

The Heroes of Broadford

An Endhaven Novella

Draft #1

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Chapter 1: The Delivery

The dwarves of the Great Dwarven Union viewed agricultural dwarves, the Loam, with remarkably low respect. Growing things struck most dwarves as foreign and distasteful, if not blasphemous. To solidify this considerable prejudice against them, the Loam caste originated far in the east, spoke a foreign language, dressed in a distinctive fashion, held considerably different religious beliefs, espoused vegetarianism, and turned purposefully turned stone into dirt. The Loam only achieved any sort of tolerance through their considerable arts in fermentation and steincraft.

Maran was a Loam. She grew up among Loam farmers on the terraced slopes of Mount Perma. She was the hearth tender of the hall. It was she who rose first to start the fires, and she who rested last after banking them. It was also her responsibility to teach hearth tending to her younger nieces and cousins. One day she would step up to tending the kilns, or making the charcoal, and a new hearth tender would be chosen. Until then, she studied under her elders, working hard at perfecting the arts of her people.

Maran was not alone in working hard. On a Loam farm, everyone worked hard for long hours. Grandfather rose before dawn and walked up the mountain to work on a new terrace, slowly breaking the basalt into fertile soil, and he toiled long into the evening designing and paint steins. Her brothers chopped trees and harvested the day's crop. Grandmother ran the kitchen in regimented precision, having many mouths to feed. Her sisters and cousins tended and milked the goats, fed the chickens, gathered the eggs, worked the garden, and wove many hours per day. The nieces and nephews tended and learned what they could. Everyone knew their work from sun up to sundown, every day, from birth to death. That was the Loam way.

One day in the early spring, while the grasslands below slowly lost their winter-gray hue, Grandfather called Maran up the mountain. Grandfather loved sitting on the rocks, smoking his pipe and working clay. Maran sat down next to him, and so they sat there together in familiar company. Grandfather sat quietly, as he usually did, contemplating. Maran knew better to expect words from him immediately, so she contemplated as well. She counted the chores that remained, and fretted that some might go undone. Done with fretting, she watched the clouds below, bending and weaving through the rocky spires, casting shadows across the valleys.

Ready for a conversation, Grandfather filled his pipe, then spoke tersely, "I want you to deliver a few things." The sudden request landed before Maran like a stone shot. She knew from a lifetime of experience that grandfather routinely understated any request. The family

called this tendency "grandfatherese."

Maran probed at the understatement, "What must I deliver, and to where?"

Grandfather pointed west, "That way a bit. Broadford."

Maran nodded in response. She saw that this would be a long trip. "I have never heard of Broadford. What place is it near?"

"Fort Resolute," mumbled the man, "From there, head east. Can't miss it."

"That's a thousand miles away," Maran pointed out, surprised quite daunted by the prospect of traveling so far, "And then I walk straight towards..." Maran lowered her voice, "... to Carmarthen."

The old dwarf smiled. "You know where it is. Good! You were always a good student. That's why we picked you. Be a dear and take these two steins to the Baron and Baroness of Broadford."

Maran blanched pale across her coffeed skin. Did her grandfather truly want this?

Grandfather cleared the phlegm from his throat, "This will require a bit of explaining. You would not know these things. I hope that my request makes sense to you afterwards."

"The Ironmongers have a iron forge out Broadford way, crazy but true. They are right there, north of Carmarthen. We, that's those of us on the council, always thought Broadford was always an odd place for an ironworks. Reasonable dwarves do not go near Carmarthen. If they do go near Carmarthen, there must be something valuable is out there. Greed can put a granite pillar in any dwarf's determination. There's only one thing that I can think of that would make the Ironmongers do something so ill conceived and going to Carmarthen, and that is adamantine."

Grandfather let that sink in for Maran as he took another few puffs on his pipe, then resumed his explanation in a tutoring tone, "That sounds good, but that is only a theory. We would be fools to trust our own theories. Let's check idea this against reason. If there were a new source of adamantine, the value of adamantine in the market would decrease. We checked the markets, and the going price of adamantine has seen a distinct fall. So, we can conclude that there's an adamantine source somewhere."

"Now, here's the important part. The Union Shares all wealth. We Loam may get a pittance, but we get something. With this new source of Adamantine, everyone is getting cut out. That is wrong. That means that the Stonebrothers have failed, and we Loam need to enforce the Contract. After a long discussion, we voted you Envoy, as is our right." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a cylinder carved with ancient figures and runes. "Will you accept this?"

Maran sat there agape. "Do I get to think about this?"

