

A Simple Plan

Alar and Ukrit stepped from the hardpack surface of the Imperial Highway onto the cobbled street at the edge of the village. Alar could hear the festive sounds of the market in the village center. A mandolin played the opening notes of a traditional song, joined by a woman's high, clear voice. The sound tugged at his memories.

Ukrit looked into the town. "This is a bad idea."

Alar glanced at him. "You're probably right."

"We're supposed to be in Richeleau in two days. You know what will happen if we're late."

Ukrit peered down the street before continuing. "If there are any Imperial soldiers here..."

Ukrit stopped, forcing Alar to stop and turn to face him. "If we don't get something to eat soon, we won't have to worry about getting to Richeleau. It's been three days," Alar said, glancing over his shoulder toward the village. "Besides, Kartok is a big village. People come from miles around to the autumn market. The village is full of strangers today. No one will notice us."

Ukrit laughed. "Look at yourself."

Alar looked down. His thin cloak was a patchwork of different colors, though it was hard to tell what colors through the mud and blood stains. His boots and pants were caked in muck. He rubbed his chin and felt a tangle of greasy, coarse whiskers.

"You look like a beggar," Ukrit said, "And you smell like a goat."

Alar groaned. "Goat!" The smell of smoke and roasting meat wafted in the breeze. "My gods, wouldn't that taste good right now." His stomach grumbled in agreement.

Ukrit snorted and shook his head.

Alar raised an eyebrow and examined Ukrit. “Anyway, you don’t look much better. We’re just trappers come down to the village for supplies.”

“Trappers? With swords. Covered with blood stains? What do we trap?”

“Keep your sword inside your cloak and don’t talk to anyone. “ Alar turned and started walking. “Come on, you worry too much.”

Ukrit shook his head again, but followed.

As they neared the village square, the smell of smoke and roasting meat was joined by the scent of baking bread and animal dung. The sound of the people laughing, haggling and singing melded into a festive cacophony. They turned a corner and the market came into view. Shoppers moved among the stalls, dressed in their best come-to-market clothes. The vendors’ stalls were colorfully decorated, and the city had festooned the square with bunting and streamers in the traditional colors of Argren. For a moment, Alar was a child again, long before the Empire stole his innocence. These were his people. The Alle’oss. This should have been his life.

They stopped at the edge of the square. Ukrit shuffled behind Alar, watching the market over Alar’s shoulder. “Okay, what do we do now?”

Alar didn’t really have a plan. He patted his empty pockets and said, “We’re going to need to steal some food.” He heard Ukrit groan. “We need a distraction.”

“Uh-uh. Don’t look at me. This is all your idea.”

Alar looked over his shoulder. “You want to eat, don’t you?”

Ukrit frowned, but nodded.

“Okay then. Let’s see. We should go stand near one of the food stalls and wait for our chance. I’ll keep the proprietor occupied and you steal some food.”

He reached for that spot behind his eyes, furrowed his brow, and *pulled*. He felt a rush of energy that eased his fatigue and left him feeling mildly euphoric. The first time it happened was six months ago. He was running for his life, exhausted, ready to give up. He didn't know how it happened, but the boost of energy probably saved his life. At first, he thought he imagined it, but his thoughts kept returning to that spot in his mind, trying to make sense of what happened. Three months later, it happened again and, this time, he did it intentionally. He had no idea what it was or, really, how to describe it. His attempt to explain it to Ukrit only earned him a worried look. It felt like he was pulling a fizzy breeze through his mind. The feeling of euphoria was intoxicating, but he learned to be careful with it. When he first learned to control it, he pulled constantly. One day, while they were waiting to ambush an Imperial tax collector, he was pulling to quiet his nerves. One minute, he was nervously watching the road and the next thing he knew, he was waking up, flat on his back with Ukrit and others peering down at him. Now he used it only when he needed a bit of energy or confidence. Like now.

He glanced once more at Ukrit, then slipped into the crowd and headed toward a stall selling freshly baked bread. He heard Ukrit groan again, but trusted that he would follow.

