

Chapter 2



A Fateful Decision

By the time Alar made his careful way back to the sight of the ambush, it was deserted. He took it as a good sign there was no blood or bodies. Maybe everyone managed to lose their pursuers in the dense forest. Faint ruts and hoofprints in the road showed the Imps continued on to their destination in Richeleau, one of the few large cities in Argren and home to the Imperial governor. As he was about to depart, he noticed Tove's arrow, snapped in two and left in the road. He picked the pieces up and slid them into a pocket. Tove, who laboriously flaked the arrowhead from flint, could reuse it. The fletching he would weave into his braid, a talisman of a lucky escape.

He swung through a nearby village in a fruitless search for food and arrived home in the early evening. Their base was a narrow cleft, high on a granite ridge. To reach it, they either had to climb the back side of the ridge or traverse a narrow ledge along the face of the ridge. Though it was inconvenient to get to, it was the perfect place to hide. It was sheltered from the worst of the winter winds, hidden from prying eyes, and from the top, they could see anyone approaching.

Dread settled on him as he climbed to the top of the ridge. Someone should have challenged him before he got this far. When he reached the top, he crouched and listened. There was no sign of a sentry and none of the chatter that arose around the fire in the evenings. He crept quietly along the spine of the ridge, until he spotted the sentry sitting with his back to a boulder, legs splayed out. It was Lief. For one chilling moment, he thought the boy might be dead, but then he heard a light snore.

Vo kustuk. He walked up to stand beside him, not bothering to be silent. When the boy didn't wake up, Alar knelt and whispered in his ear, "The Imperials would kill a man for falling asleep on sentry duty."

Lief snorted. His eyes opened and swiveled around. "Hello, Alar."

Alar stared at him.

"I ... uh ... I was just resting my eyes." Lief licked his lips and swallowed. When Alar remained silent, he sighed. "I'm sorry, Alar. I'm just so tired."

Alar took the boy's hand and helped him to his feet. "We're all tired, Lief." He clapped the boy on the shoulder, and said, "Glad to see you alive." When Lief thanked him for shoving him out of harm's way, Alar brushed it off and asked, "The others back?"

"Most of them, anyway."

They stared at one another for a long moment, then Alar gave him a gentle reminder to stay alert and turned away.

He paused at the edge of the ridge and gazed west to the smoke rising from the hearths in Richeleau. Another world where people had plenty to eat and slept soundly in safe beds. When he finally looked down into their small camp, he counted fewer people around the fire than before they left that morning. Otherwise, everything looked normal, though a bit grimmer, if that was possible. No one looked up, so he retreated to the spot that offered a way to climb down out of view of the group around the fire. At the bottom, he drew in a deep breath, fixed an easy smile onto his face, then stepped into view. The men and women gathered around the small fire tensed when he appeared, but once they saw who it was, they settled back in their seats. "No, no, don't get up," he murmured.

When Tove saw him, she leapt up, wrapped her arms around him, then stepped back and pushed him hard in the chest.

"What's that for?" Alar asked.

“For running off and making me worry.” When she spoke, the scar that cut across her lips pulled her mouth into a grimace. She had the scar when Alar found her. He knew she acquired it at the hands of the Inquisition, but she had never been willing to talk about it. She glared at him before remembering, then dropped her head, hiding her face behind her hair.

Alar smirked and waited until Tove peeked up at him, then pulled her into a hug. “Glad you got away,” he said.

Tove disentangled herself and returned to her spot by the fire. “Was going to come after you, but by the time I got out of that tree, the other Imps were back.” She looked up, hiding her mouth behind a hand. “What about the one chased you?”

Alar grinned, drew his new sword, and held it up. Tove’s hand dropped, rewarding him with a rare glimpse of her smile.

“How’d you manage that?” Sten asked, twisting around to get his good eye on Alar.

“Natural good looks and charm,” Alar said. He found a spot on the log next to Tove. To Sten’s scowl, he said, “Got lucky. Clumsy oaf fell and cracked his head.” He searched the faces around the fire. “Estrid and Frode,” he said.

“Ana saw Estrid get it. No one’s sure about Frode,” Sten said. He looked around at the other faces. “Not optimistic, but then we didn’t have much hope for you, either.”