"Yes or no," replied Grandfather.

Maran stared at the old cylinder seal, chipped and battered with age. "Well," she said after clearing her own head, "I trust my elders." Maran picked up the seal.

Grandfather nodded. With that, the old dwarf settled back into his rock and puffed his pipe again.

"What exactly does this mean?" Maran asked.

"Whatever you make it mean!" mumbled her grandfather. Despite Maran's additional questions, he waved her off. "More words are just more words," he grumbled, annoyed with her.

Maran wandered down the rocks in a daze. She stopped along the way, giddily examining the cylinder seal. The histories said that these came from the old land, far away. She believed that. This thing felt different to her, with its strange triangular runes and chipped edges. It was like a tune in a different scale from all the other tunes. It made sense, yet it stood apart.

When Maran entered the kitchens, grandmother hugged her with pride. "You have a good heart my granddaughter, a strong heart with clear eyes. Too long have we had no Envoy to protect us. Sit and rest today. Sit. Be easy. Your life will never be easy again."

Maran's grandmother, mother, and aunts gathered around her and sang her the threshold song, the same one that you sing to strangers to show that they are fully welcome in your hall. The women sang this when one of them advanced in rank. "Come into the hall. You are welcome. You are welcome." They welcomed Maran to her new position with no reserve.

Grandmother presented Maran with a beautiful mace. "I made this for myself many years ago. I never needed it, and so I am grateful. Take it. You will need it."

Maran marveled at the weapon. Made entirely of ceramic and strengthened by her grandmother's considerable skill, the mace was glazed white and decorated with a blue and yellow floral pattern. Maran felt its heft, which felt a little too heavy for its construction. Maran looked to her grandmother, who winked at her. She whispered loudly, "I used a little adamantine ore in the glaze. It's tougher than it looks."

The other women laughed. Maran showed the mace to everyone present.

Maran's mother brought out a large sack, "I worked as fast as I could, but I could not finish your armor. This was all so sudden. I'll have a good suit for you when you get back. In the meantime, here is a bag of scales. All the neighbor's helped. You will need to sew them onto the backing." With the scale went an arming coat, a heavy leather jerkin, a small toolkit.

With her rise to Envoy came a feast. Maran's father, Heurek, slaughtered a goat and her uncles made a fresh batch of stout. The neighbors traveled in, each bringing food, ale, and instruments. Maran concluded that everyone knew, and they knew her well enough that she

would accept. Even King Oro showed up from across the valley, relishing an opportunity to wear his battered crown and tell his same terrible jokes. Everyone danced and sang late into the night. All too quickly, the evening ended, a niece took over banking the fires, and Maran slept

Leaving proved far harder than Maran anticipated. 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 goats, checking and rechecking the straps. Grandmother filled the saddle bags with food and blankets. She also slipped Maran a bagful of unroasted chocolate 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 along paths steep and treacherous. Maran watched the broken peak of holy Mount Kreta receding from view. She blessed herself, giving thanks to Lord Basileus, the Lord of Earth who dwelt beneath the mountain, and Merciful Heather, the White Lady of Peace, from whom all things grow.

The bull-goats carried the pair 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 her mount on the body. She would miss his stubborn and contrary ways, but not his religious belief that crushing you against the stall was a fun game.

Heurek took them to Jura City via a longer route than Maran expected. Rather than take the direct route down the valley, 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. Three millennia ago, a mountain stood in that spot when the Hadean dwarves discovered adamantine in it. The wealth of that mountain made the fortune that built Jura City. That fortune drew in dwarves from all over the world. That fortune formed the Great Dwarven Union. The Union mined that mountain until it was a vast, empty pit in the ground. That fortune was now gone. The mine stood silent.

Maran's father pointed to the pit, "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 power that we once were. We are a great power no longer. I wish that our misfortunes were because of this empty pit, but our people dug deeper and blacker pits than this.

"During our war with the Psychotic Assembly, the Union placed many prisoners of war 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 actions can not be understated.

"Only with great shame did the Loam admit that we did these people wrong. King Oro called us back to our principals. We sought things that we could do. After constant entreatments,

the Slagsmal finally 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 gave them blankets. We gave them hope. 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, "We chose wrong. We should have marched down to that pit ourselves, scattered the guard, and freed all those prisoners. We would have paid the cost, but that is a cost that we chose. Instead, we let them pay the cost. Shameful. Utterly shameful. Remember this failure when you have choices to make. We are the Loam. We do not shun the difficult task."

With that, her father turned his goat, proceeding onward. Maran followed.

