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LITTLE GIRL LOST
A VALLEY OF TEN CRESCENTS TALE

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Little Girl Lost
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Chapter 1

A Valley of Ten Crescents Tale

Tavera gulped as the ancient crone limped towards her, her eyes two points of shining black in her wizened face. The old woman's hunched back loomed over her head, the shape of her body suggesting some powerful creature had bent her in unnatural ways. The little girl felt her heart beating in her chest as the wrinkled creature approached, the odor of spices and old sweat wafting from her. Tavera's dark eyes traveled over the old woman's small frame as the crone licked over her dried, cracked lips with a pink tongue as if the girl was a morsel and not another child up on The Block.

I'm not scared, Tavera told herself, balling her fists behind her back. She mustered all the courage she could. If nobody picked her for winter work,

she would be thrown out on the streets to fend for herself till planting time. Tradesmen came to pick up cheap labor for winter work. If she did a good job and didn't cry, maybe the person would keep her on in the spring so she wouldn't have to go back to the fields.

The ancient woman finally stood before her, still licking her lips. Her dark, sharp eyes darted over the girl's tattered clothing and body. Amazingly, she waved her hand to signal an attendant with great vigor, her shawl billowing with the movement hinting at great strength inside the sinewy, twisted frame.

"Yes...Madame Greswin?" The tall sinewy attendant stood out with his albino coloring. His heavy lidded eyes gave absolutely nothing away; Tavera couldn't read his expression. He held a formidable looking spear in his right hand, more for effect than use; the children up on the stage were usually too frightened or accustomed to The Blocks to try and get away. The old woman's mouth curled into a grin, her teeth yellow and cracked with age. She cackled somewhat cheerily before turning her head sharply, setting them on the girl again.

"So, you know who I am?" she asked, narrowing her eyes so they were almost lost in the wrinkles of her face. "Well, I imagine you know what I'm here for. How old is this one?"

"We're guessing she's around seven or eight," said the albino, looking over the wooden card Tavera wore around her neck. All of the informa-

tion they had about her would be on the card but the woman apparently was illiterate or near-sighted. She reached out a bony finger and poked Tavera in the ribs. Tavera almost cried out; it felt like she was being stabbed with a knitting needle. But she held her tongue, and pressed her lips together hoping it would over soon.

“Is she a good worker? What has she done in the past?” The pale man with the spear leaned over, his face somber as always as he read over the card, not bothering to look as the sound of a child crying out pierced the air.

“Gleaning on farms, mostly...coal sorting, fruit picking. Did a stint at a launder.”

“Ah, and her fingers...let me see them.” To Tavera’s horror, the old woman’s hand darted out and grabbed a hold of her wrist, pulling her forward and almost off the block as she brought the girl’s hand close to her eyes, looking over the digits. “Very skinny, I see,” she commented, squeezing one of the knuckles. The old woman licked her lips yet again, a bit of spittle landing onto Tavera’s hand. The girl half expected it to burn through her skin but found it to be inert. She wiped her hand on her dirty apron as soon as the woman let go of her.

“Well, their kind do come on the lean side,” said the albino, sounding unimpressed as he turned his reddish eyes to Tavera, his face void of expression. “She’s part Forester, as it seems. Not sure how much.”

"Forester, eh? I haven't seen an elf of any amount since I was a girl, by her bosom! Ah, well, I'll soon mend her leanness, I will," the woman said with a cackle, reaching into the folds of her many shawls and pulling out a small pouch. The coins inside jingling merrily. "How much for her?"

"For the winter, five white pieces," said the albino, looking over at her placard to make sure this was the case. "Though I must say, you seem to go through servants rather quickly." He left the statement at that, not bothering to elaborate or question, much to Tavera's hidden terror.

"Well, I run a successful business and I can't tolerate insolence or incompetence. They run away, the lazy beasts! She seems sure enough." The old woman counted out five coins. Tavera's dark eyes grew wide at the sight of the money and the idea she was worth that much. She had gone for four fullies last time and that had been for two whole seasons. The albino pulled the placard off from around Tavera's neck. His fingers were cold on her neck and he tossed the piece of wood into a pile with a few others, not bothering to help the girl down from the box.

"She's all yours," he said, not bothering to say goodbye to either the girl or the woman, instead turning his attention to another potential customer. This one a large, armored fellow with a booming voice. Tavera stepped off the box as daintily as she could, curtsying before the old woman named Madame Greswin.

