

# Part One



Let me you tell about the first time I killed a man.

On the morning of that day my father, Anto, lay on the simple, straw-stuffed mattress that I'd dragged out to the kitchen fire, choking on his own life as a wasting sickness ate at him from the inside.

He had been like this for days now. I had watched him grow thin, watched him cough blood, and listened to him swear at the gods in a steady mumble which I struggled to hear over the crackle of the kitchen fire.

I burned the fire to keep him warm, even though winters in Lesser Khaim were not the kind that kill men, like the ones far to the North. Winter was a cool kiss here, in Lesser Khaim, and the fire kept him comfortable and happy in his last days.

"Why haven't you fetched the healer yet, you useless creature," Anto hissed at me.

"Because there are none to fetch," I said firmly, gathering my skirts around my knees to crouch by his side. I put a scarred hand, the sign of my long years of slaughtering animals at the back of the butcher's shop, to his forehead. It felt hot to my old, callused palms.

There had been a healer, once. A wrinkled old man who lanced boils and prescribed poultices. But he'd been chased away by the Jolly Mayor and his city guards, accused of using magic. The old man had been lucky to flee into the forest with his life.

"Then bring someone who can *cure* me," Anto begged. "Even if they are of the deadly art. I'm in so much pain."

His pleading tore at me. I leaned closer to him and to the crackle of the fire that burned wood we could barely afford in these times, when refugees from Alacan crammed themselves into Lesser Khaim, eating and using everything they could get their hands on.

I sighed as I stood, my knees cracking with the pain of the movement. "Would you have me look for someone who can cast a spell for you, and then condemn us all to death if that's found out? It would be a heavy irony for anyone in this family to die at the blade of an executioner's axe, don't you think?"

I thought, for a moment, that he considered this. But when I looked closely at his face for a reaction, I realized he'd sunk back into his fever.

He was back to muttering imprecations at the gods in his sleep. A husk of a blasphemer, who took so much joy in seeing the pious void their bowels at the sight of his executioner's axe. This was the man who would lean close and whisper at the condemned through his mask, "Do you not believe you will visit the halls of the gods soon? Don't you burn favors for a god, perhaps one like Tuva, so that you will eat honey and milk from

bowls that never empty, and watch and laugh at the struggles of mortals shown on the mirrors all throughout Tuva's hall? Or do you fear that this is truly your last moment of life?"

That was my father, the profane.

Unlike his outwardly pious victims, Anto believed. He had to believe. He was an executioner. If there were no gods, then what horrible thing was it that he did?

Now he was going to find out.

It angered him that it was taking so long to slowly waste away into death. So he cursed the gods. Especially the six-armed Borzai, who would choose which hall Anto would spend eternity in.

He swore at Borzai, even though he would soon meet the god. And even though that god would decide my father's afterlife. Anto was not the sort of man who cared. He had no thoughts for the future, and he dwelled little on the past.

I always had admired that about my father.

My oldest son, Duram, peeked around a post to look into the kitchen, his dark curly hair falling down over his brown eyes. "Is he sleeping?"

I nodded. "Are you hungry?"

"I am," Duram said. "So is Set, but he doesn't want to come down the stairs. He says it hurts."

Set had been born with a twisted foot.

"Stay quiet," I cautioned as I picked up a wooden platter. I spooned olives from a jar, tore off several large pieces of bread, cut some goat's cheese, and then lined the edges with figs.

Duram dutifully snuck back up the crude wooden stairs, and I heard the planks overhead creak as he took food to his brother. Soon he would need to work for the family. He'd need to become a man early, to help replace Anto's earnings.

But for now, I sheltered him in the attic with his brother and their toys. I wanted them both to have some peace before their worlds got harder. Particularly Set's.

I opened a window and looked outside. My husband Jorda was supposed to be working the field. Instead he was sprawled under a gnarled tree, a wineskin lying over a blistered forearm.

There was always a wineskin. I never passed him a single copper earned from my butchering, but he still found wine. He usually begged them from his friends among the Alacan refugees. He'd sit with them and loudly damn the collapse of Alacan, and they'd

cheer him and buy him cheap wine.

With a sigh, I shut the wooden window.

Anto groaned and swore in his sleep, disturbed by the cold air. I would have liked to have had a healer here. Someone who could give us bitter medicine, and hope. A kind ear for the betrayals of the body.

