

## A Simple Game

Tellegvo walked to the edge of the pitch and squatted low as the skull flew over her head. The large mass of rock-filled bone dug into the sand and she stayed very still as three of the players jogged out to get it. Today, she prayed, looking at a small beetle as it scurried across the sand, today she would get her chance.

The players, two boys and a girl, were on the home team. Their rivals, from just one outpost over, were five dangerously equipped souls, each young enough that they probably hadn't been taken on any raids yet. They'd probably killed, at least with one death between them, but that was just a passing thing, likely an accident. The skull was from one of their parents, no doubt, and not from some fearsome enemy.

Her team was six in number, and the two injured of their rivals were holding broken bones in place on the sidelines. Tellegvo eyed these two hungrily, wondering if that team would take her into their midst. It would be a small treachery, and one that she could only choose once, but she had no ties here and she liked the tall girl with bones pleated down the back of her hair. She imagined taking those bones out, cleaning and sharpening them, and putting them back. She imagined the pretty boy with a mix of features from ogre to goblin with a healthy dose of orc masking his human lineage helping her up or sharing bread with her. These were good thoughts and she smiled, hoping they were kinder than the children from her outpost.

Three years ago, her mother had gone off with a man from the caravan. He had a job for her in the city, but he hadn't had a job for Tellegvo. That had been in the starving times. Tellegvo had been angry and sad at first, though, with time, she had found she cared less. Now, now she just wanted to belong to her own team. She wanted friends that relied on her instead of adults that pitied her and fellow children who picked on her.

There was a sharp crack and a third member of the opposing team went down, this time the beautiful boy. Maggie, the girl who had gone to retrieve the ball, was shaking her foot as though stomping so hard on her opponent's elbow had hurt. The rival team put up one hand each in surrender and began retreating to the edge of the pitch. Tellegvo followed, smiling at this sudden opportunity.

She drew much closer than most others would have been able to before she was noticed by the tall girl. Carefully, she drew herself up to her full height, standing at a full two feet. By halfling standards, she was not particularly tall, but she knew what to do with herself to make the most of what inches she held. Cautiously, she extended the back of her hand, fingers parted to show she held nothing on the other side, and then raised this to settle behind her head. The new team stood wide, letting her take them all in, as their wounded sat in the dust at their feet, nursing their injuries. Likely, they would all recover and Tellegvo felt small again. She wanted to join this team, she really, truly did, but it was doubtful that they would take her.

No one drove her off, however. The tall girl, probably at least half orc in makeup, and boy that seemed mostly human with a touch of hobgoblin lending an exotic cast to his features, knelt down to help set the pretty boy's broken bone. Rouch, cheap healing tonics were passed around and all who imbibed winced in pain. At the last, the pretty boy winked and, with his good hand covered in pain sweat, offered the flask with its vile medicine to Tellegvo.

Staring was impolite and yet there was nothing else she could do for several seconds. The boy shrugged and began to withdraw as the meaning behind the gesture hit her. She

lunged forward and caught the thing, bringing it to her lips and forcing herself to choke back the bitter, viscous liquid. She wasn't particularly injured, yet her dehydration headache faded a little. She smiled up at him, meeting his eyes for a brief moment before looking down again and moving her tongue to get the taste out of her mouth. The sun beat down on her, though she doubted anyone believed the heat to have caused her cheeks to flush.

The injured of that team rose as best they were able, their weight supported by their teammates, and the whole assortment began to mosey out of town. Having been bested, there was no point in lingering. Tellegvo followed along, smiling, and was not chased off. After about an hour and well beyond sight of the village, the team pulled out some trail rations -- just bits of dried meat powder and year-old dried fruit and seeds -- and the pretty boy again shared with her. She smiled, so very happy to have been accepted.

The team spent several hours there, carefully checking bandages and tending to the smaller cuts, scrapes, blisters and splinters they had accrued during the game. Almost no visitors ever won against her outpost's team, well, her former outpost's team. She sighed and considered the chances of this group rising to prominence. There was a war coming. Everyone said so. And wars needed soldiers, and the best soldiers always got good food and could sleep indoors at night and got good armor and respect. She wanted to be part of a team that could become good soldiers. The pretty boy offered her a dried mango. She blushed.

After a few hours, everyone rose and began again making their way back home. There had been few words, but Handsome, as she'd mentally decided to call the man who kept sharing, had grabbed Felix -- the first one to have been injured -- and taken his supplies from him. The goblin had skulked as Handsome, careful not to move his wounded arm, had handed this to Tellegvo. She shouldered the pack with pride, knowing now who the etzvick, the leader, of this team was. It didn't hurt that he obviously liked her.

They rounded a bend came nearly face to face with an expensive mercantile wagon. Twelve crossbows were leveled at them and the owners of the wagon began shouting in a language that no one understood. Handsome turned his head and gave the order that everyone was to retreat just as an arrow sprang into place in his lower leg. He hit the ground and most of the troupe followed that order, though the tall girl with the pleated hair knelt by his side. Tellegvo did so as well, making herself small until four of the celenicic men approached, their weapons pointed true.

Handsome whispered to the tall girl to go on, that it would be all right. She shook her head and called him brother, but two more paces set her scampering off behind the rise. None of the team had run particularly far off, though they remained in cover against those ranged weapons. She stayed close, shielding her newly claimed etzvick with her frail, too-lean body. The celenicics planted crossbows on the pair and patted Handsome down for weapons, stealing his daggers before shoving Tellegvo to the side and binding Handsome with fetters. They hauled him, limping and making faces against the pain put into both arm and leg, to the back of the wagon.

One of the celenicic men, his skin glowing brightly enough that it hurt to look on him, grabbed the weapons and shouted at Handsome in their strange language. He was hitched to the back of the wagon and hauled along behind. Tellegvo watched solemnly as the waggon continued on toward the city. They were taking that wounded boy to the city, where he would

stand in a court without knowing the language and then be hauled off to prison for a term of not less than five years. She knew the stories.

Tall Girl returned to the roadside first, her hands gripped in fists. Next came the other boys, then the girls, and finally the two wounded, Felix with a greater limp from where he had twisted his already broken ankle. Tellegvo watched the dust of that wagon rise and settle. She glanced to the side and saw the future. She stood just as she did, and her team stood just so as well. They wore armor they'd made themselves. They were soldiers. Handsome was not handsome any longer and was Second to Tall Girl, the prison numbers starkly revealed across his chest. Turning toward the city on the horizon, she imagined the city glowed crimson.

This game, they would not lose.