“Ah well, this is well and good, at least you’ve picked up manners somewhere.” The woman hooked her bony arm through Tavera’s, pulling her through the loosely packed crowd of people and onto the chilly city street. “I’m Madame,” the old woman squawked. Madame Greswin walked as if her legs were not the same length and Tavera was having a difficult time keeping her feet. “But you may call me Auntie Greswin if you like. I don’t have many rules. Do as you’re told and work hard and you’ll do well under my roof. I cannot tolerate lying, laziness, insolence or stealing. I am a well-respected member of this city and I won’t have you sully my good name or business.”

Tavera wasn’t sure if asking a question fell under the category of “insolence,” but her curiosity got the best of her and she managed to force her mouth to form a few words. “But Ma’am, I mean, Auntie Greswin, if you don’t mind me asking...what exactly is your business?”

“You don’t know me?” the woman asked, astonishment bringing her voice to a high shriek that made a few people turn. She cackled again, pulling Tavera closer to her. The reek of old sweat and spices tingled in the little girl’s nose as she cringed.

“You’re in luck, little girl. I am Madame Greswin, the maker of the finest sausages in the city of Fenwick.”

All winter, Tavera worked for Madame Greswin. She was expected to wake up before first light and

open the back door to let the butcher's apprentice in with the delivery of meat for the day. The packages were to be opened and sorted through: fat, meat, organs, bones. The meat and organs had to be separated by freshness, the best parts put in one wooden tub while the greener, nastier bits were stored in another. The bones were boiled down and the tripe rinsed in flat ale delivered by the brewer. Then Tavera cleaned the store front, work area and the small room where the old woman slept, a room whose only furniture was a bed, a table and a brazier. Tavera slept in the work area by the fireplace. She had to stoke the fire in the morning and tend to it in the evening.

Madame Greswin treated the half-elf girl fairly well. She gave her clear instructions and Tavera learned to ask for clarification if she didn't understand what was being asked of her or risk being called lazy or insolent. The punishment was a lash with a long, thin cane the old woman always seemed to have within arm's reach. The spices and combination of salts, vegetable juices and meats were a closely guarded secret, which was fine with the little girl. She was more interested in the end result than the making. The fire had to be hot enough but the water not too hot and there was a room where the woman cured long links of fat, greasy sausages.

The days alternated between making sausages and selling them. On the first day of rest, a man who Madame Greswin paid in sausages would set up a lit-

tle booth, grilling the tasty links and selling them for a half-piece or a blueie. Even in the bitter cold the man showed up, warming his hands over the grill as he shivered on his little stool, waiting for the customers who were willing to brave the weather for a hot sausage.

On the second day of rest, Auntie went to temple. She fried a few sausages, leaving half a sausage and a piece of bread for Tavera before she went out for the day. Tavera was supposed to watch the home and hearth and most importantly, clean the machines the old woman used to grind the meat. Tavera was allowed to touch them only to clean them. The crone expected a perfect job. The little girl was required to leave all the parts out on the table so the old woman could inspect them. Auntie Greswin would run the pieces of metal under her large nose, smelling the precious pieces of metal and running her fingers over them to be sure they were free of grease. The cleaner the pieces, the less likely her fresh sausages were to turn. If the metal parts were not cleaned to her specifications, Tavera received a beating with the cane. After the beating was over, she was commanded to clean the parts again and go to bed. After a few weeks of this, Tavera learned how clean the machines had to be in order to make it to bed free of welts.

There were times when Tavera had to remind Madame Greswin who she was. The old woman would squint at her from time to time and call her by different names, Kera or Gema. Madame

Greswin would complain about her joints and claimed she knew when it would snow by how they ached. Tavera wanted to say it sounded like nonsense to her. But no amount of complaints about pain ever stayed the old woman's hand with the cane so Tavera held her tongue and her wonder when the cold snows came.

The winter was harsh and the snow piled up to where the crone thought it unsafe to send Tavera out of doors to shovel. They spent more time around one another, the beady eyes of Auntie more likely to find fault with Tavera's doings the more time she spent indoors. After a particularly snowy set of days, Tavera wished she had never been taken in by the old crone. Everything she had done those few days had been wrong and with the snow piled high, she couldn't escape the old, shuffling woman and the long, wooden cane she wielded with such skill.

When the woman drank, it could go well or poorly. Sometimes she sipped something Tavera wasn't familiar with after going to temple. The alcohol dulled the old woman's senses so she slept deeply enough to allow Tavera to poke around. One late afternoon as the woman lay asleep in her bed, Tavera summoned the nerve to creep upstairs and into the small, sparsely furnished room serving as the woman's quarters. Further inspection revealed a crawlspace within the wall. The little girl was able to hold in her curiosity and bide her time till the next time the woman was out of the house, being

sure to get all of her chores done before she clipped upstairs to the room.

