

A Coming Storm

Chapter One

Ring Ding! Ding Ring! The sound of his hammer striking hot metal on his anvil echoed throughout the room. Only the sound of the bellows creaking and puffing under Stormy's steady hands vied with it. Such din was there that Alan could feel it in his teeth, despite the heavy cotton and wax ear plugs he wore to keep the sounds from making him deaf.

Under his heavy strokes the white-hot metal took shape, becoming long and thin with a narrow diamond shape to the blade and a curve at the end. When finished, it would become a barrel stave for master Roundhawk, the town miller and cooper.

Steadily he worked, checking every detail with care and precision, exactly as his own master had pounded into them as an apprentice. Now full-grown at twenty summers, he shared ownership of his forge with Stormy.

Alan paused a moment to look critically at the piece. It looked right to him, and he nodded with satisfaction before handing the work off to Stormy who took the blade and began to delicately work the surface, creating staggeringly intricate runes of luck and prosperity into the blade, as well as Roundhawk's R rune, to denote its owner.

As she worked on the time-consuming process, Alan checked the fire and stoked the bellows, ensuring the furnace never got too cold. He also started work on more knives and other tools to fill his orders. Some were for the village, but many of them--a great many--came from the outlying villages closer to the edge of the Silver Forest. Few blacksmiths could match their work, or the care they took in it, villagers said. Alan never really listened to those rumors; they made him uncomfortable anyway. He just wanted to do the best job he could, every time. It was important, especially when lives depended on his and Stormy's work: the great spears and lances of his people, as well as the thrice-forged heads of the arrows for the rangers, had to work every time, and not fail when facing the S'trell or the Ti'grel.

Stormy finished up the barrel stave. Alan saw it clearly when she handed it to him.

"Great work." He said in his calm, slow voice.

"Thank you." She said, picking up another nearly finished knife and going to the furnace to heat it.

Alan took the piece over to his collection of handles he'd carved over the years, seeing if any of them were the right size. If he couldn't find one, then he'd have to carve one tomorrow night to finish. Luck was with him, however, and he found a small handle perfectly made to fit.

Putting the workpiece into a tube of soft earth, he placed the tube into jaws of his vice and tightened. As pressure grew the earth compacted tightly around the blade, until it formed a nearly unbreakable grip thanks to the holder's collapsible sides. He used earth because it wouldn't scratch or otherwise mar the piece before he polished the blade to remove any lingering imperfections. Once he'd polished and sanded, he'd coat the handle to prevent rot and let it dry overnight.

Once Alan felt satisfied, he picked up the handle and thrust it firmly onto the tang. Selecting one of his rawhide hammers, he pounded it firmly into place.

Setting the piece aside to coat, he turned back to his forge to start the next knife.

Alan lost himself in the rhythm of the hammer. Time had no meaning for him. The world was a perfect place when he was in this state.

At long last, looking up from a piece he'd worked on (a hammer for master Moody) he discovered Stormy checking the lanterns that hung from carved beams overhead, their iron rings

securely held in holders shaped into snarling wolves. Night must have long since fallen—again.

Alan chuckled, laying aside his work. He had a bad habit of working long after the sun had set, much to the annoyance of the neighbors and his parents, but it was so immensely satisfying that he never wanted to be anywhere else.

"Don't bother adding oil to those lanterns, Stormy." He spoke up. "We've worked longer than we should have anyway. Let's close up tight and go to the house."

"We've worked just about the same as last night." Stormy pointed out. "By the oil, two hours since I lit them. But evening does fall early still, so we should be just in time for dinner, now."

"Well, let's finish banking the fire and sealing the doors for the night, as well as putting up the shutters." Alan said, feeling a wave of weariness wash over him now that he'd stopped to notice. "It was a great day's work."

"Yes." Stormy said, flicking her short, pale tail so lightly colored it was almost white. "It was."

"Well, barring some ill-luck, we should find tomorrow much easier. We'll work on some nails and things after we finish our orders. If Mira is with us, we'll close early." Alan said as he swung up onto her great broad back, the color of storm clouds just before a tempest is unleashed.

"Will we go hunting then?" Stormy asked, her dinner-plate sized hooves striking the ground with a gentle clip-clop, her gait wonderfully smooth and fast.