Ukrit was right about one thing. As he passed people, he noticed their noses wrinkling. Many of them cast about in search of the source of the odor. People began to move away from them, clearing a path and giving the bread stall proprietor a clear view of them coming from 30 feet away. When he spotted them, his eyes narrowed. He stood, crossing his arms, and watched them approach. This was going to be difficult.

Alar arrived at the stall, trying to look like a normal customer out shopping in the market. "Morning!" He hooked his thumbs in his belt and gave the man a big smile.

"Morning," the man said slowly.

Alar scanned the table. It was covered with freshly baked loaves of the coarse, black bread his mother used to bring home on market day. The smell flooded his mouth. “A fine selection you have here, sir.”

“It all costs money.”

Alar drew back, his eyes wide. “Are you implying what I think you’re implying?”

“That’s exactly what I’m implying. Now, if you don’t have the coin, move along. Your stink is keeping my customers away.”

Alar frowned. This was going to be difficult. Ukrit tapped him on his shoulder. Alar ignored him, returning the bread seller’s glare. Ukrit tapped him harder and said, “There’s something going on down there.”

Alar turned to find Ukrit pointing to the other end of the square. The music stopped, and some sort of commotion was drawing the crowd’s attention. He glanced at the bread seller who was, unfortunately, still watching them closely.

A woman’s scream rose above the sounds of the market. The crowd hushed. Another scream punctuated the silence. The festive atmosphere was gone in an instant as the orderly movement of the people in the square dissolved into chaos. Most surged toward the sound of the scream, but others scattered in every direction.

Alar glanced at the bread seller again. He was looking in the direction of the screams. Alar snatched a loaf of bread, hiding it inside his cloak. He grabbed Ukrit’s arm and pulled him away from the stall. He was in such a hurry to get away that he wasn’t paying attention to where he was going.

“Alar, I don’t think this is a good idea.” Ukrit was trying to pull his arm free, but Alar held tight, pulling harder. They were being pushed along by the flow of people heading toward the commotion when another scream brought the crowd to a halt.

Ukrit started to pull harder. Alar, pushing through the crowd, looked back at him and said, “Come on! I got some bread.”

He was still looking back at Ukrit’s panicked face when suddenly, they broke into the open. Alar found himself facing a row of angry faces. Hot sweat prickled his back and he tensed, ready to run. He spun around looking for a way out only to find a frightening scene unfolding before him. A girl was huddled on the cobbles in the center of the clearing, a woman weeping and hugging her to her breast. Surrounding them were three Imperial soldiers. Two of them stood facing the crowd with their swords drawn while the third held the reins of their horses. Sitting on an enormous black horse in the center of the clearing, wearing the white uniform of his office, was an Inquisitor of the Empire’s Church.

The Inquisitor stared at Alar, his brow furrowing. Oh gods! Alar’s brain told him to run, but his legs wouldn’t respond. Ukrit pulled his arm free and Alar heard him shoving his way through the crowd.

The Inquisitor watched Alar a moment longer, then he looked around and addressed the crowd. “This girl is a witch. She is being legally arrested by the Inquisition.” He lifted his chin slightly. “Be happy we don’t burn the village to the ground for harboring her.”

An angry murmur rose from the crowd, but no one moved to help. Alar thought of the sword hanging uselessly from his belt. He scanned the crowd and was startled to see that not everyone seemed angry. More than a few nodded, as if in agreement. Standing in the front row, behind the Inquisitor, was a priest of the Empire Church wearing a satisfied smile. An amulet depicting

their vengeful god, Daga, lay on his breast. Any of the people in the village could have informed on the girl, but Alar felt sure the priest was responsible.

“Sergeant, bind her.” The Inquisitor waved to a giant of a man. The sergeant’s close-cropped hair was streaked with gray and a network of scars on his forearms and hands testified to long years wielding a sword. Turning an empty gaze on the pair, he sheathed his sword, grasped the mother around the waist and lifted her violently away from the girl. She tried to follow, but he kicked her away, drawing more murmurs from the crowd. Throwing the woman to the ground at Alar’s feet, he turned back toward the girl.