But for all that I may have hated the Jolly Mayor for banishing the healer, my family's lives had depended on the mayor over the years. My life, my two sons, my husband, and my father. For Anto, skinny, frail, over-tempered bastard and profaner that he was, was an executioner for Khaim and the mayor.

We would have starved a long time ago without that money. The coin tossed in the executioner's cup by the soon-to-be-beheaded in hopes of buying a good cut. The coppers tossed into the bucket by the crowd. The mayor's retainer.

So when the tiny bell by the door rang, it was with the authority of a thunderclap. The tiny note floated around the old stone house, dripping into the kitchen, and wrapping itself around me as its quivering tones faded.

This was the first time it had rung since Anto had fallen sick.

He was being summoned, as executioner, to bring his axe to the square by the highest of noon.



Somewhere, across the inky, shoving waters of the Sulong river, which split Lesser Khaim and Khaim, up on Malvia Hill and in Mayors House, someone had rung the executioner's bell.

The bell was magic, of course. The Mayor swore that the spells that had been cast to create the bells had been formed a long time ago, and that the bells were safe. I wondered if that was true, as I could smell magic softly in the air by the doorway whenever the bell rang. It tasted of ancient inks, herbs, and spices, and it settled deep in the back of my throat.

Once the executioner's bell was rung in Mayor House, the goddess of a thousand multiple roads and choices, Dekka, dictated which executioner's bell rang back in sympathy. And Dekka had chosen ours.

Dekka was well known for her tricks. The goddess of dice throwers was playing one last little one on Anto.

I looked back over my thick, wooden kitchen table toward Anto. His brown eyes were

wide, his brows crinkled in intense thought.

He rubbed his anemic mustache, which was a sign of his failure: that he had only ever had one child, and a daughter at that.

“The call...” he said, voice breaking. “Tana. Did you hear it?”

I moved to him. “You can’t go. You know that.”

I wondered, as I said it, where the gentleness in my voice had come from. It had never been offered to me in my life by this old man. Not in all the years I’d cooked and chopped wood, or the long years I’d worked as a butcher.

“I know I can’t go you stupid girl,” Anto spat. “It is well beyond me.”

The bell here needed to be rung if an executioner were here. In five minutes, if there was no reply, the call would go to someone else.

In a way, that dying ring would signal the death of our family. Without Anto’s occasional income, we would have to sell the small house and the land. And then we would become little better than the refugees around us.

I watched him lie back down into the bed, gazing up at the thick ceiling beams. “Where is Jorda?” Anto asked.

“Sleeping,” I said.

“Drunk,” Anto spat. “Useless. Addled.”

I had nothing to say to that.

Anto’s jaw set, and he said, “I have always answered the call. Always come back with the Mayor’s coin to keep us alive as the bramble creeps into our useless field. I’ll slit my own throat right here and now before I hand over the executioner’s bell. It is all that keeps my miserable bloodline flowing.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

Anto coughed. “The gods hate me. Had I a son, he’d be on his way right now instead of bothering me with this.”

My voice jumped in anger. “Well, I’m not your son. I’m your daughter. You must live with that.” And then I added, “with what little life you do have left.”

Anto nodded. “This is true. This is true.”

And then he crawled out of his bed. The blankets slipped off to reveal his liver-spotted arms.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

He stumbled out of the kitchen to the door, stick-like legs quivering from the effort.

I realized what he was about to do and moved to stop it, but with a last wily burst of

energy, Anto staggered forward and rang the executioner's bell before I grabbed his arm.

As the single, clear note rang out and filled the back of my throat with the faint taste of old magic, he crumpled to the floor in a heap of bones and skin, laughing at me.

"Now you *have* to go in my place, little daughter of mine. Now you have no choice." He panted where he lay, staring up at me with eyes sunk deep into wasted, skeletal sockets. "The Mayor would execute both of us if you try to tell him what we just did. He is not a forgiving man."

"When you face Borzai in the Hall of Judgment, he will banish you to Zakia's torture cells for eternity," I told him. "When I hear your spirit groan in the night, tortured by dark gods, I will laugh and pretend I didn't hear it."

He flinched at that. "Do you hate me so?"

I trembled with outrage. "You bring me nothing but pain and drudgery and burden."

