

FELLOWSHIP FANTASTIC



EDITED BY
Martin H. Greenberg
and Kerrie Hughes

DAW BOOKS, INC.
DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, FOUNDER

375 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014

ELIZABETH R. WOLLHEIM
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Within the den, a wind was rising.

Normally a pleasant, puffy cumulus shading to a relaxed altostratus, Aerial was undergoing metamorphosis that was as ominous as it was swift. She began to swell and expand, puffing herself up mightily, spreading upward and outward until she filled half the den and her roiling crest and splintering edges pushed threateningly against the walls and ceiling. She grew dark, darker than Eric had ever seen her before. She was cumulonimbus gray, then nimbus charcoal, then—she was black, a glowing, rumbling anvil-head.

She moved toward the couple.

Jessica took a step backward, and fell down. Mesmerized by the turbulent, roaring thunderstorm that now dominated the room, she started edging backward on her backside, pushing with her hands and feet. An anxious Eric hurried to place himself between his fiancée and the glowering cloud.

“Aerial, you don’t understand! There’s no reason to be angry. This is the way people are, this is the way they’re meant to be. It doesn’t mean that you and I . . .”

—from “Overcast” by Alan Dean Foster

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INTRODUCTION

Kerrie Hughes

I started to put together this anthology because I love to read about the dynamics between friends, action-packed or challenging relationships. As the project got going and submissions came in, I realized that fellowship is more than just stories of friendship in unique settings. Fellowship is that part of friendship that defines our character and makes us who we are. It is the moment in life when we as individuals pull together and show one another what we are made of.

Consider for a minute what you do when disaster strikes or when someone or something stands in the way of your needs and desires. Do you reveal what you truly are inside through voice and action? Are you a leader or tyrant, follower or sheep, voice of reason or dissenter? The answer probably depends on who you are with at that moment and the circumstance at hand. It also depends on your experience and talents.

I would like to think of myself as a calm, guiding influence who can lead others through crisis and calamity, but I know full well that if blood is present I'm the one who calls the ambulance, not the one who gets the compress started. I tend to faint at the sight of vital fluids spilling out of open wounds, but I also know that if running is involved, you may as well give me the gun and I will buy us some time, because I'll be bringing up the rear anyway. Hopefully I'll be able to shoot all foes and you can come back for me in the car. (Given my blood aversion, I'll probably have passed out from the act of shooting someone, so hopefully my comrades will check my pulse before thinking I took a fatal hit.)

All kidding aside, as I assembled this book I noticed that fellowship can also be a quiet thing without blood, bullets, running, and mayhem. It is also cooperation and openness between people with common goals. I knew from experience that every story would be a glimpse into the hearts and minds of the authors. What I didn't realize until now was that nearly every author was someone who had enriched my life somehow and in some way. They are all truly comrades in the fellowship of the written word and friends of the human soul.

So tip a cider and enjoy the fellowship!

Gra, Dilseacht, Cairdeas!

ALMOST BROTHERS

Paul Genesse

The rope sawed into Finn's wrists as he struggled to escape from the heavy wooden chair, which was still stained with the blood and urine from the last child Nagel had captured. The leathery-skinned brute sat on a stool, grinning at the young boy as he sharpened a long rusty razor.

Nagel locked his gray eyes on Finn's wiry twelve-year-old frame, then lubricated the crumbling whetstone with blood-tinged spittle. Finn realized that hitting Nagel in the mouth with the rock had not been a good idea, but he wasn't going to be captured without a fight.

Finn shifted on the sticky chair, and a splinter poked into the naked flesh on his bum, beaten red and raw by Nagel's calloused hands. The much-too-thin boy glanced at the fireplace. His filthy clothing smoldered there, permeating the shack with a swampy odor mixed with burning hair.

Despite his hands being securely lashed behind him, Finn arched his back, fighting to escape his fate all the other orphaned refugee children had fallen victim to. Even his best friend Owen had received the "special treatment" at the hands of the Bloody Barber.

Nagel's fierce gaze met Finn's terrified green eyes. "Listen, you rat-hunting turd, if you don't stop squirming the first thing I'll do is shave off that little mushroom cap between your legs."

Knees clenched together, Finn tried in vain to hide his nakedness. He wished he had one of the dried animal skins or furs hanging on the dingy walls to cover himself. If only he could slip his hands free, he could escape out the side window of the trapper's shack. In desperation he thought, *Perhaps the Barber will listen to reason.* Finn searched for the right words, summoning his beggar's voice. "Please, sir. If you let me go I'll—"

"You'll what?!" Nagel furrowed his brow. "Steal more food? Damn Tarnite orphans like you are all the same."