In the crawlspace were several trunks marked with words she hadn't the education to decipher. Inside were old but well-done drawings of a woman and a man, the man obviously older than the girl with the solemn face who stood by him. There were a few beautiful quilts and two old fashioned dresses. Best of all though were the half-dozen hair ribbons, some of them made from some kind of shiny material. Tavera held her fingers over the ribbons for a few brief seconds before snatching the two she thought were the nicest, quickly putting everything back where it went and running downstairs so she could hide them in her bedding.

After too many phases the snow let up to the point where it actually began to melt a little, the banks growing lower. The sun turned the white mountains into gray ponds and the water pooled wherever it could, filth and dirt lining the bottoms. Auntie Greswin went out of doors more, busying herself with charitable works whatever it was that kept the old woman engaged. Tavera was glad to have more time to herself and less contact with the wooden cane, occupying her free time with her ribbons.

Sometimes she would tie them around her head and walk around the small house, talking to the inanimate objects as if they were people and she was a genteel woman. Other times she would tie the ribbons into knots so they formed makeshift

dolls, always careful to flatten them out best she could when she was done with them. And still there were days when she would find herself running up the stairs and throwing open one of the trunks, wondering who the people in the pictures were and what the symbols meant.

One day Tavera was doing just that when her ears perked up, hearing something downstairs. Could the woman be home already? Panic squeezed her heart as she quickly put everything away, cursing to herself as she pushed books, knick-knacks and drawings back where they belonged. Tavera closed the crawlspace door as quietly and quickly as she could before she ran down the stairs, hoping the woman wouldn't beat her too violently for being upstairs. She threw open the door, stopping short as her dark eyes fell upon the scene.

In the back area where the sausages were made stood two men. One of them she recognized as the man who grilled the sausages, his eyes widening in alarm as they fell upon the little girl. Out of the storage area came another man, this one similar in coloring and build to the first but with darker hair. He held a few chains of sausages in his hand, looking to the griller before turning to the little girl, his face calm.

For a brief moment Tavera wondered what they were doing but a sinking dread in the pit of her stomach told her why they were there. Behind them the back door was wide open. She ran toward them hoping she could get back the things they were intend-

ing to steal. “No, don’t!” she screamed, the griller already out the door and gone before she made it to the back room.

Just as she reached the work table, the other man tipped the piece of furniture over, the sound of wood splintering and metal clanging ringing in her ears. Tavera just barely jumped out of the way as it came crashing down, shrieking at the sound and her narrow escape. Laying on the floor, she looked up just in time to see the second man run out through the back door. He didn’t bother shutting it behind him.

Tavera scrambled up and around the table, running just outside in time to see them bolting down the alley. “Wait!” she shouted, her voice shrill, fear propelling her scream down the snowy street. “Please! Don’t! Come back!” The men disappeared behind a building, not bothering to heed the trembling girl’s pleas.

Tavera ducked back into the house, slamming the door behind her and trying to lock it, the tears in her eyes making the latch difficult to work. She began sobbing as she realized it was broken, wiping at her streaming eyes with the backs of her dirty hands as she looked over the scene. One of the legs of the table had fallen off, the door to the storeroom wide open. Tavera walked over to close it, drawing her breath in horror as a realization prickled in her brain.

The machine. She had left all the parts out on the table for the woman to inspect them and the man had tipped over the table. If Tavera knew

any prayers, she would have recited them as she dropped to her hands and knees, desperately searching for the pieces of metal which belonged to Auntie Greswin's precious machines. Panic stricken eyes scanned the floor, finding a few but not all. Quickly, she popped up and grabbed the broom, sweeping maniacally in the hopes of knocking one of the missing pieces out of hiding. A few actually did roll out and she spread them all out in front of her, counting the pieces feverishly. Tavera cursed. They weren't all there.

The sound of the front door opening flooded Tavera with fear. She felt as if she would vomit and it took every shred of her being to keep herself from passing out from fright. Instead she sat there on the floor, frozen.

"Girl?" The shuffling of Madame Greswin's feet and the tap of her cane drew closer, her shadow reaching the back room before she did. The two beady eyes glinted in the firelight and set themselves on the shivering girl. The woman stopped short, her cane banging hard on the floor as her wet, shriveled mouth quivered on her face. A thin, high whistle came out of her mouth as she stared at the girl, her gnarled knuckled gripping the head of her cane. "Where...where did you get that ribbon, girl?"