The blase way the older man recited their comrades’ brief obituary said a lot about what the group had been through in recent years. Vivacious Estrid, perennially optimistic, an open book, always quick with a joke. Frode, her direct opposite, quiet, dour even, reluctant to talk about how he ended up with them. Alar would miss them, but he missed all the people they lost.

Estrid was supposed to be fighting alongside Sten, distracting the soldier whose horse nearly trampled Lief. Alar didn’t remember seeing either Sten or Estrid during the brief altercation. And now Estrid was dead. He watched Sten staring

into the fire, but instead of asking the question he wanted to ask, he asked, “The slaves?”

The older man shook his head. “And it’s worse.”

“Word is, the garrison in Richeleau is sending a company of Imps to Lirantok,” Tove said.

“Word is?” Alar asked. “A rumor or what you know to be true?”

“Lief circled back and followed the caravan to Richeleau. Must have kicked the hornet’s nest, because the company set out almost right away.” Sten shrugged as he bent forward to turn a spit suspended over the fire. “Might be a coincidence,” Sten said, sitting back and resting his forearms on his knees, “but Torva, that gendarme Lief knows, says they’re headed up that way.”

If they were going to Lirantok, the Imps would undoubtedly encounter Ukrit. The boy was too naïve to avoid them. “Why Lirantok?” Alar asked.

“Maybe they think the people who attacked the slave caravan were from Lirantok,” Tove said. “They’re wrong, but it makes some sense.”

Alar watched her running a whetstone over her knife, trying to ignore a nagging sense of guilt. *Not my problem*. His stomach grumbled its agreement. Shoving the boy’s inconvenient predicament aside, he nodded at the roasting rodent. “Squirrel?”

Tove grinned. “First shot.”

Alar patted her on the back and forced a smile. “You keep getting better with that bow, we’ll be eating like the emperor before long.”

“I missed,” she mumbled.

It took him a moment to work out what she meant, then he remembered the arrow that narrowly missed the driver’s head. He retrieved the arrowhead, handed it over, and said, “It was close enough to give me a head start.” Her eyes lit up as she took the broken arrow shaft. “Saved my life.”

She scowled and dipped her head. Alar took in the small group lounging around the clearing. The *Alle'oss* were not fighters. When he joined their small band, none of them had a sword, much less trained with one. That wasn't unusual in Argren, but it was bad luck none of them had the slightest bit of woodcraft. There were plenty of skilled archers among the *Alle'oss*. After all, hunter was an honored profession in Argren. But the *Alle'oss* feared being associated with rebels, and their attempts at recruiting had, so far, been unsuccessful.

Tove took it on herself to carve a bow from a sturdy piece of ash. The sinew and the arrows proved more problematic. Four months ago, they stole a quiver with two arrows from a hunter who made the mistake of sleeping late. Alar smiled, remembering how they gathered around, passing the arrow around, trying to discern its secrets. Their first attempts to replicate it were pathetic, but Tove was persistent.

Tove set the whetstone aside and picked up the long piece of yew she was using to carve a new bow. Lost in concentration, she forgot her usual reticence, pushing her hair behind her ears to keep it out of the way as she bent to her task. Alar watched her face, brow furrowed, lips pressed tight, the scar puckering the corner of her mouth. The knife was too large for both her small hands and the finer details on the bow. Reaching into his pocket, he retrieved Ukrit's knife, nudged Tove and held it out to her, hilt first.

Her eyes lit up. "Where'd you get this?"

"Found it."

"Lucky you."

"No, lucky you. You can have it."

She took the knife, weighed it experimentally, then set the hunting knife aside and set to work with a satisfied grin curving her mangled lips.

Alar looked at Sten. "When did the Imps leave Richeleau?"

Sten scrunched up his face. "Early this afternoon."

“How long to get to Lirantok?”

“Walking or riding?”

“Either, both.”

Sten looked to a man sitting across the fire. “What you say, Erik? You’re from up that way.”

Erik was Sten’s closest companion and might have been considered second in command if they were actually organized. He looked up from his attempt to repair his tattered boots, brushing his long, dirty hair from his face. Looking from Sten to Alar, he said, “Walking ... maybe four, five weeks if you hump it.”