"I swear I didn't eat it! I catch my own food. I swear it on the twelve saints of the Celestrum."

"Eleven saints, stupid boy. You're not in Tarn. Everyone here knows Vivianne is a witch, not a saint." Nagel shook his bald head. "And don't expect me to believe that you be surviving on the skinny rats your ratter dogs kill in the barns."

"We do. The food I . . . found . . . was for—"

Nagel pointed the razor at Finn's crotch.

Trembling uncontrollably, Finn felt blood oozing from where the ropes sliced into his skin. He stopped struggling as pain and cold fear washed over him.

"And don't you go pissing on my chair either. The last one of you orphans to piss themselves was sorry she did."

Finn guessed he was talking about Lynn, and saw what remained of her long blond hair in the corner of the fireplace. The sticky stain on the chair had to be from her.

The Bloody Barber stopped sharpening the folding razor knife and gave Finn a wicked grin, showing all three of his front teeth.

Finn's eyes opened wide as the hulking man lumbered toward him. He almost had a hand free when cold iron pressed against Finn's dirt-smudged cheek. Nagel grabbed Finn's unkempt sandy brown hair and stepped behind him.

"No, please!" Finn squeaked. "I swear I won't—"

A rough hand squeezed Finn's throat, choking off his plea.

The razor scraped against Finn's scalp, shearing off a swath of hair over his right ear and opening several small stinging cuts. Finn screamed, "Stop! Please!"

The Bloody Barber's chortling made Finn gnash his teeth. He wished his friends were there to save him, but he was alone. Captured. Helpless. Just like Owen, Lynn, Hazel, and the others had been when Nagel had caught and killed them.

High-pitched barking and loud scratching came from the front door of Nagel's shack. Finn knew they were Pip and Fyse. His little black-and-white rat terriers were still free, and at least they hadn't abandoned him.

"Quiet!" Nagel shouted at the door, but the dogs kept scratching and barking. The barber threw a discarded child's shoe—probably Lynn's—at the door and the dogs stopped.

A yellow puddle of urine came under the threshold. *Good dogs!*

Nagel stormed toward the expanding puddle. "Stupid mutts!"

Finn pulled at his bonds as excruciating pain swept through him. Skin tore loose from his wrists. *Almost there. Just . . . keep . . . pulling.* The blood made it slippery enough to wrench a hand free. Finn slid off the chair and nearly fainted as the flesh on his backside separated itself from the splintered wood.

Cursing, Nagel opened the front door and tried to kick the little black-and-white dogs. Both darted away and growled at the huge man brandishing the rusted razor. Pip and Fyse bared their teeth. The dogs weighed less than twenty pounds each, but they lunged and snapped at Nagel, determined to save their beloved Finn from a gruesome fate.

The sight of his tiny dogs facing Nagel gave Finn a burst of strength. He slipped his other hand free and darted to the side window and clambered over the sill—remembering too late that he was supposed to grab some clothing. He landed in mud that smelled like it contained Nagel's cast-off nightsoil. "Oh, sh—"

Hands grabbed Finn from behind and pulled him up. He expected a cuff on the head, but saw Owen's clear blue eyes—and newly shaved scalp—staring at him.

"Owen, you're alive." Hope for the others flashed through Finn's mind as he stared at his lanky boyhood friend, already much taller than Finn.

"Come on!" Owen pulled Finn away from the hovel as Nagel came charging around the side of the

house with Pip and Fyse yipping and barking at his heels.

“Get back here!” Nagel shouted.

Owen and Finn sprinted away from Nagel’s shack and into the muddy streets of Ryeland. Pip and Fyse caught up as the boys ran past a column of Celestrian soldiers marching south toward the invading Tarnite army. A mounted knight from the Order of Saint Mathias lifted his visor to watch them flee.

The sight of a naked boy running in the street made a few of the villagers shake their heads, but most ignored Finn. A gang of Ryeland’s children—all with full heads of hair—laughed and pointed at Finn, making snide comments about the size of his manhood. It took every bit of control for him not to stop and start another fistfight, but his ribs still hurt from the last brawl with the locals and the thought of facing the boys naked gave him pause. And Owen had said Finn was on his own if he started another fight.

After running far from Nagel’s shack the boys stopped behind Widow Tillwell’s chicken coop to catch their breath. Finn squatted down and covered himself as Pip and Fyse snuffled at his legs before rolling on the ground and showing him their bellies. “Good girl, Pip. Good boy, Fyse.” Their soft brown eyes showed their love for him as Finn tenderly rubbed his little dogs.