"I don't know." Alan said thoughtfully. "That depends on two things; whether Tobias wants to go or stay near the village and whether that storm finally breaks. I've never known one to build up more than a day, and this has been growing for three. If it continues to hold off through the night, then I think we will go to the docks to fish on the morrow."

"Hmm, I'll make sure to pack my heavy spear then." Stormy said solemnly as she looked up at the lights of their home drawing ever nearer.

"As will I." Alan said, staring up himself at the house he and his father had built and expanded over the years.

The Eagleheart home sat on the crest of a small hill that rolled away north towards the second, and largest hill, where at the top sat the village inn, the Defender, said to be the oldest structure in the village. Beside the inn were the three sturdy storehouses, made of stone, with the rest of the village spread out around them in a series of four concentric rings, each with their own small crop field and pasture. The land around the village was no good for farming, being so wet and damp that few things could grow fit to eat.

Down at the feet of the two hills sprang the Wall, encircling the village and pierced at two points by strong gates kept manned at all times. It was made of thick heavy stone, well crafted, and said to be made in the earliest days of the Silver Kingdom.

At equal points of the compass four great Orano Oaks, the greatest trees in all of Entari it was said, grew like green towers rising to the heavens. Each oak stretching over a thousand feet into the sky, their huge branches joined others to form an impenetrable canopy. They were one of the few trees that could grow in either muddy water or dry land. Their trunks were smooth and covered in thick grey bark that grew straight into the sky without bend or twist, looking more like carved pillars of silver in some palace of giants.

Here, along their trunks, ran bridges and platforms where the town's best archers and rangers gathered to send arrows down on wild beasts seeking entrance to the city while far above on rests set into the canopy above the leaves stood those with the sharpest eyes, keeping an eye on the weather and passing their warning below through horns and trumpets and silver bells.

The Forest Road, called the Old Road by some, ran North to South through the village. On the northern passage, the road was broad and flat, wide enough for wagons to pass side by side unhindered on their way to the other villages in the Silver Forest and eventually across the border of the silver kingdom at Whitebridge, whose long stone span crossed the raging white waters of the river. Four Trees was the last, or the first, outpost before the road became overgrown, coming to a little used and doubtful end by the White River. Only twice in living memory had any come from that direction not of their own people.

Sliding off Stormy's back he walked inside just behind her. Inside they found the fires lit, burning hot and bright while just above the hearth a large cauldron burbled happily.

"There you are at last!" came an annoyed voice behind him.

"There was work to be done." Alan said mildly as he hung his hat and coat on a peg by the door before turning to face the speaker.

Sabrina glowered at him, but the corner of her ruby-red lips twitched in a smile.

"Goodness, you mean you actually do work out there? I thought you only went out there to daydream of far away places." She shook her head in pretended surprise.

"You are mistaking yourself for me." Alan retorted, grinning. His sister was just five years younger than him, but she often acted like she were the elder, and mistress of the house to boot, he thought.

"Enough you two!" cried a voice from the kitchen. "Sabrina, come and set the table and quit picking on your brother."

"Yes Mom." Sabrina said with a laugh. She hurried off to the kitchen with Stormy coming up carefully behind.

"I'll help too!" she chimed in, her white tail swishing eagerly.

Alan nodded and went to the fire first. It looked to have been tended recently; flames cackled merrily. He looked to the box, then went to the back of the house to fetch more wood from the pile.

Outside in the dark Alan paused a moment, feeling the air. A cold, wet wind bit his hands and face, surprising under the trees where warm mugginess usually predominated, and rain fell along the trunks of trees like upside-down fountains.

The storm should be here, if the wind carries such wet messages. I wonder why it holds off so long? Alan thought uneasily as he gathered an armload of wood and went back inside.

He found the table already laden with the rest of his family already gathered. His father looked at him from the head next to his mother.

"Don't forget to wash your grimy paws." Was all he said in his deep baritone, not much different than Alan's.

"Yes, father." Alan replied absently, stacking the wood neatly into the box.

He quickly washed at the sink before returning to the table.

As one the family stood and faced West, toward the Sea, silent and watchful.

Finished, they sat back down to feast on last year's fish meat and fresh fruits.

At meal's end Alan helped wash up before the family retired to the living room, easing themselves on the various chairs or, in Stormy's case, on the goose-down mattress set aside for her, placed inside a wooden box with magnificent scrollwork, guarded by four Ti'grel heads.