“What about if you’re on horseback?”

“Imperials?”

Alar nodded. One of the few advantages the rebels had was the Imps rarely ventured far from the roads in Argren. That was true of all the Imps except for the Rangers, but that elite force would not be wasted on a village like Lirantok.

“They’ll follow the Imperial Highway south, then turn east and north.” He wagged his head, pursing his lips and thinking. “Two, three weeks. Maybe a little more.”

“What are you thinking?” Sten asked.

“Was thinking of going to warn them.”

Sten and Erik exchanged a look, then Sten said, “No, we need you here.”

Alar looked from Sten to Erik, who was nodding. “Need me for what?” he asked.

“It’s just not a good idea for any of us to be running off on their own,” Erik said. “Besides, we don’t know for sure that’s where they’re going.”

“Right, might be something comes up and we need everyone here,” Sten said with a firm nod, as if the argument was closed.

Alar gazed at him. It was Sten who found Alar hiding under the porch of a general store when he had ten summers. He was alone, emaciated, and wouldn’t have survived the coming winter on his own. The older man saved Alar’s life and gave him

something even more important: a reason to live. It was true, they were few, but Sten assured him the *Alle'oss* would tire of the Empire's oppression and flock to their cause. Sten's fiery speeches ignited Alar's imagination and gave him purpose. He was excited when they finally let him take part in an operation, and equally shocked to discover they were stealing corn from a local farmer, one of their own. Sten assured him it was necessary, a temporary expedient. But it was only the first in a long series of dispiriting compromises.

The heady days of hope and expectation were long past. Alar looked at the group of people slouching around the fire and saw fatigue and, worse, resignation. The attack on the slave caravan was a rare spasm of initiative, and it brought with it a harsh lesson. His gaze settled on Sten, who stared into space, his face slack. He had never openly defied their leader before. But it wasn't just Ukrit who would pay for their transgression. If the Imps were going to retaliate, the innocent residents of Lirantok would suffer.

Tove, bent over her work, twisted her head and caught his eye. Alar leaned toward her. "Lief said he got back from Lirantok in two weeks," she whispered. She knew what he was thinking. He had to try. Even if it meant defying Sten and Erik.

Chapter 3



Spirit's Luck

Tove was right. Lief knew of a pass through the mountains that would allow Alar to get to Lirantok in two weeks. It was rugged, the trip would be exhausting, but it could be done. Tove and Lief offered to accompany him, but he declined. As broken as it was, their small band was their only home. He didn't want his friends to lose that. He waited to leave until well past sundown, when everyone was asleep. Tove made sure she was on watch when he left.

"You're going to be careful, right?" she said when Alar arrived on top of the ridge.

"Always," Alar said with a grin. "You know me, Tove."

It was at least an hour before the moon rose. With shadows cloaking her face, Tove looked directly at him. "Alar, you're the most reckless person I know."

It was true. Gambler's luck was what Sten called it. When he survived jumping off the roof of his family's farm when he had seven summers, his mother called it spirit's luck. Whatever that meant. "I'm just going to warn them the Imperials are coming. I won't get involved, I promise," he said and meant it. What was he going to do against a company of Imp cavalry, anyway?

"What do you want me to tell Sten and Erik?"

“Tell them ... tell them I left early for Richeleau. Looking for food. I’ve done that before.” He shrugged. “They might even believe it. But even if they don’t, they’ll believe you didn’t know any different.”

They said their goodbyes and Alar made his careful way down the face of the ridge. From the bottom, he looked up and could just make out Tove looking down, her face a pale moon against the dark sky.

As he walked, he tried to remember everything he knew about Lirantok. He heard of it before but couldn’t remember how until Lief reminded him. One of a handful of villages in the Ishian River valley, Lirantok gained fame as an artists’ community. He knew of Lirantok because of his sister. As a child, he would sift through the ashes in their hearth, searching for just the right bits of charcoal she could use to sketch on the rough planks of their family’s barn. When rain wiped her canvas clean, she would begin again, with Alar sitting on a stump in their yard, exclaiming when he guessed the emerging image. Recognizing her budding talent, their parents acquired, at a dear price, a rare set of watercolors from Lirantok. It was the vibrant colors that attracted the artists to the valley. The surrounding hills were rich in the plants and minerals required to produce the vivid hues the *Alle’oss* loved. The inhabitants of the valley grew rich on pigments coveted throughout the Empire and beyond.

