Ταλαιπωρία

(Talaiporía)

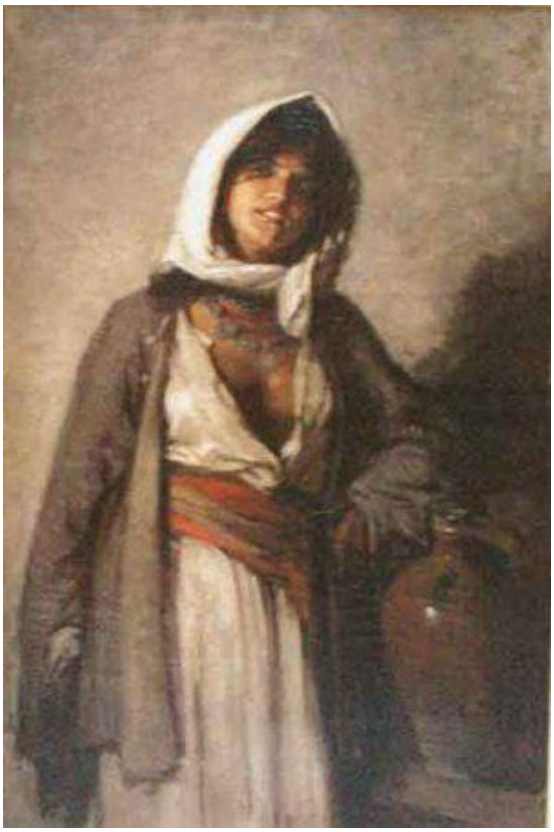


Concealed in the long deep shadows of late dusk, Tala crouched behind a few stacked crates as she watched the street vendor pack up for the night. She preferred targeting humans. Their poor eyesight at this time of day made escape easier. Her stomach grumbling at the sight of the dressed chicken hanging from the roof rack of the vendor's cart, reminding her it has been almost two days since she had been successful at pilfering her dinner.

She drew the hood of her worn cloak over her head, careful to cover the dark ram-like horns protruding from her forehead. Under her tattered skirt, her tail twitched with nervous energy then coiled around her left leg. She had done this countless times, but her experience didn't ease her anxiety. Were she Human or Dwarven or even Halfling, if she got caught she would probably get off easy with the confiscation of her dinner and a strong admonishment, maybe even a hard smack on the backside. But as the offspring of infernal blood, failure could be the end of her, especially in a city as rough as Elbulder.

She whispered, "*dissimulo,*" as she drew her opened hand over her face and down her body. Her horns seemed to disappear and her dark, cinnamon skin turned fleshy pale. Her featureless solid black eyes turned a human-looking green and her straight black hair transformed into curly red locks flowing out from under her hood. Her thread-bare clothes took on a new appearance as well, going from black and dark grey to vibrant shades of green. Even her almost five foot stature appeared to shrink an entire foot and her slender-but-womanly figure appeared to wither to that of a scrawny waif.

The merchant stood with a heavy basket of cheese and walked to the back of his cart. *'Now!'* Tala leapt up and dashed to the cart. Without stopping she snatched the hanging fowl and a wedge of cheese as she passed. The merchant cried out, "Stop! You little thief!" as he shoved the basket onto the cart and then ran after her. She sped to the next intersection then bolted left down an alley. Having spent all her life on the streets, few, if any, knew the intricate maze of roads, alleys, throughways and hiding spots as well as she did. As she nimbly weaved through the dark narrow alley congested with stacks of barrels and crates, the distance between herself and her pursuer grew.



She turned a corner to the right then stopped after a couple steps. She tossed the food into an open crate then closed the lid and sat on it. She sucked in and released a deep, calming breath, then again quietly spoke, "*dissimulo,*" as she passed her hand over her body. The fire-haired waif dressed in green was replaced by a much taller, buxom young woman with flowing waves of wheat-colored hair, flaxen eyes, sun-kissed skin and dressed in shades of brown. She leaned over and picked up a rag doll then nervously stroked its yarn hair as she hummed to herself.

A moment later the merchant skidded to a halt in the middle of the intersection and shot quick glances in each direction. As his eyes stopped on Tala he blurted, "Which way did she go?"

Her own eyes flared as she saw the large meat cleaver in the man's beefy grip. As calmly as she could she replied, "W-who, sir?"

A bit out of breath, he panted, "small girl, red hair, green dress."

"Y-yes, sir," with her left hand she pointed past him and down the dark alley across the intersection, "that way." He glanced over his shoulder. Leaving the doll in her lap, she dropped her right hand down to her side and flicked her fingers as she mumbled, "*obcumbo*," under her breath. A dozen or so paces down the alley could be heard the dull clank of perhaps a metal flagon falling from a short distance.