She flew up at him, dragging shallow furrows down his cheek. His only reaction was to pull his head back and grasp her wrists, lifting her arms above her head. Holding her wrists in one hand, he wiped the blood from his cheeks, while she struggled uselessly

One of the other soldiers laughed. Alarmed, Alar realized that he knew him. Bright red hair, unusual for an Imperial, made him instantly recognizable. Alar’s small band of rebels encountered this group before. It didn’t go well. He turned his face away, but couldn’t help watching the scene out of the corner of his eye.

The sergeant kicked the struggling girl’s feet out from under her. She fell hard on her back, head bouncing off the cobbles. The impact forced the air from her lungs, leaving her gasping, her eyes unfocused. He stood over her, fingers tracing the scratches on his cheek. When she didn’t move, he retrieved manacles from the saddle bag of his horse, then knelt, knee on her chest while he attached them to her wrists.

The woman at Alar’s feet lay on her side, apparently unable to watch. Suddenly, a man holding a small, crying boy burst out of the crowd, shoving Alar aside. He set the boy beside the woman, then stood, his fists clenched, and took a step toward the sergeant. The red-headed

soldier intercepted him, placing the tip of his sword on the man's chest. Red smiled and shook his head.

The Inquisitor, a bored look on his face, said "Don't worry, you have another." He nodded to the boy clutching his mother. The man hesitated, looking from the Inquisitor to the red-headed soldier, then turned back to sit beside the woman. He watched the girl, whom Alar guessed was his daughter, being bound, tears streaking his face.

The sergeant, having finished attaching the manacles, pulled a leather hood over her head. Her eyes focused on her father's as the hood was drawn down. The sergeant lifted her to her feet, handed her off to the third soldier and mounted his horse. Once he was settled, he reached down, grasped the back of the girl's dress and lifted her to sit in front of him. The other soldiers mounted their horses, and without a word, the group began to push through the crowd toward the other end of the village.

The Inquisitor waved his hand lazily and said, "May Daga watch you and keep you." He glanced once more in Alar's direction, then turned his horse and followed the others.

Alar stood, stunned. A flood of memories left him insensible to his surroundings. People began to disperse, jostling him, but he barely noticed. Agitated conversations broke out all around him, but the only sound he heard was the weeping of the family still huddled at his feet. Slowly, he became aware of Ukrit shaking him by the arms and saying his name.

"Alar, what's wrong?"

Alar felt a flush rise on the back of his neck. "Didn't you see what happened?"

Ukrit pulled him into an alley. "Yes, I saw it. What's gotten into you? We've seen the Inquisitors before." He glanced at the entrance to the alley and said, "I'm pretty sure we've seen that Inquisitor before."

Alar leaned his back against the building that bordered the alley. “I never told you why I joined the resistance, did I?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“When I was ten, an Inquisitor came for my sister.”

Ukrit sucked in a breath.

“My father fought back.” Alar paused, then continued quietly, “They killed both of my parents. The Inquisitor laughed while his soldiers butchered them.”

“Oh gods, I’m sorry,” Ukrit said. He hesitated. “But we’ve seen the Inquisitors before. Why was this different?”

Alar shook his head, staring into his memories. “I don’t know. It’s just...it happened almost the same way. The crowd, my mother...the boy. The only difference was that my father tried to fight.” Alar’s eyes filled with tears and he squeezed them shut. “For all the good it did.”

Ukrit rested his hand on Alar’s shoulder, but didn’t speak.

“I had nowhere to go and, being the brother of a witch, no one would take me in. I think the Inquisitor thought it was funny, leaving me like that.” Alar chuckled bitterly. “I nearly died. Sleeping where I could, begging for food. Then, one day, Eadric passed through our village.” He glanced at Ukrit who nodded. “This was before many people began to think they could fight back. He had, maybe, ten people with him then. For some reason, I followed them. For three days, I followed behind, trying to stay out of sight. In the evening of the third day, Eadric found my hiding place and sat with me. He asked me who I was and listened to me while I cried. He took me in.”

“Eadric is a great man, that’s sure.”

Alar took a deep breath. “Yes, Eadric is a great man.” He looked up at Ukrit. “But what can even a great man do against the Empire?”