Alar traveled fast, stopping only occasionally to catch a few hours of sleep. If it took the Imps three weeks to reach the valley, he might beat them there. Though he brought no food with him, he took advantage of summer’s bounty, finding berries and mushrooms as he walked. Two of the dead soldier’s iron pennies bought ten early apples from an old farmer. Feeling virtuous for being able to pay for something for a change, he climbed the

pass, chewing the sweet fruit and thanking the Mother for her generosity.

The cavalry would head south from Richeleau toward the main highway, then turn east until they met the spur of the highway that headed north into the valley. The pass Alar used was too rugged for horses, but not too difficult for a man born to the mountains. Still, by the time he reached a precipice from which he could see the valley to the north, he was nearing the end of his strength. The Ishian River, sedate for a mountain river, except where it plunged through the entrance of the valley, glinted in the afternoon sun below him. The sapphire blue lake that was the source of the river was just visible over the intervening hills. Lief told him the water was so clear, you could see the bottom two hundred paces below the surface. Though he couldn't see Lirantok, he knew it was on the southwestern shore of the lake. It was the largest and most prosperous village in the valley.

He descended until he met the highway where it turned north, paralleling the river as it left the valley. With a groan, he knelt in the center of the road and studied the packed dirt. Wagon ruts. A few hoof prints, but they were the wide hooves of *Alle'oss* mountain horses. He looked west along the road and listened. Nothing but the reassuring sounds of the forest. If he was lucky, the Imps headed somewhere other than Lirantok. In any case, no Imps passed this spot since it rained last, and they were not near.

Just as he set off, the sun dipped below a mountain peak, throwing the road into shadow. Over the course of the last day, the wind shifted to the northwest, plunging down the peaks that cradled the valley and picking up speed as it rushed through the narrow entrance. He closed his eyes, enjoying the refreshing chill on his sweaty face. Exhausted before he set out, after two weeks with little sleep and only enough food to stay alive, it was all he could do to put one foot in front of another. He gazed

longingly at the soft ground beneath the underbrush that bordered the road, but if he stopped now, he might give up the lead he worked so hard to gain. Besides, if the soldiers were coming, he would need as much time as possible to convince the residents of Lirantok death was descending on their idyllic village.

He had only six summers the day his sister received the watercolors from Lirantok, but her joyful response etched the day in his memory. He reached into a pocket he sewed inside his shirt and withdrew a bundle of waxed cloth. With the delicate precision of one handling a priceless artifact, he unwrapped the cloth, exposing a folded paper within. That it survived the early days, when he was alone, was testament to how precious it was to him. The paper was smudged and worn, the creases bit almost all the way through the sheet, but it was still intact, the colors still recognizable.

He unfolded it as he walked, cradling it and looking down at himself, or at least, the six-year-old version of himself. How often had he gazed at this portrait in the years since? Countless times. It was the first painting his sister attempted with her new treasures, and she chose to paint her little brother. Alar was a busy child, and it said a lot about how much he loved and admired his sister that he sat long enough for her to complete the painting. An untrained hand created the portrait, but the talent was obvious. It was unmistakably Alar. She captured the subtle signs of his impatience so perfectly, it never failed to make him smile. She even used a bit of the precious blue hues, Argren blue, to depict his eyes. He folded it carefully and returned it to its hidden spot. The painting was the only surviving relic of his family.

He scrubbed his face with both hands, shook himself, and picked up his pace. If Lief's directions were right, he would be in Lirantok sometime tomorrow morning.

The sun was making its presence known behind the mountains to the east as Alar approached the entrance to the valley. The road climbed a long straight slope, leaving the river to plunge through a narrow gorge below. He topped the hill as the sun emerged between two mountain peaks. Standing in the middle of the road, his last apple dangling from his hand, he watched the jagged shadow line crawl across the valley floor, leaving behind a painting in golden hues. The glittering blue lake emerged slowly, surrounded by evergreens and hardwoods, a collage of summer greens. A boat crossed into the light, rocking in a light chop, its white sail luminous. Lirantok was just visible among the trees. It was the largest village in the valley, but he could see the smoke from at least two others to the north and east.

