

The Heroes of Broadford

An Endhaven Novella
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Chapter 1: Fort Resolute

The dwarves of the Great Dwarven Union viewed agricultural dwarves, the Loam, with remarkably less respect than the artless dwarves who knew no trade. Growing things struck most dwarves as foreign and distasteful. To solidify this considerable prejudice, the Loam also spoke a foreign language, dressed in a foreign fashion, held considerably different religious beliefs, terraced mountains into farms, and espoused vegetarianism. The Loam only achieved any sort of tolerance in dwarven society as they preferred an insular life inside their own enclaves.

Maran was a Loam. She grew up among farmers on Mount Perma. As the youngest, she was the hearth tender, which is the lowliest job in the house. It was she who rose first and rested last. During the day, she removed the ashes, carried the coal, fueled the fires, and toted the hot water. This was hard and demanding work, as dwarven halls have many hearths. She was not alone in working hard. Everyone worked long and hard hours on the farm, and it was proudly worked.

One day in the early spring, when the grasslands below slowly lost their winter-gray hue, Maran's grandfather called her out to the porch. Grandfather loved sitting on that porch, smoking his pipe and working clay. Maran sat down next to them, and they sat there together. Grandfather sat quietly, as he always did, contemplating. Maran knew better to expect words from him immediately, so she sat there too. She counted the chores that remained, and fretted that they would go undone. She thought about bear hunts, and ways to improve her calling. She watched the cloud bending and weaving below, casting shadows across the valleys.

Grandfather cleared his throat, then spoke. "Maran," he said to her, "I have a request of you. It is a request that you need not follow. Several years ago, your cousin Oerek was drafted and went to war. He has not returned. We do not know if he is among the living or the dead. Would you take a trip for us, to a foreign land, and there discover what you can? Our hearts hang heavy. We do not know if he is among the living or the dead. I do not know whether this task will be hard or easy. If it is easy, you will surely bring us news quickly. If it is not easy, then it will take longer.

This request surprised Maran. Travel passes were very hard for Loam to obtain. Surely they have better uses for the pass, she thought to herself. Try as she may, she could not think of one. Having everyone home, living or dead, mattered to the Loam. Her people preferred dying together over living apart.

Oerek had not wish to go, but the Hadean overseers insisted that their troops needed Loam to support them. The village mourned as one of their own left, possibly never to return. Many years ago, their people made the long trek to these mountains. Many were left behind. Many were lost along the way. Generations later, they still mourned these missing. The Loam dreamt of the day when all the skulls had come home and the tribe was again whole.

The news of Maran's journey both delighted and pained Maran's family. The natural tensions between bringing everyone home and keeping everyone safe haunted the Loam. Their hearts always sat between these irreconcilable duties. Should they risk a loss for a gain? Such questions always required deep thinking.

Grandfather worked hard to get the travel pass for Maran. The Hadeans did not like the Loam traveling. They liked the Loam out of sight and growing food. They did occasionally relent, but only when presented with sufficiently strong arguments about ancestral obligations. When it came to ancestors, the Hadeans acknowledged that honoring your ancestors was a sacred duty that all dwarves shared. That is what Grandfather claimed, and claimed very patiently. Worn down, the Hadeans gave grandfather a travel pass.

Now that Maran had a pass, she had to go somewhere. Oerek's orders had been to support the dwarven volunteers. That meant that he had to grow food. He was assigned to the volunteer company along with three other Loam: Agus, Daoine, and Iomain. According to other records, the company of volunteers traveled to Fort Resolute to support the campaign against the Feral Nation to retake Ferra Nea. The Loam stayed at a house on Middleramp street, near Toro plaza, for several weeks before the company moved on. Maran would use this as her lead.

Oerek's mother took Maran aside and gave her a bag of coins. "This is what we have scraped together for you. I know that it must seem like a great deal to you, but you will find that it is not very much at all. Use it well. I would give you seven times as much if you could bring my son back to me."

The village feasted the next day, celebrating and mourning their daughter who left them. Maran's bear hunting team picked her up and carried her all around the town while everyone followed her clapping and singing. If she did not return, they would do poorly this spring and they knew it. "Best damned caller this side of Mount Kreta!" they hailed her. "I'll be back!" she screamed.

Leaving in the morning proved far harder than Maran feared. The goodbyes ripped at her soul. She kissed her grandparents, her uncles and aunts, father and mother, brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews. She took time to pet the goat and the cats. Her father Heurek saddled up the bull-goats, checking and rechecking the straps. Grandmother filled the saddle bags with food and blankets. She also slipped Maran a bagful of unroasted chocolate beans and coffee beans. "In some places, these are better than silver," she whispered. Maran stuffed the bag into her ample bosom. She would keep them safe.

Heurek guided their goats down the mountain. Maran watched the broken peak of holy Mount Kreta receding from view. She blessed herself, giving thanks to Basileus, the Lord of

Earth who dwelt beneath the mountain, and Heather, the White Lady of Peace, from whom all things grow.

The bull-goats carried them well. Their footing stayed firm on narrow and slippery paths along the mountains. Their ability to eat anything made them the perfect work animal for the Loam. They carried riders. They drew the plow. They gave wool and milk. They gave lambs for the spring sacrifices. They were perfect beasts. Maran patted hers on the body. She would miss Herr Magne's stubborn and contrary ways, and his religious belief that crushing you against the stall was a funny game.

Heurek took them by a different route than Maran expected. Rather than take the direct route down to Jura City, they went the long way around Jura mountain. By noon the next day, they look down over the Pit, a massive strip-mine marring the perfect earth. Once a mountain stood in that spot, and the dwarves discovered adamantine in it. The wealth of that mountain made the fortune that built Jura City. That fortune drew dwarves from all over the world. That fortune formed the Great Dwarven Union. They mined that mountain until it was a vast pit in the ground. That fortune was now gone.

Her father pointed, "I remember when I was a boy. Smoke from the furnaces filled this valley. You were lucky to see a hundred yards in front of you. There were dwarves working all day and all night, every day, all year long. Those days are gone. Now we only have a pit to remind ourselves of the great people that we once were. We are a great people no longer. I wish that was because of this empty pit, but I would be wrong.

"During our war with the Psychotic Assembly, the Union placed many prisoners in that pit. The people in that pit slowly starved or froze. They grew sick and died. They fought among themselves like animals for the little food that we gave them. They drank that polluted water in the pit. The immorality of our inaction can not be understated.

"Only with great shame did the Loam admit that we did these people wrong. After long begging, the Slagsmal allowed us to remove some prisoners to aid us in our farming. We took the strongest out: men, women, and children. We put them to work. We allowed them to take food back to the less fortunate: the sick, the lame, and the wounded. We did a good thing. We saved many lives.

Heurek paused here. He did not know how to continue. After several moments, he shook his head, "Don't ever let anything like this happen. Never. No one should be treated like that. We should have marched down there, drove out the few guards that patrolled that place, and rescued each and every one of those prisoners. When others speak to you about right and wrong, remember this place. As yourself: are their pretty words really so right, or do they refuse to see the pit before their face?"

Maran stepped from Jura City to Fort Resolute in one jarring step. Gone were the sooty canyon walls, a thousand miles gone. Her senses reeled, defiled and enraged. Friendly hands lifted her, pulling her from the mosaic. She sat dazed against the gate keep's cyclopean walls. Moments later, someone else arrived. Maran looked up to see a man reeling

about like a drunkard. They sat him next to Maran. Maran sat next to a lion man of some sort. Beyond him, a man slowly stood.

After a few minutes, Maran felt whole enough to stand. By then, two more people had arrived, helped to their seats by the workers there. Maran knew that there was some means by which the gates cooperated in transporting people, making sure that no two groups wound up at the same place at the same time, but she could not fathom how that could work.

Once Maran exited the gate, she found Fort Resolute a confusing city. She asked about, and a baker told her how to find her destination. Soon enough, she was at Toro plaza, and the women there showed her the boarding houses along that street. After a few knocks and a few disappointments, she found the correct house. A petite woman opened the door and Maran introduced herself, and spoke of her cousin. The woman looked at her sadly, then welcomed her in.

T sat in the parlor drinking sherry. The woman shook her head, "We lost many good men at Ferra Nea. So many went out and so few came back. I lost two sons. Whether they are dead or enslaved, I don't know. When you go looking, could you ask about my sons? They are Aiken and Bertolf. They were with the twelfth light infantry."

Maran nodded, "Where did you sons after they left?"

"The army assembled at Broadford, then they marched north along the old imperial highway to Ferra Nea?"

"Then I must go to Broadford," Maran stated, "I leave in the morning. Could I get a room for the night?"

From elsewhere in the house, a voice yelled, "At last!"

The landlady looked apologetically at Maran. "I can't get rid of him."

An exotic yet ragged elf strode into the room. "I must meet the woman who braves the road to Broadford. Let me introduce myself, I am Zebra, swordsman and adventurer. I have plied my trade across this world. I have been kicked out of every city from Charystos to Venalicium. I am at your service." He bowed with a flourish.

Maran knew about elves. Yet this elf was nothing like the stories that she heard about any elf before. His skin shone bright, like new copper. His hair cascaded down with the green tint of weathered copper. His clothing hung loosely, worn and torn from a hard and hazardous life. Maran could see that this was once nice clothing, with time and misfortune taxing it to rags.

The elf placed his hands on his hips, "I am Zebra, master of the dueling blade and adventurer extraordinaire. I now beg your name. Will you give it?"

Maran blinked for several seconds, then resolved. "I am Maran, Sir. I am a hearth tender in

my father's hall." She stood and curtsied her best curtsy.

Zebra looked a little more surprised. "That is a holy job, hearth tender. You are to be honored. Yes, indeed! It is I who should speak better of you." The elf knelt to her on one bended knee.

Maran shook her head, "No. No, you misunderstand. Being a hearth tender is a lowly job. I feed the fires, collect the ashes, and clean the hearths, Sir. Do not kneel to me."

Zebra doffed his hat as well, "No, my good dwarven woman, it is not lowly or unworthy. To care for fire is a holy calling. There is no calling more holy. I honor you. Among my people, the Schan, who live in the fiery land of Schanderna, we live for the great Lady Plasm, Lady of All Fire. To be a servant of hers is our greatest honor. I must address my Lady's servants. Be it known that I will be as a servant to you."

Maran stood nonplussed by this action. This strange elf made a strange sense with his babbling, but she could not figure out what it was. She looked to the landlady, but that woman shook her head with frustration. "Can't get rid of him," she mouthed.

Zebra stood with a flourish. "I see now that my Lady has led me here. Fate has joined us. Adventure is to be had! My fighting blades have been long silent and so they shall sing. I am in your service. I will take up arms with you. We shall defeat the bandits who block the road, and you shall lead us to victory. I shall gather others of like mind, and together, we shall remove this blight from this land!"

Before Maran could stop him, Zebra stood, swirling out of the room, leaving a bewildered Loam in his wake.