The ribbon. She must have put it in her hair and forgotten to take it out. Just as Tavera gained her voice back, the woman's eyes darted to the floor in front of her, falling on the metal pieces in the girl's apron. Tavera felt the rage of the woman grow-

ing steadily and then the sharp, hot pain of being grabbed by the ear.

The woman's fingers had an iron grip on the tender point and Tavera shrieked in pain, blocking the woman's cane with her hands, the hard wooden shaft cracking against her wet hands. Auntie Greswin panted, her beady eyes glazed over with intense emotion. She dropped her cane to the floor, her free hand reaching into her apron pockets. The glint Tavera saw out of the corner of her eye elevated her terror to heights unknown and she fought against the old woman, shrieking and kicking, managing to drag the old woman to the floor with her. But the bony, stone like fingers still gripped her ear.

"Evil little girl," the woman snarled, the glint still dancing somewhere out of Tavera's direct line of sight. The suggestion of what was there was worse than actually seeing it. "Stealing from me, breaking my machines! How dare you! I'll not have such treachery under my roof. Evil little creatures must be PUNISHED!" The glint shot closer and then the pain of her ear went from a throb to something sharp and raw.

Tavera was unable to keep back a beast-like shriek as the sensation seared into her brain. Something brushed against her fingers. She wrapped her small hands around it, striking around as hard as she could with it. It hit something both hard and soft. Tavera struck it again and again before the little girl realized nothing was holding her anymore.

Tavera dropped whatever was in her hands and without thinking shot up off the floor, propelling herself out the back door and bolting down the alley in the opposite direction that the thieves had gone.

Her boots and thin dress were worthless in the winter air. The thin leather soles skipped rhythmically across the barely cobbled streets as the girl ran desperately, tears threatening again in her eyes. Oh goddess, why had this happened? Her ear still stung. Cold, icy air licked the edges of her small body, the activity and pitch of her anxiety keeping her going. If anyone noticed she was bleeding, no one said anything. If anyone was concerned as to why a small child might be running around in the dead of winter without a coat, no one stopped her. So she ran, the energy it took to keep back her tears and run becoming too much for her to bear. Tavera finally stopped, slumping down against a crate and giving herself over to her sobbing.

The cold snow started to bite through her skin, the air pressing in around her. Still she cried, her hands starting to clench with cold, her body shivering. Why had this happened? Why had the woman done that to her? Her hand trembled as it reached up to the side of her head, the numb skin of her ear not registering the pressure but she felt the damage.

The little girl sobbed again, seeing her hand was covered with a red smear of blood, dark crust speckling her hand. What was going to happen to her? She couldn't go back to the sausage shop; even if Auntie would take her back, she was liable to beat

her within an inch of her life, if not out of it. If the Nabs got her, she'd be put on the block with a bad mark on her record. Only the worst professions took children like that and most of those children didn't come back for another cycle on The Blocks. They were usually too crippled by whatever work they had been doing to do anything else or just disappeared.

There was no safe place to go for her. Eventually, someone would notice her and take her to the Nabs. From the Nabs, it would be The Blocks and then it wouldn't be much longer after that. Tavera sobbed, trembling so hard she almost toppled over onto the snow, dreading whatever was to come and take her away.

The sound of footsteps barely registered in her ears as she faded away. The alley was staring to swim before her senses and she felt herself being lifted up. Tavera thought she heard, "red is my lucky color today." Before she could try to figure out what it meant, she passed out.

Tavera sniffled, shaking her head from side to side slightly as she came to, still under the impression ill fortune was all that was hers. As she moved her head, someone came towards her and sat next to her, laying a soft, warm hand on her forehead. It was one of the kindest ways anyone had ever touched her. Still she started to cry again, trying to bring her hands up to push them away. Something seemed to be sitting on her chest and legs, weighing her down and the girl began thrashing around, trying

to push the weight off her. Pressure came down on her shoulders and there was a low shushing sound beside her, something quiet and soft. Tavera managed to open her eyes, as sleepy as she was, trying to focus them on the person who had their hands on her shoulders.

It was a woman with blond curls and light eyes, her cheeks very rosy and her nose covered in some kind of white dust. She was plump without being fat, her pale bosom pushed up and out by the woman's belt she wore around her torso. The expression on her face was kind and as her eyes met Tavera's, she lifted her hands off the little girl's shoulders, releasing her.