He hastily dug a copper piece from his belt pouch and tossed it at her feet as he nodded once at her, then turned and dashed in the direction of the fleeing thief.

Tala held her breath as she watched him disappear down the alley. When the sound of him stumbling off in the darkness could no longer be heard, she let out a heavy sigh of relief. She stood and tucked the doll under her belt. She retrieved the food from the crate and quickly wrapped it in a square of rough cloth. She turned again and picked up the coin, rubbed the dust off then dropped it into her empty pouch.

As she hurried back to her own squat with her prize, a nervous but content smile creased her lips. She will eat well tonight.

Tala wandered through the maze-like alleys of the slum until she reached her 'home' which consisted of a few worn out wool blankets behind a half-collapsed wall in an abandoned wreck of a shack. She shared this living space with an old blind woman, Agnes. As she approached the old woman called out, "Tala? Is that you?"

"Yes, dear, it is. A keen ear you do have," Tala replied, a little disappointed that the old woman could still hear her soft steps. The old woman nodded dismissively. "The hunt was successful tonight," she said triumphantly as she absentmindedly held up the burlap bundle. "How was your day?"

Agnes lifted her tin cup and shook it as she tilted her head ever-so-slightly toward it, "six… no, seven coppers," she said.

Tala retrieved the lone coin in her pouch and dropped it into the woman's tin cup, "make that eight," she said with a forlorn smile. "Dinner will be ready in a half hour." Agnes returned the sad smile.

Tala walked to a fire pit and set down the wrapped bundle. Squatting down, she arranged a few chunks of half-burnt wood into the semblance of a pile. Turning her attention to the chicken she unwrapped it then skewered it on a branch of green wood. She then straddled it across the columns of cobblestones on either side of the fire pit.

Holding her hand out in front of herself, palm up, she whispered, "*Ignis*." A small flame appeared in her hand. Tilting her palm down toward the pile she spoke softly, "*Transveho*." The flame stretched to the pile of wood and set it on fire. Tala watched the flames take hold and spread across the pile. She has had a fascination with fire for as long as she can remember, and an ability to control it, at least a little. She assumed it was due to the fiendish blood flowing through her veins. She never studied magic. It just came naturally to her. But she was never able to expand her knowledge or ability.

"*Crescat*!" The flame in her palm flared from a candle-like flame to that of a blazing torch. She waved her hand slowly in front of her, enamored with how the flame appeared both physical, yet illusion. The skin on her hand suddenly returned from fleshy tan to a dark cinnamon. Her fingernails similarly returned to long pointed shards of polished obsidian. Panicked, she shot a glance over her shoulder to the doorway as her disguise spell wore off. She caught her breath when she saw the entry was empty. Unable to cast it again until she rests, she'll have to stay in and out of sight until morning.

Closing her hand she extinguished the flame, then picked up the wedge of cheese. As she walked over to the old woman she broke it in two then placed one of them in the old woman's lap. "Dinner will be ready soon." The old woman reached up and found Tala's arm, then trailed her hand down until she found Tala's hand. Stopping there she gave it a gentle squeeze.

"Such a sweet young lass, taking care of an old woman." Another sad but grateful smile formed on the old woman's lips. Tala couldn't help but return the smile, and the squeeze.

Tala walked back to the fire pit and stood vigil, rotating the fowl periodically until it was cooked through. When it was ready she removed it from the fire and set it aside until it was cool enough for the old woman to handle. She picked up a wood plate and spoke softly, "*purus*." All dirt and old food stains instantly disappeared from the dish. She ripped the juicy chicken in two and placed a half on the plate, then walked over and set it on Agnes' lap. She and the old woman ate in silence. Tala gazed up at the stars wondering if this was all she had to look forward to.

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Tala woke to a commotion. It wasn't entirely unusual for the occasional drunk to wander this deep into the beggars' quarter, but they were usually alone, and easy to hide from. But this seemed… different. She heard several voices; laughing, yet, angry. She could make out that they were upset that they were tossed out of the tavern, yet they were making light of it; trying to 'save face' with drunken bravado of what they'd do to the barkeep if they happened to stumble across him in the dark alley. They approached the doorway to her hovel. One stopped just outside and began to relieve himself.

Agnes lifted her head from her make-shift pillow, "Quiet down you fools and move on!" She croaked.

Tala's heart stopped. She whispered forcefully, "Agnes. Hush!" The old woman seemed particularly spunky.

