



Run Kessa Run P2

A Spirit Song Story

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Now Kessa was truly lost. After leaving the fracas in the tavern, she ran blindly, paying little attention to where she was going. When the rain diminished to a miserable drizzle, she slowed to a limping trudge. Glancing around for pursuers, she ducked into a dark alley and sought shelter from the rain beneath a staircase that led to a second-floor landing. She hadn't seen or heard her pursuers in some time, but she had no clue where she was. Her shoulder ached from her fall in the market. Her ankle throbbed. She probed cautiously at the lump growing on her forehead where the crazy woman whacked her with the ladle.

Letting her hand drop, she sagged against the wall, sighed deeply, and mumbled, "*Vo, kustok.*" She tapped her head against the brick wall in frustration. What was she thinking? Just couldn't leave the inquisitor alone. She gazed at misty raindrops glinting in the light of the street lamp at the mouth of the alley.

All was not lost. Despite her stupidity, she was still alive, and she could still find the Fallows. She just had to find a landmark she recognized. Preferably before dawn. Bumping herself off the wall, she emerged from beneath the stairs and limped toward the mouth of the alley.

She was several paces from the street when she heard footsteps. A moment later, a soldier appeared. Caught in the light of the street lamp, she froze, afraid to move lest she attract his attention. But just as she thought he might pass without noticing her, he glanced her way. She turned and ran. The other end of the alley was a dead end, so her only option was up the stairs.

She made it to the second-floor landing as the soldier started pounding up the steps. The door into the building was locked. It was a long drop to the alley. She looked up. A stone parapet jutted out from the roof. Out of time, Kessa threw the club onto the roof, climbed onto the railing

and leapt up. She got her hands on the ledge, her fingers curled around a small ridge. She swung her legs sideways, trying to get a foot on top of the wall. When her foot struck something, she nearly lost her grip on the wet stone. Ignoring the Imp's shriek, she swung her legs again and got a foot on top of the wall. With a mighty grunt, she hauled herself up and over the edge.

Panting, she lay on her back in a pool of rainwater, marveling at her deliverance and listening to a creative stream of obscenities from below. When he fell silent, she got to her knees and peered over the edge. The soldier was standing on the landing, studying the railing.

When he glanced up and saw her, he growled, "You got nowhere to run now, little *l'oss*. When I get hold of you, a broken nose will be the least of it."

At least, that's what she thought he said. His voice, thickened by a squashed nose, was hard to understand. Between the ruin of his nose and the fresh blood on his upper lip, he was almost unrecognizable. But she remembered the scar on his forehead. It was the soldier whose face she stomped in the tavern. That would explain the hostility.

She watched him test the sturdiness of the rail, then she stood and studied the rooftop. The front of the building was a two-story drop onto cobblestones. A featureless brick wall rose from the back. There was no way she could climb that. She picked up the club, limped to the far side and peered down into the small yard. There were no stairs, and the gap between this building and the next was too wide to leap. The Imp was right. There was nowhere to run. When she looked back, his fingers had appeared on the top of the parapet.

She limped back and peered down at him. Despite his extra height, he was having difficulty pulling himself up. Rather than swing his leg up like she had, he was trying to pull himself straight up, and his legs kept swinging under the parapet. She watched him struggle,

hoping it would be too much for him. Unfortunately, when he saw her, he let out a mighty roar, and heaved himself up until his chin rested on the parapet. She sighed, lifted the club and let the ball end fall on his fingers.

She watched him drop out of sight, then listened to him tumbling down the stairs. He should survive that. Probably. Planting a hand on her hip, she gazed around. Now what? While she studied the neighboring buildings, the full face of the moon peeked through an opening in the clouds, its light making her unaccountably happy.

Although most of the neighboring buildings were taller than the one she was on, the white marble of the emperor's palace glowed in the moonlight through a narrow gap. That gave her a rough idea where she was. She knew how to find the Fallows. She just had to find a way down before the Imp brought reinforcements. There was always the way she came up, but whatever the soldier's fate, she didn't want to run into him again. That left the opposite side.

