear stream where they paused to drink.

"Warm, isn't it?" Jawhool said. "Listen."

Tirk looked around and frowned, making Jawhool giggle. "No, for the water!" the older girl said. "There's a waterfall!"

There was indeed. It trickled down a black, glittering cliff and formed a shallow pool floored with sand and crunching stones. Along the far side a dense thicket backed it, with tall pines soaring out of the dense vines. The girls, though, approached it from the friendly side, a tiny beach open enough that the black boulders along it could drink in the sun and become as warm to the touch as a friend's arm.

"Oh," Tirk said, looking around. A tentative smile crossed her face.

"Come on then," Jawhool said, undoing her belt and the skirt beneath as she stepped from her boots. "The water's warm as a bath, and cleaner."

Tirk blinked at the speed with which Jawhool disrobed and, more gradually, followed suit. The older girl already had the body of a woman, and Tirk felt small and plain and pale beside her.

They left their clothes on the stones, then gasped and started giggling as they entered the water, which was, perhaps, not as warm as Jawhool had promised.

#

The pair who followed them were similar to them, but also not. Dasch, like the bonesetter's daughter, was older and bigger and more brash. His father was a renowned honor-fighter and had recently given his son a fine bow of horn, won in contest from the Water People. Dasch had sixteen summers and his friend Madule followed him and smiled shyly at his boasts and jokes. Like Tirk, Madule was smaller and younger and less certain.

But unlike Tirk, Madule had been with this friend for most of his life. They barely had to speak to communicate. They were Riders, too—ranging out far to hunt game and watch for trouble from outsiders. Or, on occasion, to cause trouble for outsiders.

The greatest difference, of course, was that they were male.

Only one day previous, Madule and Dasch had brought down an elk, caught lucky-close to the main body of the traveling tribe. Dasch, of course, credited this more to skill than fortune. He'd hit it once, and Maduel twice, but Dasch's arrow had struck deeper and when it had fallen, exhausted, he was the one who'd cut its throat.

The pair had ridden out that morning in search of more meat on the hoof, but with the unspoken understanding that they would ride gently and enjoy the sunshine, having already nearly a week's meals. Dasch had spotted a doe but missed it, and

Maduel had managed to down a pair of birds, when they'd seen the girls far ahead of them, crossing the forest's edge with purposeful stride.

With only a gesture, Dasch had stopped Maduel and silenced him. At first, Maduel had assumed Dasch had spotted game, but then he followed his friend's gaze.

"Is that the herbalist's daughter?" Maduel asked, his voice barely louder than a cricket-chirp.

"Aye," Dasch replied, but in that one soft syllable he let Maduel know that they would tie their ponies there, and follow on foot, softly and in shadow, giving no sign of their presence until....

Maduel didn't know what the 'until' was, but sensed it had something to do with the way Dasch's brags always got louder and deeper when girls of his age, or a bit older, came near their fires at night.

So the two followed, with the grace and stealth of those who've hunted since their bodies were as hairless as a peeled willow twig. The girls, at a brisk walk, were soon out of sight, but their trail was easy. When the two hunters heard voices, Dasch set his large bow aside, so it wouldn't snag and betray them with a sound or a shaken twig as they approached. Maduel's weapon, unstrung, was short enough that he could crawl unseen with it snug on his back between his quiver and his shirt. The pair belly-crawled forward through the undergrowth, then nearer, on either side of a wide and low-hanging tree. Tirk's naked back was stark white among the green shadows as she dove forward.

Both stared as the girls ducked and shrieked, getting used to the water.

"Dasch," Maduel said, plucking at his friend's sleeve, certain the girls wouldn't hear him over the splashing and mirth.

Dasch didn't look at him, but only made gestures. A finger pointing at the ground: *Stay here.* Then a curving reach with his left hand. *I'll flank that way, up the hill and above them.*

Maduel tugged the sleeve once more, but Dasch pulled the buckskin free of his friend's grasp and, never taking his eyes off Jawhool, began to slowly move. Maduel, unsure what was happening, waited in place. It was what hunters did.

#

"Jawhool, someone's here."

"What?"

Tirk's voice was tight and she'd dropped to her knees in the water, her chin level with the surface. Her eyes were wide and sharp, staring into the shadows.

"The way we came," she said. "Someone followed us."

"Don't be silly." Jawhool had loosened her hair and was vigorously running it between her fingers in the water.