With this demonstration, the landlady took pity upon Maran. "The only thing that man is good for is a fight and he doesn't own a sword."

In times of peace, swordsmen are uneasy.

Tazebra was a swordsman, in training and in blood. He learned his maneuvers, precisely and exactly. He learned the vulnerable points on the body, throat, chest, and thigh. He learned to fight with guile and speed. He learned to read his opponent. He learned happiness. To wield a sword is a sacred joy.

When war came, he went to war. He learned the ways of the intruder. No fortress and no defense could stop an intruder. They lived on the edge between life and death, their audacity and fearlessness driving their courage. They left many officers dead in their own beds. The missions were dangerous, and they always returned without friends. The Red Lady of War is an unforgiving mistress.

With peace, Tazebra grew restless and wandered from his home in Schanderna, always seeking the thrill and danger that heart craved. Time and again he sought the razor's edge.

He traveled to the human world to fight in their cities. Sometimes he won. Sometimes he lost. Always he wanted more. He wanted to fight the best, and the best fought in Charystos. He traveled to the ancient capital of all the world, and there he fought the finest street duelists in the world. Those fights were good. He made his living letting blood on the streets, and he was happy.

Perfect worlds do not stay perfect. They get swept away in the tides of change. Someone gets too brash, a prince dies from his own hubris, and the world crumbles like a child's pretend house. The result was inevitable. A grieving mother is a storm unto the world. The announcement came soon after, "Effective immediately, by order of the Queen of Charystos, and Empress of the Malachite Empire, that all dueling in the streets is forbidden on pain of exile or death."

The street duelers thought nothing of this ban. The laws of Charystos were rarely enforced, and bribery cleared up most charges. Short of sending in the army, the Queen had no way to enforce her order. Feeling confident, the duelers continued their duels, and the gamblers continued their betting. This did not continue for long. The Queen hired men who found them. One by one, the great duelists fell. Xetoc lost his right arm resisting capture. Jelta hung by her neck for murder, the blood of a foolish Prince on her hands. Many more followed. Finally, Taruman fought an entire company in his hubris, killing fourteen men before his head hit the cobblestones. With his death, the great age of dueling was over.

As for Zebra, his landlady turned him in. The Queen's men stuffed him into a bag, took his sword, and tossed him on a boat to Tasa Kora. Zebra tried to duel in Tasa Kora, but the criminal syndicates there were bloodthirsty and had no honor. No self-respecting duelist took a fall. Zebra spent what little money he had to leave, traveling across the Savage Seas seeking adventure. He used his last penny to pick his next destination: Fort Resolute or Jumbalaya? Heads came up. The Griffon Emperor won. Zebra walked to Fort Resolute.

The landlady, Bertra, recalled that her former Loam tenants were very good with pottery. She brought some things to Maran. If Maran would fix them, the landlady promised her a room for the night. Maran found this offer acceptable, so settled herself into sorting out a broken pitcher.

Mending pottery relaxed Maran. Since childhood, she had a secret joy in reassembling broken things. She could sit for hours on end figuring one end from another. For the Loam, mending pottery or ceramic lay among their unique skills. Clay came from soft earth. Even hardened by fire, its nature remained and the Loam could touch that. The Randsfjorden looked down on the Loam for their work in clay. Why make artificial rock when they had so much real rock? Randsfjorden were famous for their stoneware. Loam were infamous for their mockery of stoneware.

Maran stayed well occupied until Zebra returned, bringing with him a petite young woman who walked with considerable authority. The woman carried a gray umbrella in her left hand, holding it firmly. Her clothes were gray robes with blue arms, a blue sash, and a complex belt with knotted strings hanging from it. Zebra carried her case. It did not look

heavy.

Zebra gestured towards Maran. "She is the one."

The woman made a dismissing gesture. "You may go, Zebra." She turned to Maran, then spoke exactly, "I am Lady Altyn Tag. To whom do I speak?"

Maran brushed the pottery dust off herself as she stood. "I am Maran, good lady."

Altyn examined Maran more closely. "I was expecting something different from you. Zebra spoke of you as if you were the first born of some fire god. To me, you look like a farm girl."

Maran nodded. "I am a hearth tender. He believes that a holy position. I could not convince him otherwise."

Altyn took off her gloves. "Be that as it may, it remains an impressive position for one so young. Maran, I do not guiding people well. It is best that you remain in charge. You need not worry. I will direct you. Now call the landlady. I wish supper. You shall join me. What would you like?"

Becoming a Storm Sage is difficult. The position requires both sublime mastery of the air and practical mastery politics. In the flying city of Astrea, magic and politics were one in the same. On Astrea, politics is played by chess masters. Their strategies are obscure; their motions indecipherable.

Altyn Tag's family's power gave her access to the highest levels of education and power. They gave her the best tutors. They sent her to the best schools. By all measures, her future seemed secure. Her parents arranged a very prestigious position for her, one that would lead to the coveted title of Storm Sage.

Altyn's parents could not know that their good fortune came from their enemies. Her parents went to strange lands for an opportunity of a lifetime. Altyn herself remained behind, her last few weeks of school before her assignment. She would then move on to her new position.

Two weeks was enough to undo her future.

By tradition, her school formed students into triads. The fate of one student was the fate of all three. The purpose of this was rather practical: to minimize the level of outside politics on the school. Any move to strike at one enemy would produce two additional enemies.

One weeks before the allotment of positions, significant allegations arose about one of Altyn's triad. These were serious enough to warrant investigation. Her triad was suspended until such time as these allegations were investigated. Those investigations took two weeks. The results came back clear: there was no impropriety.

Although the results were clear, the damage was done. All three had lost their allotted positions. Unable to fulfill their obligations, others were put into their allotted places. The school handed them their rings and showed them the door. The system could do nothing more for them.

Altyn carried her case through the streets, finding a place to watch the lands below go by. She sat down and thought a long while. She could easily walk home. The servants would welcome her home and keep her safe. She would languish there. With no prospects of a position and the shadow of a scandal over her triad, the matchmakers would skip over her. Her considerable chances of marrying up into the most elite of society were gone. Home lead to nothing, and nothing was unacceptable.

Sad, Altyn watched the lands below slip by below. They were almost across the Hadeas, the great mountains spanning the middle of the world. The navigator brought the city lower, slipping down through the mountains. She spotted the tiered farms, carved into the mount sides, ribbony and wondrously beautiful. Beyond the farms was the Pit, and beyond that the smog-covered canyon that was Jura city.

She looked at he school ring. Each one was unique, designed by the headmaster. Hers was a stylized sunburst pattern around an amber stone in an old style. This was the symbol of the legendary Crusade of Light. She remembered the stories, and she remembered how much that she wanted to part of those stories. A flood of dreams returned to Altyn. Her heart leapt with adventuring across lost lands, slaying dragons, rescuing nations, and winning the mantle of Storm Sage by her heroics.

There were few things that trumped family and politics in Astrea. If she were successful enough to gain wings from Lord Astreaus, the God of Air, then she could go beyond all mortal titles, and she would be a Storm Sage of the highest order.

With a ruined and boring life before her, Altyn chose danger and reward. If fortune abandoned her, then it must be fame that redeems her. It must be fame that propelled her into the highest level of nobility. Altyn picked up her case in resolve. She must leave her city and its safety, and venture forth to the most dangerous part of the world. She would not return until stood above her peers.

Altyn purchased her ticket to the ground and did not look back.

Danger. Maran admitted it. She would be in danger. She would do what it took to reach Broadford. She would track down her cousin. Yet there was danger, and she did not want danger. Most likely, their fears were unfounded. They were just three people. They would slip through to Broadford and that would be that.

Maran did not believe herself. She knew better than to trust in her own optimism. Her grandfather's voice echoed through her head "You don't need to plan for the best."

Danger required both proper arms and armor, both of which were critically out of her reach.

The Loam had their own answer to this problem. They were a poor people steeped in the secrets of soil. They knew pottery. Pottery responded to them. They could make pottery flexible and malleable, or they could make it hard and resilient. The Loam regularly made their tools and utensils out of strengthened ceramic. For armor, they collected the pottery that others discarded and turned it into a scale style armor. They could also turn the broken pottery into a variety of basic weapons, depending on the materials and time available.

Zebra was quite willing to help Maran. He went searching for pottery as he searched for others to help their cause. He returned frequently with pottery shards of all shapes and colors.

Maran began with a weapon. That was the easiest task. She took a broom handle, some shards of broken plate, and constructed a flanged mace for herself. A few finger-pinches guaranteed a few sharper edges. The white and blue glazing from the plate gave the mace a decorative look. From a distance, you would believe the weapon a parade piece made more for beauty than for use.

Altyn watched the process with fascination. "I did not know those things could be done. I learned nothing of such techniques."

Maran shrugged. "You aren't as poor as we are. Why should you learn them?"

With her shorter project done, Maran launched into making her armor. She rolled one fragment into an awl to create hole. She systematically pierced and shaped each fragment into useful shape. She merged some fragments. She split others. She finished by smoothing out the rough edged, making sure that she did not suffer for wearing her own armor. She soon had a pile of rainbow colored scales for her armor.

Sewing the armor together was the hard part. She used twine to lace it all together. In a fight, the armor would not last long. That was not its job. It was there to last just long enough to keep her from dying horribly. Due to all the pleats, the work went slow. Maran saw herself staying up the whole night getting this done.

"You would be valued in Astrea," Altyn commented, "We must import everything. Turbulence breaks many jugs and plates. You could make a profitable career fixing these things. When I have a proper household, I will hire you."

"Plates shouldn't break. You just strengthen them. See." She took out her ceramic knife, banging it on the floor a few times. "You have to be a fool to make a breakable plate."

"Wondrous. We shall keep that secret to ourselves. I shall have unbreakable plates and my neighbors shall not." Maran had no doubt that she would tell all her neighbors.

Maran paused, then spoke about the subject. "By dwarven law, we are not allowed," Maran replied, "The Hadean Priests consider these techniques blasphemous. Dwarves do not make fake stone. We may not export such items, nor may we take contracts or employment to produce such items, nor may we give them as gifts, nor may we use these techniques in any sort of service. However, we can use these techniques for ourselves and make things for

ourselves."

Altyn shook her head at the madness of dwarves. She returned to weaving her beads. Her bead-strings held reminders of arcane secrets, so that studying them refreshed the mind where the mind needed refreshing. All the secrets were placed into knots and beads, allowing an adept to easily refer to knowledge in the windiest environments. Great wind masters possessed strings hanging from every part of their bodies. In this way, she remained occupied through the afternoon.

Near sunset, Zebra returned again. This time, a huge man in shining armor accompanied him. The man looked visibly irritated. "My friends," said Zebra, "This is Sigaid Arth, he has come here to help us."