The parapet on the far side was identical to the one she climbed over, with one difference. The low wall had two openings that allowed rainwater to drain. The openings fed through funnels into cast-iron pipes that descended to the ground. She eyed the pipes gleaming wetly in the moonlight. She would have to climb over the funnel to reach the pipe, and cast iron was brittle. It was risky, but what choice did she have? She dropped the club into the yard, then clambered up on the wall before second thoughts could intrude.

Sitting on the top of the parapet, she reached a foot down to the funnel to get a feel for how far it was. Then she twisted onto her stomach and felt for the funnel with her toes. Finding it, she clamped her feet on either side and slowly let herself down until her feet found the bottom of the funnel. Grunting at the pain in her shoulder, she gripped the funnel between her knees,

took a breath, then let go with her right hand and grabbed the top of the funnel. She held her breath while the entire assembly trembled, listening for the crack of iron fracturing. But it felt solid. More or less.

Taking a firmer grip with her right hand, she let go with her left and grabbed the funnel, putting her full weight on the drain. After a moment's hesitation, she let her legs dangle, let go with her right hand and felt around for the pipe where it angled from the bottom of the funnel to the wall. Getting her hand around it, she slowly let it take her weight, then let go with her left hand and immediately began shimmying down.

Halfway down, grinning in triumph, she heard the crack. The pipe fractured near the top, below the bracket holding it to the bricks. Before she could react, she was falling backwards. Arms and legs clamped around the pipe, she rode it as it arced away from the wall.

The impact with the ground forced the air from her lungs in an explosive whoosh and set off fireworks behind her eyes. The jagged end of the top half of the drainpipe dug into the mud beside her head with a squelch. There was one last clatter as the bracket crashed down and then silence, but for her short, shallow gasps. Fortunately, the muddy ground cushioned her fall. If it had been cobbles... But it wasn't. She lay spread-eagled in the mud, struggling to fill her lungs.

When she could draw a full breath, she shoved the pipe aside and fought her way to her feet. Her abused ankle was swelling, the effort had sharpened the pain in her shoulder, and her head throbbed. Still, she was alive and on the ground, and had a rough idea where she was. She retrieved the club and limped to a gate in the fence at the edge of the yard. No one was on the street, so she slipped through the gate and headed in the direction opposite where she'd seen the palace.

“You!”

Kessa’s heart fell. Looking back, she was surprised to find it was the Imp with the broken nose again. How he was still walking was beyond her, but there he was, dragging his right foot and holding his right hand protectively against his stomach. He wasn’t moving very fast.

She watched him for a moment, then rolled her eyes and started a limping jog away. She made it half a block, opening the gap between her and her pursuer, when two more Imps stepped out of a cross street a block ahead of her and turned toward her.

Kessa sprinted to the next intersection, ankle screaming. After a moment of confusion, the soldiers ahead of her set out to cut her off. She made it to the cross street first and turned right.

Except it wasn’t a street. It was a small patio. The only exit was a door into the building on the opposite side. She didn’t slow. A man sitting in a chair next to the door looked up as she rounded the corner. His chair was tilted back, resting against the wall behind him. When he saw her making for the door, he lurched upright. The chair legs slipped on the wet stone, dropping him to the ground in a clattering heap.

She made it to the door and grasped the latch. If it was locked, she was a dead woman. The latch turned, and the door swung inward. She glimpsed the man struggling to rise out of the corner of her eye as she squeezed through the gap, threw her weight against the door and slammed the bolt home.

Taking a step back, blowing like a bellows, she watched the latch rattle and then... BAM! She jumped backwards. The door shook, but held. She whirled around. She was in a small foyer. There was a staircase leading up to the second floor, dark rooms to the left and right, and a dimly

lit hallway leading farther into the first floor. The assault on the door continued in earnest. Which way?

“Munch!” a voice called down the hall, causing Kessa to jump. “What in Daga’s name is that racket, Munch?”

She took off down the hallway at a run, just before the door gave way with a splintering crash. A man’s silhouette appeared at the end of the hall. She flew past him into a crowded room. People standing around the edges of the room surrounding a table, where a group of men sat looking her way. A door on the opposite wall. Without slowing, she launched herself onto the table. Her heel came down on a pile of coins and slid out from under her.

