

Chapter Four

Storm Clouds Gather

Alan breathed easier after Aldehyde's departure. A trouble had been removed and now they could get on with more important things, such as preparing for the fall Trading, when...well not Hubtree but perhaps Connels and Ismodel would return, which would be well.

Alan and Stormy worked their crafts in the forge shop, replenishing their stocks of weapons and tools and trade-able goods, while the miners went to their mines for stones.

When they returned two weeks later, they were greeted with cheers and Stormy purchased several stones for her jewel-work.

They'd hardly returned to the forge, happy with their success, when Stormy cocked her head, disquiet forming on her face.

"What is it?" Alan asked, knowing how sensitive her hearing was.

"Shouting, and angry voices." She said.

Alan frowned—shouting, particularly angry shouting, was rare in Four Trees.

"Let us..." he began slowly when the alarm horn blew.

"To arms!" Alan cried, startled. "'Tis the alarm!"

They grabbed weapons from the forge—as many as they could carry—and raced to the space in front of the inn to join the reserves.

People flooded in from all directions armed for battle, though most hadn't time to don armor. Spears were everywhere, as were bows, short-handled axes and long knives. A few had shields Alan had made years previously, a leaf-shaped thing with clever cutouts to lock spear or pike in place.

Taking his place in the muster, Alan planted the butts of his spare spears freely so any without could grab one. Looking now to the inn he noticed the entire council there and the mayor—weaponless. He frowned.

"This is no attack." He told Stormy, "Look at Da and the others, they're angry but not armed for battle."

"I wonder greatly then what has happened." She whispered back.

The muster finished speedily, and those that were not already on the walls were formed into disciplined ranks, the men and women (those not with children or other duty requiring them to stay and defend home and hearth) waiting to see where they would be sent.

Moody's voice cracked with anger as it whipped over the crowd.

"We have been robbed!"

People gasped. Alan felt thunderstruck; such a thing had never happened in the village.

"Someone has forced or crept into the storehouse and stolen most of the jewels and destroyed our store of medicines." He continued. "Healer Jasmin is seeing what she can save, but there is precious little left, just what she has in her house."

"Who has done this!" someone shouted.

Strangely Moody looked at Alan.

"The thief," he said harshly, "tried to frame one of our own, using horseshoes to leave impressions in the earth."

Alan's hand gripped his spear.

"Yet I know Storm Walker would never have done such a thing," Moody continued, "As do all of us. That only leaves outsiders, and we have left the storehouse all but alone in the time since..."

"Aldehyde." Alan's voice carried in the suddenly still air, full of wrath. People looked at him, what they saw he could not guess, shuddered and looked away.

"Yes." Moody nodded. "That is the most likely suspect, though the other two with Hubtree are to be considered as well."

He sighed. "I fear now that they are far outside our borders, and I would count it a small price to pay if the stones are lost rather than any of our people. Stones may be found, and the theft will make them more dear to the Traders, lest they deliver either the value of the stones or Aldehyde himself to answer us for his crimes."

Alan thought about his words, but his heart compelled him to speak.

"No."

"No?" Moody asked, frowning.

"Indeed, mayor." Alan looked each man of the Council in the eye as he spoke. "'The thief that is not punished feels free to thief again', is that not what King Alwhin wrote? Finding who the thief is will be important," he continued, "as you have said, Connels and Ismodel came in trade with Aldehyde, but there are also the guards who may have done this for their own purposes. We must get at the truth so we do not suffer such wrongs again."

Heads were nodding but Moody spoke now directly to Alan.

"Your words speak true, but I mind the warnings of Hubtree! 'All lower beasts shall henceforth be enslaved and shall not be freed', such were his words at the council, prodded of course by Aldehyde. Those were the words of the kings, all of them. You could not walk freely outside our borders, not with Storm Walker by your side. You would have to choose between your anger and your family."

Anguish fell on him. He knew the truth of those words; leaving would mean going alone.

"He will not be alone." Tobias declared, stepping forward from the ranks of the archers.

"He shall still have me!" Stormy said in the same instant, grim and resolute. "I shall not be daunted or swayed: if I am to die, let it be guarding my brother!" she stamped, shaking her spear for added emphasis.

Alan felt his tongue stick, unable to speak. He could not—would not—cry, but he never felt more proud than that moment as he waited for the pronouncement.

People watched as the mayor and council bent to speak. They seemed to argue with each other before at last Moody stepped away.

"Very well." He said. "We acknowledge that justice must be served, and as your family has been so grievously injured it would be well if you are the ones to see it done. If you are resolved in this, then come to us when the light begins to fade from the leaves for your instructions."

All three of them bowed low before withdrawing from the ranks.

"Well, we are going to be the first to step outside the forest from our village in a thousand years, perhaps." Tobias said cheerfully as behind them the villagers began to filter away, since the alarm was over.

Alan grunted in agreement, his mind going over what the mayor had said and the warning given.

He looked at Stormy, touched and humbled by her incredible courage.

"I could not imagine better companions on such a journey." He said.

"Of course." Tobias raised an eyebrow. "Did you think we would let you go off alone to face that worm? You are a very fine fellow, Alan, and full of courage exceeding the normal allowed, but courage can only take you so far. You'll need brains to see you through."

"Indeed. Then I see why Stormy is coming along, but why are you?" Alan jested.

