



DARKLAW BY TERESA WYMORE

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Strange Flesh Press

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Chapter 1

THE DIM SUNRISE filtered through red glass, but the gloom haunting the temple's vestibule didn't deter Kami.

She entered the sanctuary, passing through curls of sooty smoke from an oil lamp before stopping at one end of the altar. A wooden statue sat on the floor, dozens of sacrificed pigeons at its feet. Kneeling before the statue of the Unsetting Sun was a pious silhouette. The silhouette finished its prayer with a touch to its forehead before turning like a bull facing a tormenter.

Kami tensed as she stepped close enough to see the woman she had been tracking for nearly a year.

Cords of muscle twitched in the woman's bare arms. Her sleeveless tunic hung belted over her trousers. Ties cinched the frayed hem of each leg around the auburn patina of her boots. The woman dropped a satchel into a heap on the stone floor and stepped toward Kami as if she would attack. She turned instead and vanished behind the altar.

Although Kami had lost sight of her quarry, she heard the rush of angry breaths through a wet mouth and smelled the sweat of a body's hard labor. The scent embraced her, sinking into her skin like the damp air of a cave, like something mysterious and powerful.

Compulsion drove her from the city into the forest.

In the land of the Unsetting Sun, night came only in the thick of the trees, and she found it suddenly when she stood alone and lost. Like twisted snakes, the verdant growth blocked all but a few rays that lit the air in sparkles above her.

The pungent musk enticed her, stealing her attention and leaving her with an ear-pounding silence. In her distraction, she stumbled against a moss-covered trunk and slipped from its support. She lost her balance and leapt off a ridge. The ground rushed up at her until her boots hit the dirt. The violent impact buckled her knees, and a boulder stopped her tumble down the embankment.

Angry hands seized her and shoved her face into the cold current of a stream. She flailed until her chest burned for the relief of a single breath. In a last moment of strength, she twisted free.

Too desperate to look back, she crawled away, grasping at the water as if it could pull her to safety, but the hands seized her again and dragged her through mud. She heard the wet slap before she felt the sting from the woman's hand.

"He sends children!" The woman clutched Kami's hair in one fist and shook her. "Is coin all your pitiful life's worth?"

Kami tried to catch her breath as she peered up into two slivers of blue ice, eyes as cold as the water that had nearly taken her life. When the hand dropped her, she fell into the leaves, relieved to be alive, relieved to have completed her journey.

The woman hopped onto a large rock and squatted on her heels. She kept herself lightly balanced, as if she were a panther ready to pounce.

Kami propped herself against a tree, but when the tree strangely shed its bark, she slid, stopping only after she thudded against the rock where the woman crouched.

"You should find different work." The woman's voice was deep. She fondled her queue of golden hair as her fierce eyes calmed. "The Trade Empire is no place for a child alone."

"I'm not a child."

"Are you alone?"

"My knee hurts."

"You're no bounty hunter."

"You're Avestine of the Hunt."

"My name is 'Asada'."

"You stopped Darklaw at Agate Bay ten years ago. You led my village into battle when Darklaw soldiers came. You drove them back into the sea. You saved us."

The woman's eyes narrowed several times as she looked over Kami. "What do you want with Avestine?"

Kami didn't know what she wanted, exactly. "Darklaw has returned. The legions burned Elderwood again, and there was no one to stop them from taking Featherwood, too. Agate Bay is cut off. I don't think they're leaving this time. I think they're coming to the Trade Quarter. Avestar will do what his father couldn't."

The woman pulled Kami to her feet. "You're lucky I didn't kill you."

Kami took a few steps to test her knee, which was weak. "I'll need help back to Queenscourt."

"That's not a safe place for a girl."

"I've already been there for three days. I know who to avoid."

"You can't even avoid confusing a villager buying supplies with an outlaw."

Kami laughed. "You didn't buy supplies. You bought a two-day whore at the worst tavern in town."

The woman seized Kami's arm. "I'll take you to Riverside. Your knee can heal, and then you can go back where you came from."

"Why haven't the bounty hunters found you?" asked Kami as they walked. "Why don't you disguise yourself?"

"I have no reason to hide."

RIVERSIDE WAS A village community of families and adults who lived in the depth of the Fulbern Forest. The community sat at the nexus of two forests: the Trade Empire's expanse of the Fulbern and the crest of The Breakland that spread into the Koledoon Peninsula.