Arms pinwheeling, legs flying up, her momentum carried her forward until she collided with the man just rising from his chair on the far side, carrying him backward until she was sitting on his chest. She had half a heartbeat to take in the man’s expression, one eye wide with surprise, the other covered by a patch that sported a shiny red stone, before a hand landed on her shoulder. As she swung the club to dislodge the hand, the man below her arched upward, pushing up on the backs of her legs, launching her toward the exit. She hit the ground running and sprinted through the door, leaving chaos in her wake.

Down the hall, through a kitchen, another cook bent over a fire, and she was back outside. She ran, not caring which direction she went, until a stitch in her side grew too sharp to ignore and ebbing adrenaline brought the condition of her ankle to her attention. Hand on her side, she limped down the middle of a quiet street, short, sharp breaths keeping the tears at bay.

An old drunk loomed out of the darkness. Kessa stumbled to a stop and raised the club.

“*Bita, nuri.*” A pittance, please.



She froze and peered at him. His flyaway white hair didn't tell her much, but his skin might have been pale under the grime, and his rheumy eyes might be blue. "*Ērtsu Alle'oss da?*" she asked warily.

His hopeful smile collapsed into a scowl. "*Ka?*"

Kessa's eyes narrowed. It sounded a little like *Alle'oss*. She tried again. "*Vehlu ka?*"

They stared at one another until the man shook his head and said, "Girl, where did you learn to speak the tongue? I can't understand a word you're saying."

Throughout this horrible day, she managed to keep her cool. Mostly. But this small insult was too much. She let the club fall to her side. "Listen, when the Empire outlawed our language, the *Alle'oss* let them do it. Thanks for that, old man, by the way," she said indignantly. "We had to teach ourselves, and we understand each other well enough." Hot prickles crawled across her skin.

The old man waved her pique away. "I'm just teasing. It's good to hear a young person speaking it. Or trying to, anyway." He grinned at her frown. "What you doing wandering around Brennan at night, anyway?" Looking her over, he added, "You don't look like you been here long." He gave her a toothless grin and said, "Too clean." One shaggy eyebrow lifted as he examined her more closely. "Looks like you been handled rough, too."

Kessa sniffed at his understatement, gingerly touching the walnut-sized lump on her forehead. "I got here last night. I was supposed to meet someone in the Fallows." Suddenly, the dike damming her emotions gave way. Her breath caught. She limped to the side of the street, dropped limply onto the curb, and wept.

The old man sat beside her and patted her shoulder. “There, there. The city can do that to anyone.”

Before she knew it, she was spilling the events of the day. Everything except the fact she was sent to make contact with rebels. The man listened quietly until she ended with, “And then I landed on some man wearing an eye patch.” Her voice trailed off as she ran out of momentum.

“Eye patch? Did it have a red ruby in the middle of it?”

“Yeah. Then I ran. And now I don’t know where I am.” She wiped her nose with the back of her hand and gazed vaguely around.

“Zut, girl. You been in town one day and you got the Inquisition, the Imps and the Black Guild after you.”

“Black Guild?”

“Ayuh, unless I miss my guess, that man with the patch was Helman Gann, the head of one of the most powerful sefiliad in the city.” When he noticed her confusion, he said, “Crime lord.” They stared at one another until he said, “I’d leave town, if I were you.”

She nodded, peering around and swiping at her cheeks. “I have to get to the Fallows. Where are we?”

He looked about to answer, then a frown creased his lined face and he lifted his nose. “You smell that?”

Kessa gaped at him. “You’re kidding, right?” The city was a miasma of unfamiliar and unwelcome odors.

“Wood smoke.”



Now that he mentioned it, Kessa did detect a whiff of wood smoke under the stench. It was such a common scent in the mountains and in Lachton it hadn't registered. "Is that unusual?"

"You see any trees anywhere around the city?" the old man asked. He stood, moved to the center of the road and tilted his head to the side. "Listen."

Kessa followed him and did as he said. It was late, and this part of the city was mostly quiet, beyond a few dogs barking. But now that she was paying attention, she heard a familiar and frightening murmur beneath the silence. "Fighting," she breathed. It was faint, but unmistakable.

The old man turned in place, sweeping his head around, then came to a stop. "There," he said and pointed.

Kessa looked up at the stars. He was pointing a little north of west. "What's over there?"