Chapter 2: Fort Resolute

Maran stepped from Jura City to Fort Resolute in one jarring step. Gone were the sooty canyon walls, the furnaces, and the smokestacks. These were 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, his mane braided and tied with silk. Beyond him, a human woman slowly stood, once again feeling herself.

Gates are rare constructs. They are were built in the time of Empires by the great sages of Aq. From those gates, you can go anywhere in the world as long as there is another gate to welcome you. Most places in the world did not have a gate as they were too young or too poor. Only places significant enough or rich enough in ancient times had a gate. Since those days, the Sages of Aq had lost the secrets of gates, making those that existed even more valuable.

The great cities guarded their gates well, treating them as both treasures and threats. Small fortresses called gate citadels were built around them, both to protect them from harm and to protect the city from attack. Jura City's gate lie in a canyon surrounded by sooty walls. The gate stone itself sat in a dwarven laid mosaic, each tile a massive chunk of jade from Mount Perma. In contrast to the smoke-covered walls, the caretakers of the gate kept the mosaic pristine and beautiful. The gate was a treasure, and dwarves know how to care for treasure. Should an enemy gain a gate, the gate citadels would hamper, if not slaughter, any force coming through. The dwarves kept a large cistern above their citadel. Should an enemy breach the gate, the caretaker would close the great doors and flood the citadel.

After a few minutes, Maran felt whole enough to stand. By then, two more people had arrived, helped to their seats by caretakers. 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.

Not knowing what else she could do, she asked for the potters. When she found the potters,

she asked where to lodge. She did not know who to trust in this strange city, but if she was going to trust anyone, it was another potter. The potters pointed her down to Toro plaza where many boarding houses stood. She knocked on one randomly, asking for a room for several days. The woman had no room. After several such attempts, she found a place.

The graying woman assessed her quickly, then opened the door. "I am Bertra, the landlady. Breakfast is bread. Dinner is at three. Supper is at seven. If you miss them, I won't help you." Bertra paused for a moment, then touched Maran's arm, "You seem like a good sort. Don't worry if you miss dinner. You are a Loam, aren't you? I had your kind some years back. They planted my garden for me. It is still the best garden on the block."

Maran looked rather apologetic. "I need some space to work, ma'am. I will be a bit messy. I have a bag of pottery. When I am done, I am going to Broadford."

From up the stairwell, a voice echoed her words, "Broadford!" A figure moved into the corridor and descended the dark steps.

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

An proud yet ragged elf strode into the foyer. "My name is Zebra. I am a professional adventurer. There is no risk that I am unwilling to take. I have won countless fights. I have been kicked out of cities from Charystos to Venalicium. I am looking for like-minded souls." He did not bow, nor flourish, nor lilt. These were motions that he discounted.

Maran thought she 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 his garb was once nice clothing, time and misfortune taxing it to rags.

The elf placed his hands on his hips, "Who are you and why should I take you on?"

Maran blinked for several seconds, then resolved to avoid the problem before her. "I am Maran, Sir. I am a hearth tender in my father's hall." She stood and curtsied her best curtsy.

Zebra showed surprise at her answer. "That is a holy job, hearth tender. You are to be honored. Yes, indeed! It is I who should speak better of you."

Maran shook her head, "That is not the way of my people."

Zebra crossed his arms, "No, my good dwarven woman, fire is never lowly or unworthy. To care for fire is a holy calling. There is none 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."

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

Zebra hooked his thumbs through his empty sword belt, "I see now that my Lady has led me here. Fate has joined us. You shall take up arms with me. We shall defeat the bandits who block the road the road, and I shall lead us to victory. You shall stay here. I will gather others of like mind. I will return by evening."

Before Maran could stop him, Zebra strode out the door.

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

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 free room for the night and forgive her of whatever mess she made. Maran found this offer acceptable, so settled herself into sorting out a broken pitcher.

Mending pottery relaxed Maran. Since childhood, she possessed a secret joy in reassembling 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 Randsfjordens looked down on the Loam for their work in clay. Why make artificial rock when they had so much real rock? Randsfjordens were famous for their stoneware and the 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. She wore soft gray robes with blue arms, a blue sash, and a complex belt of knotted strings. Zebra carried her case, which looked rather light.

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

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."

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. You look like a dwarf."

Maran nodded. "I was a hearth keeper. He believes that a holy position. I could not convince him otherwise." Maran kept her new position to herself.

Altyn face showed no reaction. She took off her gloves. "I am surprised. That is an impressive position for one so young. In our time together, I sincerely hope that you serve me as well. I will direct you. Now call the landlady. I wish dinner. You shall join me. What would you like?"