“Someone’s watching us. Don’t let on!” Tirk had to squeeze her eyes shut before she could make herself get closer to the edge. Nonchalance was not natural to her, so it was hard for her to feign it as she reached up for the deerskin shirt Tanty had given her. It was a bit too large, something Jawhool had outgrown.

“Fine,” Jawhool said. “You get out over there, in that muddy thicket.”

“I don’t want...” Tirk began, but stopped as Jawhool stood to her full height under the waterfall and flung her hair back in a glistening arc. She seemed as comfortable naked as a hare in the springtime.

“I...”

“Go,” Jawhool whispered, and the younger girl darted across the water, shirt clutched before her.

#

When Jawhool stood, Maduel was thunderstruck. He could not have said how much time passed, how long he stood and stared at the clean perfection of the bonesetter’s daughter. The flower-named beauty knelt at the edge of the water and spread her hair out to dry on the rocks, leaving him only a tantalizing strip of profile at which to stare, rapt, caught in what seemed an unbreakable fascination that was, at the same time, thrilling and nauseating. He knew he wanted what he saw, yet something felt deeply wrong. His heart felt ill, as if he himself was the disease poisoning him.

Then there was a crack behind him and he spun in time for one brief glimpse. It was the other girl, hair dripping, loose shirt hanging to her thighs and bare feet muddy to mid-calf. She was pointing an arrow at him, the way hunters learned never to do, not in play, not in jest, not even by accident. He heard the familiar bowstring sound, then his world was eclipsed by shock and pain.

#

Dasch had gained the top of the hill and crept forward, nose scraping stone, until only his forehead and eyes hung over the pool. His view was perfect and he drank in Jawhool’s beauty. Gradually, so slowly that he’d been unable to name when it started, strange sensations had taken hold of him over the course of the last year. His father had explained a great many mysteries and assured him that all was well and that in time his urges and longings would not only make sense, but would be finely fulfilled as was natural and right. Gazing at Jawhool, this fulfillment had never seemed so miraculously impossible, yet perfectly close.

He didn’t know what he was going to do, but he knew he had to do something and was about to—what, he could never, afterwards, know or explain—when a shrill and

hideous shriek split the sounds of murmuring stream and whispering forest. He didn't recognize Maduel's voice because Dasch had never heard his friend in such pain, but he knew it came from the younger hunter's perch. All lusts forgotten, he leaped to his feet and ran.

#

Tirk trembled as the man before her—he suddenly seemed so much smaller, with the arrow sticking out of him and the red welling up weirdly bright—writhed and clutched his wounded arm. He wasn't screaming any words, just wide-throated howls of pain and terror.

But somehow she nocked another arrow. The bow she'd found, set aside behind him and already strung, was far stiffer than the weapon her older brother had used to teach her. This was for killing bigger game than the pigeons and grouse she'd fired on for the family stew pot.

She took a deep breath as she hauled the arrow back, then realized someone else was coming. She refocussed her aim as a bigger man crashed through the undergrowth.

When he saw the bow, he stopped as if he'd run straight into a tree trunk, face instantly pale and mouth a black open O.

Her arms weren't yet quaking, but Tirk knew they would start soon. The unhurt boy stepped forward and jerked a skinning knife from his belt, and she let loose the shaft with a wail of fear.

She had a third arrow out and drawn before she dared look up, but the sounds of snapping twigs and rapid footsteps were receding. She fired once more at the movements in the brush, at the brief flash of his back, but heard instead a muted 'thock' as the arrow sank into wood.

"Gods and devils what did you do!?" Tirk jumped and turned to see Jawhool, entirely naked still, staring aghast at the weeping and bleeding boy.

"I... they were... I..."

"Put the bow down and get me my clothes," Jawhool snapped.

#

The bonesetter's daughter knew her work. She unbuckled Maduel's belt and strapped down his arm, speaking gently to him the whole time.

"Your blood still wants to be in you," she said, "It's not dangerous, it's not leaping forth, it goes grudgingly." She tried to keep the angle of the arrow the same, but it inevitably shifted as she immobilized the limb, stretching the channel through his bicep and the corresponding holes in his side and chest. Tirk's shot had slammed

through the arm, between two ribs, and out between two others, leaving the bloody steel arrowhead poking out like a bright red nipple.

“Blindfold him,” she told Tirk. “No, not with the kerchief, we’ll want that for a bandage. Use a skirt-edge. It won’t be long.” She turned back to her patient and said, “Your soul won’t leave so easily, if your eyes are closed.”