Ukrit frowned and Alar continued before he could speak. “We’ve been fighting for six years. What good has it done? The Inquisitors can still snatch little girls from their parents right in front of us.”

“That’s not fair, Alar. It was just the two of us. Those soldiers would have killed us without even trying.”

Alar shook his head. “That’s the point. No matter how much we fight, we’ll never be the equal of the Imperial soldiers.”

Ukrit sighed. “It takes time. More and more people are joining our cause. We’re getting stronger every day.”

“Look at us, Ukrit. We’re filthy, starving. We’re stealing bread from our own people. If they wanted to fight back, they would, at least, feed us.”

They were both silent for a moment, then Ukrit said, “You’re upset because of what you saw. Give yourself some time to settle down. You’ll come around.” Ukrit put his hands on his hips, his voice growing firmer as he said, “We have to be in Richeleau in two days. We need to leave now.”

Alar clenched his teeth and shook his head. “No. I’m going to save the girl.”

Ukrit burst out laughing. “What? How are you going to do that? There were three soldiers and the Inquisitor. What are you going to do, become a seida witch all of a sudden?”

“I don’t know what I’ll do, but I’m going to save her. I’m tired of fighting and achieving nothing.”

“You’ll never catch them. They’re on horses and have a head start.”

Alar shook his head and looked up at the thin patch of sky visible in the alley. “It’s late in the day, so they’ll have to stop for the night soon. They’ll probably stop at the top of Eagle Pass. It’s too dangerous to go down the other side in the dark. I’ll go through the forest and meet them there. I grew up not far from here. I know this country.”

“And then what?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll come up with something.” He pulled the loaf of bread from his cloak, tore it in half and offered one to Ukrit. “Here, you take half.”

Ukrit’s eyes widened. He snatched the bread and took a bite. He leaned against the building beside Alar, chewed and moaned. When he opened his eyes, he looked at Alar and grinned. “I’ve always known you’re crazy.”

Alar returned his grin and took a bite.

“Okay, you go save the girl. I’ll meet you in Richeleau in two days. If you live. If you kill them all, bring their food and horses.” They clasped hands and Ukrit said, “You better get going.”

Alar nodded, tucked the rest of the bread into his cloak and pulled Ukrit into a hug. With one more look at his friend, he turned and walked toward the mouth of the alley.

Ukrit called, “Good luck!”

Reaching the street, Alar broke into a jog. He pulled and felt the rush, welcoming the burst of energy. Nearing the edge of the village he caught sight of the priest standing with a small group of men. He was laughing and patting one of the men on the shoulder. Alar caught his eye. The priest’s smile faltered as he turned to watch Alar pass.

As the road exited the village, it curved to the east. A mile or so on, it curved back to the west and began a long gradual climb to the top of Eagle Pass. The pass, which cut through a precipitous ridge, was the only way from Kartok to the Inquisition compound in the capital.

Alar turned off the road onto a path that climbed straight up the ridge. Theoretically, he could beat them to the top of the pass. The reality became starkly evident too soon. The climb was steep and Alar was weakened by hunger and lack of sleep. Before he went a hundred yards, his wooden legs wouldn't carry him further and he stumbled, catching himself against a tree next to the path. He leaned over and vomited the bread onto the ground. What a waste. Before he was ready, he stood, wiping his mouth on his cloak and looked up the path. The top was still a long way away. He groaned and stumbled on.

When he finally reached the top, he fell to his hands and knees. His heart was thudding in his chest and he couldn't seem to get enough air. He would have vomited again, but had nothing left to give. He pulled carefully. The rush slowed his heart, and, after a moment, he had the energy to stand. He stood, swaying slightly and examined his surroundings.

Off the path, there was an outcrop that jutted out far enough that he could see the road far below. He shuffled carefully to the edge. The vista that stretched out before him would have been breathtaking any other time. The forest was a patchwork of blue and green spruces, red maples and yellow aspens. The late afternoon sky was a deep blue, dotted, here and there, by small puffy clouds. He looked out across the mountains, feeling the breeze lift his damp hair.