"Too far to be this district. There's the headquarters of the Imperial Guard. Cathedral Square. But those are too close. Got to be the Imperial District. Maybe at the gate."

"Someone is attacking the Imperial District?" she asked. "The rebels? That's suicide."

"Rebels?! Nah." He was quiet for a moment, then shrugged. "Got to be them Karatoum."

"Who?"

"Mercenaries from the Union. Been coming into the city for weeks. Replacements for the Imperial Guard."

"Who are the Imperial Guard?"

The emperor's personal legion. Kept their headquarters close to the palace and the bulk of the legion north of the city." He turned and squinted at her. "Make sure no one gets any ideas.

But they all pulled out recently, and the Karatoum took their place."



Kessa held his gaze for a moment, then looked toward the sound of fighting. A faint glow in the sky above the rooftops suggested the source of the wood smoke wasn't a controlled fire.

"Someone got some ideas."

"Yeah. Gotta be the mercenaries." After a pause, he said, "Might be, we should all think about leaving the city."

Kessa turned to her left and looked past the old man. "So, the Fallows have to be that way."

"Yup."

"*Tok,*" Kessa said as she took off. She staggered the first few steps on her swollen ankle before finding a stumbling gait she thought she could maintain.

"*Andsutra!*" he called after her.

She made it two blocks before news of whatever was happening near the Imperial District began to filter through the city. She came to a stop at an intersection and watched a man jogging down the middle of the cross street, ringing a large brass bell and shouting, "Oye! Oye! Fire! Fighting in the Imperial District!"

People began to emerge onto the street, gathering in small anxious groups. Focused on what was happening to the northwest, they mostly ignored a disheveled, roughly handled *Alle'oss* woman jogging past.

When she neared a group so large it spilled out from the walkway into the street, she slowed to see what had their attention. She was stunned to see a familiar figure standing at the head of the crowd on the stoop of a three-story townhouse. He'd exchanged his uniform for a

housecoat, his hair was tousled by sleep, but it was unmistakably the inquisitor she'd seen in the market.

More people pushed past her to join the crowd. Worried neighbors seeking answers from an authority figure. From his exasperated responses to their questions, she could tell he had nothing informative to offer. He searched the street over the heads of the crowd as if he were expecting someone. When he caught her eye, his face went blank, then recognition narrowed his eyes. He stared at her, ignoring his neighbors.

Relinquishing her gaze, he lifted his hands and called, "Calm. Calm. I'll go immediately to the fortress and find out what is happening. Return to your homes. Stay inside. When morning comes, I'm sure you'll find it's a false alarm." He glanced her way, then turned and entered his home.

As the crowd dispersed, Kessa noticed he had left his door ajar. Was it an invitation? Or was he just in a rush? People turning away spotted her. She must be a sight. *Alle'oss* red hair, hanging lank and still grungy from the soot she used to disguise it. An egg-sized lump in the middle of her forehead. And a wicked-looking club swinging loose by her thigh. A convenient focus for their fears.

Catching a tall man staring at her as he passed, she leveled her gaze at him, held it until he turned away. But there were others who weren't so shy. Too many. She gave the inquisitor's house one last look. This wouldn't be her last opportunity to avenge her sister. Turning away, she set off at a sprint, raising her club to warn off the people closing in around her. Breaking through the loose ring, she ran.

When no one followed her, she slowed to a painful jog. She passed the tavern where she encountered the soldiers, passed through the plaza where the market had been. A few people were milling about, drawn from their homes by the alarm, but the vendor stalls were shuttered and deserted. As she exited the plaza, she glanced west and noticed the glow of the fires was now reflected by a towering column of smoke. As she continued south, more and more people emerged, responding to the messengers' warnings.

When she noticed the next intersection opened onto a much wider street, she slowed. If she could rely on Gotye's description of the city, this was the Emperor's Way, a wide boulevard which ran from the eastern city gate to the center of the city. The Fallows began a block south of it. She moved over to the side of the street and limped slowly toward the intersection.

She was ten paces from the wide street when she saw shadows moving. Crouching, she entered a stairwell that led to a basement door, then squinted at the figures. High clouds again veiled the full moon, so it was hard to make out details. They moved like men, but they were larger than any man she'd ever seen. They spoke in a guttural language she'd never heard before. This must be the Karatoum, the mercenaries from the Union the old man spoke of.