The woman smiled, her face a mixture of anxiety and relief under the make up. "You gave us quite a fright there, little one. Don't worry, you're safe with us." Tavera's eyes darted around the room, first across her body and then around her, trying to take in everything at once. She was covered in thick, warm blankets; this was the pressure she felt over her body. The room was lit with two oil lamps and over against one of the walls was the biggest mirror the little girl had ever seen. The woman smelled good and was still looking at her kindly.

"Where's my clothes?" Tavera asked. She realized that she was naked under all the quilts. The woman laughed, leaning closer to her and brushing a stray hair out of the girl's face.

"Don't worry about those old things. I just had to get them off of you so we could look you over.

'Sides, they were wet and we had to get you warmed up." The woman reached over to the side of the bed, where a bowl sat, steam still rising off the top. She dipped the spoon in a few times before blowing on whatever she pulled out, looking at the girl again. "Kept the ribbons, though."

"I don't want them," Tavera mumbled, eyes filling with tears as she looked to the side. Those ribbons...they had been the first thing the old crone had noticed. She never wanted to see them again. Tavera sniffled, the aroma of whatever was in the bowl wafting up to her nose. The little girl shifted under the blankets, deciding this was the warmest she had been in a long time. She rather liked it. Her mouth was a distrustful pout as she tried to look into the bowl, the woman still holding the spoon. "What's that?"

"It's soup," the woman said, putting the bowl under her chin and offering her the spoon. "Ain't you hungry? It'll warm you up." Tavera looked down into the spoon, opening her mouth slightly so that the woman could feed her, swallowing the warm broth. It did warm her up and it tasted good. Why was this woman so kind to her? The woman smiled and fed her another spoon of soup, blowing on it so it wouldn't burn the little girl's tongue. It was all very surreal to Tavera but she wouldn't object to being placed in warm blankets and fed hot soup. She would only hope that it didn't come to an end too soon.

“Prisca, Fior is here askin’ ’bout taking us both for a go. What should I say? Oh, you’re awake!” A thin, long haired girl popped into the doorway, her cheeks the same rosy hue as the buxom one. The girl smiled at Tavera, showing that one of molars was missing but she had a sweet smile. She sat down by the woman called Prisca on the bed, her brown eyes looking over Tavera. “You gave us all a scare!” she said, reiterating what the other had said. The skinny one placed her arms around Prisca’s middle and hugged her, sighing as she looked over the little girl. “You was bleeding something fierce but Sera got you patched up. You poor little thing.”

Tavera blushed at having someone pity her, swallowing the spoonful of soup the woman had fed her. She squirmed under the covers. Both the woman laughed out loud, Prisca’s laugh bordering on a high pitched cackle while the others was more sweet and melodic, the woman even putting a hand over her mouth.

“It sure is quaint to see a body blush in this house, ain’t it Gia?” Prisca set down the bowl and placed her hand on the girl’s forehead again, even bending over to kiss her on top of her head. When she did, her breasts smashed into Tavera’s face, almost suffocating her but the kiss was brief and the crisis avoided. Tavera snaked her arms out from under the blankets, letting them rest on top as she frowned, looking over the two woman that were looking over her hair ribbons and apparently trying to decide who should take which one. The little girl

waited for a moment before she drew in a breath, touching her ear.

It was cut straight across, the slight point completely gone. It was still raw but someone had put something oily on it, the orange colored grease staining her fingers as she drew them away.

The woman named Prisca saw the little girl's face and pity managed to force its way past rouge and powder. Tavera trembled as Prisca perched on the side of the bed. The woman's warm hand brushed her knotty tresses out of her face and she tucked her hair behind her ears, careful not to touch the still fresh wound.

"Don't you worry 'bout that, love," said Prisca. She laid a hand on the little girl's face, staring into her eyes. The eye contact made Tavera feel slightly uncomfortable but the woman held her head, the other woman sighing faintly in the background. Prisca kissed her yet again on the forehead before releasing her, letting her fall back. "You're with us now and us brass take care of each other. Just get some rest." The woman put a hand on her forehead before she pulled herself away, the thin woman taking her hand before leading her out. Prisca shut the door behind her so Tavera was left in the room alone.

Tavera sniffled under the sheets, drawing them closer around herself as she rolled over. Brass. It could have been worse. Tavera saw them walking the streets, wearing bells at their breasts as advertisement for something Tavera didn't quite

understand. All that she knew was men were interested in it and brass sold it. They frequented the temples in the morning, peddling their invisible wares on the surrounding blocks. She figured in time she would find out what it was they were selling. For now, Tavera knew she was warm and extremely tired. Without giving heed to the bumps and noises of the house around her, the little girl closed her eyes and fell asleep.