Iceward rose the Katan Ri, a range of mountains that stepped its way into the kingdom of Avjagar, beginning with gentle slopes but quickly rising with rocky crags that cascaded into great jagged cliffs of granite.

Kami stayed long after her knee healed from the damage done by the woman who called herself "Asada." She had made friends with Serene, a young woman who didn't seem to believe her story about traveling through the Trade Quarter any more than the other villagers had.

"Soldiers took Featherwood," insisted Kami one day as she and Serene sat by the river. "All I had was Mama, and I still don't know if she's alive. I didn't know where to go, but this isn't the first time Darklaw came to Featherwood. That's why I'm here. Avestine defended us ten years ago when Darklaw tried to take Agate Bay. After that, pirates were always claiming to have seen her around Ureth Mourning." Kami rolled onto her back and continued, "What I don't know is how she fooled you into thinking she was anybody else. She's everything the legend says she is."

“Asada?” pondered Serene, her doe eyes glancing skyward. “She’s tall, if that’s what you mean, and she has a sword. I’ve seen her with it.” Serene’s blonde hair swayed as she pressed the flower she held to her nose. “She looks like one of Hell’s soldiers.”

“Because of the scars?”

“The scars. The muscles. That raspy voice. The vulgar things she says. She makes me feel sullied. And that sneer. I don’t even like to look at her.” Serene shook her head.

Kami nodded as she listened. She thought of Avestine as Serene described her and wondered if they were even talking about the same person. “I don’t know,” she said with distraction. “When she looks at me with those blue eyes. And that sneer.” Kami’s stomach fluttered at the thought.

Serene giggled and Kami glanced away, her cheeks warming.

“Well, the men let her stay. Some of them like to look at her. They like other things, too.” Serene giggled again.

“You’re not safe. Darklaw will find her if I did. The empire will punish you for hiding her.”

“We’re families, innocent women and children.”

“Nobody’s innocent,” said Kami.

“Hadred was looking for you, Serene.” Both Kami and Serene startled at the voice. Avestine was leaning against a tree as if she had been there awhile. “Something about fixing holes in the fishing nets.”

After her initial surprise, Serene sprang to her feet and disappeared into the trees with the elegance of a deer.

“I’ve always liked Serene’s honesty.” Avestine sat down. “But I like yours better.”

Embarrassment heated Kami’s cheeks again. “Honesty? I wouldn’t think you cared about that.”

“You’re right. There are more important things.” Avestine picked up a stick and tapped it. After a time she said, “Do you like the river?” Kami nodded, and Avestine added, “Me, too. I used to think the stillness of this place would be peaceful, but it’s just stubborn. It doesn’t care about us. Doesn’t need us, and what can we do about it anyway? Can’t stop or control it.”

Kami squinted at Avestine, sure she was making a point but not sure what it was. Then she breathed in the sunshine, transformed into something vigorous by Avestine’s scent. “We can dam and route it.”

“Ah,” replied Avestine as if she had anticipated the response. “But that’s how it controls us, child. That’s how everything controls us, making us think we must do something, when we don’t have to do anything at all. We can enjoy the river for what it gives us, so why bother with stopping it?”

“Because you can use it to help people.” Kami felt some satisfaction as she watched Avestine’s jaw tighten with irritation. “A river is life,” she added. “That’s why you should bother.”

“You’re wrong, you know, what you told Serene. Some people are innocent. I know because I’ve killed many of them.” Despite her cruel confession, Avestine’s cool eyes grew friendly as she poked the stick at

Kami's feet. "How long did it take you to get here from Featherwood? How did you manage it? You're just a girl."

"I'm almost twenty."

Avestine's eyes twitched. "How did you avoid the Trade patrols? They would have taken a girl with no family to town, put you to work in a bakery or cleaning the temples."

"I stayed away from the villages. I went into Queenscourt because I knew you were there."

"What about the wolves and bears? The bobcats? The lice and flies? Hell, you look like you've had clean water and soap." Avestine's affection fell away. She pointed at Kami's boots. "That's quality dyed leather. You're not from Featherwood at all. You're the respectable daughter of some fat merchant looking for excitement, but you'll regret your curiosity when you discover all you have to barter is your cunt."