He squeezed them shut so hard they wrinkled and she said, “Good, that’s the way. That’s the way you’ll live. I’m taking out your knife now—not to cut you! I have to cut off the fletching, do you understand? The more you can lie still, here, on your side, the easier it will be. Do you understand me?”

“...yes...” He’d stopped screaming and could now only hiss.

“Tirk, get a rock, something flat-faced, put it under the fletching. Just so. Go soak the kerchiefs now.” There was a thunk as she chopped the arrow, a shudder passed through the wooden shaft and he bit back a scream. “All well. This next bit won’t be as bad. Oh you’re a brave one! What’s your name?” As he breathed in to answer, she pulled the arrow forward, free of both arm and lung. The hoarse howl forced blood to bubble from his chest wound.

“Right,” Jawhool said briskly, wrapping a soaking bandage around his pierced arm. “I’m going to tie this quite tight. Splendid. And the one for the chest. Be strong.”

“...strong...” he whined, face white and slick with sweat.

“Now I need you to put your hand here. You hold it right here, where the arrow passed through. I’m going to put your belt around your arm and chest. We want this tight.”

“Ugh!” he moaned, but it was less raw than his earlier shrieking.

“Good. Good. You lie there.”

For a moment, they were quiet while Jawhool stared down at the bloody young man. Then, as if awakening, she blinked hard and stood.

“It’s well that we’re close to clean water. I’m going to clean off again and dress. Tirk, you?”

“There’s only blood on my hands,” the other replied.

“Wash them. We’ll be walking this one back to the camp.”

“Maduel,” he said.

“What?” Tirk asked.

“My name is Maduel.”

###

That night, Tirk sat on her bed, arms hugging knees as if she was trying to compress herself into the smallest possible ball. Her eyes were wide, staring at nothing. At home, she’d never had a bed of her own, let alone a room that was her

space. Even though it was tiny, and never completely motionless, it was privacy. Strange, terrifying privacy.

She'd had such hopes. One heard of Fosters who learned valuable things, made important friends, became bridges between tribes and had powerful Drivers vying to give them residence Above. But there were also Fosters who were little better than slaves, kept for a year and sent back to their families beaten and bitter. It was impossible to tell.

Someone knocked at the door and it took Tirk a moment to remember that she had to offer permission to enter.

"Gry wants to see you," Tanty said. Silhouetted in the door, it was easy to see she was Jawhool's mother. The daughter's incandescent loveliness had, in Tanty, aged into a steady and comforting beauty.

"The Driver?" Tirk whispered.

Tanty nodded, holding out a wooden box. "Give her this." Carved on its lid was a beautifully rendered leaf and berry pattern, recurring with minor variations. Tirk was pretty sure it was the herb called Surcease Of Sorrow.

"Wash your face before you go." Tanty gave her a hug, but found Tirk too stiff to return it.

#

"Shot in the back," Maduel's father said. He was pacing the ground behind the family pavilion, clenching and unclenching his right fist. It crackled, the joints heavy from a lifetime spent cinching saddles and pulling bowstrings. "How did you let her get behind you?"

"She had a light step," Maduel muttered.

"Storm-Eyed." The older man spat out into the darkness. Parent and son had walked into the plain-stubble, cleared by the tribe's first suterrap a day earlier, its horizontal scythe-jaws as long as old pine trees. Behind them, a few Riders' tents surrounded a small fire. Dasch's family tent was beside them, but Dasch hadn't come to the circle. "Tracherous savages, the lot of them. Slit your throat for the Storm God soon as look at you."

"Maybe I scared her." They were conversing in the habitual low tones of hunters, but this was even softer.

"You're lucky to be alive. What have I taught you again and again? *You must pay attention!* The woods have worse things than Storm-Eye witches in them, and whenever you think you're safe in the forest, that's when you're in peril."

"Thinking I'm safe there is more dangerous than any beast," Maduel quoted, voice dull.

His father whirled and dropped beside him, arms reaching to embrace before he paused, then hugged the boy's head instead of his wounded side.

"You are precious to me," he whispered, so soft that Maduel could barely hear him over the crackle of the distant fire.

#

"Tell me again," Dasch's father said, in that particular, icy cold tone his son had only heard a few times, "How an out-tribe girl half your size took away your bow and shot your best friend with it?"

"I didn't know she was going to double back," Dasch said. The two of them had also walked off into the dark, to the forest's very edge.