Alan picked up his flute case and clasped the old, faded leather to reveal a brilliant silver instrument with delicate chasing; a gift to him from Stormy herself years ago. He put the mouthpiece to his lips and started to play.

Anna and the Three Foolish Kings was followed by Wind in the Saw Grass and Hawk on the Limb, one of their favorites.

While he played, Sabrina settled on her chair to read but soon sprawled on the floor leaning against Stormy while Mary, his youngest sister at eight, sat on her back and tried

enthusiastically, if not very skillfully, to braid her magnificent mane of hair.

The fire began to burn low, letting shadows spring forth to swallow wall and furniture, while still Alan played on.

An old tune, older than the hills themselves, he'd heard it said, came to his mind. He didn't know why the melancholy melody struck him as appropriate, but the desire to hear it again burst from his heart and he found himself playing the opening bars.

As the tune filled the room, Sabrina put down her book to listen while Mary stopped her knot-tying practice against poor Stormy. For a while they were content merely to listen to the haunting notes, echoing strangely in the dark room, but then their mother suddenly began to sing.

Her voice started in low, and then it started to grow, her clear voice sounding strong and clear. Then Sabrina joined and Mary, adding their voices to it, and finally Stormy, in her clear soprano, joined in.

Together they weaved a beautiful harmony, the voices strong and beautiful to hear.

"The world was young, the land like new; when the ancients first sailed the waters blue; from heaven's light to ocean bright; their ship sailed proud and fair; to find land and call all upon part of their care; From them sprang the races of the world; Centaurs, Elves, Fairies and Men with bright banners furled; building strong homes where the tall grass bent and curled..."

There was a great deal more to the song, as it told how their Enemy came to destroy the ancients and claim stewardship over the lands, and how men fought with other free peoples to stem the tide of slaughter and drive back the evil, but failed to do so. Instead, an uneasy truce fell and the world continued to grow.

When the tune ended, his father spoke.

"Well, it has been a time since I last heard that tune. What made you play it?" he asked.

"I don't know." Alan replied. "It just felt right to me, somehow."

"It was well done, dear." his mother, said. "But now, I think, it's time to sleep. Go and brush your teeth and we'll follow as soon as we put out the fire."

"Aww, do I have to?" Mary whined.

"Yes you do." Sabrina said sharply, though Alan thought he could see the corners of her mouth turning upward ever so slightly. "And I will make sure you go right to sleep. No staying up late for you!"

"Your not mamma!" Mary retorted standing up to her full, diminutive height.

"No, I'm much worse!" Sabrina's eyes narrowed and her voice dropped to an intimidating snarl. "I'm your sister! And I will tickle you if you don't! Raaar!" she lunged towards Mary who took off with a squeal of frightened laughter.

Alan chuckled as he turned to Stormy.

"Sleep well." He bade her good-night. "We will talk more in the morning." He waved.

She waved back and went to her room to sleep.

Alan ascended the narrow stairs, down the hallway to his room at the back of the house. Here a few of his personal items could be found: his bow and arrows, his small library, a few rolls of parchment and feathered pen, and two precious bottles of ink. He valued his reputation of being a lettered man, one of the few in the village.

Turning his mind to other matters, Alan pulled off his boots and went to the bowl of washwater and pitcher. Wiping clean his face he brushed his teeth with soda and tossed the filth out the window.

Lying in bed, he wondered at the weather he'd felt, and what it might mean. Tomorrow, he thought, he'd have to find out if a storm would come or not.

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Alan woke the next morning feeling refreshed. He dressed and went downstairs where he found a hearty breakfast laid out under the groaning table. After breakfast, he and Stormy went out to forge to finish their last odds and ends before midmorning.

"Come on Stormy." He said at last. "Let's bank the fires and grab our spears. I feel like fishing today. I don't like the weather, it's too damp."

"I know what you mean." Stormy agreed, helping him bank the coals. "It feels...ominous somehow. Like evil men watching over me."

She shivered, perhaps remembering some old torture from her youth before she arrived in the Silver Forest.

"I doubt weather can be evil." Alan said at last. "Not inherently, at least. It is said that the Ancients could harness weather for their purposes, but they are all gone."

"So it is said." Stormy agreed.