Leaning out, he could just see the road where it topped the pass far below. Directly beneath him was a flat clearing beside the road where travelers could stop for the night. Opposite the clearing, the road was bordered by a deep gorge. The gorge was the reason that travelers didn't

normally descend the far side of the pass at night. The road narrowed on the way down, and a single slip could send a horse or a person plunging to their death.

Alar watched the road in the failing light and was relieved when the group came into sight. “Please stop,” he murmured.

As they drew even with the clearing, the Inquisitor pointed, and they turned onto it and began to dismount. Alar threw his hands into the air. “Yes!” He watched them for a moment. Now what? He needed a plan. A plan that would allow a skinny, barely trained, sixteen-year old save a girl from three Imperial soldiers and an Inquisitor. What exactly was I thinking?

The sergeant dismounted, pulled the girl down and dropped her on the ground. Stepping over her, he led his horse to the edge of the clearing where he removed the saddle and began to brush the animal. Alar felt hot prickles on his back. They treat their horses better than they treat the Alle’oss. He pulled, relishing the rush of energy.

“Eadric always says a simple plan is the best plan.” He returned to the path and started down toward the clearing.

It was dark as he drew near the encampment. A full moon cast a pale, blue light over the scene. They appeared to be preparing to bed down for the night. The Inquisitor was already under his blanket and the soldiers were cleaning their bowls and utensils. The girl lay, without a blanket, near the horses, her manacles tied to a stake driven into the ground.

He crouched behind a tree just off the path, watching the soldiers argue over who would take the first watch. Eventually, the sergeant sat by the fire and the others went to their bedrolls. Alar waited. His plan was simple. He would rush the sergeant from behind and kill him. Quick and silent. Then he would kill one of the other soldiers in their sleep. If he was quick, he could kill

the third soldier before he was able to disentangle himself from his blanket. That would leave the Inquisitor...well, how hard could that be?

It was a feeble plan. More of a hope, really. Alar winced and waited.

When he judged the others went to sleep, he removed his cloak and lowered it quietly to the ground. He slipped from his hiding place and edged onto the path so that he could approach quietly. He drew his sword. He pulled, feeling the rush of energy and then, before he could have second thoughts, he ran as quietly as he could toward the sentry.

The sergeant sat with his back to Alar. He didn't move as Alar approached and Alar begin to think the plan might get off to a good start. He drew his sword back, closed his eyes and swung with all his strength at the back of the guard's neck.

The next thing he knew, he was spinning. The momentum of his swing spun him around. His feet tangled on the log the guard was sitting on and he fell with an explosion of sparks into the dying campfire. "Ahhh!" He rolled through the fire and came to his feet on the other side. How had he missed? The sergeant was leaning over, a stick in his hand, frozen in the act of poking the fire. His shocked expression mirrored the one on Alar's face. So much for quick and silent.

The guard smiled, stood and drew his sword. "You just made a big mistake, son." He started around the fire.

Alar stumbled backwards, tripping over another log. He tried to assume a ready position, but got stuck between fight and flight and stumbled again. The soldier laughed and lunged forward, bringing his sword down hard. Alar just managed to get his sword up in time. He felt the shock up to his elbow and it was a near miracle he held onto his sword. He shuffled back, the guard following casually.

There was no finesse to his attack. The sergeant wasn't really trying to kill him. At least, not at first. The soldier was playing with him. He took long, hard swings like he was chopping wood. Alar could see them coming from a mile away. Still, it was all he could do to block the blows.

He was tiring, using both hands on his sword. He pulled hard, feeling the rush. The distraction caused him to tangle his feet. The soldier seeing him stumble, stepped forward and swung his sword horizontally at Alar's neck. Alar was dead. In the midst of his stumble, he couldn't get his feet to move and he would never get his sword up in time. He closed his eyes, pulled hard, wanting nothing more than to be anywhere else. He felt a small twist behind his eyes. Then everything went silent.

He opened his eyes and gaped. The guard was frozen in mid-swing, the sword poised inches from the spot where Alar's neck met his shoulders. Alar jumped back. The guard didn't move. In fact, nothing was moving.