As she watched them, a story she'd heard about *Oss'stera's* early days came into her mind. The rebels joined with Imperial Cavalry to fight mercenaries from the Union in Richeleau. It was General Alar's first victory. Though the storyteller hadn't used the word Karatoum, his description matched what she was looking at.

The moon emerged, allowing her to see they wore leather armor. They carried swords and shields or halberds. What were they doing here if their comrades were attacking the Imperial District? She tried to think like a soldier. They would want to make sure no one interfered with

their attack. These men might be part of a screening force, making sure no one came from the Fallows to join the defense of the Imperial District.

She looked past them to the row of buildings on the far side of the boulevard. Beyond them was where she needed to go. The Fallows. She was so close. Would they stop one person moving away from the battle? Before she could decide what to do, she heard a horse approaching from behind her. She looked back and found a man approaching on a black horse. His white uniform showed he was Inquisition. She couldn't see him well enough to tell if he was the inquisitor she chased, but he had said he was going to the fortress. It could be him. His attention on the sound of fighting behind him, which was clearly audible now, he didn't appear to be aware of the mercenaries.

He stopped twenty paces short of the intersection, twisted around in his saddle and looked behind him. A moment later, she heard voices, then the tramp of many feet. A squad of Imperial Infantry appeared at the head of a host of men in civilian clothes. The inquisitor leaned down and conferred with one of the soldiers while the mob waited restlessly, clutching pitchforks, shovels, axes and a few swords.

Kessa looked to the Karatoum. They had seen the threat. Their movement was eerily silent, as they merged with the shadows on the far side of the street. She could barely draw breath into her lungs. Her heart sped. Coppery tasting saliva flooded her mouth. The throbbing ache in her ankle faded. Her body preparing for carnage and violence. She wiped her damp palm on her tunic and gripped the handle of the club.

The rider, still talking to the soldier, pointed back toward the intersection. She could warn them. If the Karatoum were only a screening force, they would likely let the Imperials go. There

were only ten of them against perhaps a hundred Imperials. But Kessa had seen enough action to know the size of the forces wasn't the most important factor in deciding the outcome. Most of the Imperials were civilians. The mercenaries were professional killers. This would be a slaughter.

The moment of decision came when the rider sat up and urged his horse into a walk toward the intersection. A single shout from her would save many lives. In the end, the decision was made by the memory of her father's devastated face and her mother's sobs. As the rider approached his fate, she murmured, "*Shedi'enun*. Reap what you've sown."

The Karatoum waited until the rider entered the intersection before they sprung their trap. The attack was so silent and swift, the rider and his horse barely had time to react as a single Karatoum emerged. Moonlight glinted on the blade of the halberd as it swept in a horizontal arc and split the rider's chest with a wet chunk. When the horse shied away, the blade embedded in the man's chest, pulled him sideways and dropped him in a heap on the street.

As the horse fled west on the Emperor's Way with a clatter of hooves on cobbles. While the other Imperials froze, too stunned to react, the rest of the Karatoum surged from hiding. Before the civilians could turn and run, the mercenaries crashed into the thin line of soldiers. Not wanting to get caught in the chaos, Kessa joined the flood fleeing north. She dodged men who veered in front of her, seeking shelter in the dwellings at the side of the street. Glancing back, she saw the soldiers were dead. But the Karatoum weren't satisfied. They fell on the foolish, slow and clumsy with quiet efficiency. Shadowy weapons rising and falling. The screams of the dying and the terrified filled the night.

She put her head down, gritted her teeth and limped away from the carnage as fast as she could. Someone shoved her hard from the side. She hit the cobbles hard on her shoulder, rolled onto her back and looked up, expecting to find a Karatoum looming over her. But it was just a man. His face was lost in shadow, but she recognized his bulk before his nasally voice gave him away. “Time’s up, little *l’oss*.”

She looked past him, where she could see the enormous men approaching. “They’re coming, you stupid *wota!*” She tried to scramble backwards, but he reached down, caught her swollen ankle in an immense hand and jerked up.