Kami grinned at Avestine's attempt to frighten her. Coarse language wasn't new to Kami, because she wasn't the respectable daughter of a fat merchant. "What else does any girl have to barter? The price decided by her father. But I set my own price."

Avestine's eyes narrowed. "You're a liar."

"Do you remember Domna?"

"Should I?"

"She was your favorite girl at Fat Rosi's Place. When you came to Featherwood, you showed the men how to fight and taught the women to supply them. When ships landed at Agate Bay, we drove them back into the sea. You stayed through the full moon and visited Domna many times before you finally left."

"Don't know what you're talking about."

"You defeated Darklaw to keep Featherwood free, and one day, you'll have to do the same for Riverside."

"What does it matter? We pay tribute to the Trade Empire. Do you think it would be so different to pay tribute to Darklaw instead?"

"Of course! The emperor's mad."

"And what are you?"

Kami realized her suspicion was correct. "I thought that's what you must have been telling everyone. I'm not mad."

"What girl journeys alone across a continent? And all to find a fugitive. Did you think about what would happen when you found her?" Avestine's eyes roamed Kami's body.

"I thought she would want to help."

Avestine dropped her stick. Her intensity made Kami uncomfortable. Kami scooted away. Avestine moved closer. Too close. Her hand came to rest on Kami's knee.

Kami pushed it away. "What are you doing?"

Avestine searched Kami's eyes as if she expected to find something. When Kami rose, Avestine followed, staying near, crowding her. She brushed Kami's shoulder with light fingers.

Kami pushed Avestine's hands away, but they slid into her short hair. "Don't touch me." Kami tried to firm up her trembling voice. "Leave me alone."

Avestine's eyes flashed with excitement, and she continued to menace Kami until she had her pinned against a tree. Lewd breaths warmed Kami's neck, and Avestine said, "Don't be afraid."

The wet caress of Avestine's lips trailed a cooling line behind Kami's ear. Avestine's imposing height and strength left Kami with little to do but flex defensively against the assault. Avestine's sinewy hand seized Kami's jaw and rough kisses forced her lips apart. Hands burrowed under her clothes in search of skin, and Kami couldn't stop them.

Avestine released her so unexpectedly that Kami lost her balance and fell.

Avestine took a few steps backward. "Taking what I want from a girl is easy enough. Finding one who likes it. Well now, that's something else entirely."

Kami put a tree between them.

"Are you going to run away?" Avestine's cunning eyes flashed as she sat down on a boulder. She picked up her stick again.

"You're the one who's mad." Kami stepped away from the tree.

Avestine scoffed and said, "You have a lot to learn, and if I don't teach you, someone else might, someone not as fond of you."

"Fond of me? Well, I'm not fond of you. I don't like you at all."

One of Avestine's eyebrows rose. "We both know the lie of that, child." Amusement became a shadow on her face as she said, "You don't understand what Avestar was doing."

"What are you talking about?"

"What you were saying about Darklaw." Avestine began to tap her stick on the ground again. "Avestar left your village unmolested, but it wasn't because of your shovels and clubs. He left because he already had what he wanted. He didn't care about land or slaves. He was there for the Essanti. That's what brought him to the Demon Quarter. He impaled the twelve he knew about, and then he left. But he didn't know about you."

"Well, I know about you, and you don't seem to be denying it."

"Do you even know what Essanti are? What you are?" Avestine continued to scrutinize Kami. "You're small and dark-eyed, like all the demonfolk, but your color is odd. Polluted blood, no doubt. You've come looking for Avestine. Do you know why? Do you know what compels you?"

“A legion of soldiers.”

“Stupid girl.” A bitter smile revealed Avestine’s strong, shiny teeth. “You have no idea what you’ve started. You have no idea what you’ll do for me.”

“I’m not afraid of you.”

“You should be.”

As much as Avestine acted the part of a lone wolf, Kami thought she was only alone. Kami wasn’t afraid. Somehow, she knew a great deal about this woman. “If you want to kill me, do it. Dying isn’t hard.”

Avestine laughed heartily.

“I don’t care why Avestar’s here,” said Kami. “I only care what he’s done to my village. I know the people his army doesn’t butcher become slaves in Sahrdon. If my mother’s not dead, she’s probably swallowing swords in some barracks. Avestine told us that. Who would know better? Who should we trust more than the sister of the emperor?”

“You shouldn’t trust her, child. You shouldn’t trust anyone.”