The vast hairy bulk of Sigaid looked over the assembled group. His eyes peered out through unruly hair and wild eyebrows, noting each person in the room and determining their worth. He turned back to Zebra, looking down at him, "This is your team? They are pathetic. I have better offers." The man walked out the door, slamming it with a crack.

Zebra shrugged, then walked over to the remains of Altyn's dinner, making no comment the warrior. As he ate the scraps on the plate, he spoke, waving a bread crust, "My friends, we begin today this task of driving off the bandits who raid the road to Broadford. I do not pretend that it is an easy task. No. It is not an easy task, and that is what make this task so engaging. We must use our wits and our courage together to secure victory. I believe shall secure victory. We shall go forth, engage the enemy, and vanquish him."

Zebra stopped. They expected him to say more, but Zebra only stood there, apparently finished. Altyn, sensing that the whole meeting was careening with no sense of direction, spoke up. "That is an excellent approach, Zebra. I am sure that we will fulfill you vision. Maran, you have been tasked with developing a more detailed plan. Please discuss the difficulties that we face and possible mitigations of those difficulties."

All eyes to Maran and she froze. She was not ready for this. Her brain stopped. For many seconds, she stared at her companions. Unexpectedly, as if on cue, she caught herself freezing and she found the start of a sentence. "I have been thinking this. Our first problem is that we do not know where the bandit camp lies. Second, we can safely assume that their camp is walled or otherwise defended, so we must find our way into those defenses. Third, and by no means least important, we must defeat an unknown number of bandits to take the field."

Maran stood, then paced, thinking as she spoke. "They have the following advantages: they have numbers, they have equipment, and we do not know where their camp lies. Until we can proffer advantages on par with that, we will not see victory.

"The one advantage that we have is preparation. We know that we are going to attack them in a few days. They don't. They will not be deployed correctly. We choose the battlefield and the time. We get to choose the stakes."

Everyone nodded at this.

"Here's my plan. We need to find their camp. The best way to do that is to let them capture someone. We then follow them in. I volunteer me. I am a dwarf and they will want to capture me. We also need leverage. That will be alcohol. I get caught trying to smuggle alcohol through their toll racket. They capture me and take me to their camp. They drink the alcohol. You follow me to the camp. I open the gate. We kill many drunks."

Altyn nodded for the plan but Zebra frowned. He saw the sense of the plan, but he was disappointed that they were not charging in, fighting all the toughest enemies across the walls, and earning victory in the face of certain death.

Maran returned them to the topic at hand. "We need to review our capabilities. How are we on armor and weapons?"

Zebra drew and showed his dagger. "This is all that is left of my weapons. With this, I will gain victory. I will also make armor from pressed ash. This armor is known to my people. it is very cheap to make and almost impossible to destroy."

Altyn showed her hands and a smile. She did not need armor or weapons. She had a fan and an umbrella.

Maran held up her crude mace and half-sewn armor, "I have these. I am tolerable archer. I'm an acceptable warrior. I believe in meeting my enemies head-on."

Everyone nodded. They were each still willing.

Maran sighed. Deep inside, she had hoped that someone would be unwilling. She wanted someone else to break away. She wanted someone else to find and destroy these bandits. Her fears filled her briefly, but she waited for them to subside. She vowed to find her countrymen, and that was her duty, even if her duty were hard.

With that plan established, they retired for the evening. The landlady kicked Zebra out of his room, placing the two women there. Zebra went out to walk the streets. He eventually wandered in late and slept on the kitchen table.

In their small room, the women settled down. Maran continued her armor, working through the tedious and repetitive weaving of the plates. Meanwhile, Altyn removed her costume, piece by piece, placing each item precisely on the dresser. As she removed each item, she removed some inhibition upon her, growing more relaxed and talkative as she went. She began by commenting upon the room and the landlady, soon growing chatty and inane. Maran realized that Altyn was younger than she had thought, barely twenty years of age.

Altyn's chatter soon became informative. "This room is such luxury. We get one room to ourselves. Can you believe it? I am used to the dorms at school, where you sleep three to a bed, six beds to a room. Everyone wakes at the same time, and everyone sleeps at the same time. And now I am here, and I can stay up as I please and sleep as I please. I only need agree with one person. We can even stay up and talk. That would be so good. I have never hired my own servant before. We really need to get to know each other. We'll have

such fun."

Altyn laid herself on top of the bed with its thin blankets and hard mattress. She turned over to watch Maran working. "When you are in the sky, you are never warm. The fuel costs too much money. If you wanted heat, you had to bribe the hearth tender. I am sure that you must have been bribed by many people. How did you reach such a high position so young?"

"High position? Hearth tender is not a high position."

"Really?" inquired Altyn, "Then who do you give your purse to? Who buys the wood?"

"You buy the wood from the woodcutter. He gets it from the trees. Most things are far more valuable than wood."

"We must import everything. We must ferry everything up, load by load. The city itself is very crowded. We have nowhere to build. We have buildings on buildings. Everything is only as big as it needs to be. I had no ideas that buildings could be so luxurious until I came here."

Maran held her tongue. Even to a farm girl, this boarding house looked like one step above squalor.

In time, conversation turned to Zebra. They both agreed that Zebra had no hidden agenda. He was exactly who he appeared to be, which was a truly impressive fact.

After speaking for a while, they slept.

Fort Resolute stood as the capital for Cladhathach, a principality of considerable size. The trio walked eastward for an entire day along the highway, yet they did not exit the realm. At first, they traveled with many others, but as the day wore on, the travelers turned off one by one, until only the three remained.

The March weather returned towards evening, the cool and blustery gusts blowing through them. The sun rarely showed, rarely allowing them to grow warm in the day. Their cheeks flushed red from the continuous damp cold. Despite the cool wind, the daffodils grew green amid snow patches, readying to bloom.

The trio carried little with them. Altyn wrapped her clothes around her in their many layers. She was used to wind and cold, but she was not used to damp and cold. This experience was new to her. Maran carried Altyn's case, little noticing the weight that she carried. As a mountain dweller, Maran had enough clothing to stay warm. Zebra had little to nothing. He shivered in the wind but never complained.

Zebra carried his future armor, which was nothing more than a pile of burlap sacks. When they rested, he pulled out the cloth and stitched more. He would soon be wearing rags on

top of rags. Maran could see that the wind whipped through him, but he refused to acknowledge the hardship. Surprisingly, the armor came together. He worked cinders and ash into the weave, creating a material as strong and light as boiled leather, but darker and duller than any leather.

When trio finally found the inn, they all sighed with deep relief. Even Zebra greeted the warmth and the light with relish. His refusal to show hardship contrasted greatly with his exuberance in any delight. In a move that surprised them, Zebra pressed his hands directly into the fire, showing the same relief that a thirsty man might show after a deep drink of water.

Zebra talked around the common room. He did his best to excite those who sat there. Too many were merchants or farmers. None wished to face the dangers that lie in the badlands. They did wish him the best of luck, buying him a few rounds. Despite all this goodwill, Zebra still succeeded in finding a fight. The innkeeper kicked him out, so he slept with the dogs.

The second day's weather proved harder than the first. The winds picked up considerably, gusting all day. The cold and damp wind cut through them, sending shivers down their spines. Despite all their warm clothing, they did not feel warm. Zebra grew so cold that he wrapped his threadbare blanket about himself. Maran and Altyn, both veterans of cold climes, felt the damp air suck the warmth from them.

In their travels, they left the land of Cladhathach behind them, moving into the emptied land of Whitthorn. The locals said that Whitthorn was once a prosperous land, but war and fear had whittled her down to a handful of settlements scattered along the highway. Beyond Whitthorn was the Mallaig Badlands, a land of crags, crevasses, irregular forest, and undergrowth. It was here that the bandits raided the highways.

On the edge of the badlands lie the heavily walled Hawick Inn. They stopped there for the night. The only other boarder was a dark skinned man with a flashing smile and hearty laugh. When he heard their mission, he laughed more. "Only a fool would do as you see," he said, "But only a fool would follow him whim across the world, just to see what is there. My friend, you now have me curious. I want to know the answer to these riddles that you pose. May I join you?"

A restless heart moves a restless man. A righteous heart moves a righteous man. Who can rest happy when the islands are ruled by pirates and thieves? How can a man guard what others have robbed? How can a righteous man guard robbers? How can a man with a wife and six children abandon them for a cause far beyond himself?

Osei Akyem went to Grandmother Akibinu, and he asked her these questions. She looked deep into him with her milky eyes, blind with age, and spoke to him. "The old blood awakens in you. Your father and your uncles can see it. The elders see it. Do not fear this. Rejoice, for the blood of our ancestors moves within you. You are no hired guard. You are a Sea Lord. You have no destiny but that which you forge for yourself. Sit with me, and I shall teach you old ways of scale and shell, and the mysteries of the deep water."

Grandmother Akibinu taught Osei the old ways, for the sea blood flowed strongly within her, and she had lived many years beyond that of most men. When she was done teaching, she declared a feast. They held a great feast in honor of the Dauphin, Elemental Lady of the Water. Many came. They poured many libations of port and rum. They made a great feast upon the shore. Osei sacrificed many animals, letting their blood flow into the waters. In an event unseen for a generation, the Sea People responded, leaving the water to join their celebration on the shore. After a long estrangement, Dauphin again accepted the people of Jumbalaya, and she gave her blessings to Osei.

During the feast, Osei rose and addressed his family, friends, and new friends.

"Welcome my friends," said Osei, "Hear what I have learned and remember. A long time ago, when the world was greater, we left Rhakotis to explore the great oceans. Our ancestors wrecked upon Jumbalaya. They married the daughters of the sea. As a wedding gift, the Lord Tsunami, rulers of all the waters, gave unto our ancestors all the islands of all oceans and the surface of all the seas. In time, we grew into a great people, respected and feared by all. We were the Sea Lords. We explored all the known world and beyond. Our restless hearts pushed us ever onward. Ever do our hearts wander.

"Where are we now, my family and friends? We suffer. Our people now have nothing. The sea is not our own. Our homes are not our own. Jumbalaya Island was once our garden, and Kingsport our capital. Our island appeared so beautiful that the Emperor Thule built a palace here, and he recognized the Sea Lords dominion over all whole oceans. Of those great days, we have nothing. We lost all when Lord Tsunami fell. We failed to embrace the new Lady, and she frowned upon us. Look at what we have gained. Pirates and thieves now call themselves our kings. They live in the palace once reserved for emperors. They sail the seas given to us. Venalicious fights the pirates. Venalicious plies the waters, claiming that the ocean is theirs. What do we do? Do we build ships? Do we fight for what is ours? Do we honor our ancient blood? No.

"That my father should have fought for me, I might be free. That my grandfather should have fought for me, I should be free. I am not. No. That I shall fight for my sons and my daughters, they will be free. That I shall fight for your sons and daughters, they shall be free. That I shall fight for all sons and all daughters of all people, they shall be free. I vow this: that I shall journey, and when I am ready, I shall return. When I return, Dauphin will flow with me and I shall strike down the pirate king, and they shall fear the Sea Lords once again."