"Well, let's see if Tobias wants to go fishing." Alan said when the silence grew to long. "Or what news he has from above, if he has stood watch this week."

Gathering their spears and Alan's fishing pole, made from a long wand of oak wood, they went in search of Tobias and found him sitting in front of his family's large wooden house, working down through a pile of straight sticks he'd been whittling into shafts for arrows.

"Fishing, eh?" he said, his blue eyes twinkling. "It sounds like fun! But who will be the fisherman and who will be the guards, I wonder?"

"I shall be the fisherman this time." Alan said. "And you and Stormy can keep me from falling in."

Tobias laughed as he stood up, stretching his tall, lean frame to its full height. From his porch he grabbed his ever present gray bow, almost as tall as him, and a quiver of arrows. On his belt he wore a long knife.

"I'm set." He said. "Let's go!"

The three of them walked down the path to the bottom of the hill where the Old Road ran round its foot and passed through the South Gate.

Nodding cheerfully to the gate guards they went a short way along the road and turned left. Soon the ground around the path turned soft and boggy. Water pooled up to the edges of tree roots. Before long they were on a dock coming from the last dry point of land and stretching out a bowshot away, between two trees standing on either side like door guards of some forgotten palace of giants.

Just beyond the bole of the trees the pier split into a broad floating dock. The great barge that took the miners to and from the mines bobbed peacefully along the other side, waiting to take the miners out to their mines by secret ways.

Alan cast his line at the southernmost end. Tobias fitted an arrow to string while Stormy tested the tip of her leaf-bladed spear.

"Let's hope you won't need your weapons today!" Alan said after a while.

"I hope not, but the water is murky. Who knows what might be lurking about?" Tobias said.

"Who knows indeed. But now that you bring it up, er, does the water seem more...brown to you?" Alan asked, looking curiously at the muddy surface.

"Maybe, maybe," Tobias replied, glancing down at the dark brown water. "Yes, now that you mention it. But I'm not overly surprised. The guards at the Roof yesterday reported a strong wind and away East there were storm clouds."

"East, you say?" Alan frowned. "That's an unusual direction for a storm, isn't it?"

"True." Tobias agreed. "I can't remember seeing a storm come from the Mountains of Sun before."

"Maybe it's the Dark Ones, making mischief for amusement." Stormy said, shivering. The company shuddered.

"That is a cheery thought." Tobias said. "And this storm is big, they say."

"Last night I felt a cold, damp wind as I went to get firewood." Alan said honestly. "I've never felt that before so close to the West wall and all."

"Well, news has made it to Mayor Thistlehawk, I know." Tobias said. "And messages are to be sent back down to the Village Council and himself every hour."

Alan opened his mouth to respond but a powerful tug on his line interrupted him. The pole suddenly bent! The line hissed out like an angry snake as he fumbled with the brake, a corkscrew-shaped device that pushed a disk of wood against the reel.

Stormy and Tobias tensed, watching silently as Alan carefully tested the line.

"It feels good-sized." Alan said thoughtfully, testing the pole. "Maybe a hundred pounds...no! A hundred and fifty at least! That was a good tug!"

He bent his mind to the task of bringing his fish in warily. He knew that larger fish would sometimes come if they heard the splashing. Some would take just the fish, but others would take both fish and fisherman for supper.

For three slow hours he fought his prey until, nearly exhausted, he saw its narrow back finally break the surface exposing a new danger.

"Ware!" he called out tiredly, gasping for breath, "It's a Gulper fish!"

The others nodded but did not move while Alan slowly drew it in bit by bit until it was near the dock, not twelve paces off. Then Tobias shot it with an arrow. The fish went mad! It twisted and fought with a hideous strength, actually drawing more line out and disappearing back under the surface once more.

Alan gave a groan, still feeling the fish running as he struggled to reset the brake.

Stormy stepped forward, her keen glance searching the water for a place to stab when the line went slack in Alan's hands. Before he could recover, the brown waters exploded outward! The long, thin fish leaped high out of the water, two large yellow eyes glaring hatefully at them, its huge mouth opening wide! Wider than the fish itself!

Stormy shrieked in surprise when the leaping fish dropped down on her, taking head, bosom and waist in a single gulp, its downward momentum only checked by her horse half.