Their laughter floated towards the roof.

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She stood by the door with her hands folded under her breasts, an angry scowl on her face.

"I've already heard." She said before they could speak. "And it is not fair of you to go adventuring and drag Stormy into such dangers with only you two oxen to ward her."

Alan's eyebrows shot up to his scalp.

"It is my idea to go along with Master Alan." Stormy rejoined, looking at Sabrina. "And the party has not been counted yet. I saw many others looking determined as we left. I think we shall have others before we leave the wood."

"That would be no good." Alan shook his head. "We do not march off to war, but to hunt thieves."

Storm Walker nodded. "I don't think many will be allowed to accompany us." She said. "But certainly one or two more would be helpful."

"One." Sabrina said firmly. "For I am going to accompany you."

Alan wondered. In truth he knew her worth well, she was as cunning as any warrior and courageous nearly to a fault. Her only downside was her experience with the spear, she'd yet to complete her training, though she practiced everyday.

"I would not mind that." Alan said slowly under her glare, "but I wonder if Ma will be as keen for your departure on top of one son and daughter already leaving."

Sabrina's gaze softened.

"As always brother, you think of others and family first. I wager you would go alone and not take Stormy into such danger if you would. But I am not a child dangling on our mother's apron strings. I've already joined the Maiden's Festival twice now, you know, as has Stormy."

Alan knew quite well. The Maiden's Festival, hosted once a year by various villages, was a time for the unmarried women to congregate with the unmarried men of Silverwood where there would be dancing, feasting, and singing contests. Tests of strength and daring, feats of grace and cooking, all interwoven in a pageantry that lasted five days. Usually by the third pageant, most had found someone and agreed to live at the other's village for a year and three days, according to custom, to determine if they were right for each other. If both were resolved, then they were married.

His sister had not yet found someone in the Festivals, but that was not uncommon either, some taking five or six Festivals to meet the right person. He himself had not found anyone he'd liked, though there had been propositions. Storm Walker had found no one yet, though there had been some interested people. She'd thought, however, they were more interested in her jewel-craft than in herself.

"Well, I have no real objections, beyond that which all here already know." Alan sighed. "If you can convince mother of your decision, then you are free to join us."

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They returned to the Inn at the appointed hour. After laying their spears at Tavernhawk's door, they found the council standing by the great hearth in a solemn half-circle waiting for them. The common room held the entire village sitting or standing solemnly as they waited.

The four of them strode forward and halted five paces from the silent, staring faces. Alan rubbed sweaty palms on his trousers but carefully kept the nervousness from his face. Storm Walker may have been carved from ice, standing serenely beside him, while Sabrina looked determined. Tobias stood on the far side of her, smiling amusedly.

"Welcome. Three I have seen and heard their pledge to bring justice, but I have not heard yours, Sabrina Eagleheart."

"I pledge so now." She said stubbornly. "I shall go with the company unto the end."

"So be it." Moody said heavily after some discussion. "I make the tale four now. Are there any others wanting to go?"

Hands rose.

"Masters," Alan interjected, "We go on a hunt, not a war. We cannot travel swiftly if there are many of us."

"Your advice is well heeded." Moody agreed, "And we do not think any more than six would be advisable, so we would make your tale six."

Alan nodded, it made sense to have enough people on hand in case of trouble, yet not so many as to hinder them.

"I will go!" cried a voice. Marcus Shovelhand, a powerful miner, strode forward. Years of working the mines left him with muscles powerful enough to rival Alan's. Rumor had it that once he'd killed a young Ti'grel himself after it tried ambushing the miners' boats.

"So shall I!" Mary cried.

"Hush!" her mother scolded. "Not yet."

"I shall go in her stead." An amused voice called out. Genevive Redhawk grinned at Mary as the child pouted. "You can walk with us next time Mary." She promised.

"Very well. The six of you shall depart in two days to begin your hunt. Pack well, and leave nothing to chance." Moody said. "For the outside is strange to us, and little known these days."

From his pouch he pulled out a large roll of parchment.

"Here is a map," he said, "of Meledrin and the principle cities of the kingdoms. I once bartered it from Hubtree long ago. It should prove useful."

Alan bent over the table and looked carefully at the map. It had been drawn in detail. He noted the space towards the south of the map seemed dominated by the Silverwood and the coast as far down as a small coastal village of Basil's-By-The-Sea. Alan had never heard such an outlandish name before, and he wondered briefly what its people must be like.

He finally noted the small dot near the center of the Forest simply called "Four Villages".

"I think this map was made in foreign parts," Moody explained. "It's not exact, this map, at least of our home, but the general area is about right."

Alan realized then that this would not be a small undertaking: there were dozens of dots all across the map! And to the East the lands did not seem well marked, growing ever less distinct until there were only symbols, one of odd creatures he'd never seen, and one..."

"Centaur!" Alan said in surprise.

"Yes, but whether that means that is where they are, or if it was some fancy by a map maker long ago, I could not say." Moody said sadly. "So do not look at it as fact, lads. It may not be as truthful as some would hold it to be."

Alan nodded slowly. "We shall trade for better maps as we travel." He decided. "For only with accuracy shall we achieve speed and not let our quarry escape."

"May Mira go with you, and the Ancients guide you on your path." Moody said softly.

Alan bowed.