Danger. Maran admitted it. She would be in danger. With each punch of her awl, each pull of leather, each attachment of ceramic scale, Maran thought about danger. That was the way of armor making. Each step was exact, patient, and precise. That armor protected a life. Maran had made many such suits. The Loam received little help from their dwarven brethren. They defended the norther border of the Union, engaging whatever strange creature or peoples wandered down from that great mountain range. Even though the dwarven Union's holdings were great, the Hadean mountains were far greater. Entire civilizations arose and collapsed in those great valleys. Some enemies were fierce and monstrous creatures, some were savage peoples, while others were dragons.

Dwarves and dragons are the same. Their love of gold, their hard scales, and their dwellings in stone spoke of some mystery that bound them together. Maran had no idea what that could be, nor did any of her people. Yet deep in their hearts, they could hear each other, and they grew restless. The stirring of dragons forever haunted dwarven dreams. Briefly, Maran wondered if the stirrings of dwarves haunted dragon dreams.

Her mind drifting, Maran refocused on her work. She must reach Broadford. She would brave what perils necessary to reach Broadford. That was the way of her people. You said what you said, then you do what you said. According to the landlady, there was a considerable group of bandits in the Mallaig Badlands. No traders had moved across them all winter. The bandits themselves had defeated companies of armed men. Every attempt to find their lair had ended in frustration or death. If the only way to success was through bandits, then she would travel through bandits, she would deliver these two steins, then she would find the source of the adamantium.

Maran had no intention of finding the the bandits. She sincerely hoped that they could slip by them unnoticed. She was ready and able to take on opponents in a fight, but she did not prefer this. In her heart, as the hearts of all her people, the White Lady of Peace held sway. To lift an arm in violence always represented some sort of failure. All the Loam felt this way, even when fighting to defend their homes. If a large bear came into a town, they organized to kill it. Once it was dead, an elder Loam would go to the dead animal and explain that they did not kill the animal in spite, asked its forgiveness, and told the animal to carry their apologies to its animal elders.

A comment from Altyn broke Maran's thought. "I have not seen such pottery technique before."

Maran responded factually. "My people know many secrets of clay and soft earth. Our history says that we came from the east, from Umma, and metals are rare there. We can soften and re-harden ceramics and pottery. It is still better to shape and fire than reshape later. So we use pottery and ceramics for everything. They are easy to improvise with. We use pottery shards to make arrowheads and spearheads. If we are truly desperate, we smash up all your vases and urns to make armor.

"Dwarven law also forbids us from carrying any metal other than coin. The Hadeans tried to

forbid us coin, but even our detractors thought that particular law too blasphemous. A dwarf without gold is a dwarf without a soul."

"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 your people."

Maran frowned, "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."

Altyn let loose a broad and honest smile, "Wondrous. I shall import a set when I return home."

Maran smiled, "That gives me every incentive to get you there." A trading deal with the rich Astreans would be a considerable boon to her people. She had no idea how she could get the deal past the Hadeans, who frowned upon everything Loam, but with high-enough export taxes, the gold would make its own case.

Altyn returned to handling her knots and beads. Maran became curious, "What are those beads?"

Altyn replied with a short lecture. "These knots and beads are books of a sort. They tell me important things. When you live for the wind, having books with pages and leaves is not practical. We use these strings to both focus our minds and to record magical knowledge. We can consult them in any sort of weather. Our great masters have strings of beads that wrap around themselves five or six times. My favorite teacher wrapped his book around him ten times."

Their curiosities settled, each woman returned to her task.

Near sunset, Zebra returned again. This time, a huge man in shining armor accompanied him. The man looked visibly irritated. Zebra introduced him tersely, "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, "Is this your team? They are pathetic. I have better offers." The man spun, then strode out the door, slamming it with a resounding crack.

Zebra cracked his knuckles, then walked over to the remains of Altyn's tea, making no comments about warrior. As he ate the scraps on the plate, he spoke, waving a bread crust, "We leave for Broadford tomorrow. Our goal is to find the bandit camp."

Pausing only long enough to eat a few more bits, Zebra continued, "I have been thinking this. We have three identifiable obstacles to overcome. The bandits must have a camp. Our first obstacle 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 engage an unknown number of bandits, most likely too many to secure outright victory.

"They have the following advantages: they have numbers, they have equipment, and secrecy. Until we can proffer advantages on par with that, we will not see victory.

