

What was left of her tunic lay in her lap, and she turned it over and over again inspecting the damage. Rips on the sleeve, little tears on the hems, gaping seams. She turned the material over in her hands, until she realized her eyes were filled and she could no longer see. She curled up tight, buried her face deep into the green wool and let hot tears flow.

“Tey?” a voice came from the doorway. Tey bolted upright from her cot and attempted to set herself right. “Her Ladyship needs you.” Mirren took a couple of short steps into the small undercroft they shared and pulled her up on to her feet. “Really now, Tey. You’re fine. Everyone’s fine.” Merrin said as she brushed the wrinkles out of Teytoli’s dress. “You act as if you’re the only one caught up in that mess!” She turned Tey around and began smoothing down her wild tangle of long red curls. “But, you *won’t* be fine if you don’t get down there and see what Her Highness wants from you.” Merrin turned Tey back around, and began wiping her stained cheeks with a bit of her sleeve.

This mothering was foreign and unexpected from Merrin. Tey stood there awkwardly as the older girl tended to her. “I can’t...” she began and Merrin followed her eyes to the destroyed tunic that lay on the bed.

“Oh, for the love of the gods!” Merrin huffed and pulled of hers and tossed it to Tey. Merrin began pushing her out the door. “Go!”

Teytoli’s pulled the borrowed garment on as she walked numbly in the direction of the servant’s stairs. The tunic hung loosely and the neck gaped. Merrin was a bigger girl, bustier and well fed. *It’s showing.* She panicked and Tey tried to pinch the back to force the top to hang tighter on her collar. She fussed at the stays and, by the time she got down the stairs and to Her Lady’s Bower, she had it adjusted as best she could. Now if she could just manage to get control enough to slide a smile on.

“My lady?” She dropped into a deep curtsy. She watched through her lashes as Helthor, the Lady’s guard, nodded and closed the door. He was usually all leers and winks with Tey, but since the attack the guards had all turned stoic and solemn.

“Come here.” The Dwarven queen was sitting up in her bed. A beautifully embroidered quilt covered her to her waist, and she was still in her dressing gown. Talk about the castle had it that she had not been out of bed for 2 days. Despite her convalescent state, her hair was intricately coiled on top of her head and her sideburns braided and ringed in copper. Her face had the impassive mask that made Tey’s heart pound against her ribs.

Tey approached her bedside and bowed again. The queen waved, and she stood and waited. Lady Verna looked her up and down and scowled. “Well, *you’re a massive failure,*” the queen said with a hiss. Teytoli’s blood iced. “I asked you to do *one* thing. Just one! And you failed.”

Each phrase rose in intensity and Teytolli braced herself for the onslaught. The queen's hand darted out and caught her wrist pulling her closer to the bed.

"Do you see the state I'm in? I could have been killed by that bastard! And it's *your* fault!" Lady Verna gave a sharp twist to Tey's wrist that brought her to her knees. With her other hand, the dwarf queen grabbed Tey's upper arm and yanked her close. "What good is all that youth and charm if you can't even get a stupid *mul* to drink a glass of wine." She growled into her ear. "You *worthless* little *bitch*!" Teytolli knew better than to speak or flinch. She would ride out the tirade. She had ridden out others. She held her breath for several long moments, and then the queen's fury seemed to fade and her grip grew slack. "No, no." Lady Verna grew still and stared hard in thought. Tey focused on the dust motes floating in the morning sun. The smell of fresh linen and rose oil. She willed herself invisible. "No. It's his companions. We have underestimated them." Once again she turned a hard eyes on the young woman. "Leave now. I must think." The queen traced a dismissive wave. Tey made to leave, but the queen snapped "Wait.." and clutched at her tunic, pulling her careful assembly loose and exposing her neck. Tey silently prayed to all the ancestors that queen would not notice. "Cut your hair off." She said flatly, and then let her go.

Out in the hallway, Teytolli let out the breath she felt as if she held for the entire interview. She slumped against the wall and its stones were cooling. A surge of laughter bubbled up. *Cut my hair!* She giggled into her hand. *I'll shave my whole head!* How the old cow had miscalculated her punishment. Teytolli had no greater wish than make herself into a hideous monster. She wished day and night that she'd had never grown into a woman, never grown in beauty, never caught their attention and become *useful* to the queen,...or become useful to others.

She would have cut her hair, even cut her body and face long ago if she had been allowed too. There wasn't much she wouldn't do if it meant she would be ignored or overlooked. In her lowest moments, she had prayed for the bravery to plunge herself into the boiling laundry vats. She imagined re emerging like a disfigured phoenix to the freedom and solitude disgust offered. Now, she didn't have to. In celebration, she turned a few of joyful circles in the middle of the hall, but the sound of an exaggerated throat clear brought her to a halt.

Prince Yimrik had appeared at the end of the long corridor. She didn't need to see his face. She knew the shape of him too well. The hot prick of sweat broke out over her body and her hands went instinctively to the hidden leather around her neck. Her mouth turned to her ash and tongue to lead.

Then the whistle and thigh pat. Then the "Come,Tey." A silent wish turned over and over in her head. *Come back. Come back. Come back. Come back. Please come back.*