He was steeling himself for one last effort when he heard them. Cold sweat prickled his back as he spun around. The cavalry was approaching the base of the hill, emerging from the fog that often lay in the low places in the mountains. They were still far away and in no hurry, coming on at a slow walk. Alar turned and ran.

He only took a few steps before he knew it was useless. He spent his reserves getting to this point and had nothing left. He felt as if he were plowing through waist deep snow. Leaden legs refused to respond to his urgent pleas. His feet ached, and every jarring step sent sharp spikes into his hips. For one fleeting moment, he considered ducking into the forest and abandoning the citizens of Lirantok to their fate. Maybe the Imps were only here to arrest the village elders. Besides, even if they had darker intentions, what was he doing jumping into the middle of it?

But still, he ran on, grateful, at least, he was running downhill. He crossed a narrow meadow at the entrance of the valley and entered the forest that surrounded the village. Risking a glance

over his shoulder, he found the horses stopped at the top of the hill. The officer, sunlight glinting off gold ornaments on his blue uniform, pointed toward the village. That must be Captain Brennerman, the commander of the cavalry detachment in Richeleau, and no friend of the *Alle'oss*. Alar had seen it before. They would gather themselves, finalizing their plans before descending on the village at a gallop to maximize shock and minimize resistance.

“Oh no, oh no,” Alar huffed out. Turning his back to the threat, he bent his head and pumped his arms, but only managed a few more steps before he stumbled and sprawled across the dusty surface of the road. For a moment, the memory of that day long ago came back to him. The day the Empire stole his life. His body convulsed, desperate for air, but his limbs were frozen. The feeling of helplessness that stalked him since that day pounced, freezing him in place. He lowered his forehead to the ground.

But he was no longer eight years old, no longer the helpless son of a farmer. “Not this time!” he growled, threw himself upright and took a few stumbling steps. “*Sheoda*.” He was so close!

And then, amid the turmoil in his mind, something tore. He gasped, stuttered to a stop on stiff legs and bent over, hands clamped to the sides of his head. He could *feel* his mind tearing deep behind his eyes, a wet, rotten burlap rending. “Arrgh!” He pressed his hands to his temples, as if he could hold the ragged edges together.

And then it stopped.

Through slitted eyes, he stared at his boots planted on the road’s brown surface. He was conscious. He dug his fingernails into his scalp above his temples. He could still feel. In fact, outwardly nothing had changed. What happened to him? He straightened, letting his hands drop to his sides. When he had six summers his mother’s brother suffered a brain injury that left him partially paralyzed and feeble. Afraid what he would find, he turned his attention inward, but instead of the debilitating fog he

imagined cloaked his uncle's mind, he found a quiet serenity centered on the spot where he felt the tearing sensation. Closing his eyes, he focused on it.

A note, high and pure as a bell's peal, emanated from the spot, accompanied by overpowering waves of euphoria that suffused his mind. He jerked upright, fists clenched, shivers rolling up and down his limbs.

As the note faded, the waves ebbed, lapping at the corners of his mind and leaving behind a mellow bliss. He opened his eyes but focused on what was happening inside his mind. The cool spot was still there, but he shied away from it. He lifted his arms out to his sides and rose up onto his toes. The accumulated aches and fatigue had evaporated. In fact, he felt better than he had in weeks. Like he slept for hours.

Imperials! He glanced over his shoulder. The cavalry was on the move, still walking for the moment, but they would come fast. Shoving aside the riddle of what happened to him, he flew toward the village.

The citizens of Lirantok were already out and about when Alar appeared. "Imperials! Run!" He slid to a stop in the town square, shouting at the top of his lungs and waving his arms, but his warnings only drew curious stares. "Run you fools!"

"Boy!" An elderly man grabbed his arm and pulled him around. "What are you talking about?"

