

Chapter 1 - Lost Fruit

The sun shone brightly over the Swamp, but its light barely reached Hobbsliver, a tiny hamlet engulfed by lush vegetation and constant mist.

Outside the rusted iron walls, a few farmers toiled in an unprotected greenfruit farm. They had a simple way of distributing their crops: each house gets what a single member can harvest.

One by one, the exhausted villagers finished stuffing their crude straw baskets with their meager produce, and went back inside the safety of their homes.

When the sun hid itself behind the distant mountains, a lone scrawny girl remained working at a turtle's pace, wincing every time she touched the bark of the bushes. The village guard, a burly man by the name of Grim, emerged from the village gate behind her.

"Taby, inside, now. It's not safe to be here after dark."

Taby tossed her half-full basket over her shoulder, but her skinny legs buckled under the weight of the heavy fruits. She fell to the ground and watched as the basket's contents rolled down the field. Before she could retrieve them, Grim picked her up and carried her to safety.

"When I tell you to get inside, you get inside," he scolded.

The helpless Taby stared at the greenfruit remaining on the fields with desperate eyes. The raptors would devour everything on the fields as soon as the night fell.

Taby tried to run past Grim to get her harvest back, but he caught her and threw her into a turbid puddle that stank of rotten fish. She bolted back up, disgusted, and threw a furious punch at Grim that bounced off his chest. His amused grin heightened her frustration.

"What about my father? And my brother? They'll starve if we don't have any crops," Taby protested.

"Not my problem. My job is to protect you, not to feed you. Grab a crossbow and hunt if you're starving so badly."

Hesitant, Taby reached for one of the crossbows leaning on the walls of the guardhouse. A burning sensation enveloped her arm as soon as she gripped the wooden handle, and made her drop the crossbow into the mud. Grim scoffed and turned away, as Taby submerged her arm into the puddle to try and soothe the pain.

She was heading home when she felt a heavy stare upon her. It was Hotlongs, the fisherman, a wrinkled old man with jet black skin, glowing red eyes and a creepy toothless smile. He reeked of a mysterious smell that resembled concentrated hemp.

"Wassup, Taby? You look like a Garru ran you over. Wanna come in? I have grog!"

"Thanks, Hotlongs, but I'm fine outside. I don't want to get mud into your home."

"You live in the same shithole as the rest of us, and you worry about the mud? Here, take these sandals and get in."

Taby looked at the sandals in Hotlongs's hand, but they were made out of the same wood as the crossbow and his shack. Her bare feet ached by the lone act of looking at them.

"No, thank you. It's nothing personal, it's just that my body doesn't like wood," Taby said, gently shoving his hand away.

"Whatever, gal," he replied, with a puzzled frown. "Hey, I saw the greenfruit incident. I have something inside my shop that might help."

"Fish?"

"No, even better. There's this trippy thing they make in Rot: hashish. For a kilo, the Tech Hunters at Flats Lagoon can pay a fortune."

"Flats Lagoon?"

"A strange town in the desert, east of here. The adventurers there have a lot of shit to buy and sell. Anyway, I have enough hashish for you to get out of this piece-of-shit village."

"Uhh, I don't know about this," Taby said, fidgeting with her long, muddy hair.

"If you can do it, I promise you will get rich enough to put those stupid nobles in the United Cities to shame."

"What's the United Cities?"

"Okran's nuts, Taby! Do you know anything about this land?"

"Sorry, sir. Hobbsliver is all I know. My father..." she murmured, before Hotlongs cut her off.

"Yeah, yeah, I know those sob stories. So, you in?"

"I... um..." Taby blabbered, taking sneaky steps away from the shady fisherman, which then turned into a panicked retreat.

"If you ever stop being a pussy, you know where to find me!" Hotlongs yelled as she went out of sight.

Taby ambled home, her thoughts revolving around Hotlongs's proposal of immense riches. The Swamp beyond Hobbsliver terrified her. The villagers' tales about the creatures that lived there were enough to convince her that venturing outside was a suicide mission.

But, on the other hand, the empty basket on her back was an unbearable burden. It weighed more than a full basket ever would. Her family couldn't survive too many of those farming incidents. If the blood spiders didn't eat them alive, their own bodies would.

At the end of the road, Taby spotted her family's hovel, even more decrepit than the rest of the village. For her, it was a small paradise.

One of her earliest memories was when her father noticed her strange allergy to wood. He tore down his old sturdy shack, and built a new one out of whatever non-wood materials he could find. Despite its ugly appearance, their new mud shack became a cradle of love that protected Taby from the hostility of the world around her.

Taby opened the roughspun curtain separating the inside of her home from the world. An unusual display of festive candles and colorful decoration greeted her. Momo, her little brother, sprinted to meet her with an excited hug.

"Happy birthday, Taby!"