Chapter 2: The Compound

Night fell. Maran watched Zebra swagger into the night. He went to scout their way and to learn what he could of the bandits and their hideout. Maran itched with worry. "I am a Schan infiltrator," he reassured her, "The night is my lover, easily wooed but impossible to hold. We go where no others can to do what no others can do. I have crossed many foreign lands, passed unseen through enemy lines, and killed their lords in their own beds. I do not fear. I fear more that I should be denied."

This waiting grated on Maran. How long should he be gone? Would he fight the bandits by himself? The man might. Maran returned to the iron gate frequently, listening in the darkness for friend. The wind rose. A south wind blew, bringing thunder and heavy rain. The heavens battled. The cacophony calmed Altyn. "A warm front from the south," she commented, "We will have warmer weather tomorrow."

The storm abated. The hours passed by as the night grew full. Osei spoke to Maran, keeping her vigil. "The night runs in his soul, like soot in fire. He will not return soon. Go to bed. Tomorrow begins too early."

No one knew when Zebra returned. Maran found him in the pre-dawn, sleeping on the kitchen table. When he returned, he had stuffed himself full of whatever he could find before he fell collapsed. He roused himself as the house rose.

The innkeeper, long suffering from the lack of traffic, filled their bags with food and prayed for them. They walked into the damp dawn.

Zebra led them down the road. "It will be several hours before we reach the bandits. Their main group is formed up along the road ahead of us. There are too many to fight, so I will lead us along the southern footpaths. They seem to come from that area. I found places where small groups watch the paths. We can use them out our advantage."

They wandered through the side paths for a while, twisting and turning who knows where. Craggs rose and fell in unpredictable order. The trees grew larger and closer together.

Zebra stopped them at a strategic point. "We are near a watch point. We can go no further. Maran, it is time for you to go forward on your own. Good fortune, my friend. You have great courage, and that I respect. Have no fear. We shall follow you and we shall free you. If we are lucky, there will be a good fight."

Maran sighed, then handed her mace to Zebra. She took off her armored coat, handing that to Osei. Altyn picked up her own case again.

Maran felt naked without her things. Even though they were new things, and she never needed such thing before, they had been comforting in the face of danger. Maran wrapped her shawl about her, trying to wrap in what spirit remained in her. Slowly, with overwhelmed breath, Maran picked up her load of alcohol, paused and resolved, then stepped forward in small steps. She looked back several times, but found that looking back made her task too difficult. She refocused her will, facing herself forward. Fear should not rule her. She took bold steps forward, quickly leaving her companions.

As she walked, she dropped bits of colorful pottery on the ground. If she was fortunate, she would drop enough to make a clear trail to the bandit's hideout. She hid bits in her sleeves and belt as well. She wanted every guarantee that she could arrange. If her friends could not follow her, she would far too easily face her own doom.

Maran walked easily with her heavy load. As a farm girl, her strong shoulders carried heavy burdens every day. Maran settled properly into her load, setting her feet into their rhythm. Once moving, the walk relaxed her. She fell straight back into her normal routine, letting her mind wander. She gazed at the world about her, charmed by the spring that came early here. Many wildflowers already bloomed in the frigid morning, living their lives in narrow cracks and meager patches. This was a harsh land, she noted to herself, but a good land. A Loam could make a good life here, carving terraces into the land as they did in their homeland. In a century or so, this would be a fine farmland.

A glint from the right brought her back in a snap. Fear gripped Maran. Two armed men sprang out of hiding, one grabbing her by her collar, bringing a knife to her throat.

"You lose," said the other, "The boss doesn't want anybody coming through here. That includes little geniuses like you who try to go around. The boss is not forgiving."

Maran looked to both. "I'm sorry. I don't have any money. This is all that I have. I didn't want to do this. Can't I just go? You can have the firewater. Just let me go."

"No dice, dwarf." asserted the man, "The boss likes to make a bad example of people just like you. You think you're so smart, but you're dumb." The man grabbed her by the hair. "You will regret that you tried to sneaking through here. I'm going to take you to the boss, and then he'll put you in irons, and we'll sell you to the goblins. How do you like that? Was that worth a sovereign?"

The big one pushed Maran down. The little one barked orders. "I want you to walk. If you do not walk, I kill you. Now walk, damn it. Walk!"

The big one chuckled. The little one laughed in return. The little one forced Maran away down the path. The large one lingered on the path for a while, then retreated into his hiding spot.

Several minutes later, Zebra stabbed the larger man in the back. Zebra did not check to see if his victim was alive or dead, as he did not care. It was Osei who muttered a brief prayer, then sent the man to the nether-world.

Osei caught Zebra by the arm, "You should have more respect for live."

Zebra shook him off, "You should have more respect for death."

Altyn called them back to their duty, who had found Maran's trail leading off. The colored bits that Maran dropped could easily be followed. Between the bits, scuff marks, the soft ground, they had no trouble following Maran's trail.

Zebra killed more lookouts along the way. Most bore only knives and clubs. Their clothing was poor. Their faces were gaunt. Most bore whip marks, both old and new. "They were all slaves," Osei noted to Altyn, "And perhaps they still are slaves, if not in body, then in mind. They deserve better than death."

After half an hour, in an area dominated by pines and maples, they came to a large gorge or a small canyon. Hidden below them was a compound built against a cliff, defended by a palisade of log and mud. A tower stood at each corner, protecting a crude door in the center. Behind the compound rose a short cliff topped by a trees and a great rock. In the cliff opened a large maw protected with a large door.

"They made this place hard to find. That's good for us. The trees and ground cover will shield us as we advance," commented Zebra, "The defenses are crude but effective. I can get in easily. I need you to set up a distraction. The sooner we get inside, the sooner we get Maran back. Take out the alarm bells first." Zebra started forward.

Altyn paused him, "Zebra! The plan was to let them get drunk first!"

Zebra smiled back at her. "They are too much rabble to worry over. Look at them. They are half-starved and badly armed, hiding in a hole beneath the ground. They can't respond fast. We can take them. Give me two minutes." With that, Zebra advanced, disappearing into the underbrush, despite Altyn's angry orders. Their plan was now to attack and win.

Altyn gave Osei a concerned look. Osei met her eyes, "I will do what I must. I will fight, but I will not slaughter. Left tower, then right."

Osei took out his great bow made of whale bone and shark cartilage. Altyn readied her umbrella. After waiting several minutes, Osei took aim at the guards fired. With a smooth rhythm, he drew and fired, his shell-tipped arrow flying silently, felling his target.

Altyn stood slightly behind Osei. She flicked her umbrella by the middle, moving her whole body in a whipping motion. A small crack erupted from her target, throwing a man backwards off the tower. Two were down. Altyn's follow-up shot missed the next man, striking the bell instead, sending a loud peal through the gorge. Osei winced. Altyn shrugged. "He wanted a distraction, he's got a distraction. Now, let's hope we take this place before all of creation comes down on us."

The surviving watchmen saw where the attacks came from. They peppered the area with crossbows, missing wildly. As they reloaded, Altyn and Osei advanced, killing the last watchman in the leftmost tower. They turned their attack to the right tower. The crossbows now fired closer to them. They fell, only to be replaced by two ugly things who were far better shots. These soldiers knelt, using their cover well.

"Hobgoblin mercenaries," Osei stated, shielding Altyn from the bolts, "They aim better than slaves."

When the bandits shut Maran into a small cage, she got worried fast. This was not her plan. How would she get out? They were not drinking anything. They were so worried about their boss that Maran feared that she truly would be chained-up and shipped into slavery. She looked about in fright. The only identifiable slave that she could see was a fox-headed

reynard carrying water. His chains were riveted on, neck to armor to leg. These things looked so large on his naturally small frame. She pitied him. Maran paused. If she did not get out, she would pity herself.

Among the humans she saw hobgoblins, and the hobgoblins were giving the orders. What would hobgoblins be doing among humans? Were they from the Feral Nation? If so, that would explain why the bandits were so successful. They were not preying on traffic, but stopping it!

One particularly strong and ugly hobgoblin stamped up to her cage. He did not say a word. He expertly reached in, grabbed her, then hauled her out in an arm lock. "Time to get you chained up," he complained, "Sweep! I get your ass down to the forge."

The smith dragged her down into the caves behind the palisade. The many tunnels looked extensive. He veered down several corridors, always keeping her off balance. Maran dropped the last few bits hoped beyond hope that Zebra would find her.

The smithy itself was a hot little room, cramped and dusty. Maran frowned at its poor condition. No self-respecting dwarven smith would leave his forge in such condition.

The smith dropped her into stocks, clamping them shut. "This make my job easier," he said, patting her cheek. The smith turned and pumped the forge. As the smith worked, he commented to her. "I never know when I'll get a new prisoner in, so I like to keep a few rivets in the coals, just in case." He reached in with tongs and pulled out a glowing rivet. "I enjoy chaining the dwarves the most. When I think of the irony, I feel double the satisfaction."

The reynard wrapped manacles about Maran's hands, wrists, and throat. Maran took a chance. She whispered to him, "Free me. I'm here to help you."

The reynard shook his orange head. "With that dragon down there, nothing can free us. He has four hundred bandits and hundreds slaves. Can you defeat four hundred bandits?" Sweep cast his eyes down again.

The mention of "dragon" caught Maran's ear. Dragons were always bad news, even if small. "Tell me about the dragon."

Sweep looked briefly at his owner, and seeing no danger, whispered to her, "The leader is a dragon, and you had better respect him. He's a foul thing. If he thinks that you are useful, he'll keep you here rather than sell you to the Feral Nation. If he hates you, he'll just eat you."

A noise came from the passage beyond. A resounding bell rang. She heard a few distant screams. Were her companions? She grimaced at her failure. She was locked up when they needed the gate opened! If it was them, there would be help. Where was Zebra? Why weren't they following the plan? All those questions popped through her mind fast as fast, just before the smith clamped the first rivet into her collar. With his great strength, he quickly squeezed the rivet with his pliers. Within a minute, he pushed all the rivets in. The

reynard doused them with water. Maran was now stuck in chains.

The smith released Maran from the stocks, daring her to fight. He pushed her a few times in amusement. "Where's that dwarf gusto now? Do something. Come on. Make me laugh."

Out of her eye, Maran saw Zebra moving quietly into the room. She avoided glancing at him. He needed a distraction, and that she could do. She charged at the smith, letting the chains trip her. The smith laughed deeply as she smacked the ground, but stopped when Zebra drove his knife into the hobgoblin's back. The smith grimaced. Unexpectedly, the he did not collapse. He spun about, letting his hefty arm do the work for him. His fist slammed Zebra, staggering the Schan into a shelf. The smith then grabbed his forge hammers, spinning them expertly in his hands.

"I'm tougher than that, elf," he bragged as he sent one hammer flying at Zebra, missing closer than Maran preferred.