Owen got a whiff of Finn and wrinkled his nose. The brown mess on Finn’s knees definitely wasn’t mud.

“You’ve smelled worse.” Finn shrugged. “And I should have taken some clothes.”

“Nagel gave everyone new clothes once he finished. He was just going to shave off your hair.”

“What?” Relief and shame washed over Finn. *They’re all still alive.* “How was I supposed to know I thought—”

“If you hadn’t run off you would’ve known.”

“But the locals said he skinned the children he caught alive and—”

“You listened to them?” Owen shook his head in disbelief.

Finn’s face turned red as he realized what a fool he’d been by believing the Ryelanders. His shame turned to boiling anger. “I’m not letting anyone shave my head. Especially the Bloody Barber!” Finn stroked the bare spot by his ear, and grimaced when he felt the fresh cuts. Finn glanced at the scabs on Owen’s freshly shaved head and the little bumps and knots revealed by the absence of his blond hair. “I can’t believe you let him do that to you.”

“Sir Luther and the Deacons ordered all of us to let him.” Owen gestured to the abbey’s bell tower dominating the skyline over Ryeland, as if pointing explained everything. “Finn, you’ve got lice, just like the rest of us did.”

“I do not.” Finn’s scalp started to itch fiercely, but he resisted scratching. Owen was right, but Finn wouldn’t yield. “Why do you do everything they say? The Deacons aren’t going to let you be a knight.”

“Sir Luther’s teaching me to ride.”

“Only when you’re not cleaning steaming piles of shit out of the stables or polishing his shield. W

might as well be slaves back home in Tarn.”

Owen shook his head. “Sir Luther said he would teach me the lance and sword when I’m fourteen.”

“That’s two years away! They’ll cart us off to the orphanage in Templemoore, just as they did the others.”

“No. The Deacons said they’re keeping a few of us here to be in a proper orphanage—like a school—for devout Celestians like us.”

“You mean like you.” Finn rolled his eyes.

“They say the Saints have a plan for us. If you’d come to the prayer services you might understand better.”

“I’ve been to plenty back home. I’m not going again. The Saints abandoned us.” Finn stared at the dirt, remembering when the Tarnite soldiers dragged away his mother and sister during the attack on their refugee column.

“Here.” Owen handed him his tunic, leaving himself with only a pair of rough brown breeches. “It’s long enough to cover your—”

“Thanks.” Finn put on the itchy wool garment, stitched together by the holy sisters for the refugee children. “I’ll give it back later.”

“Keep it. Sir Luther gave me an extra one with the coat of arms of Saint Mathias on it. I’ll get some more breeches for you tonight, but we better not go back to the abbey now. Nagel will catch us for sure.”

Finn pulled the tunic down. The rough material chafed against his bum and he raised an eyebrow at Owen. “Hey, what were you doing outside the Barber’s shack?”

Owen grinned. “I figured you’d do something stupid, and we’re supposed to watch out for each other. We’re almost brothers, you know?”

Finn’s stomach growled. “Brother, I don’t suppose you have any food?”

The boys laughed and Owen explained, “The holy sisters won’t feed us again until sunset. They wanted to get rid of us while they deloused the dormitory, and they won’t let you in with that hair on your head.”

“I’m not going back anyway.”

“You’ve been hiding out for two days!”

“The farmers feed me and the dogs for killing barn rats.”

“You can’t stay out there forever.”

Finn rolled his eyes.

“Everyone misses you, especially Lynn.”

A needle of guilt poked into Finn. “Where’d the gang go?”

“To the river. To find lunch.”

“Those carp taste like mud.” He thought about stealing some eggs from Widow Tillwell’s coop, but Owen would probably object.

“The fish taste better than the rats you catch.”

Finn sighed. “I know a perfect place to find trout. Nagel will never find us and it’s just a little way up the Little Iden, by the road to Ashkirk.”

“But Deacon Nethers said not to go near the road. Bandits and such.”

“Who cares? There’re lots of trout and big crayfish. Aren’t you hungry?”

Owen nodded, then chuckled. “Just be careful.”

“Why?” Finn’s brows narrowed.

“You don’t have any breeches on and that thing looks like bait.” Owen laughed and Finn couldn’t help but smile—then he punched Owen in the arm. Hard.

Owen ran to get the others, while Finn and the dogs headed for their meeting place at the marsh area outside of town. He snuffled at the swampy air and let the cool mud on the shore soothe his bare feet. His raw backside ached. Just when he was going to sit in the mud Owen and the gang arrived.