The fish's belly bulged tight around her, thinning until her face could just be seen, like looking at a wax bust before the wax worker trimmed the excess away. Its teeth clamped tight around her belly, seeking to grip into flesh but her stout woolen shirt defeated them.

"Hurry!" Tobias shouted, "it's trying to finish the job!" as he leapt to Stormy's aid, drawing his knife.

When the fish had burst from the water Alan had fallen backwards at the sudden loss of tension. Getting swiftly to his feet he lunged forward and grabbed the upper lip, which had been trying to walk its way down her legs, no doubt hoping to jam them against her and bring both of them splashing into the water where it could try to devour her in safety, though Alan later suspected the attempt would have burst even that Gulper's stomach, which can expand to six times the fish's own size and hold struggling prey for days and the digesting remains for months after.

"MMMmph!" Stormy's muffled voice could be heard as she struggled against the creature.

Tobias stuck it in the eye, gouging it out. Alan stooped to grab Stormy's dropped spear and thrust it through the fish's back, just behind the head.

Immediately the fish went limp, the tail twitching spastically as Stormy sank to her knees.

"Tobias, help! She's running out of air." Alan said urgently as he let go the spear and grasped the mouth. Tobias hurried to help grab the fish and pulled. Bit by bit the stomach shrank

as Stormy slipped free: goo was in her hair and eyes and her clothes looked to have fallen in slime.

"That was foul." She wheezed, seeking to recover her strength.

"I am so sorry." Tobias apologized. "I missed my shot! I could have sworn I took it in the brain box!"

"So you did." Alan pointed to the still corpse of the fish. Sticking high out of the darkly mottled head, halfway between the eyes, stood the broken shaft. "There's your arrow."

"I see it." Stormy coughed and spat. "It should have died."

"It should have, but Gulper fish have tough heads--probably because they eat large prey whole and alive. The arrow wasn't enough to pierce it, and no bowman alive can shoot a fighting fish in the eye, especially underwater." Alan said, helping her to her feet and looking critically for a mortal or dangerous wound. He sighed in relief when he failed to find anything more serious than a slight cut where the shirt had bunched up and let a single tooth score the skin.

"Well, well, that's that." He shook his head. "Far more excitement than I wanted today. Come! Let's get you home and washed up. I'll carry the fish. Will you come over later for your share?" he asked Tobias.

"Probably. I have a barrel of good salt we can use." Tobias replied, helping Alan string extra lengths of line through its gills and attach it to his pack to carry.

"Oof! Sounds good." Alan huffed, feeling the heavy weight of the fish. He shuddered. Poor Stormy! To have that weight on her and be crushed inside its belly? Horrifying!

He watched her intently as they made their way back home, searching for hurt or signs of lameness, but he saw none, lest it be the slight shudder that went through her frame each time she glanced at the fish he carried.

Their company parted ways next to Alan's house, Tobias promising to bring the barrel of salt over as soon as he got home.

He put the fish down by the door and entered inside with Stormy, shouting loudly for Sabrina.

"What?" she came to the top of the stairs, looking annoyed. A pillowcase was in her hands--she'd been helping turn the beds.

"It's nothing." Stormy said immediately while Alan said at the same moment, "Stormy needs help..."

He glared at her while she looked steadily back at him. He rolled his eyes and continued.

"She needs help cleaning the fish guts off her and checking for wounds." He finished firmly. "She got partially eaten by a Gulper."

Sabrina threw up her hands in amazement, coming down the stairs two at a time to reach Stormy's side in an instant.

"Come!" she urged, taking Stormy's hand and escorting her to the bathroom. "I'll draw some hot water in the tub! I was just heating some for laundry, but..."

Her voice cut off behind the closing door.

Alan wearily turned back outside. He started a fire to cook the fish and built a small external rotisserie by the time Tobias showed up.

"Sorry," Tobias muttered as he sat by him. "I got caught helping me sister."

They waited for the fire to grow to a satisfactory size before skewering the fish. Wrestling it onto the supports, they began the long slow process of smoking and salting the meat to last, cutting off slivers for themselves every now and then.

Sabrina came out a little later and told them Stormy was resting comfortably. By their mother's order, she wasn't to do anything else that day. Otherwise, she was unhurt from her ordeal.

"That's good! I'm glad she's not hurt!" Alan said fervently. Tobias nodded in agreement.