Dangling from his iron grip, Kessa screamed and swung the club at his arm. She winced as the impact of the club on his forearm sent a painful jolt through her ankle. He screeched. She yanked her foot free of his grip, leaving his hand flopping loosely at the end of his forearm. He screamed again.

Before she could drag her eyes from his ruined arm, she noticed a shadow a head taller than the soldier looming up behind him. “Look out!” But her warning was too late. The sword passed through his neck like a scythe through wheat. The head thumped onto the stone beside Kessa. The body stood for a moment, not yet aware it was dead, blood fountaining from the neck. Then it fell slowly to the side and thudded onto the walkway beside the street.

Kessa stared up at the hulking mercenary. She couldn’t see his face, but she had the sense he was looking down at her. Her eyes dropped to the sword dangling from his hand, black droplets dribbling from the point and pattering into the pool of blood at his feet.

And then he turned and strode away. She gaped at his retreating form until his silhouette joined those of the other Karatoum. They headed back to the Emperor’s Way, leaving the street

littered with bodies. Unlike the aftermath of every other battle she'd been in, it was silent. No screams of the wounded. No pleading moans of the dying. The mercenaries left no one alive.

Shoving the head away, she rolled onto her knees and got gingerly to her feet. Her weight on her good ankle, she hopped, turning in place and trying to decide what to do. The mercenaries had moved out of sight, but she was sure they were still there. Somewhere. The street was still silent, but the fighting to the northwest had risen to a crescendo.

She limped toward the next intersection and headed west. She would try other streets, look for a gap in the Karatoum's screen. Somewhere she could cross over to the Fallows.

It was nearing dawn when she found herself in a small park surrounding a simple marble building at the edge of an immense plaza. It looked like a small forest. Trees, grass, and shrubs had somehow avoided the rigid Imperial need to control nature. She didn't know what the park was and how it came to be this way. She was too exhausted to care. Walking past the shrine, she saw runes on the marble wall and stopped to peer at it. Coming closer, she read it. "Friends of Minna!" Minna Hunter? She stared at it, then shrugged and moved away.

Forcing her way through a rangy hedge at the edge of the park, she gazed numbly at the fires burning to the northwest, beyond the northern wall of the Imperial District. She couldn't see what was burning, but she guessed it must be the mansions she'd seen when she passed that way.

The sounds of fighting had quieted, but she saw groups of Karatoum coming and going on the plaza. They didn't look in any particular hurry. She wondered idly if they breached the gate. Whether they did or not, their lack of urgency suggested there was no one left to oppose them.

She looked up at the graying sky. If she didn't get to the Fallows before the sun was up, she would have to hide in this park all day. It was dangerous to leave cover, but it would be even more dangerous to wait. She no longer felt her hunger, but she was dreadfully thirsty.

Taking one more look around, she headed south to where the Emperor's Way entered the plaza. When she reached it, she paused and studied the shadows on the far side. She'd tried several times to cross it during the night, but had been thwarted each time by groups of mercenaries.

Something moved in the shadows on the far side of the street. Karatoum? She hefted the club and glanced over her shoulder. "Too tired to go back," she mumbled. She limped out onto the wide boulevard. She kept her eye on the spot where she'd seen the movement, but it wasn't until she was ten paces away that she saw the Karatoum. There were two of them standing beside the entrance to the street she was heading to.

She stopped. In the gray twilight, they could have been statues, their bodies eerily still, their blank expressions etched in granite. Too exhausted to run, she edged over to the far side of the intersection. Their heads rotated to follow her, but they made no move to stop her as she limped past them into the Fallows. She glanced back from time to time to ensure they hadn't changed their minds, but they only watched her. She was twenty paces from the intersection when someone spoke.

"Lehasa."

She stopped and turned to find a group of ten or so men and women emerging from a decrepit building. The man had spoken *Alle'oss*, but he had the black hair of an Imperial. She tightened her grip on the club. "*Hasa,*" she said warily and eyed the others.

He approached her, his eyes on the Karatoum who still hadn't moved. The others, holding spears and bows, formed an arc around them facing north. Stopping two paces from her, he looked her up and down, his eyes lingering on the club in her hand, then studied her face. "You look like you've had a rough time."