The kids, ranging in age from six to ten, almost all held crude fishing poles as they marched behind Owen. Finn hadn’t seen any of them since he’d been hiding out and was surprised at how excited he was to see them, even though he barely recognized them with their bald heads and newly sewn baggy clothes.

Trailing behind Owen came Lynn, Hazel, Brek, Gael, Lilly, Baird, Watt, Salty, Rhyssa, and little Tupper. Hazel squinted as she approached. “Finn, what happened to your breeches?”

Finn wanted to say something witty to the ten-year-old girl, who once had had long beautiful raven tresses—often filled with leaves. But the sight of her stark white scalp with nicks all over it made him bite his lip.

“They’re still making his clothes.” Owen winked at Finn.

“Finn!”

“Hey, Finn!” The youngest orphans, Brek and Tupper, both six, ran over to Finn to show him the tiny frogs they had caught. Tupper held up three miniature amphibians, each with a tadpole’s tail. “Show me your frogs?”

“Look!” Brek dug a mass of gray worms and one little frog out of his pocket.

Finn nodded his approval, then made eye contact with Lynn. Fuzzy nubs of blond hair shone in the sunlight. Finn remembered seeing strands of her hair in Nagel’s fireplace—*Bloody Barber!* Tears and marks streaked through the dirt on her face and Finn decided Nagel would pay for cutting off her beautiful hair. At least she didn’t have many nicks on her freckled scalp. He hugged her close and remembered when he had decided to be Lynn’s big brother, when her own family had disappeared in the flight from the Tarnite soldiers. Plus, Pip and Fyse really liked her. The little dogs ran around her legs yipping. Lynn smiled and Finn took the ten-year-old girl’s hand. “Come on, Lynn. Let’s catch up some fish.”

Finn guided the children toward the Little Iden and the fishing place, a bend in the river where the current slowed and flies swarmed. The kids put their poles into the green water and Finn wondered how many fish they would catch. Soon, half of the kids took off their barely stained clothes, and

jumped into the warm water. The kids splashed and dunked each other, screaming with glee as they frolicked in the shallows.

“You’re going to scare the fish away!” Owen shouted, his child’s voice becoming deeper for a moment.

Finn’s nostrils flared. “Nagel will hear us back in Ryeland if they keep this up. And the road to Ashkirk isn’t that far either.”

The games and shouting persisted off and on and Finn kept an eye out for Nagel. After midday Pip and Fyse barked at something in the forest, but Nagel didn’t appear. Finn guessed it must have been a squirrel or maybe one of the barn cats that despised him and his dogs.

Late in the afternoon, hungry bellies forced the gang of Tarnite children to man their poles earnestly. But still, no fish were caught.

“Look what I found!” Lynn’s high voice made everyone turn away from the river.

The little girl clutched a big clay honey pot against her body. She could barely lift it, and leaned backward as she waddled forward.

“What’s in the pot?” Tupper asked, bounding over to her as Pip and Fyse pranced at her feet, wagging their little tails.

“Honey.” Lynn licked her lips and plopped down the pot.

Owen put his hands on his hips. “Where’d you steal it?”

“I didn’t steal it!” Lynn’s face flashed with indignation. “I found it right over there on the path.”

“Some farmer must have forgot it.” Finn swished away the flies. “Let’s eat it!”

The kids squealed with delight and swarmed around the little girl, dipping their hands into the pot and licking the sticky honey off their fingers. Owen stepped in and made certain the younger ones got their share. Everyone was soon swallowing the sweet, syrupy nectar and joking about sticky fingers.

“How’d we get so lucky?” Hazel asked.

“Who knows?” Finn shrugged, letting Pip and Fyse lick his hands as he yawned. “I need a nap.” Finn almost forgot about his tender backside and closed his eyes. Moments later, all of the orphans lay down along the riverbank and fell asleep.

Finn felt himself flying, then he slammed into something hard and wet. River water went up his nose as the ground shifted. He realized he was in the bottom of a leaky boat as two pointy sacks landed on him—then whimpered. Finn could barely open his eyes, but realized the sacks were sleeping children: Lynn and possibly Tupper. Owen lay beside them, apparently asleep, along with others in the boat, probably the rest of his friends.

Pip and Fyse barked savagely from somewhere close by, and Finn tried to lift his head when a brown boot caked with river mud stepped beside his head. An older man with a shaggy gray beard snatched up a crossbow and loosed a quarrel.

A dog’s shrill yelp made Finn shudder. “No!” Finn’s shout came out as a whimper. The barking

stopped. Finn tried to sit up, but his body wouldn't move. "*Pip! Fyse!*" Finn could only mumble as the sweet flavor in his mouth turned bitter. Oars splashed into the water and he fell asleep as lethargy overwhelmed him.