He thought on that for a long while. Longer than I'd seen him consider anything. "You must go just this once, then. After this, you can turn the bell in. I'll be dead soon, I can't stop you, yet you must at least cover the expense of my funeral. I'll not have my appearance in Borzai's Hall of Judgment delayed because the rites were not pleasing to him. And after that if you wish it, it could be your trade. It is a good living, daughter. And with me gone, there will be one less body to care for, one less mouth to feed. You have no field, and butchering people will give you more than butchering pigs."

Then he sighed and crawled toward his bed. I said nothing. I helped him back to it, his body surprisingly light as I slung his arm over my neck.

"How can I kill someone who has done nothing to me?" I asked.

Anto grunted. "Don't look into their eyes. Consider that the Mayor has a reason for their death. Remember that if they have led a proper life, they will be sent to the right hall for eternity."

"Won't the Mayor's guards be able to tell I'm not you?"

"No," Anto murmured. "I've been wasting away long enough. I'm a small figure, so are you. Wear my hood, carry my axe, none will be able to tell the difference. It is no different than chopping wood. Raise the axe, let it fall, don't swing it, and aim the edge for the neck. You've killed enough pigs, you can do this."

And with that, he slipped away to his sleep, exhausted by all his recent efforts.

I understood he'd always wanted a son. That he'd wanted the farm to produce the crops it had when he was little, before the bramble grew to choke it. I understood that he never wanted me to marry Jorda.

I understood that maybe, he'd wanted to give me the bell a long time ago, but had been too scared to do it. Why else would he have begged and called in so many favors from old friends to make sure I worked as a butcher?



I walked through Lesser Khaim dressed as an executioner.

Inside I was still me, Tana, weary and tired, struggling to see through the small slits in the leather hood over my face.

I'd called Duram down, and kissed him on his forehead before I had left.

"What was that for?" he'd asked, puzzled.

"Just know that I love you and your brother. I have to leave for an errand. But I will be back home soon."

After I sent him back upstairs, I'd opened the cedar chest in Anto's room and pulled out both his hood and heavy cape. They fit me well as I pulled them on, as Anto said they would. His canvas leggings slid off my waist, but a length of rope fixed that.

The axe lay in the bottom of the chest, the edged curve of the blade gleaming in the light.

It weighed less than it looked, and was well balanced in my hand. Heavier than the axe I used to chop wood with, but not anywhere as heavy as I had somehow imagined.

Now I rested the axe on my shoulder and walked down the banks of the Sulong.

I followed a fire crew down the stone steps. They wore masks and thick, double-canvas clothing. As they walked they pumped the primers on the back of their tanks, then lit the fires on the brass-tipped ends of their hoses.

When they flicked the levers, fresh flame licked out across the bramble threatening to creep over the stairs. Clumps of the thorny, thick creep withered under the assault.

Clearers followed close behind, chopping at the bramble, careful not to touch any of it lest they get pricked. Children scampered around with burlap sacks to pick up bramble seeds.

They stopped the burn when they saw me and stepped aside to let me down the path.

"If it's Alacan magic users you're sending to Borzai's judgment today," one of them called out from behind a mask as fearsome as mine, "then I salute you."

Others agreed in wordless grunts as they hacked at bramble with axes.

The ferry across the river dipped low to the water when I stepped aboard. The ferryman dug his pole deep into the muck and shoved us along the guide ropes that kept

the raft from drifting downstream.

“Ain’t the Alacan refugees causing the bramble creep,” he muttered, and juttied his chin upriver.

I knew that. I could both see and smell the problem as the raft cleared a tall thicket of ossified bramble. When it wasn’t cleared, the roots thickened, and hardened to become a singular and impenetrable mass.

And appearing behind that mass, far over the river Sulong, a half completed bridge soared from Khaim’s side of the riverbanks. The unfinished structure hung in the air with no visible means of support, floating over the river as men worked on extending it toward Lesser Khaim day and night.

The stench of the magic holding the half-completed structure in the air wafted down over the river’s surface: strong, tangy, and dangerous.

All that magic caused bramble to spring up all throughout Khaim and Lesser Khaim. People scraped it from their windowsills and fought it throughout their fields.

“Mark me,” the man said with a final push to get us to the other side. “We’ll end up like Alacan: choked with bramble and fleeing our city if we keep building that unholy thing.”

I paid the ferryman his copper and stepped off onto the pier. He said those things only because he was bitter about losing his livelihood. There would be no place for him when people could simply walk the bridge.