They turned back to their chore, talking quietly amongst themselves about taxes and trade, and the likelihood of favorable prices this year, and other things while the meat cooked. Eventually Alan estimated they had close to two hundred pounds of smoked and salted meat from the fish, leaving aside the bones which would go to make ornaments, handles, needles and other things. He felt inordinately glad it wasn't a much larger fish, or stronger, or Stormy might very well have ended up in its belly before they could get her out.

Putting out the fire, Alan gave Tobias his share of the meat, a full third, before carrying the rest in baskets to the cellar to keep.

Returning to the house he checked on Stormy, who'd fallen asleep from her adventures, and went upstairs. He washed the fish guts off himself and settled down in his chair to read while waiting on dinner. He wondered how long it would be until until they heard news of the storm.

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As it turned out, not long at all. On the fourth day he heard the bells ringing and heard horns blowing. Peering outside the forge he saw people moving purposefully towards the center of the village with grim faces.

"Hurry, Stormy." Alan called. "Help me bank the fires. We must get to the Inn as soon as possible."

They bustled around, banking the fires so they would not escape to wreak havoc. The hot iron they'd started to work on had started to cool, but Alan placed it carefully on bricks and covered it with ash to insulate the metal and let it cool slowly, so as not to ruin the metal.

With the forge secured, they hurried to the top of the Hill where the White Tree stood, its massive timbers providing a gloomy backdrop to the Mayor as he stood on the topmost step to speak.

Mayor Moody raised thick muscular arms towards the Roof far above them while his deep basso voice could be heard clearly over the silent crowd.

"Folks!" he cried, "The scouts have returned from duty in the Roof. They have brought reports that a massive storm has been gathering away Eastward for some days now and today it seems to be moving towards us! We must finish all preparations, and be well inside before nightfall. They believe it may come on us in the early watches of the night?"

"What about those at the mine?" shouted a woman's voice. "My Harold is there!"

Others clamored too, shouting names to the mayor with concern and worry.

The mayor raised his voice to be heard.

"Messengers have already been sent out and the miners are returning home." He said. "They should be here in a couple of hours if nothing evil happens."

That seemed to satisfy the crowd for they calmed immediately, the shouting subsiding to a dull murmur of speculation.

"Now, we must finish gathering this season's harvest, early as it is, and put it into the Storehouse." The mayor continued. "Who among you can lay aside duty and business to help bring in the crops and stores?"

Alan tried to think, wondering if he could spare the time. He looked to Stormy.

"Can you help the village with the provisioning?" he asked her, "While I close down the forge. I don't think I shall be long at it and will come to help."

Stormy nodded.

"As soon as you can, my brother!" she said.

She went with the children and older women to gather the excess from the village fields while the herdsmen brought in the animals.

At his forge Alan bustled about; putting up his tools, putting the lids on the barrels of quenching water and oils, barricading the windows, and dousing the forge fire.

This proved the hardest job, for his fire was hot and strong and fought against the water he dumped on it, the coals hissing like thousands of snakes in anger. Steam blanketed him like dense, hot fog but he didn't let up. Only when the entire basin swam with water did he at last turn from the forge. Barring the door on the outside with a heavy oaken beam, he hurried to find Stormy and lend what aid he could.

He found her at the Colson's, the oldest inhabitants in the village. Old Anna Colson was lean and hard-faced with a heart of solid gold. She worked her gnarled fingers around root and vegetable with some children, tossing them into the baskets where older girls and Stormy took them to the storehouse. The baskets were huge two-handled things that were by now almost filled to the brim. It took two women to move just one basket, but Stormy picked up the other two with the help of some ropes, slinging them onto her back like saddlebags.

"This will be the last load for you, Mistress Colson." Alan overheard her say.

"Bless you, youngin's," The old woman sighed and looked wistfully at the baskets. "I couldn't have managed it by myself. How kin I repay you?"

"Don't even try." The three said sincerely. "We were happy to help."

Alan recognized Genevive, Tobias's sister, and Elsa, a tall, pretty girl with long brown hair reaching down to her waist. All three were about the same age in the village, and Genevive had come to their house often to play with Stormy and now Mary, much to his sister's delight.

Alan trotted up from the road and offered to take the third basket to the storehouse himself.

"No, thank you!" the two said huffing from exertion, "We have it!"

Alan didn't feel as certain about that as them, so he gathered some fallen asparagus leaves and other things and carried them to the storehouse, ready to help.