Finn awoke as his body crashed onto a bouncing wooden floor. The sound of horses' hooves clapping on the ground and squeaking wagon wheels made him realize he was no longer in the boat. His hands were tied in front of him and his feet bound tightly together with twine. Owen and the other orphans lay in the wagon, similarly bound.

A vague memory of barking surfaced in his mind. "Pip! Fyse!"

"Shut your mouth, or I'll fill it with sand," a shaggy-bearded man cloaked in darkness warned from the bench in front of the wagon.

Panic filled Finn's entire being as the wagon rumbled down a rocky road that snaked through the gloomy woods.

"You all right?" Owen whispered.

Finn nodded, but he wanted to vomit—or maybe cry. "What happened to . . . the dogs?"

Owen shook his head.

The crack of a whip made Finn shrink down.

"They'll never catch us," the driver said, then whipped the horses again.

Shaggy-beard nudged the driver with a dirty elbow. "Them Ryelanders wouldn't give the ass end of a skunk for these Tarnite whelps. They're not coming after us."

"Who are they?" Finn scowled at Shaggy-beard and the wagon driver—Whip.

"Slavers."

"How'd they get us?" Finn asked, already knowing as waves of nausea spread from his gut.

"Poisoned honey." Owen shook his head and Finn dry heaved.

Five men on horses charged out from shadowy trees. The wagon jerked to a halt, and the horses snorted with displeasure.

"Celestrian soldiers!" Lynn shouted, sitting up beside Finn.

Shaggy-beard and driver bellowed with laughter and Lynn withered.

A man on a tall horse with braided red hair asked, "How many?"

"Twelve." Shaggy-beard glanced back. "Half are girls."

"Good catch." Red-braid peered into the wagon, a hard smile on his ruddy face. "You two wait by the trees. We'll ride ahead and tell the Tarnite soldiers what these will cost them. And don't touch any of them little girls. Sir Maddox is buying, and you know he likes them unspoiled. But you can have one of them boys if you want."

The horseman snickered as Shaggy-beard cast a hungry gaze at the children. Red-braid and the other three rode off and the terrified kids stared at Finn and Owen. Finn wasted no time in trying to get his hands free. The slavers had bound his hands in front and he quickly set to work. Owen shielded his

from Shaggy-beard and Whip as Finn easily untied his feet, then chewed on the twine, wishing his teeth were as sharp as the rats he hunted.

The two slavers waited until the horsemen were long gone, then both made water beside the wagon. “Doesn’t matter to me,” Shaggy-beard told Whip, “they both squeal the same when I’m with ’em.”

Shaggy-beard growled and shook the wagon, thrusting his hips against it. Lynn and Rhyssa began to cry. Tupper asked for his mother and Hazel curled into a tight little ball beside Owen.

“What are they going to do to us?” Lynn sniffled as big tears fell from her eyes.

“Don’t worry,” Owen soothed, “the twelve angels of the Celestrum will watch over us. Say your prayers and you’ll be safe.”

Finn bit into his bindings, wanting to say the saints who had supposedly become angels weren’t going to lift a precious wing to help them. He knew the Ryelanders—probably Bloody Nagel—had sold them to the slavers. *We’re on our own. No one’s coming to save us.*

Shaggy-beard stalked toward the back of the wagon. Finn stopped chewing at the frayed twine and held still.

“This one’s a boy, isn’t it?” Shaggy-beard asked Whip, and seized Lynn’s leg, pulling her toward the rear of the wagon.

“She’s a girl!” Finn shouted.

Owen sat up. “Leave her alone.” His voice sounded like a man’s, not a skinny twelve-year-old’s.

Lynn screamed as Shaggy-beard pulled her closer. Owen dove forward and grabbed Lynn. “Please, not her. She’s just a little girl. That man said take a boy.”

Shaggy-beard’s eyes flared at Owen. “You want to take her place, *boy*?”

Finn shredded the twine with his teeth, not caring if they saw him.

Shaggy-beard dragged Lynn out of Owen’s grasp and let her fall to the ground.

“No!” Owen shouted, and crawled forward on his elbows.

“Don’t worry. You’re next, *boy*.” Shaggy-beard slapped Owen hard in the face.

Finn tore his hands free and sprang out of the wagon, landing on the grass. Shaggy-beard put a foot on Lynn’s neck and pointed a dirty finger at Finn. “Don’t you run, or she’ll wish she was dead.”

Finn found a fist-sized rock. “Shut your mouth!” He hurled the stone as hard as he could. It struck Shaggy-beard in the throat, staggering him.