I walked through Khaim, enjoying the taller marble and stone buildings and fluted columns. Lesser Khaim grew too quick: its buildings were cramped and close together, made of any materials that could be found. It was chaotic, and the Alacaner slums added the stench of cooking fires and sewage to what had once been lemon trees and pomegranates in bloom.

But my relaxation faded as I realized people scuttled away before me in nervousness. And it fled when I turned to the public square and the raised platform at the center where the executions were held.

Early crowds had already gathered. Vendors walked around selling flatbreads and fruits, and city guards waited by the steps.

They waved me on impatiently, and I saw the figure in chains between them. He turned, saw me, and his knees buckled. The guards held him up under his arms and laughed.





The Jolly Mayor himself came to the square and puffed his way up the stairs. His beady eyes regarded me for only the briefest of seconds, then fixed on the blade.

He smiled and moved closer. “Make this a good one, eh, Executioner?” He chuckled before I could even think to ask what he meant. Which was a good thing, as I wasn’t sure I could reach for a deeper voice. I was far too nervous.

The guards dragged the prisoner up the stairs, sobbing and retching. They shackled him to the four iron rings on the floor of the platform, half bowed to the Mayor, and then retreated.

Chains tinkled as the prisoner moved, trying to look over his shoulder. “Please, please, have you no mercy? My sheep were dying of mouth rot, my family would have starved...”

The Mayor did not look at the man, but instead at the crowd. He cried out, for all to hear, “Khaim will *not* fall to the bramble, like the cities of the Empire of Jhandpara. Their failures guide us, and we call for the gods to forgive us for what we *must* do: which is to punish those who use forbidden magic, for they threaten every last one of us.”

Then the Mayor turned to me and waved his hand.

A sound like a babbling brook came from the crowd. The murmur of a hundred or so voices at once. Behind that I heard the shifting of chains, and the sobbing of a doomed man.

I imagined either of my two sons laid out like this, begging for forgiveness. I imagined my Jorda’s scrawny body there, his burn-marked fire crew arms pulled to either side by the chains.

I had to steady myself to banish these thoughts, so I wobbled a step forward.

I raised the axe high, so that I would only need to let it fall to do its work, and as I did, the crowd quieted in anticipation.



I let the axe fall.

It swung toward the vulnerable nape of the man’s neck as if the blade knew what it was doing.

And then the man shifted, ever so slightly.

I twisted the handle to compensate, just a twitch to guide the blade, and the curving edge of the axe buried itself in the man’s back at an angle on the right. It sank into

shoulder meat and fetched up against bone with a sickening crunch.

It had all gone wrong.

Blood flew back up the handle, across my hands, and splattered against my leather apron.

The man screamed. He thrashed in the chains, a tortured animal, almost jerking the axe out of my blood-slippery hands.

“Gods, gods, gods,” I said, terrified and sick. I yanked the axe free. Blood gushed down the man’s back and he screamed even louder.

The crowd stared. Anonymous oval faces, hardly blinking.

I raised the axe quickly, and brought it right back down on him. It bit deep into his upper left arm, and I had to push against his body with my foot to lever it free. He screamed like a dying animal, and I was crying as I raised the axe yet again.

“Borzai will surely consider this before he sends you to your hall,” I said, my voice scratchy and loud inside the hood. I took a deep breath and counted to three.

I would not miss again. I would not torture this dying man any more.

I must imagine I am only chopping wood, I thought.

I let the axe fall once again. I let it guide itself, looking at where it needed to be at the end of the stroke.

The blade struck the man’s neck, cleaved right through it, and buried itself in the wooden platform below.

The screaming stopped.

My breath tasted of sick. I was panting, and terrified as the Mayor approached me. He leaned close, and I braced for some form of punishment for doing such a horrible thing.

“Well done!” the Mayor said. “Well done indeed. What a show, what a piece of butchery! The point has well been made!”

He shoved several hard-edged coins into my hand, and then walked over to the edge of the platform. The crowd cheered, and I yanked my axe free and escaped.

But everywhere I turned the crowd shoved coppers into the pockets of my cape, and the guards smacked me on the back and smiled.

When I turned the corner from the square I leaned over a gutter, pulled the hood up as far as I dared, and threw up until my stomach hurt.

Afterwards, I looked down and opened the clenched fist without the axe in it. Four pieces of silver gleamed back at me from the blood-soaked hand.