"You just stumbled across the two girls?"

"We..." Dasch didn't know what to do with his hands. "We saw them in the woods and followed."

"What was in your mind?"

"I don't know."

"I see."

Dasch had heard his father yell and bellow and howl, terrifying other Riders when they'd slighted him, his voice leaving them stammering apologies, but Dasch had always known, somehow, that it was an unreal rage. Even with men who wouldn't back down, there was a twinkle in his father's eye, when they fought, in formal honor duels with staves or ropes, or just punching and wrestling by firelight until one would surrender and the other, laugh. But two times, Dasch had seen his father speak soft and cold and those duels had been fought with long blades and each time, the other man had died.

"What were they doing?"

"They went for a swim," Dasch whispered.

His father said nothing, and when Dasch looked at him, the look of contempt was worse than any blow.

"So you crept, and stared," his father hissed, voice barely a whisper. "And worst of all, when your friend was shot... *you ran.*"

Dasch tried very hard not to cry, but he cried.

"Father," he said, "I didn't know... there was blood... I didn't..."

"I came out here thinking I might have to Foster you," his father said. "Send you away to another tribe and hope they might know how to make you a man. I thought you were one, but this..." He turned away.

"Father, no, please, I won't... Please don't make me go to them! I won't... I won't do anything bad! Ever again! I'll make you proud, father, please."

"Don't call me that."

“...father?”

“*Don't call me that.*” He turned back to glare. “You don't wish to be sent off and Fostered? That's good, because I'm forgoing my right to send you.”

“...don't...”

“Only a *parent* can Foster.”

#

The Driver's house was the largest and finest upon the suterrap's mighty back, three stories high—all for one woman whose sons had homes of their own nearby and whose grandchildren were the only ones who dared speak to her without showing respect. Tirk, eyes downcast, knocked on the door.

Gry opened the door herself, for she saw little point in keeping servants. She was tall and rawboned, with fierce eyes blazing from a web of wrinkles. She had a face that weakness had long ago abandoned as hopelessly infertile.

“Gypel's Foster, hm? Come in.” She turned her back and returned to a tall chair, skins slung tight between carved antlers, affixed to the floor before a fire that swayed as the whole house crept along.

“I have... this...” Tirk said, holding out the box. Any who came to the Driver's house brought honor-gifts. Her daughters and sons brought her flowers or loaves of bread, little things. This present was obviously old and precious. Tirk's father would have felled trees for a year to afford its price. Gry didn't even look inside, just grunted.

“Put it in the cabinet under the stag-horns,” she said. “Mind you close it tight when you're done.” As Tirk obeyed, she saw that the cupboard was crowded with fine things. There were pottery cups made with the impossible balance of the Valley People, hammered copper drinking vessels from distant southlands, linen bags with strange labels and countless tight-capped jars.

“So,” the old ruler said. “Shot a man in the woods, did you?”

“His name is Maduel,” Tirk admitted.

“Oh. You shot a *boy* in the woods.”

“He was... following us?”

“Is that a question or an excuse? Come over here by the fire,” Gry commanded. As Tirk obeyed, she realized the older woman was grunting and pushing at the tops of her boots. They were finely made, leather thongs so tightly woven and lacquered that they'd repel water and snow for a dozen years.

“Go get that bucket,” Gry said, wrenching off one shoe and turning her attention to the other. She pointed at a wooden pail warming by the fireplace. When Tirk had fetched it, the older woman plopped her feet in it and visibly relaxed.

“Right. He was following you. You and the young herbalist, Jawhool?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“We were... swimming. Bathing.”

“Oh,” Gry said. “Did you know they were there? Maybe put on a little show?”

“No! They didn’t... weren’t there until we were... you know. Jawhool especially,” Tirk said, though she wasn’t sure what that ‘especially’ meant to emphasize.

“She’s a one to draw trouble,” Gry said. “Got herself a heart-breaking body and can’t wait to try it out.”

“She saved Maduel’s life!” Tirk cried.

“Maybe, if he was fool enough to jerk out the arrow, or get himself panicked in the woods,” Gry said, face twisted with skepticism. “But a man can bleed a lot before he dies. You’d be surprised.”

Tirk had heard stories about Gry, of the time before she was Driver. If anyone living on the suterrap knew what a man could take before perishing, Gry was the one.