"Imps!" Alar pointed back the way he came. "Imp cavalry." When the man looked confused, Alar shouted, "Slavers!" Invoking their recent experience finally got people moving. Alar snagged the retreating man by his tunic. "The Woodsmiths? Ukrit?"

The man pointed west and said, "Outside town, up the hill." He pulled his tunic free and ran toward the lake.

The bright clop of horses' hooves on cobbles chased Alar from the square. Screams and the soldier's whoops followed him through the narrow lane that led out of town. Beyond the western

boundary of the village, the road wound up a hill. The Woodsmith's tidy house perched on the crown of the hill. He paused at the top to look down at the chaos erupting in the town. The Imps were not merely here to arrest the elders. The western wind at his back muted the screams, but people were fleeing in every direction, and smoke was already rising. Turning away, he scanned the Woodsmith's homestead. Besides the main house, there were two other buildings, but none of the family was in sight.

He ran to the house and burst through the door. The common room was empty except for a girl, who screamed and leapt up at Alar's entrance.

"Where are your parents?" Alar asked.

Instead of answering, she fled into an adjacent room and slammed the door. Alar took a step to follow, then heard hoofbeats behind him. He dodged to the side and peeked around the doorjamb in time to see two Imps reining up in the yard. One of them pointed to the other buildings, then dismounted and came toward the house. Alar put his back to the wall, panting, blinking away the sweat dripping into his eyes. He drew his sword as the soldier's boots sounded on the porch, then, without thinking, he pivoted and drove the blade through the doorway.

He met resistance, as if he were thrusting through a bale of hay. There was a low grunt, then the sword was jerked from his hand. He edged over and peeked through the door. A soldier lay on his back in the yard, his boots still on the porch, his hands clutching Alar's sword protruding from his abdomen below his ribcage. Alar jumped back, spun around, searching frantically for a place to hide. He leapt onto the table that stretched across the middle of the room and cast about. He was heading to the open door on the right side of the room when he remembered the girl. Crossing back to the closed door, he knocked lightly and put his ear to the door.

“Hello,” he said and winced. “We, uh, have to get out of here. Can you let me in?” There was a squeal followed by a thump from inside the room, but the door didn’t open. He rattled the latch. Locked, and the door was sturdy.

“Klaus!” The other Imp’s voice, faint, came from outside.

His sword! Alar ran to the door and peeked outside again. The body was still there, the sword protruding from its abdomen. Seeing no one else, he stepped warily on the porch, peering around for the other Imp.

“Klaus, there’s no one here.” This time, the voice was nearby, just around the corner.

With one last glance at his sword, Alar slipped around the opposite corner.

“Klaus!” Surprise and anger.

“Oh, *sheoda*,” Alar muttered under his breath. The forest pushed up close on this side of the house. He took a step toward the shadowy refuge when he noticed the window. The girl. They would find her, and they would kill her, or worse, for what he did to Klaus. He hesitated for only a heartbeat before running to the window and tapping on it. He didn’t expect her to respond, but to his surprise, a pair of wide blue eyes, in a round face framed by blond curls, appeared. Alar beckoned, then pointed to the front of the house, trying to convey the danger she was in. He saw her lips moving, and winced, putting a finger to his lips, miming opening the window. She stared at him, started to shake her head, then something heavy struck the door to her room. Alar could hear it through the window.

She jumped at the sound and disappeared, as the soldier let loose with a stream of furious threats, leaving no doubt as to his intentions. Alar bent over, looking for something he could use to break the window, when the sound of the soldier’s voice rose in volume. He jerked upright and bright lights exploded in his head. *Oh Mother! Whatever tore before gave way!*

“You okay?”

Hands rubbing the top of his head, he forced his eyes open and squinted up at the girl. She had one leg out the window, which swung out on hinges. Another crash on the door, accompanied by an ominous splintering sound, got her moving.

“Come on, hurry,” Alar said, reaching up to take her hand. “If he sees which way we go, we’ll never lose him.”

