

SCAVENGER GIRL SERIES

SEASON OF ATCHEM

An Excerpt

Mother tried to help with the daily chores, but as I expected, she tired easily. As much as I hated to admit it, my father was right; she did need someone here to help her. I tucked her into bed, making sure she had fresh water on her bedside table. “You get some sleep, and I’ll start dinner. Did you want me to use the pork from the storage crock or are the men bringing home fish?”

“We never know what the river will give.” She yawned.

“Pork it is.” I kissed her forehead.

The best part of preparing dinner by myself was getting to decide what to have. Since I had no one to ask, I could fix whatever I wanted, and no one could complain. Tonight I wished to have cabbage and wild onions with the roast, simply because the men of our family didn’t prefer it. *That’ll teach them for leaving me behind.*

After putting the meat over the fire in the roasting pot, I found my plucking blade and headed to the vacant field across the road to find the onions. We had some in our garden, but the ones that grew on their own were much sweeter and had a richer flavor than their domesticated cousins.

I was searching at the edge of the tree line when I heard a branch snap. Gripping my blade, I crouched down immediately. While it was rare for anyone to come this far down our road, it wasn’t impossible. My eyes darted through the brush to find the source of the sound. It was too loud to be a rodent, and since I couldn’t see it, I assumed it was hiding from me.

My house was not that far away. I saw the corner of the perimeter from where I hid. Whoever was out there knew where I was and had the advantage. The gardening tool in my hand was not my weapon of choice. I had two options.

I could stay and let them get closer, or take my chances and run. If they caught up to me, at least I'd be somewhat armed.

I checked my shoes and gathered my skirt in my free hand. There was no movement. My heartbeat pounded in my ears. Lunging from my spot, I sprinted toward home. Whoever was out there would either be chasing me or would let me flee, unless they attacked me with a spear gun or arrows. I glanced back to satisfy my fear only to miss the mole hole that tripped me. I fell and lost grip of my blade, which landed just out of reach. Panting, I rolled onto my back and searched the lot for movement again. This time, I saw something.

I crept back, searching blindly for the blade somewhere behind me in the grass. The shrubs rustled several yards away. If I were on my feet, I could outrun them for sure, but I wasn't. To my surprise, I found the blade. Preparing myself for an attack, I rose above the grass, facing the moving darkness of the woods.

Slow and uninterested, a brown horse presented itself, still chewing the long reeds it found.

"Rebel?" My shoulders dropped in relief. The horse moseyed to where I lost the onions and folded open the cloth I had wrapped them in. "Hey! No!" I shouted, running back to get them.

The horse, with his massive face, gobbled them up before I got to them. "Seriously?" I shoved his nose away from the fabric. There was only one half-eaten bulb left.

I sighed. How did the horse get out here anyway? As angry as I was at him, at least I was here and could bring him back home. "Come on," I said, walking away from him. When he didn't follow, I showed him the bulb he hadn't finished in an attempt to bribe him. "I said, let's go."

Rebel started to follow me back but stopped when we got to the road. As hard as I tried to convince him, he refused to go any farther. I teased him with the onion, pulled his mane, and even cussed at him. I would have pushed him from behind if I didn't know better than to be at the back end of a horse. Desperate to move the beast, I slapped his hindquarters, and he started to move. Unfortunately, he moved in the wrong direction.

"Stop! Rebel, no!" I stood in front of him, but he kept walking, using his head to push me out of his way.

If only I had a rope! I ran back to our land, sprinting across the bridge and over to the hay barn. I grabbed the rope hanging on the outside of it, and at the same

time, pushed myself off of it to redirect my run. I never stopped moving. With my skirt pulled high, I made it back to the road faster than I expected. I called out to Rebel, who had picked up his pace and was skipping down the road like a misbehaving child.

I would have let him go, except he was the only horse we had. My mother wouldn't be of any help, and the men were at the river. I promised my family that I would not leave the house alone, yet there was no one to come with me. We needed that animal, and I could not let him simply walk away. *Neither of my brothers would give a second thought to chasing him down. Why should I?* There was no point arguing with myself; there was no right answer. I would be wrong if I went after him, or if I let him go.

As fast as I went, Rebel never seemed to get any closer. Out of breath and out of stamina, I stopped running. As long as I could see him, I would follow him. Horses got tired too, didn't they? Apparently not as easily as I did. I was regretting my decision to miss breakfast this morning. I felt around in my pockets and found the half-eaten onion. "Ergh," I moaned, turning it over in my hand. As much as I liked them, it made me ill to think of eating it raw and covered in horse drool. I shoved it back into my pocket with new motivation to put a noose around that horse's neck. If I were lucky, I might be home in time for dinner.

Over the course of the day, the road we traveled whittled down to the width of a game trail, giving no evidence of it ever being used by men. I had never been out this far in this direction. We had long passed by the field of wildflowers, and I hadn't seen anyone else for hours. At that point, I gave up my fear and stopped expecting enemies lying in wait. Initially, I worried about the Authority, but why would they be all the way out here? There was nothing to police this far from the village. Not during this season, anyway. Talium would be a different matter, but right now, I figured they'd be caught up in the preparations for the Festival and making sure Citizens were following the laws of Atchem.