I wanted to toss them into the stinking gutter. But then, where would that leave my

family?

Guards ran past me, shouting orders. I didn't pay attention to whatever it was that had stirred them. But whatever they had shouted was repeated through the crowd, which began to fade away, their interest in executions lost in favor of something else.

I folded my fingers back over my payment, even though they shook, and began to walk back toward Lesser Khaim.



The ferryman looked nervous and intent on his work as he poled me across the river. He had unloaded a full raft, and people had shoved past me with determination.

He blanched when I offered him a bloody copper. "You keep it," he murmured. Then he looked at me again. "Are you sure you want to cross over right now, Executioner?"

I broke free of my daze. "What do you mean?"

The ferryman pointed a callused finger at the air over Lesser Khaim. "Raiders have attacked. Haven't you heard?"

A tendril of smoke snaked up over the jagged roofs and clustered wooden buildings.

"No. Whoever told you that must be mistaken," I told him. I'd lived my entire life on the edge of Lesser Khaim. The raiders would never strike this far north. There was nothing here for them, on the edge of the bramblelands that were once Jhandpara's great empire.

"Believe what you will," he said, as the raft struck the other side. A crowd rushed to the raft as I left it. I walked up the bank to Lesser Khaim, stepping around black tendrils of bramble scattered on the carved steps.

A screaming man smacked into me at the top. His left arm dangled uselessly, crushed. We both fell to the ground, and he scrabbled up.

"Damn you," I grunted, "what are you doing..."

"Raiders!" He shouted at me. "Raiders."

I sat up, pulling the axe close to me, and looked down the street. More smoke seeped into the tight alleyways between buildings.

And I could hear screams in the distance.

The streets were filling with people moving quickly for the river, their eyes darting about, expecting attackers in every shadow and around every alley.

"They're here to burn us to the ground," the man said. He was originally from Turis, I could hear it in his accent. His eyes seemed to be looking far away, as if he were reliving

the horrors of the raider attacks that forced him to walk barefoot all the way to Lesser Khaim.

People jostled past us, a moving river of humanity headed for the riverbanks. “Where are they going?” I asked. They would drown in the river if the raiders got this far.

“Away,” the man said, and ran off with them.

I pushed through the oncoming crowds. They split apart for an executioner, and if they did not, I used the bronze-weighted butt of the axe to shove them aside.

Five streets from the river, I had to turn away from my usual route home. Smoke choked the street, black and thick, and it spat people out who coughed and collapsed to the dirt, gasping for air.

“They set fire to the slums! Don’t go down there,” a woman with a flour-covered apron shouted at me.

I ignored her and ran through alleyways. I pushed through the doors of empty houses and climbed through windows to make my way around the burning sections of town, slowly getting closer to home.

I ran past the burning wrecks of the small farms of the Lesser Estates, my boots raising dust with each step. I could see the gnarled trees behind my house writhing in flame, and as I scrambled painfully over the stone wall, I saw the timbers give way and the roof fall in on itself.

The heat forced me back when I tried to run inside. I paced around the house like a confused animal. Stone cracked from the heat, and a screaming wail came from within. I ripped my hood off and shoved it into one of my pockets so I could breathe.

“Duram?” I cried. “Set?”

A blazing figure erupted from the front door, leaping onto the dusty ground and rolling around until the flames were extinguished.

It was Anto. His blackened form lay by my feet, rasping in pain. “Tana?”

I dropped to my knees. “Father?”

“It hurts,” Anto whimpered. “It hurts. Please...” He looked up at me, eyes startlingly white against the blackened face.

The smell of burnt flesh filled my lungs. “You can’t ask me...” I started to say.

“Please...” he groaned.

So I used the axe for the second time that day.

When it was done, I crawled on the ground and sobbed my despair, waiting for the house to finish burning. It was just. I had taken a man’s life. Now mine was being taken

from me.

I found Jorda's body while on my hands and knees. There was an arrow through his neck and a wineskin by his feet.

Drunkard he may have been. A disappointment to Anto, this was true. But the dirt was scuffed with footmarks. Small footmarks. He'd tried to protect my sons.

I kissed the three rings on my hand and prayed to Mara that my sons were alive, and as I did so, saw the scraped dirt of Set's dragged foot next to the hoofmarks leading off down the dirt road.

With an apology to Anto's lifeless body, a whisper of thanks to Mara, I got up and began to follow the tracks, axe gripped tight in both hands.