He glanced around. Everything was dim and shifting as if he was looking through a thin, roiling mist. He heard distant wails and moans drifting eerily out of the mist. Am I dead? He studied the soldier and noticed he wasn't actually frozen. The sword had moved slightly since the last time he looked at it.

He walked around behind the guard and considered the situation. He had been about to die, that was sure. He had pulled hard and closed his eyes...and wished that he was somewhere else. Alar turned in place and examined the shifting mist. At least it looked like mist. It wasn't wet like mist. He listened to the wails in the distance. A memory drifted up from his childhood. He knew this place. Every Alle'oss child heard the tales. It was just like the stories of the underworld, the realm of the dead, the lore master told in the tavern on cold, dark winter nights.

He flashed on a memory of sitting in his father's lap, clutching his older sister, captivated by the tales. If this was the underworld, the wails in the distance were the sjel'and, spirits of the dead, waiting to pass on to the other realms. He looked around nervously.

So...he was dead. Alar frowned. That wasn't right. He looked down at himself and he was still Alar. He wasn't a spirit. So, what then? Some of the older soldiers in the resistance told stories of the Empire's seida witches who could walk in the underworld. He grinned. He had scoffed at the idea, but maybe it wasn't so crazy after all.

He looked at the soldier's back. What should he do now? He lifted his sword, pointed it at the sergeant's back, thrust it forward then pulled it back. Nothing. It left no mark. He reached out, tentatively, and touched him. His fingers sunk into his back. It felt slippery and mildly unsettling. He jerked his hand back, shaking it and wiping it on his tunic. Now what? He got here by pulling. Maybe...

He pulled tentatively. The rush that flooded his mind almost overwhelmed him. He squeezed his eyes shut, wishing to be back in the material realm. He felt the same twisting sensation behind his eyes. Gasps and shocked yells sounded behind him accompanied by a grunt of surprise in front of him. He opened his eyes to find the world moving again.

The sergeant over-balanced when his target disappeared, but he quickly righted himself. Alar smiled as the soldier looked frantically around. Finally, alerted by his companion's yells, the soldier turned to face Alar. His surprised expression was almost funny. His hands were extended uselessly out to his side, so Alar stepped forward and drove his sword into his unprotected throat. His surprised expression didn't change, but he clutched at his throat with both hands and fell to his knees. Alar stepped back, pulling his sword free and watched him fall.

If he was honest with himself, he never expected to get this far. He turned to face the others, a smiled stretching his face.

Their shocked expressions changed to outrage. The Inquisitor yelled, “Kill him,” and the soldiers scrambled for their swords. Alar stepped clear of the body, assuming a much more confident ready position.

The two remaining soldiers approached him warily. One of them was the soldier with the bright red hair. The other had a scar that extended from just below his right eye to his jawline.

Red motioned Scar behind him and continued to advance. He stopped two paces from Alar, studying him. His eyes narrowed and he peered at Alar’s face. “Have we met before?”

Alar shook his head. Red shrugged and glanced at Alar’s feet. Alar’s eyes flicked down, checking his stance. Red smiled, crouched and lifted his sword into a ready position. He paused, then leapt forward.

His attacks were not the unsophisticated hammer blows of the sergeant. He attacked with purpose. Alar barely parried the first thrust and then started to back up fast, trying to stay out of reach. Unfortunately, he was approaching the edge of the gorge and was running out of places to run. He pulled desperately, but, unable to focus properly, nothing happened. *Uh oh*. He backed up frantically.

And then he ran out of room. He was standing at the edge of the road. Red was no longer smiling when he stepped forward and swung down in a hard, overhead chop. Alar blocked it, two hands on his sword, but the blow drove him to one knee and knocked the sword from his hands. His sword pinged off the edge of the road and spun out over the gorge. Red paused, smiling and lifted his sword, ready to cleave Alar’s head.

Alar reached for the spot behind his eyes. There, a tiny trickle of energy. He pulled hard, concentrating on being somewhere else. He felt the twist behind his eyes and the world went silent. He waited, his entire body clenched against the expected blow. Slowly, he opened his eyes to find Red frozen in the midst of his downward swing, his face twisted in an angry grimace. Alar shifted carefully to the side. Can you fall into a gorge in the underworld? When he was clear, he stood, threw his hands up and whooped. He walked around behind Scar, still standing behind Red, and studied the situation. When he was ready, he pulled carefully.