The Temple didn't have its own enforcement, so they would utilize the Authority whenever it suited them. Atchem was the holiest of times because of the three moons and their proximity to each other. For the God-fearing folks, this was the pinnacle of the year—celebration and fear of damnation all at the same time. Like little river swans, they'd follow the leader simply because everyone else did. If you spent enough time at the river watching their behavior, you'd learn that the leader rarely did anything except tire the smaller ones out.

Rebel finally stopped in a heavily wooded area with thick underbrush. Grateful for the rest, I sat on a boulder and let him graze on the greens. I didn't intend on walking back; that horse was going to carry me back. I most certainly had earned it. The least I could do is let him eat before I made him take me home.

Under the tall evergreen trees, covering the undergrowth as far as the eye could see, grew a collection of the rarest shrubs in known existence. Rebel's impromptu day trip turned up the find of a lifetime. In utter disbelief, I walked among them with my arms spread wide, touching the tops as if I were in a dream. Nobu-trees, characterized by their broad, waxy leaves and small, dark purple berries, were the things of tales and legends. The berries were useful if you needed to make yourself sick, but the thin woody stems were more valuable than gold. They were extremely flexible when harvested, but within hours of removing their bark, the wood dried out, becoming hard as stone. They were used for everything from nails, fishing hooks, and sewing needles to fine jewelry and much more.

From what I'd learned, these shrubs grew only during Talium, when it was dark. I wasn't sure why I was seeing them now. To find them growing wild was impossible because they had been harvested to the brink of extinction decades ago. The Authority collected the roots of the few they found and now the last few only existed in the Temple Gardens, or so I'd been told. Nobu-trees were heavily protected and were considered sacred plants of Malderbud, the tree god.

The legend was that Malderbud fell in love with a mortal woman whose body reminded him of a flower. He took her from her family and locked her within the tall, stone walls of his private garden for his personal enjoyment. He would visit her each day, bringing her gifts and hoping to make her fall in love with him, yet each attempt failed. His continued presence sickened her. Every gift he would bring, she would reject. The only thing she congratulated him for was the beauty of what she saw around the garden, but each plant, vine, fruit, and flower, reminded her of home and the family that she desperately missed.

After several seasons, he tired of her constant sorrow and was angered by her refusal to love him, despite his attempts at winning her affection. In a fit of rage, he dug his feet deep into the garden's soil and poisoned the plants from their roots to the end of their leaves. It was as if he burned them from the ground up. The pain of losing his garden was unbearable, so he created the Nobu-tree and

placed it in the center of the ashes as his final gift to the woman. He thought, no matter where she was, she would see it as a symbol of his hope to win her love. He told her that once she confessed her love for him, he'd bring the gardens back and together they'd create new life. His plan couldn't have failed him more. The only thing the woman saw was a reminder of his vengeance, and it broke her will to live. She decided she'd rather die than keep company with a deplorable tree for the rest of her mortal life.

During the change of seasons, when his attention was on the hills and the valley, she attempted to kill the tree by pulling at the stems and skinning them with her teeth. As she held it in her hands, she felt it firm up in the shape in which she held it. Then she created a new plan. She spent the next several hours cutting the branches into spikes and putting them together on the ground next to the wall of the garden. She whittled each one to be razor-sharp, pointing toward the sky. At dusk, when the wood had turned to rock, she climbed the garden's wall as high as she was able before she pushed herself off, falling backward onto the bed of honed spikes.

Meanwhile, seeing all the beauty he created for mortals, Malderbud decided he had been unjust in his attempts at the woman's love. He concluded that he'd rather see her happy and enjoying his creation outside his personal garden than entrapped in a desolate one with a single, unappreciated, blooming tree. When he returned home, he decided he would open the gates and set the beautiful woman free. His new hope was that she would learn to love him through the nature he created each season.

However, this particular season was long and laborious. When Malderbud returned, his plans suddenly didn't matter. First, he found the mutilated tree in the center of the garden. Angered by her vandalism, but determined to set her free, he called for the woman for an explanation. She did not answer. He broke down the walls and watched for her to leave, but he never saw her. Feeling guilty for crushing her spirit, he roamed the garden, calling for her. To his dismay, he found her dried, dead body broken by the bed of hardened spikes the disheveled tree had provided. He was too late and knew he was the reason for her death.

They say that Malderbud only grows the Nobu-tree in his absence, during the darkness of Talium, in remembrance of the only woman he ever loved. Unlike many other useful vegetation species, it has no defense against harvesting. The

roots are small, and its coloring stands out among the ground cover. Some say it's an effort of repentance for his unbridled selfishness.

So, why was it growing here during the harvest season? Knowing the treasure I'd found, I collected as many Nobu branches as I was able to bind with the rope I intended to use to lead Rebel back. While I didn't expect a leisurely ride home, I now had a sense of urgency to get there. These twigs would dry slower with their bark still attached, and time was a luxury I was not about to waste. My father would be so pleased with my recapture of Rebel, not to mention how impressed he'd be with my claim!

I felt like a thief as I hurried Rebel back the way we'd come. Thankfully, he did as I commanded and stopped refusing my lead. The constant pressure to check for strangers made me perspire with anticipation. *If caught, would I be arrested?* I was merely doing what Scavengers did; I was claiming what was given by the gods, right? Would that matter to a passing Citizen? Growing ever more anxious, I kicked Rebel to go faster. We needed to get home, *now*.