“If you wanted him to die, you’d need a second arrow or, better, the knife.” She poked a finger at her temple. “Right here and a twist, that’s that. Up over the top of the eye if you’ve got the stomach for it. Or...” she drew a finger across her wrinkled throat. “That one’s a mess.”

She shifted her feet around in the bucket, then pulled one out and set it on a low table, dripping and steaming. “Rub that, would you?”

“Um...”

“Don’t be shy around the calluses.”

With an upward glance, Tirk obeyed. To kneel and grab the foot, she had to move a discarded boot aside. Its leather was softer than Gry’s soles.

“The Riders are going to say I should send you from my suterrap,” Gry said. “That would put you in their power, with no family or tribe to protect you. A few think I should cast you under. I’m not going to,” she said as Tirk looked up in terror.

“Thank you. Do you...” she stopped and redoubled her efforts on the old woman’s gnarled toes.

“Do I what?”

“Do you think I did the right thing?”

Tirk was looking down and didn’t expect the blow. It was knuckles to the temple, hard and fast. It stung, but it didn’t knock her over.

“Don’t be stupid,” Gry said, voice still cool, her hand lazily returning to her lap. “Forest justice means finishing things and not getting caught, it’s a secret you take to the grave. Harder than it looks, and it looks hard.”

Tirk touched her scalp and felt it swelling. Gry switched feet and gestured for Tirk to rub the left as she’d done the right.

“Unripe fruit,” she said. “You know the saying? Unripe fruit, eaten too soon...”

“...burns up the belly before the next noon,” Tirk automatically replied.

“Mm hm. Didn’t want a man to see you all nakers, huh?”

“I don’t.” Tirk applied herself to the foot rub and mumbled, “Why would I?”

“One day, you’ll want a man to see you raw more than anything in the world. Probably. It’s that way for most.”

“Not me,” Tirk said.

“Not yet,” Gry said, and her hand stretched out to gently caress Tirk’s scalp. Unconsciously, the young girl shifted closer.

“I know a bit about your Fostering. Not a lot,” Gry said. “But enough, I think. You’re still at ‘not yet,’ maybe someone at your old tribe didn’t see it that way?”

Tirk’s hands tightened, without her even realizing it.

“I was Fostered myself you know,” Gry continued, with all the leathery toughness gone from her voice. “Same old story. Came from the Water People. Another unripe fruit.”

Tirk didn’t realize Gry was guiding her into a gentle hug, because she was too surprised by her own tears.

“You have to apologize to Maduel,” Gry said. Tirk twisted her face around to stare.

“But...!”

“He looked at you before you were ready and that’s bad,” she said. “But you almost took away all his life before *he* was ready, and that’s not something anyone could have fixed. You apologize. You go down into the Riders and apologize. Let them see you’re just a girl, scared, who made a mistake. I can set things up to make it easier for him to forgive you. Jawhool,” she said thoughtfully. “He’ll be up for Gypel to check his wound, if invited, and Jawhool will talk to him. Hm. The one you have to watch out for is the other. Dasch.”

“Who? I didn’t... I did nothing to him.”

Something dry and old came from Gry’s mouth, something like the ghost of a laugh. “You made him run. That’s how it’ll be said, anyhow. You ask me, he made himself run. Not ready to see man-blood is all. Another unripe fruit, but you take a man’s pride like that... especially pride thrust upon him... that’s a difficult wound to heal.”

###

Even as Gry spoke those words, Maduel’s mother was leading Dasch to her son, an expression of fear and wonderment on her face.

“Don’t look at me,” Dasch said, twisting his tear-streaked face away from Maduel’s gaze. He flung himself to the ground. “I have nothing,” he said. “I don’t... but everything I get, half is yours. Everything I hunt, half is yours. Everything I find, half is yours.”

“Dasch, friend, what...?”

“Don’t call me friend. I left you when you were hurt and I can never, ever... *change* that,” he said, voice breaking into sobs. “But if you’ll have me, I’ll be your slave, tend your horse, fletch your arrows...”

“No, Dasch, you don’t have to...”

“*Don’t forgive me!*” Dasch said. “I don’t deserve it! But... let me stay here? I’ll work hard!”

“You don’t have to be my servant,” Maduel said, lip curling, staring at what seemed to be a groveling stranger with his best friend’s face.

“But I do. I... don’t have a family. I’ve been cast out. Says he won’t, won’t have a coward for a son. And you don’t hate me?”

“I could never hate you!”

Dasch’s sobs became louder, more raw.

“I have nowhere else to go.”