Owen leaped out of the wagon, his feet and hands still tied. He landed on Shaggy-beard’s back and wrapped his bound hands around the man’s throat. Owen pulled the twine as hard as he could and Shaggy-beard’s face turned red, the veins in his neck bulging.

The driver laughed so hard he fell off the wagon bench.

Finn sprang toward Shaggy-beard, who stumbled backward as Owen choked him. Finn knelt behind the man’s legs and the slaver tripped over Finn’s body and hit the ground, pinning Owen under him. Shaggy-beard pushed Owen’s arms away from his throat and rolled off the boy.

Finn kicked Shaggy-beard in the groin and smashed an apple-sized rock into the slaver's skull. He whirled around to see what the driver was doing, and spotted the man shuddering and gurgling on the ground as blood leaked out of his slit throat. A huge bald man in fur boots stood over the dying slave. The man wiped the bloody razor on his deerskin breeches.

"*Bloody Nagel.*" Finn dropped the rock beside Shaggy-beard's body, stifling the urge to run away as fast as he could.

"Bloody *Barber* Nagel." The big man bared his three front teeth and stomped toward Lynn.

"You betrayed your slaver friends?" Finn's mouth hung open, wondering how much they had paid Nagel to help them.

"I'm a hunter, you stupid boy. And the Deacons wanted you tracked down." Nagel pulled Lynn up. She yelped as he sliced the twine binding her limbs.

"They sent you . . . for *us*?" Finn couldn't believe it.

Owen stood, trying to catch his breath. "Thank . . . you . . ."

Nagel cut Owen free and stared at Shaggy-beard. "He's not dead . . . yet."

Finn noticed the man's chest rose, despite the blood oozing out of his scalp.

Nagel offered the razor to Finn. "Boy. You're going to have to learn to kill men soon enough. Now cut his throat."

Finn reached tentatively for the blade, but Owen snatched it out of Nagel's hand. Owen glared at Finn. "This man should face judgment in Ryeland. In front of the Deacons."

"Maybe so, but we ain't in Ryeland." Nagel's eyes focused on Owen, who turned away and jumped into the wagon where he started cutting the other children loose.

Horses on the road made Nagel duck behind the wagon. "They're coming back."

Owen ushered the children out of the wagon, some of their hands still bound. Nagel lifted the little ones out and Finn herded them toward the woods. Nagel and Owen came behind and they all rushed into the forest as five horses arrived at the wagon.

Nagel picked up Brek and Tupper, then carried them under his arms. Finn held Lynn's hand and guided her through the brush, while Owen held Hazel's. Nagel took the lead and they found the Barber's brown gelding tied near a willow tree. Nagel lifted five of the smallest children onto the horse. "Hold on. And no one cry. You boys don't let the others get lost." He pointed at Finn and Owen, who ushered Lynn, Hazel, Watt, Baird, and Rhyssa through the forest.

Nagel led the way through the brush; moonlight flashed off the hilt of a massive sword strapped to Nagel's saddle. Finn recognized the two-handed greatsword, and knew it was taller than he or Owen. A stout crossbow also hung on from the saddle and Finn imagined shooting it would be like getting kicked by an angry plow horse.

"*Shhh.*" Nagel raised a big hand and they stopped. Finn heard horses moving ahead of them. A line of horses. Nagel crept forward, then came back with a foul expression and whispered, "Tarnish the cavalry."

Behind them, a horse whinnied and a man cursed loudly. Faint torchlight appeared in the forest.

Finn's heart raced.

"Slavers. Come on." Nagel guided them through the trees, away from the Tarnite column and the slavers. For two hours they tramped through the brush. Finn noticed the five exhausted children at the horse had fallen asleep. Lynn was nearly asleep on her feet; eventually Finn had to carry her on his back for a while. She wasn't that heavy at first, but his strength ran out when the forest opened up on a burned field. Nagel marched them forward without mercy. Lynn kept up with Finn leading her along by the hand.

Lightning flashed, then thunder boomed in the distance. Moments later, rain fell in fat drops. Finnc h grimaced as Tupper and Brek began to shiver uncontrollably. Tupper nearly fell off the horse as cold, fatigue, and the residual effects of the poison took their toll. Finn poked Nagel in the leg and the big man turned.

Finn craned his neck to stare upwards. "Listen, you heartless bastard. We've got to stop."

The hulking man scowled at Finn as rivulets of water ran off Nagel's bald pate.

"Finn's right." Owen's voice didn't waver.