"Shadd'up, hag!" One growled. "I'll move along when I'm damnwell ready." A moment later he stepped into the doorway and looked around, buttoning up his pants. Judging by his clothes and musculature, Tala figured him for a common laborer, probably a logger. Scanning around he spotted Agnes' tankard. He stomped in and picked it up. Realizing it wasn't full of ale he raised it up to toss it at the old woman until the jingling of coins rang out.

"Heh, almosht asz goood!" He slurred as he dumped the copper into his palm. "Next round iss on mee, boyz!" He chuckled. The three ruffians behind him laughed.

Agnes rose up onto an elbow and reached out. "Give that back you miscreant and be gone!" She started crawling toward the doorway.

Tala whispered harshly, "Agnes! Let them go!" she wrapped herself in her blanket, doing her best to conceal her features.

The old woman clawed her way to the doorway, then up the drunk's legs and body, reaching out frantically for the hand containing her meager fortune.

"Get off of me, crone!" he grunted as he shoved her away, sending her sprawling into her collection of treasured junk. The four men chuckled in chorus.

Agnes reached out for whatever was within range and started hurling random objects at her muggers. Unfazed at the futile assault they laughed, until a knife found one of the muggers legs. Enraged, he stormed in and punched the old woman square in the face.

Tala screamed, "Stop! Please!" Not realizing it, her hood was not covering the horns protruding from the sides of her forehead.

"What in the name of Torm? A devil!" One cursed as he pulled a hand axe from his belt.

Another ruffian from behind called out, "Kill it! Kill the cursed creature!" The four of them charged in as they drew various small weapons.

"No! No! I mean you no harm!" Tala cried. "Stay away!" But they did not stop their advance. The man with the axe lunged at her with a growl and grabbed her by the hair. He raised the axe over his head.

"No! NO! A*mbustio!*" She shouted. A small fiery orb sprang forth from her open hand and struck her assailant in his chest. The thug stumbled back into his mates as he screamed, then fell forward rolling around in a panic. The three stepped back for a moment shocked by the spectacle. A few seconds later the man ceased thrashing.

"Why you fucking little demon!" One said. They rushed toward Tala in unison, knives in hand.

Tala scrambled for higher ground. Squeezing herself through some fallen beams she climbed up into the rafters of the partially collapsed ceiling. As the ruffians climbed through the timbers to reach her Tala called out repeatedly, "A*mbustio! Ambustio! Ambustio!*" raining orbs of fire down upon her assailants. With each incantation her fear lessened and her urge to do harm upon her attackers grew.

The thugs were on fire, flailing and screaming in torment. Her heart quickened and her bloodlust surged. "*Propago. Propago! PROPAGO!*" Tala dragged her clawing hands through the air over the collapsed building under her. The flames spread unnaturally quickly from her attackers to the timber house around them, engulfing everything near them.

Tala climbed through a small hole in the roof and pulled herself up, then leapt from the decrepit structure as it went up in flames. She heard Agnes' wails of agony as the old woman caught fire and began to be consumed in the blaze. Part of her felt a heavy pang of remorse, but it could not compare to the feeling of vengeance and hatred she felt while killing the ruffians. It felt good. No… 'good' was not the correct word. She stared at the spreading blaze 'Right'? Almost... It felt… natural, correct, true… yes. 'True'. That's the word. Not 'right' or 'wrong', but 'true'.

Tala was pulled from her reverie by the alarms ringing out in the streets. Elbulder, a timber and logging town, was well practiced in the methods of spotting and putting out fires. The watch quickly became aware of the blaze raging in the beggars' quarter of town.

Townspeople began to arrive at the conflagration. Tala dashed over to where her bedding was. She reached out her hand toward the gaps in the wall, "*capio*." She grasped the air as an invisible hand picked up her blankets, then drew her hand toward herself, pulling the bedding through the opening to her. She bundled them up and tucked them under her arm. She saw Agnes' burning body deep in the blazing heap. She whispered, "I'm sorry!"

"Look! A devil!" Tala looked down the alley to her right. Several men were pointing in her direction. Her horns, tail and red skin clearly visible in the light of the blaze. "She must have started this. You two, get her!" The two drew weapons and ran toward her. She sprinted away from them and wove her way through the dark alleys. With her stealth and her knowledge of the city, it didn't take long to lose them.

She crept toward the main street out of Elbulder. She could no longer call this place home. Surely the people of this city would be searching for the 'she-devil' that murdered four loggers and an old, blind, beggar woman. The road leads to Grymwood. She had heard about the city a few days east from travelers. Supposedly it's inhabitants are very open to all kinds and races. Elves, Dwarves and Orcs living together; not always free of conflict, but mostly so. Perhaps even a half-devil Tiefling could be accepted there?