The world started again. Red swung at air, causing him to lose his balance. He teetered on his toes at the edge of the gorge. Scar stepped forward and grasped the collar of Red's mail shirt, helping him to regain his balance. Alar lowered his shoulder and slammed into the Scar's back. It was like hitting a stone wall. It didn't feel like the man even noticed he was there, but he took a small step forward. The tiny shove was just enough to push poor Red off balance. He swayed once, rising up on his toes, then his feet slipped off the edge and he dropped, feet first into the gorge.

Scar was yanked forward, his hand tangled in Red's mail shirt. He let go before he was pulled over, but he balanced on the edge, his sword flying into the night, his arms windmilling. Alar watched him, amused, then put his foot on his backside and shoved him headfirst after his sword.

Alar stepped up to the edge and looked down in time to see the soldier's disgusted grimace before he disappeared into darkness.

"You're a witch!"

He looked back to find the Inquisitor pointing at him, a look of disbelief on his face. Alar smiled and strode forward. The Inquisitor drew a knife and looked down at the girl laying at his feet.

“Uh-uh, I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Alar said.

The Inquisitor looked up, hesitated, then dashed for his horse. He pulled the tether free and hauled himself up. Alar started running toward him, but was forced to leap aside as the horse raced past. When they reached the road, the Inquisitor dug his heels into the horse’s side. The horse leapt forward, heading down the far side of the pass. Without a saddle or reins, the abrupt surge of speed left the rider flailing. He was thrown backward, his hands flying out to his sides. As the Inquisitor struggled to regain his seat, the horse bucked, sending him cartwheeling out over the gorge.

Alar watched him drop out of sight and then turned to watch the horse disappearing down the road. “That’s unfortunate.”

He turned and surveyed the scene. He walked over to the sergeant’s body and was relieved to see a set of keys attached to his belt. He picked up the sergeant’s sword. It was a beautiful blade. Longer than his own, but lighter, due to a wide fuller cut down the center of the blade. The edge was pristine, despite the punishment it just endured, and the balance was perfect. He cut the keys free and carried them back to the girl. She hadn’t made a sound through the entire ordeal, at least not that he noticed. She was either brave or unconscious. Kneeling, he cut the leather thong that secured the hood. She jumped. Not unconscious then. He gently pulled it off, revealing wide, frightened eyes.

“Hello, I’m Alar. What’s your name?”

“Ece,” she said.

“Ah, that means queen. Did you know that?” he said as he unlocked the manacles.

“Yes. My mother named me.” She rubbed her wrists and looked around the clearing.

“Where did they go?”

Alar glanced at the body and said, “They, uh, had to go. Have you ever ridden a horse?” He glanced at the sergeant again, then added, “Willingly?”

“No. I’ve always wanted to.” She sounded a bit detached. Probably in shock.

“Today’s your lucky day then.” He stood and set about preparing to leave. There was soup left in the pot by the fire. They ate their fill. He dragged the body to the gorge and tipped it over the edge. He packed the men’s belongings, finding a warm replacement for his old, tattered cloak. There was enough food and money to feed their entire company. Ukrit would be happy.

By the time he was saddling the horses, Ece was beginning to regain her wits. She watched him and asked, “Can I go home?”

Alar turned to her, frowned and shook his head. “I don’t think that would be a good idea. Someone in that village betrayed you to the Inquisition. It won’t be safe for you or your family for you to go back now. We’ll find a way to send them a message and, maybe, after some time, you can visit.” She nodded, and he turned back to the horses.

Ece thought for a minute and then asked, “Where will we go?”

Alar smiled. “To Richeleau.”

Having finished his preparations, he turned to Ece and asked, “Are you ready to go?”

She hesitated then looked back toward the only home she had ever known. Her shoulders sagged, and Alar’s heart sank. Then she seemed to gather herself. Pulling her shoulders back, she turned back to look into his eyes. She pressed her lips together and nodded. “Yes, I am.”

Alar smiled. “Well then, let’s go.”