

Chapter Three

Morning dawned cold but free of other troubles. The early morning rays turned the roof crimson and gold, patterning the ground below in treasure.

Alan ran his thumb over the newly planed wood of the door, the strange sign of the night before gone.

"May these troubles end today." He muttered.

Straightening, he stepped out of the doorway and went to his forge. Stormy went with him and together they opened it up for the day's business.

They'd barely gotten the fire going hot when Hubtree showed up at the forge looking haggard. Beside him were Master Connells and the other Trader, looking nervous.

"Well, Master Hubtree." Alan said, taking no notice of the other two. "What brings you here? Come to see Stormy's efforts?"

"Yes, Master Alan." Hubtree nodded. "And more, if you'll let us."

"Perhaps, perhaps. My promise is known, though. They may ask Stormy herself, if they wish; she has not made such a promise, so far as I know."

Stormy shook her head, her pixie face looking determined.

"I have not. Nor have I been asked, though." She admitted.

They were silent at first, looking furtively at one another while Hubtree gave no sign.

Suddenly he roared, "Well, are you going to ask, or not? If not, then we'd best be on our way, for there is no further purpose in being here!"

Connells jumped, blurting: "Please, er, Lady Stormy, can you fix my wagon?"

Stormy looked at him long. At last she said, "Yes, I can fix your wagon. The break was not bad, but I would forge you a new bracket anyway."

Connells nodded in relief. "How much?" he asked.

"Six silver pennies." Stormy said.

Connells nodded, murmuring, "The fellow in Crossroads would have charged twelve."

Stormy raised her head up indignantly. "I am no robber." She said, "gouging my customers. It is a fair price, but if you do not want to pay..."

"No! No!" Connells said placatingly, raising his hands "It is a fair price, fairer than I expected. I am grateful, Mistress." Again, he had a slight hesitation when he said "mistress," but Alan felt obliged to let it go, after all he didn't know better and this was all strange to him, he reasoned.

"Very well. I shouldn't have to work long on it: we have one in stock, for Master Hubtree's wagon." She explained. "It will have to be changed a little for yours: the shaft is smaller than his, but that will be an hour's work, and then the price of the material itself."

"Ah." Connells nodded.

"Excellent!" Hubtree rubbed his hands together. "Now, my dear, I wonder if you might be so good as to show me these treasure's you've made? I've heard much and I can say I'm dying to get a good look at them!"

Stormy smiled at him. With a "please, excuse me," she went to her workbench and pulled out a set of keys. Going to the safe, she unlocked the heavy metal door and opened it. Pulling out a stack of trays, she closed the door carefully behind her and walked back to Hubtree.

She set them down on the nearest bench and the Traders clustered around to get a closer look.

In the trays were nearly thirty silver rings, each with a polished swamp gem set on them and some with more than one. The silver had been worked with delicate precision, showing waves around the band, or trees sprouting, or deer bounding. Others had runes of fortune and luck on

them, and some had scenes of Ti'grells hunting in the forest, wrought so exquisitely they seemed almost alive.

Hubtree sighed, "Stormy, this is your best efforts yet! Why, I could have kings wearing these! Your name would be praised from Hell's Gate to Halwin by the Sea!"

"Indeed!" Connels breathed. "Never have I seen such work!"

Alan felt a surge of pride while Stormy went pink.

"Thank you. An artist likes to hear her words are appreciated; but I doubt my name will be praised, once they hear I am..."

"Of the forest." Alan jumped in firmly. "She is of Silverwood."

Stormy gave him a sunny smile, a tear forming in her eye.

"Of course." She said, "but I am still a centaur, and they would not like to think of such being so skilled."

"Indeed." Hubtree commiserated as if it were the greatest tragedy in the world. "Ah, what a loss to the world! But mayhap someday you will get due credit."

Stormy smiled and they began to dicker over the price.

"Regretfully," he said, "I will not be able to purchase many of them for a good price." He said. "For I shall not have time upon my return to sell them properly. This is my last journey, after all. I shan't travel again, when all this is over."

Connels and the other Trader looked at one another. "We may be able to purchase some of them." They said. "You have a good notion of the current price, and we can not afford them all, but we, at least, may be able to return, if Master Eagleheart forgets his harsh words about us."

"I may." Alan said, "For you said nothing when the quarrel broke out. And you do not strike me as evil men. But I would you answer this question to me first: do either of you own a centaur?"

Connels shook his head.

"I can not afford such." He said. "I know it may seem otherwise, but Centaurs are very rare in the outside world, and are nearly the sole province of the nobility or the wealthiest men. Master Aldehyde, for example, owns three of them on his estates."

Alan suppressed a growl but his hand gripped the handle of his hammer. The others noticed for the last trader assured him he had no centaurs either.

"I am Isdemos," he said, "and I am a third-level trader. I do not own a centaur at this time, though my family has in the past." He looked steadily at them, as they looked steadily back. Alan admired his frankness and honesty and spoke in kind.

"I will accept that, and say this: I do not hold with slavery, and believe that all should be paid fairly for their work. Should you not own another, then I will welcome you to my forge and work. Should you decide otherwise then you will understand if I choose not to take your work."

Isdemos nodded gravely.

Stormy eventually sold most of her rings for twenty gold pieces and thirty silver, a small fortune.

Hubtree smiled as he pocketed the rings.

"I wager I can make half-again as much when all are sold, Mistress." He told her.

"Will you depart today?" she asked.

Hubtree sighed deeply.

"I'm afraid so, mistress. Master Aldehyde is insistent that we leave here as soon as may be. He...has not been kind." Hubtree admitted. "Truly, I fear what may happen now, though I hope it will come to naught."

"What will be, will be." Alan said, shrugging his massive shoulders.

"Indeed." Hubtree nodded.

"I shall be at the wagon shortly." Stormy told them, "to work on the bracket. It shan't take me long. You may pay me when the work is finished."

Connels smiled.

"Thank you!"