Zebra slipped back in, feinting and waiting. Maran gave him the opportunity. She rolled into the smith, distracting him. Zebra took that split second to drive a knife into the smith. Zebra moved fast, but not fast enough. The smith moved with astounding speed, only taking a long graze on his arm. He retaliated by kicking Maran solidly, nearly knocking the breath out of her. Maran responded by rolling onto her back and kicking with both feet. Again, she missed. Again Zebra darted in when the smith lost his focus, this time pushing his knife into the smith's ribs. The hulking smith gasped, his lungs empty. Zebra followed up with a throat cut, severing a blood vessel which sprayed forth until the hobgoblin died. The body slammed wetly into the ground.

Maran rolled onto her back sighed. She was alive and Zebra was here. She muttered a prayer of thanks to her favorite god.

Zebra grabbed her by her chains, yanking her up. "We must open the gate," he noted.

"I'm in chains!" Maran objected.

Zebra gave Maran her mace back. "Hold this." Maran grabbed it between her chained hands. Zebra grabbed Maran, tossing her across his shoulder. Zebra gasped, unexpectedly confirming that dwarves are heavy. Undaunted, he kept her up there as he staggered along. He carried her back out to the compound where loud noises peppered the air. Across the court Maran saw many bodies blown from the tower, many in pieces. Men stooped behind the rude battlements that were the wall. The towers now stood undefended.

Zebra dropped Maran, heading for the gate, only to spot the gate's defender. A hobgoblin taskmaster loosened his chain-whip, barbed and lethal. He casually flicked the chain about himself, wielding the awkward weapon as if it were a instrument, ringing as he chose. He looked eager for a fight, but not impatient. He could afford patience.

Maran drifted left, Zebra twisted right. This felt dangerous to Maran. She could taste the danger. Her mind fell into her training from home. He skills as a caller took over. Only this time, the victim could understand her. Maran watched the taskmaster, learning his moves as

Zebra dashed back and forth, daring the taskmaster to make a move. Each move gave Maran pieces. Her brain began solving the puzzle, so often had she done this. She directed Zebra even as she herself dashed and moved. "Drift left, feint right. Push! Push!" The fight moved across the yard with great speed, the taskmaster aggressively defending his position in see-saw maneuvers. "Flank right!" she shouted, Zebra dashing over. In that moment, the battle flipped. The taskmaster's well trained discipline sent him right, flipping his position with their. Maran and Zebra now held the door.

The taskmaster immediately recognized his mistake. He swung his chain wildly, aiming for Maran. Zebra took the blow, slamming into the ground. The taskmaster cursed. He had the wrong opponent caught. In those brief seconds, Maran managed with her shoulder to lift the bar and open the gate. Osei strode through in his heavy, shell armor. His eyes caught the taskmaster's. He readied his trident, coldly, like a farmer readies to slaughter an animal. He moved in like a dancer, aggressively pushing into the taskmaster.

The taskmaster panicked. He freed his chain from Zebra, swinging it as quickly as possible. Osei did not care. The chain could not bite through his armor. Flashing his trident forward, he backed the taskmaster into a corner, step by step, then killed him.

With the taskmaster's death, the remaining bandits fled. Altyn let them pass by. When all had left, she ordered, "Bar this door!"

Maran grabbed Altyn. "There's a dragon in that cave. We don't have much time. We need to get into that cave and bar the inside door. If it gets out, we don't stand a chance. The think will fly." Even a weak dragon could kill a platoon of soldiers. Their reputation for cunning and violence filled the legends. Dragons were creatures to be respected.

The word "dragon" caught everyone's attention. Altyn looked Maran into their eyes, then nodded. Maran yelled out, "Move it people. Through that door now!"

Maran ran clinking. She had no idea how she would fight in chains. That did not matter. She did not have time. Fate raced to meet them. They rushed forward, pulling the large doors closed. The sun disappeared with the doors, slivers of light illuminating the tunnel.

Maran ambled to the fore. "Stand ready. Strike where you can. Protect each other. Don't hold back. Dragons don't give you a second chance."

A growl responded. "You need correction," hissed a thing sliding up the shadows, "I am Blightgarten and I give no chances. Open the door, and I shall let you live. Deny me and die." The sound of scales stirred enmity in Maran. All dwarves, deep in their souls, revile the stirrings of dragons.

"No," Maran responded, a little too softly, "We are firm. We oppose you."

The dragon rumbled, "I smell your fear. You are not firm. You are not strong. I shall play and you shall die."

The dragon spoke no more. The thing surged forward, slamming through Maran and Osei,

tossing them to the floor. The thing reared to strike Altyn when Altyn brought down her umbrella with a terrible word. A cacophonous thunderclap slammed the scaled beast backwards, overwhelmed for the briefest moment. That moment was enough. Zebra moved in with his knife, slicing the thing under its wing joint.

Osei rolled back onto his feet, surprisingly agile in his armor. He pushed the trident's point into the creature's flesh, along the flank. The thing kicked in response, pushing Osei backwards.

As Altyn raised her umbrella a second time, the dragon spun in reaction, using its heavy tail to slam the umbrella from her hands, cracking the thing like a shattered ribcage.

Fearing for Altyn, Maran threw herself bodily into the dragon's side, diverting its attention. The thing bit at Maran, catching her by the chains. With a quick head snap, it whipped her around, hurling her further into the cave. Using its momentum, it slammed itself towards Altyn. She dodged, leaving the dragon to slam the great door which boomed and cracked under the strain.

Osei pushed up, jabbing fiercely with his trident, failing to find any weak spot in the creature's scales. The thing whipped its wings across itself, driving Osei to the left and Zebra to the right.

Maran stood up and cursed to itself. The dragon had just used the same tactic that she had. The dragon had flipped positions. It now controlled the door. "It's trying to get out!" Maran yelled.

The dragon heard her and hissed. With a great kick, the dragon busted the door off its frame. The creature eased backwards, breathing in, holding, then breathing out fire. The flames bought the dragon the time that it needed. It turned and flew, launching itself into the sky. It landed just as quickly, its wounded wing unable to bear its weight. The creature thought fast. Instead, it leaped the palisade much like a great cat, then disappeared into the scrubland beyond, its patchy markings helping it to disappear.

Chapter 3: Holding On

In a courtyard full of dead bandits, Maran summarized the facts, "We have caverns full of slaves. The dragon is galloping towards four hundred bandits. Stand or run?"

"Run," said Zebra, "We've hit them. We know where they are. Speed is on our side."

Osei frowned at this. Before he could speak, he was interrupted.

"No," stated Altyn, "We do not leave. You do not understand dragons. Your predictions are wrong. Point, we hold the dragon's lair. Point, we would only attack his lair if we wanted his treasure. Since four people could not defeat his army of bandits, we must have attacked while expecting reinforcements. The closest help is Broadford. Therefore, Broadford must be marching at this moment with reinforcements. Therefore, the dragon will deploy his forces

to defend against the superior threat, thus enabling him to take the superior position. If he were to crush us immediately, he may lose that superior position, thus costing him the battle and his treasure. If he defeats the superior force in the field, not only will he acquire the wealth of that large military force, which itself is a tempting target, he will use his remaining forces to crush us with ease. Therefore, he will attack us the minimal force necessary, if any, just to keep us occupied, while preparing for the larger confrontation."

Altyn paused, looking at each face in turn. "We have an opportunity. If we are to hold, we must hold. We must have reinforcements. One of us must go to Broadford and mobilize their forces."

Zebra volunteered. "I will go. I can get anywhere."

"No," asserted Osei, "I can travel faster. Speed is everything for us."

Zebra looked at Osei with incredulity. Altyn waved him silent. "How do you travel faster?"

"I can run the distance between two cities, and then return. Can you?" stated Osei.

"Run," answered Altyn. "Good fortune. Bring us our army. Maran, see to the defenses. I will mount the tower and defend the wall."

Osei stripped his armor. He retained only his koa, a shark-toothed sword. Zebra let him out the gate. Osei ran. He slipped up a storm gully and disappeared.

Meanwhile, Maran inspected their position. She assessed the situation quickly. Her largest liability was the cliff and rock behind them. They needed to control that point, or the bandits would control it for them. Maran pointed, "Zebra, get up that rock and hold it against all comers."

Zebra shook off his scowl and laughed. "That is better. I get a challenge." He laughed again, then searched about for the equipment that he needed. On an impulse, he patted a dead taskmaster down, finding a cigar on the corpse. Zebra lit the cigar, needing no flame. "This is pretty good," he said, puffing quickly, "It's better than that eastern stuff. Charystos always had really bad tobacco."

While smoking the cigar, Zebra picked up a crossbow and filled three quivers with bolts. He tied these to a rope, and then tied the rope to himself. Showing no hurry, Zebra mounted the wall, climbing easily up the cliff face. When he reached the top, he pulled the crossbow and quiver up to himself, then tossed down the cigar butt down.

Maran's next job was the slaves. Still in chains, Maran had Sweep walk her down to the slave pens. The people had worried eyes, not knowing what to make of this new person in chains. They hoped, but they dared not to hope.

With help, Maran mounted the guard's chair. She spoke to the prisoners there. "I fight for our freedom." She paused to let that sink in. "As you can see, I am one of you. That does not stop me. I fight for our freedom. We have won this first battle, but there are more

battles to come. Our freedom is not secure. I need volunteers who will stand and fight with me. There is a smithy up that corridor there. Free yourselves. Take up arms and fight with me. I vow this, that I shall not free myself of my chains until you are free of yours. Sweep, unlock the doors."

Maran jumped down, walking back up the sloping tunnel. Returning to the inner door, Maran picked up Altyn's umbrella. The dragon had shattered its many spokes, splintering the bamboo and tearing the cloth. Maran tried to adjust the umbrella, but the break was too complex. She could not fix it.

Maran climbed a tower to stand with Altyn. "I tried my best to fix your umbrella," she said, "It is beyond me."

Altyn glanced at her. "I never expected you to. They look like simple things, but they requires great training to repair. Do not worry. The umbrella was a student instrument. It can easily be replaced."

Maran picked up a dropped crossbow and cocked it awkwardly, her chains rattling.

Altyn looked curiously at her. "Why are you still wearing those chains?"

Maran paused for a moment. "People work hard for a leader that they respect. If they respect me, they will work hard to free themselves so that they can free me. I trust them to secure my freedom. They will respond by working harder."

Altyn nodded. "Why aren't you down there helping them?"

"I would get tired of freeing them, but they will never tire of freeing themselves. They'll go faster. I think that they will also feel better for it. Freeing themselves is a ritual that will hearten them. We need them heartened. We have a difficult fight ahead. I need them to volunteer. I need them to stand. If they break, we all die."

The volunteers slowly appeared. The first few had their chains entirely removed. The next few merely had their chains broken. Once the slaves learned how to break their chains, they proceeded to break chains as fast as possible. Maran directed them to the towers and to the catwalks, taking up spears and clubs from the camp. From their bearing, she could tell these were tough men and women.