Nagel turned and kept marching, but he headed toward a razed homestead in the distance. The house was a pile of scorched timbers, but lightning revealed an intact barn with a patched roof and rotting walls.

Finn entered the empty barn and sniffed a fresh rat pellet. "If Pip and Fyse were with me we'd clean all the rats out of here in one night."

Nagel frowned at Finn. "How long with one dog?"

Finn's heart pounded. "One?"

Nagel sighed. "Your male one is dead."

"Dead? Fyse is . . ." Finn fought back the tears as Lynn hugged him. Brek and Tupper wrapped their arms around Finn and Hazel sobbed. After hugging them back, Finn stomped into one of the empty stalls. All of his friends hovered outside, but Owen held them back.

Finn pounded his fists against the wood. *First, Father doesn't come back from the war with the Murhatans, then we lose our farm to the baron's taxmen, then Mother and my sister are taken by soldiers. Now Fyse is killed by slavers? It's not fair! This can't be happening to me!*

Finn slumped to the floor in the darkness. Owen stepped into the stall and sat beside Finn for a long time before saying, "He was a good dog."

Finn's chest shook, but he held in the sobs, taking a shuddering breath. *I'm never going to come again.* "Now all I've got left is Pip."

Owen punched Finn hard in the arm.

Finn's anger built, but the hurt look in Owen's eyes made him pause. "What?"

"You've still got me." Owen pointed at the other kids. "Us."

Finn fought back the tears, and a frown mixed with hope spread across his face. "I guess we're still almost brothers."

Owen smiled, then Finn punched him in the arm.

The other children came into the stall and surrounded the two boys. They all fell asleep on the moldy hay, sleeping like a litter of puppies.

The pounding rain on the roof finally stopped, but water dripped down into murky puddles.

“Riders on the road,” Nagel whispered.

Owen and Finn crept out of the stall where the children huddled together in the darkness.

“Too late to run.” Nagel barred the doors with a plank. “Boys, close the back way.”

Finn and Owen quickly finished their task, returning to find Nagel had loaded his crossbow and unsheathed his greatsword. The big man’s eyes were nearly invisible in the darkness, and he kept peering out a crack in the barn doors, watching the riders come ever closer. Finn stared into the night through a knothole at six riders bearing torches.

“What do we do?” Owen asked.

“Tell the little ones to be quiet.”

Owen held up a pitchfork. “We can help.”

Finn raised a stout ax handle.

“Damn Tarnite orphans,” Nagel grumbled.

Six horses stopped outside the barn. In the torchlight, Finn saw Shaggy-beard with a bloody cloak around his head. The red-haired man pointed at tracks in the mud. Two men rode to the rear of the barn and Red sent another man—a skinny fellow with a hooded cloak—to the front. Skinny held an axe in one hand as he sloshed through the mud, then peered into the barn.

Nagel plunged his sword through the gap between the doors. The tip pierced the man’s gut. Nagel yanked the sword out and Skinny fell into a puddle clutching at his belly.

When Skinny stopped moving, Red and Shaggy-beard circled the barn and spoke with the other two horsemen. They argued. Finn heard Red say, “We took coin from Sir Maddox. We deliver tonight or he’ll have our heads on pikes. He’s probably after us already.”

Thunder boomed in the distance as two men approached the rear, while three came at the front, all on horseback.

Nagel handed his crossbow to Finn. “Aim, then pull this lever here. Wait until he’s close.”

Finn nodded, intimidated by the size of the weapon and wondering how to hold it. Nagel sent Finn and Owen scurrying away to hide, and pressed himself into a shadowy alcove.

The slavers tossed ropes over the handles of the barn doors and used their horses to tear them open. They dismounted and marched into the barn with torches held high, each carrying a club or ax. Nagel leaped to attack, his greatsword arcing toward the slavers. Red and the other two men jumped back, recoiling from Nagel’s slashing blade. Shaggy-beard came from the rear and checked the stalls, getting closer to where the children huddled together. The kids screamed when he appeared in the doorway.

Finn stood in front of the little ones, squinting in the torchlight. He scowled at the grinning slaver and thought about his dead dog. Shaggy-beard sidestepped out of the way just as Finn pulled the crossbow lever. The bolt *thunked* into the chest of the other slaver as the recoil sent Finn tumbling backward.

Riding Nagel's horse, Owen burst out of a stall and charged Shaggy-beard with a pitchfork held like a lance, yelling as he attacked. The slaver dropped his torch to ward off the blow. One of the tines pierced Shaggy-beard's hand as Nagel's horse knocked him down.