The burnt remains of Lesser Khaim's southern fringe faded away into the rocky hills of sparse grass and clumps of bramble as the day passed. Weariness spread through my knees, and the miles wore at me as I doggedly moved southward.

I plowed on. I knew that the hairy tentacles of bramble along the road brushing me would probably not pierce my canvas leggings. I had to move faster, not pick my way around bramble if I hoped to catch the raiders. I had to hope the leather apron would also help protect me from the bramble's malevolence.

At the crest of a hill scattered with boulders I looked back at the pyre that was now Lesser Khaim. Tiny figures formed a line by the river, passing along buckets of water to try and douse denser areas of town. The outer sections had become a black mass of skeletal building frames.

I turned from it all, walking down the other side of the hill, the axe weighing heavier and heavier.

At the bottom of the hill, turning onto the old cobblestoned ruins of the Junpavati road, I caught up to the raiding party. The men rode massive, barrel-chested warhorses that looked like they could pull an oxen's plough. The raiders held their long spears in the air, like flagpoles, and their brass helmets glinted as they rode alongside a mass of humanity being herded south like sheep.

Somewhere in that sad, roped-together crowd, were my sons.

I wondered how many other townsmen had tried to fight the raiders? And how many lay dead on the dirt roads of Lesser Khaim with pitchforks or knives in hands.

I stared at the raiders. Only four of them had been left to march their captives along.

No doubt the rest had ridden on ahead.

Four trained men.

And me.

I would die, I knew. But what choice did I have? They were ripping my family away. What person would run from their own blood?

I had killed already today, I thought, hefting the executioner's axe. I was dizzy from exhaustion, and the mild poison of the few bramble needles that had poked through my leggings threatened to drop me into bramble sleep. But I made my decision, and moved toward the raiders.

As I did so, I pulled the executioner's hood back over my face to protect myself from the taller clumps of bramble drooping off of the rocks.



I used the rocks and boulders of the dead landscape to get close to the raider trailing the column of prisoners. I was stunned by how large the man's warhorse was. When its hooves slammed into the ground, I could feel them from twenty feet behind.

The hems of my cloak brushed bramble as I ran at the man's back, and the horse whinnied as it sensed me. The raider spun in his saddle, spear swinging down in an arc as he looked for what had spooked the horse, and he spotted me.

He realized I was inside the spear's reach, and he leaped off his horse to avoid the first high swing of my axe at his thigh, putting the horse between us. I ran in front of the giant beast to get at him, but before I could even raise the axe again, he attacked.

His red cloak flared out behind him, and the spear lashed out. I was slow, but I dodged the point. In response the man flicked it up and smacked the top of my head with the side of the shaft.

"And what do you think you're doing?" the raider demanded. He sounded unhurried and calm.

"You stole my family," I said as my knees buckled from the blow to the head. I fought to stand, and wobbled slightly. Hoofbeats thudded behind me.

The raider used the spear to hit me on the side of my head before I could even raise the axe to try and block the movement. His movements would have been too fast for me even if I hadn't been tired from chasing them, or my blood filled with bramble poison. The blow dropped me to the ground, blood running down over my eyes inside the hood, blinding me.

“What do we have here?” a second raider voice asked, as feet hit the ground. My hood was ripped clear of my head.

The two raiders bent over me, dark eyes shadowed by their bronze helmets, spears pinning my cloak, and me, to the ground.

I blinked the blood out of my eyes and waited for death.

“It’s a woman,” the raider I’d attacked said.

“That’s quite plain,” said the other. “Should we kill her or take her with us?”

“She’s too old to go to the camps or to sell.”

The other raider nodded. “So we kill her?”

“She doesn’t need to be part of the Culling,” the older-sounding raider said. He shook his head. “No, she’s too old to have children. She’s no threat. Cripple her so she can’t follow us, then leave.”

The older raider remounted his horse and left.

The remaining raider and I stared at each, and then he reversed his spear. “The Way of the Six says that we should...”

I spat at him. The effort dizzied me. “I don’t care about your damned Way of the Six, slaver. Do what you came to do.”

He shrugged and slammed the butt of his spear into my ankle, crushing it.

As I screamed, he smacked my head. I fell back away, down into a patch of bramble the pierced my clothing. With so many bramble needles stuck to my skin calling me down to sleep, it was enough to easily throw me away from the world.