Maran looked back towards the enemy. Beyond the trees, she heard more voices. The enemy gathered. They wielded their hatchets, cutting down small trees. Maran knew what that mean: siege ladders. Their battle was underway. Maran yelled an order, "Shoot any stray person that you see. Keep them hopping."

Maran felt anxious. She paced and wondered. The enemy fell silent. They fell silent for too long. What were they up to? Why were they not attacking? She had fifteen slaves. She did not have enough people. She turned over tactics in her mind, but could find none that would win the day.

A clatter interrupted her thoughts. A stray crossbow bolts clattered down the rocks behind them. Maran looked up. Fine gray smoke drifted from atop the large rock. Seconds later, a few more bolts flew downward, striking random places. What was going on up there? Maran bit her lip. The bandits had to be on top of that hill. When they had the hill, they would attack. The only thing between them and a firm loss was Zebra. Maran crossed her fingers hoping for luck. "Keep it up, Zebe," she said to herself.

Meanwhile, Altyn caught sight of another group coming down a storm gully. She alerted Maran, who saw them assume a perfect position to split their defense. Her opponent had this wrapped up. If they were smart, they would ask for surrender. She saw no way to hold the compound.

A signal from the men in the gully came as a surprise. One of the freed slaves had to show her their signals. "They want to talk," Maran told Altyn, "I don't want to shout to them. I need to send a man. Any objections?"

"Sweep," Maran called to the Reynard, "I need you to do something. This is dangerous. There are a group of people out there, and I need to tell them something. They must stay hidden. When the attack comes, they are to wait until the first wave is bunched at the wall, then attack. They are to attack the group closest to them. Do you have that? Can you do this?"

Sweep nodded yes. With a nervousness that showed his bravery, he slipped a narrow gap in the palisade. He paused. No one shot at him. He moved a little further, then paused. Nothing. His ears turned to pick up sounds. Nothing. Slowly he slinked along the ground until he came to the group of humans. Their leader was a woman in a strange type of wooden armor. They spoke briefly, then Sweep then returned with just as much cautions as before, slinking the entire way. Once inside, he came to Maran. "They understand. They said that Osei met them on the road. They say that more help is on the way."

In the gully, the woman in wood armor pointed, then disappeared into the brush.

Zebra smoked through another cigar. He loved tobacco. He could smoke this stuff all day. He propped his back up against the warm rock and enjoyed the sun.

Below him, a troop of bandits slowly advanced up the steep hill. Zebra waited. They were not close enough yet. Their terrain was too easy. They could run. He wanted them in rougher terrain. He wanted easier targets. He worked out his attack plan. He would attack a bandit, then their officer, then another bandit, and then the officer, until the officer was dead. Once the officer was dead, the demoralized bandits should break.

When Zebra was ready, he stood, aimed his crossbow, and fired. His nature filled the bolt with fire, causing it to leave a twisting streamer of gray smoke along its path. Solid hit. The bandit fell dead, no scream. Zebra ducked back around the rock, reloading. He poked out again, this time aiming for the officer. The shot bounced the shot off the tree by the hobgoblin's head. "Dammit," he grumbled, watching the smoking streamer drift away.

By now, the advancing bandits had identified where Zebra shot from and were ready. When Zebra popped out, they fired. The shots went wild. Zebra killed another man. He knew that the men would get more accurate as they fired.

The exchange of shots continued, each round giving Zebra less and less time to pop out. The men steadily made their way around the rock, giving Zebra a fit. His tactics were not working, especially as that damned officer refused to die. Zebra changed tactics. He went around the other way around the rock and shot a bandit hiding in the wrong place. The bandits responded with more shots, missing him. Zebra played this trick a few more times before the shots came too close.

With the bandits slowly circling him, Zebra found his options narrowed. He wedged himself into the safest cleft he could find. That wasn't enough, but it was enough for him to take potshot. Those men were not eager to get shot. They hesitated moving forward. Unfortunately for Zebra, those men had a hard-nosed hobgoblin pushing them forward. They feared their sergeant more than death.

Zebra counted. Seven firm hits. Fourteen bandits left? Things were looking mighty bad for him. Zebra smiled. This was fun. He ducked out and shot at the hobgoblin again. Miss! "Dammit," he swore.

As Zebra tried to think of some new, cunning plan, a dying scream caught his ear. He looked around the rock to see a woman in wooden armor firing arrows with exacting precision into the hobgoblin officer. The woman moved with no wasted motion, each shot committed to death. Each shot killed a bandit. The remaining bandits realized their danger and panicked, dying as they stumbled slowly across the rocky hillside.

Zebra moved around to shoot, killing as many as he could before they were too far into the trees. He laughed as he shot them.

When the killing was done, woman in the armor walked forward. Zebra could see the dryad in her, and the human. Zebra spoke to her, "Who has come to save me? What magnificent archer are you." Zebra looked her up and down, appreciating the woman's body.

After the woman took a long look at Zebra, and found him acceptable, she smiled back. "I am Cassidea Thrush. Now introduce yourself, pretty man."

Zebra smiled at her. "I am Zebra from the fiery land of Schanderna."

She met his smile with a glow. "Do you want to shoot bandits with me? They're about to attack."

Zebra strolled to the cliff with her. "How could I say no?"

A few minutes later, the bandits rushed down along the path, attacking with their siege ladders. Zebra and Thrush rained mortal carnage from above.

The bandits rushed in carrying the ladders on their shoulders. Questions flashed across Maran's mind. Which way would their feint? Would the stockade hold? Would her people hold? Would the plan hold? She desperately wanted to know the answers, but she had no time to think. The bandits wound down the path, then sprinted across the open strip far too quickly.

Maran ordered her men in the towers to fire. All the crossbows twanged, felling a handful of enemy. That was not enough. Maran encouraged them on as they reloaded. She needed at least two more shots. The towers shot again as the bandits brought ladders up to the wall. Her men along the wall pushed back as bandits mounted the ladders. Maran encouraged her crossbowmen, hoping beyond hope that they could shoot again. As the first bandits reach the top of the ladder, the crossbowmen let loose another volley into the knot of bandits on the ladder. Many fell. More climbed onto the ladders.

Just as the first bandit reach the wall, Altyn stood from her stool, waved, and pointed. A blast of thunder and lightning blew apart a siege ladder, sending wood and bandits flying in random directions. She lifted her arms again, this time intoning words that cut across Maran's being. Her hair stood on end. The thunderclap that followed flashed with solar brilliance, followed by darkness. When Maran's sight returned, the bandits lie scattered about the ground like sticks thrown down in a game. Many picked themselves up in panic. Most did not move, nor would they again.

Altyn stepped back, brushing the dust from her dress, and sat upon her stool, as if she had passed an exam. Maran blinked numbly from the shock and the carnage. She had never seen such fury. Looking down upon the fruits of war, Maran felt the presence of her father. She understood why her people avoided war. The harvest of war is pain and death. How could she avoid this? How could she do this better? She did not know, but she resolved at that moment to find the better way.

The thunder fury had distracted her. The battle still raged and victory remained in doubt. Maran looked towards the right flank. Those bandits, the second group, chaotically raised their ladders to the wall. Altyn's cacophony had distracted them so well that they did not notice the longbow men revealing themselves. The archers drew their bows and fired into the mass of men. Many went down. Many screamed. Maran winced. The second volley killed even more men. Butchered and battered, their will flagged. They fled pell-mell, racing for safety.

Maran heaved a sigh of relief. Her plan had worked. They had survived an assault with an overwhelming victory. Looking at the writhing wounded on the ground, the bandits had lost significant numbers. Maran reminded herself that they may not be so fortunate if the bandits attacked again, this time in greater numbers.

Altyn brought Maran back to herself with a light tap. She pointed. The crossbowmen were taking pot-shots into the wounded bandits, gleefully murdering their former captors. Maran watched them to fire for several minutes, letting them vent their anger. When they were sufficiently satiated, she ordered, "Save your ammo. The next attack won't be so easy."

The men groused a little, but obeyed.

Needing the high ground, Maran ordered the bowmen up the rock. The freed slaves would soon provide enough bodies to man the walls. She needed the archers holding that rock and raining fire and brimstone on any follow-up assault.

Redeployed, the waiting began. She did not know what the enemy would try, or when.

Maran sat down with Altyn to pass the time. Both were very hungry. Breakfast that morning seemed very far away. Maran pulled out lunch. The innkeeper had given them bread, cheese, boiled eggs, jerky, and a bottle of ale. They invited Zebra down, but he refused. He was far too busy chatting up the lieutenant, and the lieutenant was far too busy letting him.

Altyn asked Maran a few questions. "Tell me a little about dwarves. How do your people fit in?"

Maran scrunched her face, then thought a moment. "Its all a bit complicated for most outsiders," Maran said, "But its really very simple at its base. Just remember metal, stone, wood, dirt, and plants. At the top of the hierarchy are the Smelters who run the blast furnaces. They know how to turn iron into steel and how to refine ores. They are the High Priests of Molten Metal. It is they who attend Lord Basileus, the Elemental Lord of Earth.

"The smiths come after the smelters. They shape the metal that the smelters make. Whether the work iron, tin, copper, or gold, they are smiths. Each metal has its own rank within the smiths, and specific types of smiths have higher or lower ranks depending on the items that they produce. An armor smith, for example, ranks higher than a general ferrier."

Maran took a pause to drink the ale. Altyn peeled an egg.

Maran continued, "Below the smiths are the stonemasons. Same deal. They are the ones who make statues and buildings, or dig tunnels and halls.

"The smelters, smiths, and stonemasons are essentially our aristocracy. They are the ones who have the highest standing. Our middle-class are all our other professions, such as cooper, limner, innkeeper, and brewers. Below them are the people who work in soft earth. They're the working class. They are laborers and only laborers. They have no true trade.

"At the bottom of the heap are those of us who grow things, or work in dirt that grows things, which is a downright non-dwarven thing to do. That's us. The Loam. We're the farmers, the brick makers, and the potters."

Altyn nodded her head. "That does sounds complicated."

Maran laughed, "It gets worse. The different dwarven peoples fit into those ranks. The Hadeans are the smelters, the smiths, and the stoneworkers. The Randsfjorden are the tradesmen. When most people say 'dwarf', they mean Randsfjorden. Below them are the Farsund. They are not a race so much as a mixture of many lesser dwarven clans. The word means "traveler." They are the ones who wander from place to place doing whatever work

that they can. And at the bottom of that heap come my people, the Loam. We speak our own language. We have our own traditions. We farm. You can't get much lower than that. It's downright undwarven."

"How come your people are like that?"

"According to our legends, our people traveled with the Umma when they came to Aq. The Loam were servants of the goddess Heather. During the Crusade of Light, they wandered west to the Hadeans and settled there with the other dwarves. We've been there for the last thousand years."