The girl ignored his offered hand and hopped deftly to the ground. Alar turned toward the forest, but the girl took his hand and pulled him toward the back of the house. The unmistakable sound of the door giving way followed them around the corner. She led him across the backyard, avoiding the soft earth in the beds of their summer garden. Unlike the gradual climb in the front, the hill fell away steeply here for ten paces, exposing a rough granite face. She sat on the edge, scooted forward and slid to the bottom, then, without a backward glance, she disappeared into the trees. Alar sat, scooted over the edge, trying to mimic her movements. Instead of sliding gracefully down the stone, he rolled, leaving skin on the rock’s rough surface and coming to a painful stop at the bottom.

He opened his eyes to find her looking down at him. “Something familiar about this,” he murmured.

“You coming?” she asked, then turned and disappeared again.

“Must be Ukrit’s sister,” he muttered. He pulled himself up on the rock face and limped after her.

She led them far enough into the densest part of the forest they could no longer hear screams nor smell smoke, then dropped to sit on a log. Alar knew what would happen next. He had seen it often. She was one of the lucky few who coolly navigated violence’s terrible turmoil. But, the immediate danger passed, she would begin to process what happened to her. He watched her panting, wild eyes casting about the dim clearing, wondering which way she would go. When she spoke, there was

a dangerous, hysterical edge to her voice. “Who were those people? Why—” A sob convulsed her body.

Alar stared, feeling suddenly awkward. He took a step toward her and stopped. It wasn't as if he had no experience with this type of trauma. It was, in fact, depressingly familiar. If it were one of his fellow rebels, he would sit with them, put his arm around their shoulders. Let them rage or weep until the crisis passed. But he didn't know this girl. What was the protocol? She might respond violently if he touched her. He stood awkwardly for a moment, hands making inarticulate gestures, then he sat on the log, close enough that she could lean on him if she wished, but far enough to be proper.

Finally, she quieted and sat up. She looked at him and searched his face, wiping her nose on her sleeve. “Who are you?” she asked.

Relieved, Alar started to answer, then shut his mouth. That was a complicated question. He was the person who brought this calamity into her life, or at least he was partially responsible. It may be Imperial soldiers who were busy killing her neighbors and burning her village, but that was the result, not the cause. They wouldn't have come if he and his fellow rebels hadn't attacked the slave wagon. But instead of giving a complicated answer, he said, “A friend of Ukrit.”

She stared at him, a small furrow appearing between her brows. The puzzle seemed to focus her mind, and she asked, “Ukrit? How do you know Ukrit?”

“I, uh, met him in Richeleau. Or on the road to Richeleau, actually.”

Her face smoothed, and she nodded. She wiped tears from her cheeks, and after a moment, she asked, “Where *is* my brother? Did he come back with you?”

“He's not back yet?”

“No, we haven't seen him for weeks.”

Alar chewed his lips and looked up at the patches of blue sky visible through the thick canopy. That was not good news. If he wasn't back and Alar didn't see him, he probably took the same road the cavalry took. The boy didn't seem to know how to deal with hostile Imperials. Still, they didn't normally kill or capture random *Alle'oss* they encountered. There was a good chance they ignored him. Which meant he would return to this devastation. Alar looked back at his sister and asked, "Where are your parents?"

Her face froze. She was up in a flash and had taken a step toward the village before Alar grasped her wrist and jerked her to a stop.

"Let me go!"

"If you go back, they'll kill you." He took a breath and let it out. "Or worse."

"My ma and pa went into town this morning," she said, trying to yank her arm free. Alar may have had little skill with a sword, but he had the rock-hard calluses and iron grip of one accustomed to its use. When it became obvious she couldn't escape, she stopped struggling and gave him a pleading look.

"I warned them in town," Alar said. "They had little time, but there's always a chance they got away." He forced a small smile, willing himself to hide the lie. A flicker of something that might be hope crossed her face, then she sagged and looked pointedly at his hand wrapped around her wrist. He looked into her eyes, gauging her intentions. She gazed steadily at him, showing no sign of the wild panic he saw before. He let go, tense, ready to chase her if she bolted. Instead, she returned to her seat on the log. After a moment, she looked up at him and said, "How long?"

"Hard to say," he said. "A couple of hours. Then we'll go check." He sat, elbows on his knees, and stared into the shadows between the trees.

"I'm Scilla," she said, dully.

"Alar."

Find out what happens next!

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