He hardly needed to have bothered, because Stormy walked beside Genevive, laughing lightly and keeping a steadying hand ready, though her help was unneeded. Even with the heavy basket the two kept their feet as nimbly as young deer and the baskets were placed in the fortress-like storehouse without difficulty.

Then they were off to gather water for the houses in case the wells were damaged, herd the goats, sheep and cattle into the stout barns with the herdsman, and drag thick beams to the storehouse for extra bracing.

Alan and the trio worked long into the evening hours before, tired and hungry, they went to the village inn of Four Trees to rest.

Inside, Genevive and Elsa went to grab plates for everyone while Alan and Stormy joined a group of men and women aiding Mistress Tavernhawk pull stout woolen blankets from chests and closets for the children to sleep on in the common room. No one wanted to be alone tonight, just in case.

Alan turned at a tap on his shoulder and beheld Tobias dressed in his Ranger cloak and armor, dripping water all over the floor.

"I've just been to the Roof for my watch and returned." He said in answer to his look. "The leading edge of the storm is already upon us up above. It will not be long before the hardest blows hit and we shall feel them down here."

"Well, let it hit." Stormy said with quiet confidence. "We've prepared for it all we can."

"Yes," Alan agreed, thinking hard. "We have. Let us hope it was enough."

Alan noticed Genevive weaving her way through the crowd carrying two plates. Behind her he could just make out Elsa with her own burden following.

Suddenly a brown-haired missile darted from the crowd and intercepted Genevive, grasping her tightly around the middle. Genevive jumped backwards in shock, only just managing to keep from dumping all the dishes.

"Mary!" Alan rebuked, hurrying to help. "You must have more care! You nearly made poor Genevive drop those heavy plates! Justice would have been for all of them to fall on your foolish head."

"I'm sorry." Mary said, contritely. Alan noticed she did not let go her hold though. "But I want to play!"

"In a moment." Genevive said with a smile. "Let me get a bite, and then I'll come play with you."

"Yay!" Mary went away happily.

Alan shook his head and apologized for Mary's enthusiasm. Genevive waved it away with a, "It was nothing."

The company took one of the tables for themselves and settled down to eat. For several long minutes there was nothing but the klink of knife and fork and the thud of glass bottom on table. Alan took a look around as he ate.

The entire village had to have been there; he spotted his mother and sisters now amongst the tall, grave figures of the village women, hurrying to and fro with their own labors in the Inn while in a corner, seated in a circle of chairs around the fire, his father sat with the mayor and the rest of the council drying their clothes and talking amongst themselves quietly.

For an hour nothing happened, then a group of drenched and shivering men walked in through the front door, asking leave to lay their spears at the door. Tavernhawk gave the customary replies as people shouted questions to the group, the last of the guardsmen on the wall.

"We felt no wind yet," they answered, "but the rain is hard and heavy. Anything in this rain would have to have gills and swim with their fins rather than their feet. We have come down to seek shelter in safety."

"It won't be long now." Alan said quietly to the group. "The wind will hit next, I think."

"I don't doubt it." Tobias said equally quietly. "As for me, storm or no storm, I shall fall asleep and not rouse until morning. I've no doubt I'll be amongst the scouts sent to check the Road between here and Jagger's Strike."

"No doubt." Stormy laughed. But then her voice grew grave and her expression thoughtful.

"Master Hubtree is just about due. I hope he isn't caught in this storm."

"Nor me." Alan agreed, casting his mind back to the energetic and wiry Trader who'd been his father's friend for longer than Alan could remember.

"I'll keep my eyes open." Tobias promised.

"If we weather this storm," Alan said thoughtfully, "Then perhaps Stormy and I can accompany you." He said.

"I wouldn't say no to the company." Tobias shrugged.

"Good. We shall see. But either way let's take your advice and sleep while we can. Tomorrow, no doubt, will be busy."

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They settled down on spare beds in the common room, wrapping themselves in blankets. Around them the people of Four Trees slept while outside a low moan began, rising steadily to a great roar and shriek as the winds beat the Inn with all their fury.

The last thing Alan saw, before he closed his eyes, was the calm figure of his father unconcernedly tapping the dottle out of his long-stemmed pipe that he'd gotten as a birthday present from Stormy the year before.