"Your people are from Aq? Astrea is Umma. We do not have any legends of a dwarven people."

Maran shrugged, "We don't remember you either."

A few hours following, Osei returned, bringing a company of volunteers. The scouts cheered the newcomers. These men knew each other and were encouraged by their comrades.

Osei brought good news, "The Baroness wishes to see us. We must journey to her encampment immediately."

Leaving Cassidea in charge of the stockade, they journeyed to the regiment's camp in the fleeting light. The weary soldiers rested and laughed, readying themselves for action the next day. This was not a conscript army. They were an eager force of volunteers. Their morale was high. Their weapons were sharp. They were ready for the fight.

Maran had never seen a human camp before. The lays and sagas told of armies and tents. The reality looked far less magnificent than the tales. Many men gathered about many fires. Their finest pavilions were little better than hovels. These were not the royal armies of old. These were mercenaries. No saga told of their plain equipment and tired backs.

Returning from her thoughts, Maran found that she had lost her comrades. She looked around for them, wandering here and there, but she could not find them. After a while of looking, she admitted that she could not find herself as well.

At a nearby fire, men noticed her wandering around lost. "Come on over," one called, "We have lots of room at the fire."

Maran approached cautiously. "We don't see many dwarves hereabouts," the soldier continued, "We have lots of ale. The Baroness treats her troops well." He raised his bottle, "Here's to the Missus!" Everyone joined in, intoning, "The Missus," and downing a bit more ale.

The soldier pushed a fresh bottle into Maran's hand, "Never heard of a dwarf who didn't want ale." His men laughed. "Where are you from, Miss Dwarf?"

Maran replied quietly, "I'm from the stockade. I was fighting the bandits"

With that, the men exploded with questions. Everyone knew of the stockade, but none of them knew anything substantial. Maran told them about everything that she could remember, blow for blow, move for move, tactic for tactic. The men were enthralled, especially about the battle with the dragon. Maran described the battle with the dragon three times.

When she was done, the sergeant pulled out a "good bottle" "To Maran!" the sergeant exclaimed. "To Maran!" a host of voices responded. The sergeant repeated this, and even more voices answered. Maran looked about, now realizing that she had attracted quite the crowd during her story.

The newcomers demanded for the story again. The men wanted to see her. Maran climbed herself on a nearby wagon so that everyone could see her and she could see them. She told her story again, this time more practiced, and better in tune to the soldiers before her. The men responded boisterously, clapping and yelling frequently. With each turn of chance, the men cheered and hollered, louder and louder. These were men eager for the fight before them. Maran felt their esprit. These men only needed a few words to unlocked their ambitions. Maran took the opportunity before her.

"Soldiers," she exclaimed, "I am a stranger in your land, and you have greeted me with open arms and open bottles of beer." The men laughed, then cheered, raising their own bottles. "I know that tomorrow, you will enter battle. You shall not shirk your duty. You shall press to the fore of the fight, bringing your spears to the enemy. You shall face the gauntlet knowing that victory lies on the other side. The enemy shall see your resolve, and they shall quake when they see you. Soldiers, I am proud to address you tonight. I am proud to fight by your side. The gods themselves should know of your courage." Maran opened a bottle and poured it out in libation. "Oh great Hart, Lady of the Hunt, these men go forth to hunt tomorrow. They sing your praises and acknowledge your sovereignty. They pour the fruit of your sister Heather in your honor. They sacrifice to you on your feast days, giving you the best of their herd. Never do they give you the sickly or small animals. Never do hunt without sacrificing to you. Hart, please favor your faithful servants. Be with us tomorrow and bring us victory over our enemies. Guide our blades and arrows. Take this drink from our fields with our respect." Maran poured the bottle. The men cheered. One soldier began chanting, "Maran", and the chant spread, rising into a cacophonous roar.

With no warning, the chant collapsed. An authoritative voice ordered, "Attention!" The men immediately stood at attention. The crowd parted for the person walking through, as if she were a profit or a king. Into the torchlight came a heavysset woman lumbering with a cane. The fat old woman looked up at Maran. "Who are the fuck you and what are you doing here?"

"I am Maran, ma'am."

"And..." the Missus prompted.

"I was telling the men about our battle earlier today. They wanted to hear about it. I was lost. I forgot where I was going."

The woman looked at Maran with cutting eyes. "You're too damned truthful. That will work against you." The Baroness looked about her, then sat on a nearby crate. "Dwarf Maran, I want to hear your story. Please begin again."

The regiment now knew something was up. Hundred of men gathered about. Maran raised her voice and recited her tale yet again. When she concluded, the Baroness rose and approached the wagon. Soldiers helped her climb up. "Tomorrow is our time of trial. All the gods look down upon us. Tomorrow is the first time that I will lead this regiment into battle. I have full faith that you will stand for me like you stood for my husband. This dragon and his bandits killed my husband, killed your friends and your family, and left their corpses for the wolves. We all grieve for our loved ones, and we all ache for revenge. My friends, tomorrow, we shall have that revenge. We shall take our will against our enemy, and that enemy shall falter.

"Our enemy has prepared for this. All along the highway, where the ancients cut through the badlands, the enemy has fortified the heights. They are well prepared to hold out against a superior force. Our numbers will matter little. Our cleverness will matter more.

"We have allies who work with us. Chief Sleepless Crow has brought several hundred warriors. The Appaloosa will attack their southern flank. Stonebrother Flint will lead his fellow dwarves down from the north. Finally, and most important, this dwarven woman here will take her elite team and target the dragon himself. If everyone else does their job, she gets an opportunity to kill the head of the serpent. With the head gone, the body follows.

"My soldiers fight well and hard for Maran the dwarf, who you cheered so deeply. When you are out there in the field and your resolve flags, remember her. You are the arm and she is the lance. Stay strong so that her point bites deep."

With that, she woman climbed down. The men hooted and hollered. The chant for "Maran" rose again.

Chapter 4: Blightgarten

With dawn came battle. The regiment formed ranks. The dwarves moved north. The fenrid moved south. Maran, her friends, and her volunteers prepared.

New to Maran were the fenrid, a wolf-headed people. The tribe in this valley called themselves the Appaloosa. This primitive and swaggering people hailed from the far north, but were driven south by the Feral Nation. News that Feral Nation hobgoblins were among the bandits lit the fire in their blood. These were their enemy. Their shaman consulted the spirits and the spirits called for war. The tribe responded arms. Chief Sleepless Crow gathered a huge band of warriors and offered his tribe's might to his tribe's long-time friend, the Baroness. The Baroness sent these allies south to help Maran.

In many ways, despite their bravado and their friendliness, Maran found the fenrid a morbid people. They made their armor from split bones and rough hides. They used secret magics to make the bones as strong as steel. They made spears from teeth and bone, with keen piercing points and many barbs. Their shaman wore a crown of antlers wrenched from some great buck. The chief also wore a skull from a great cat. The overall effect reminded Maran more of skeletons than people.

To ready his people for war, the Appaloosa chief lead a great buck, struggling but alive, to an open space before the wall. His warriors gathered about them. When they were ready, he spoke some wolfish prayer, then slit the throat of the struggling beast. The blood splattered across the warriors who howled with ecstasy, painting their hides with the liquid. Once the creature was dead, they placed its head onto a pike and carried it before them as a battle standard.

Despite their devotion to hunting and the ways of the wild, the Appaloosa paid no attention to Hart, the Woman of the Wild. Instead, they spoke to animal kings, great spirits that ruled over the lesser creatures of their kind. The Appaloosa stood before their fellows and boasted of their hunts against these animals, and how they had honored the spirits of those animals when they had achieved victory. With each story, they rank and file barked louder and longer. When the stories were done, the fenrid beat many drums and danced their war-dance before the impaled skull until the predawn came, when the chief yelled for war, and his warriors ran forth from their savage ritual.

This display quickly instructed Maran on the politics of war. The Baroness separated allies like a parent may separate siblings. Together they would clash, becoming more interested in bickering rather than in cooperating. By separating them, her allies turned their intolerance on the enemy rather than on each other.

By her understanding, the town had dwarves working for them. The Ironmongers ran the iron smelter near the town. The Ironmonger clan had an excellent reputation as effective mountaineers. These were dwarves who were excellent in difficult country. Maran was glad that the Ironmongers were on the other side of the battle. They would dismiss her, dismiss her plan, and order her about with impunity. Like bear hunting, war was one of the few areas where a Loam could be an equal.

With dawn came battle. From across the hill, horns blared. Men shouted. Drums beat. A dragon blared. The military machine slowly wound up its hammer to fall upon the enemy. The regiment far outnumbered the enemy, but due to the enemy's position, could not bring those numbers to bear. The great titan limped forward.

Maran paced. That was all that she could do. Until someone reported, the battle on the road was a mystery. She could not know whether the battle went well or poorly.

Osei methodically checked his equipment. He readied his trident. He threw his trident, then drew his shield and sword in the same fluid movement. He drew his knife. She sheathed his knife. He punched and kicked the air. He picked up a club like the bandits used and he fought invisible enemies with it. He then replaced everything that he carried, and moved

through the motions again.

Osei commented to Maran, "The young warrior is eager for battle. He wishes to prove himself. He will fight any battle. The elder warrior chooses his battle. He chooses battles worth fighting, where even losing shows his great courage and his indomitable strength. This dragon is a worthy battle, and I am honored to fight it."

In contrast, Zebra chatted with everyone that he could. He practiced nothing. "If I can't fight by now, another five minutes won't help." He then showed off his bargaining with an Appaloosa He had traded his steel knife for bone-tooth knife. "This incisor is from a northern drake. It's beautiful. You can feel the savagery in it."

After Zebra finished trading, he slipped away with Cassidea.

Altyn neither paced, nor traded, nor practiced. She sat alone and stared at the sky. Maran did not disturb her.

A runner eventually arrived from the front. The Appaloosa had located Blightgarten. The group moved out, moving along the paths cleared by the Appaloosa They passed dead bandits and dead Appaloosa twisted on the ground. The dragon had arranged ambushes to ward its flanks. "The bandits shoot at us, then run," he said, "They fight cleverly They slow us down well. They know we are coming."

They joined Chief Sleepless Crow near the road. He had located Blightgarten. There were a ring of crags, each about twenty feet high, with stockades built atop them. In the center of those stockades, on the highest crag with a stockade, the dragon hunkered down, directing the battle. The arrangement made for a mini-castle. The outside stockades were towers. The dragon's stockade was the donjon. Crossbowmen occupied each high. The bandits built each stockade so that they could fire downward. The chief also had a plan.

The Chief showed them the fortification. From their vantage point, they could see their battlefield well. From the central tower, the dragon's head occasionally bobbed over the wall, inspecting the battle on the road. Bandits yelled orders back and forth. Down the road, out of their sight, the regiment engaged well placed positions. The men on the rises looked alert and ready. They would provide effective crossfire. The Chief wanted to take out each perimeter tower before engaging the dragon as that crossfire would be deadly. Breaking the circle was the hardest part. He proposed sending his warriors to the right and left tower while the dragon slayers attacked the central tower.