Finn screamed and rushed out of the stall with the ax handle held over his head in two hands. All the children followed him out, makeshift clubs in their hands and feral screams erupting from their lips. They descended on Shaggy-beard and pummeled him mercilessly.

Smoke and flickering orange light made Finn stop hitting the slaver's bloody skull. Flames erupted all around them where the torches had been discarded. The rear of the barn was engulfed in a rapidly spreading fire.

"We've got to get everyone out!" Owen shouted to Finn as Nagel's horse bucked and screamed. Owen jumped onto a pile of hay as the horse sped out the front of the barn, past Nagel and Red.

Finn and Owen herded the children as the flames swept along the floor of the barn and up into the loft. They stopped near the entrance where two slavers lay dead, gruesome gashes across their bodies.

Red and Nagel still faced each other, the slaver staying beyond the reach of Nagel's sword. Red held the blade of a throwing knife in one hand and an ax in the other.

Nagel could barely stand, a knife handle protruding from each of his thighs, and another in the center of his chest. A cut across the right side of Red's neck appeared to be his only wound.

Finn and the other children reached Nagel as the big man fell hard to his knees, still holding up his sword. Finn and Owen flanked the Bloody Barber, brandishing ax handle and pitchfork. Nagel coughed and the tip of his sword hit the dirt. Bright red blood leaked out of his chest. Finn reached for the knife.

"Leave it." Nagel shook his head.

Smoke billowed around them and Red backed out of the barn, a content grin on his face as Nagel fell backward. Finn and Owen tried to ease him down, but the big man was too much for them and he fell hard.

Nagel whispered to Finn, "Take my razor. Hide it. Then cut that bastard's throat when he falls asleep."

Finn took the folded razor out of Nagel's hand. "I will."

"When he's dead . . . get the children back to Ryeland," Nagel whispered. "Protect them all. The Deacons want you there. Especially you two boys."

Finn shook his head. "But we're nobody."

Nagel managed a gurgling laugh. "I'm nobody. An orphaned bastard from Tarn who became an unworthy servant of the Deacons. But you'll both be knights in the Order of Saint Mathias. The Deacons told me that."

Finn and Owen exchanged wide-eyed glances. *Knights? Impossible.*

“Now get out of here and let me die in peace.” Blood leaked out of Nagel’s chest.

“But you’ll burn to death!” Finn urgently grabbed onto Nagel. “We’ll drag you out.”

“No. I’ll be dead before the fire comes. Now go.”

“We’ll pray for you.” Owen’s lips trembled.

Nagel pressed his greatsword into Owen’s hands.

“Go!” Nagel commanded as he coughed and choked on the blood filling his lungs.

Sad at leaving Nagel behind, Finn helped Owen lead the children out of the burning barn.

The slaver waited as horses galloped down the road toward them. Red grinned at the children after staring through the darkness at the incoming armored warriors. “Look! Sir Maddox comes for his slaves. There’s nowhere to run.” The slaver smirked at the children. “That big man was a fool to steal you from me.”

“Shut your bloody mouth!” Finn lunged, but Owen held him back.

“Sir Maddox will cut your tongue out for that.” Red turned as the riders emerged from the darkness. “Sir Maddox! I have your slaves.”

The leader galloped toward Red and drove a lance through the slaver’s chest. Red splashed into a puddle, gasping, “*But . . . I . . .*”

Finn knelt down and put a hand over Red’s mouth, then slowly cut his throat.

Shadowy horsemen in full plate armor ringed the children, helms down, faces hidden, lances and swords drawn.

Owen lifted Nagel’s sword, his small hands around the massive hilt. The knight who lanced the slaver dismounted, drew his longsword, and faced Owen.

Bloody razor in his hand, Finn stood shoulder to shoulder with his best friend.

“*Yield.*” The knight commanded, his voice muffled by his helm.

Owen’s arms trembled, barely able to hold up the heavy sword. “Never,” both of the boys said in unison, as Finn helped Owen lift the sword.

The other children stepped forward, some with clubs, others with rocks to throw at the shadowy cloaked knights.

“Go back to Tarn!” Finn shouted.

Laughter erupted from the riders and many raised their visors. The dismounted knight took off his helm and stared at Finn and Owen, his steely eyes and scarred face revealed in the growing firelight. “Tonight we’re headed to Ryeland.” The knight’s eyes softened. “I’m Sir Gregory. The Deacons sent me to find you. Now I understand why.”

The barn fire raged higher; in the burgeoning light Finn saw emblazoned on their shields a Celestrian angel raising a silver sword. Overpowering relief made Finn’s strength fade away. The greatsword fell as Finn realized the horsemen were knights in the Order of Saint Mathias.

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