"I'm looking for Harold Wolfe," she said. She had no patience nor energy for banter.

He glanced at a tall man standing next to him. "Why?"

"We were sent by General Alar to make contact." She gestured to the north with her free hand, the motion nearly throwing her off balance. "Ranger's killed my... The others. I'm all that's left." Her eyes prickled, but no tears watered her eyes. "Can I have some water?"

Someone handed him a leather bottle. He pulled the stopper and handed it to her. She drank deeply, then let the bottle fall, the effort leaving her breathless. "The Karatoum are attacking the Imperial District."

"We know," he said. His wry smile was visible in the growing light. He looked north, took the bottle when she offered it and replaced the stopper. Handing it off, he asked, "What's your name?"

"Kessa Linsom."

His face tightened, then he exchanged a look with the taller man. "You wouldn't be from from Lanatok, up north, would you?"

She nodded. She knew she should be curious about his reaction, or how he knew of her tiny village, but she had no energy for anything other than remaining upright.

"Let's get her to the healers," the man said.

The taller man stepped forward and swept her up into his arms.

“I can...” she started.

“Just relax,” he said. “We’ll take care of you.”

Kessa sat up in the narrow bed, put her back to the wall and propped her bandaged ankle on top of a pillow. After the healers tended her wounds, they’d put her in this small room. There was another bed, but it was unoccupied. People passing the door glanced curiously in at her. She’d found that annoying, but then the healers made her drink a tea that dulled the pain and left her feeling drifty. She looked up when the man who greeted her entered. She’d learned he was the man she came to see. Harold Wolfe. “*Lehasa*,” she said with a lazy smile.

“*Hasa*.”

Kessa had talked to him twice since arriving. She’d told her what Alar wanted them to say and told him about her trip. He’d listened attentively, but he’d appeared uncomfortable. As if he had something he wanted to say. She let her head fall back to rest on the wall and looked at him expectantly.

“Is your sister named Ibbe?” he asked.

The shock of having her sister’s name sprung on her so suddenly chased the pleasant effects of the tea. “Why?” she asked cautiously.

“Was she taken by the Inquisition a little over a year ago?”

“Yes.”

“Her name was Ibbe?”

“Yes.”

“Your sister was rescued from the Inquisition fortress by Minna Hunter and —” He swallowed, then gave her a half smile. “She’s in a village called *Helala*, in Argren.”

“*Helala*?” It was the only word she could extract from the turmoil in her mind.

“It’s a... sanctuary for girls with spirit sight. Like your sister.”

“I...” She lifted her head from the wall and frowned at the far wall, then looked up at him. “My sister is in *Helala*?”

He gave her a peculiar look. “You’ve heard of it?”

“Yes. I didn’t know about the sanctuary part, but a member of our party, Sienna. She mentioned she was a teacher there. Until she —” She looked at her lap and swallowed.

“The rangers killed her.”

Kessa nodded. “My sister’s alive,” she said, a small smile curving her lips. She needed to get word to her parents. She looked up at him and asked, “But how do you know?”

His face tightened. He wiped his mouth with his hand. His lips parted, then pressed into a tight line.

Watching him struggle with his emotions, she decided she didn’t want to hear what he had to say. Whatever it was, she had a feeling it would diminish her joy.

Fortunately, the boy with the odd name entered the room and interrupted the awkward moment. He looked up at Harold, then looked at Kessa and lifted a small wood rasp.

“You found it!” Kessa said in a rush. She took the rasp from Lika, then retrieved the club from the bedside table, laid it on her lap and looked determinedly at it.

“Well,” Harold said, sounding relieved. “I’ll leave you to it. Glad to see you’re getting better.”

“Tok,” Kessa said. “And thank you for telling me about Ibbe.”

He hesitated, nodded and left.

Lika watched him go, then sat cross-legged on the foot of her bed.

She tapped the hard wood with the rasp, then looked up at the boy, who watched her solemnly. “You know any of the old *Alle’oss* myths? The ones with heroes?”

He nodded.

“Tell me one,” she said.

The End

Lika ends up being one of the most important characters in the Spirit Song Saga. Want to learn more about what happens to the witches and rebels who take on an evil oligarchy? Find out what happens next!



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