In response, Altyn whispered in Maran's ear, "That's a good plan. Once I have the height, I can target the other towers."

Maran nodded. "We have a plan. Zebra, can you get into that ... forget that. Zebra, we'll distract the central tower. I need you to climb up and get inside."

Zebra laughed. Maran saw the fire in his eyes. He would follow the plan this time. This time, she place him in his part correctly.

The Chief arrayed his forces. The dragon slayers moved themselves to a new vantage. They waited. The chief's bowmen opened the battle with arrows, his warriors using the cover to begin their charge. Maran and company followed suit. They emerged with arrows and thunder. Altyn targeted the ground before the crag, raising a cloud of dust and debris, covering Zebra as he sprinted ahead, a shadow against the morning. The Schan disappeared into the dust bank, aiming to climb the crag and vault the wall.

They waited and watched.

A furious cry from behind was their only warning of a counterattack. Well armored footmen charged at the attacking groups. The men split into three groups, each targeting an attacking group. One quarter aimed directly for them. They had no time to react, yet Osei did react. He tossed his bow at the feet of the first man racing in, tripping him and the man behind him. He used that second to draw his shield and sword. Maran used that second to pull Altyn behind. Seconds later, blades and blows rained down upon them. They were outnumbered four to three and in deadly peril. Maran's brain raced, striving to develop a plan in the middle of sword swings. The bandits attacked so hard that pottery bits flew off her shield.

The bandits took every advantage that they could. They flanked, pushed, shoved, and pressed the trio. Maran and Osei worked hard protecting Altyn. The bandits knew that Altyn was their most vulnerable, and they also knew that she was a wizard. Maran quickly realized that killing Altyn was their mission. If they lost Altyn, defeating that dragon became damned near impossible.

Remembering what Altyn did last time, Maran changed her tactics. "Set 'em up for Altyn!" she exclaimed. She pushed and shoved one way, slamming one with her shield. Osei shoved at one, then stepped back. Altyn sidestepped, then spoke her thunderous word. The men reeled, stumbling backward. One man fell, blood pouring from his eyes and ears. They were now down to three against three.

The bandits were more careful now. They did not repeat their last mistake. They kept separated, circling them like wolves, probing for every advantage. They each sought the tipping point. Whoever lost the next man would lose the fight. Maran heard Altyn getting tired. She was no dwarf. She was not good at such strenuous work. "Keep it up, Airhead!" Maran barked like a drill sergeant. That was not the best nickname for Altyn, but it stuck between them. Maran would later explain, "I made it up when people were trying to bash my head in. I think it is fair to say that I put less than no thought into it."

"Mudboots!" shouted Altyn in reply. That name stuck too.

One of them finally made a mistake, and Osei made him pay for it. A jab to his face caught his eye. The man ducked away, blood streaming down his face.

The bandits now had two. They had three. Osei shouted, "You are beaten. Your master has abandoned you. Throw down your arms and save yourselves." The men circled, ready, trying to gauge each other. First one backed off, then the other. Once they had backed far enough away, they fled.

Maran breathed and sighed. They were all safe, all except ... Zebra! She turned towards the stockade where they had left Zebra. Was he alive? Only now was the dust settling. "I got four!" he shouted down to them. When he noted the dead and fleeing bandits, he added, "By myself."

Altyn turned her own attentions to the other nearby stockades. She methodically laid down a dust cloud across the area, greatly dropping the threat of their crossbows. Shots poured in wildly. The Appaloosa groups used this cover to their advantage. They burned the enemy out with fire and pitch, creating vast gray and black columns of smoke. Those beyond now knew of the battle.

Inexplicably, the dragon had not yet emerged from his shelter. He stayed safe. Maran should have questioned this, but with demanding her attention, she never did. The perfect time for the dragon to act had passed, yet it had not acted.

Several Appaloosa troupes came over to join them in the final attack. Maran gave the orders. They moved. When Altyn was close enough, she stopped and aimed. She waved and precisely enunciated terrible words. Maran could see the physical strain upon her, the very words that she muttered tearing her apart as well. The tulmit that formed in the dragon's stockade exploded in an unbelievable loud clap, so loud that women in camp heard the noise. The energy that she released blew the walls off the stockade, along with several feet of earth and stone. Wood, plaster, canvas, and human remains rained down upon the battlefield. When the smoke cleared, there was no dragon but for a paper mache head that lie burning below the ruin.

"It was a fake," stated Altyn, showing no emotion.

Maran asked the correct question, "If that was a fake, then where did the dragon go?"

With the question, everyone knew the answer. The dragon outmaneuvered them. It was never here. Osei spun around and pointed. "I see smoke," he said grimly. From behind them, about a mile away, a black column rose. "The stockade."

The dragon had drawn off the army and the reinforcements so that it could recover its treasure hoard, meagre as that was. A chill ran through them all, colder than the gray day. They ran for the stockade to find it consumed by flame. One watchtower stood ablaze. Many lie dead, while the blackened living cried in despair. Many huddled together in shock. They were leaderless and aimless.

Zebra did not stop running. He entered the stockade of smoke and flame, shouting "Cassie!" over and over, his Schandernan form unharmed by the smoke and flame. A wail soon followed. He soon emerged with Cassidea's delicate form in his hand, half-burned and smoking. Tears streamed his face. He placed her corpse gently on the ground.

"Oh tragic love," he quoted, then cried. He could not finish the poem. He wiped his face, smearing the soot across it. Into her charred hands, he placed her scorched, broken bow.

He then took up her blackened sword, grasping it solemnly. "I vow that I shall use your sword to avenge your death. It shall be your hand, not mine, that sends this dragon to its grave. This sword is our union, the meeting of two worlds and of living wood baptized by dragon's flame into a new weapon. This sword is no longer a thrush. It is a Thornraven. I shall learn to use this blade, and when both it and I are ready, slay Blightgarten in flames so great that even the dragon shall wither beneath them."

Altyn roiled the clouds. She lit a stick of incense and began chatting. The clouds gathered, soon sending rain into the fire. She chanted for a long while as she brought those flames under control. "I am not skilled enough to extinguish this," she stated, "But this will help."

Zebra wailed. He did not see Cassidea Thrush. He rushed into the smoke. Never once did he cough as his Schandernan lungs were born of heat and the smoke. He disappeared for many minutes. He staggered out a madman, his blackened face traced with tears, carrying the immolated corpse of Cassidea. He gently laid her down.

The dragon disappeared along with his treasure. The Baroness believed that he slipped into the labyrinth of caves and tunnels that lie beneath the badlands. Those tunnels were dangerous and few men braved them. Rumor spoke of buried ruins and endless treasures. Practical experience spoke of horrid creatures and endless dangers. Even the Appaloosa avoided those places.

The dragon's disappearance aggravated Zebra. What was in that dragon's treasure? Something niggled inside his brain. This dragon added up to nonsense. The more that he thought about it, the more apparent it became that something was amiss. Dragons were cunning. Surely the bandits had a second lair? Surely they could melt into the badlands when a larger force arrived and avoid destruction? As Zebra imagined more and more possibilities, he found more and more "facts" about the dragon did not add up. The real question was, which facts were good and which were misleading. This was a puzzle. This was a challenge. The more that Zebra thought about the puzzle, the more that he enjoyed it.

In the face of overwhelming opposition, the bandits dispersed. The Appaloosa and the scouts hunted down as many as they could, impaling those that they caught, displaying their corpses along the highway. Those who escaped were not more fortunate. The unmerciful beasts of the badlands killed most who fled. Few bandits ever claimed to survive that battle, and most who did spoke of the badlands in hushed voices.

The Broadford regiment held a celebration for Maran and her band. The townsfolk cooked all night, ready to throw a feast for the regiment's return. Calves and lambs were slaughtered by the score. Tents and tables were erected on the great drill field outside of town. They lined the road with branches and wildflowers: a sign of Heather, the White Lady of Peace. The farmers brought out their cult statues of her, erecting a large altar of crates and flowers. Over the days to come, the statues slowly became buried beneath those wildflowers.

The Baroness proclaimed the quartet the Heroes of Broadford, giving necklaces to each. In the mercenary tradition, these necklaces were necklaces made from coins. The Baroness gave coins of gold, which showed her esteem for those she honored. The Baroness showed the necklaces to the statues of Heather. "These are ancient coins, taken from the mounds of this valley." The priests and priestesses blessed her necklaces. She then placed them upon the heroes, beginning with Osei, then Zebra, Altyn, and concluding with Maran.

Altyn quaked when she saw the ancient coins. They bore an ancient symbol upon them: a two-head snake, the symbol of Knessex, a long-lost kingdom of evil. She wondered to herself, but dare not seek the answer. The Lord of Lagan was a founding member of the Shadow Lance. If the Feral Nation were to take this valley, would they find some ancient power? She did not know. She compared the old coin to the old ring upon her finger. The Shadow Lance fought the Crusade of Light. A week ago, the sunburst sign on the ring seemed archaic. It reminded her of the fanciful stories of her childhood. Now that symbol held foreboding. Altyn did not believe in coincidence. The headmaster had given her this ring. What did that imply? What was his message? What did he know? By all rights, she should have been excited. Instead, she grew concerned. If she were home, she could ask him. Here on the ground, she felt alone.

Following the presentation of necklaces, the men of the regiment and the people of the town lined up to greet the heroes. In the ancient mercenary tradition, a great basket was placed before the honored. Mercenaries believed in paying their debts. When a great favor has been done to them, they repaid that favor. The people thanked them, one by one, throwing coins and gifts into the basket. Some gave pennies. Some gave flowers. Some gave trinkets and jewelry. A few gave weapons or tools.

One soldier brought forth a beautiful ceramic axe and placed it into the basket. Maran eyes fell upon it and her heart jumped. She caught arm, "Do you know of this axe?"

That man told a story of war. He marched with many other volunteers to Ferrana. He helped to occupy that city. When the goblins forced them out, he retreated with a different group of volunteers. Among them was a dwarf who had that axe. His group was eventually ambushed by hobgoblin slavers as they slept. He escaped, but many were captured. He only wound up with that axe because it was a convenient weapon to grab during the ambush.

Maran also asked about Aiken and Bertolf, the sons of the landlady from Fort Resolute. The man shook his head. He did not recognize those names.

Afterwards, Osei spoke with Maran about the story. "Your cousin is not free. I now call you my sister, and I take him as my cousin. I promise you, we shall free him. I do not know or when, but when the time comes, I will be there with you. And then I shall take you and drag you to your home, and I shall take you among your own people, and you shall free them."

Maran's face emptied of color. Maran did not know what to make of this. What was Osei saying? How could he say such a thing.

After the feast, Maran returned to the battlefield to bury the dead, soldier and bandit alike. She sought a closure that she could not find.