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

"We need to find the location of their camp. Once we have that location, we can better plan how we will engage them. We need to determine their numbers. Once we have numbers, and where their numbers are deployed, we can better determine how to engage them. If their numbers are low enough, we can defeat them ourselves. If their numbers are high, we will need aid, so we will profit better by taking that information to the local lords.

"Most bandits have the capacity of relocating quickly. Not only must we find their location, but our response must be timely. We must either defeat them with haste, or bring in reinforcements. We can not afford to dawdle.

"The single most critical piece of information is their location. Nothing happens without it. The only people who know the location is the bandits. We can force them to tell us, or we can trick them. I prefer the latter. I propose that one of us gets captured, and leaves a trail for the others. That should be Maran. You will carry as much liquor as possible. We follow the track that you leave. They drink your liquor. We attack when they are drunk and rescue you. From there, we win or retreat.

Altyn nodded at the plan, accepting it, but Maran frowned. She saw the sense in the plan, but did not value getting herself captured and then rescued. However, she could not propose a better plan, so she unwillingly accepted it.

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, battered and bruised from several fights, sleeping off his inebriation on the kitchen table.

The women settled down in their small room. Maran sat on the floor and continued her armor, working through the tedious and repetitive weaving of the plates. 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 presumed, barely twenty years of age. She carried herself far older.

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 staff before. We really need to get to know each other."

Altyn sat herself on top of the bed with its thin blankets and hard mattress. She wrapped her coat about herself. "Up in school, we were rarely warm. Fuel cost too much money. If we wanted heat, we had to pool our money 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?"

Maran laughed at this, "High position? Hearth tender is not a high position. I was learning to be a kiln tender, which is a far more critical job."

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

Maran shrugged, "My brothers grow and chop the wood, then they make charcoal. They can grow and chop an acre a week, which is enough for us. We sell the excess charcoal to the smelters. Sometimes I made the charcoal."

Little realizations began clicking in Altyn's head, where facts learned in school, much like fairy tales, became true. "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 smelled one step above squalor. Maran needed to know more about this young woman. "Altyn, if I am going to work for you, I need to know more about you. How does a person like you come to be here?"

Altyn sobered a little with this question, drawing herself in for a moment. Maran watched a decision cross her eyes. She decided to trust Maran. She loosed up, focused on her words, then began speaking. "I the flying city of Astrea, magic and politics are one in the same. Each is played by chess masters. The strategies are obscure, the motions indecipherable.

"My family is a good one. They had arranged for me the best tutors, the best schools, and the best opportunities, all for the goal of placing me in the best possible position. Positions are allocated in the final two weeks of schooling. By all measure, I stood as a strong candidate for Storm Sage apprentice. That is an extremely prestigious position.

"As fortune should appear, my parents were offered a chance to study in the great library of Rhakotis. This was an opportunity that they could not say no to. They left the city. Shortly after they left, accusations were laid against me in my studies. All the proper rules were invoked, even those that are obscure. No one was able to come to my aid. For those two critical weeks, I was suspended from school and forbidden to interview. The accusation were dropped after the interviews were over. I had no position.

"Those two weeks were enough to undo my future. The man who sponsored my parents abroad had a granddaughter who gained the position that I sought."

She lapsed into silence. After the firm pause, Altyn continued, "The headmaster apologized to me. He could do nothing for me. He gave me my graduation ring, then escorted me out the gate. I wandered around for a while. I found a place to sit and watch lands go by. I could have walked home. The servants would keep me safe and warm. They love me very much, but I would languish there. With a scandal over my schooling, and no position, who would come to my parents and pay my bride price? The matchmakers would skip over me. I lost any chance of advancing through marriage.

"As I sat there, I examined my school ring. Each newly trained adept gains a ring from their school. The headmaster picks which ring. Mine has a stylized sunburst pattern around an amber stone. It is an archaic style. The sunburst pattern is the symbol of the ancient Crusade of Light. That symbol brought back so many different stories to me. I remembered my daydreams. I remembered those dreams of adventuring across lost lands, binding dragons to my will, rescuing nations, and winning the mantle of Storm Sage.

"In Astrea, few things transcend politics. Lord Astrea is one of them. If I can win an audience with Lord Astrea through fame or fortune, I can beg a boon. He can promote me to any position, for he is the Lord of Air and the Eternal King of our city. I chose this path, and so I rode a launch down and came to this city. After wandering around for a while, Zebra found me."

Having learned something about each other, they bedded down for the night.

In the morning, Maran awoke early. She needed pocket money, and she knew how to get it. After setting a cooking fire for her landlady, she wandered into the untended garden, shaking her head at the untended state. The place was a mess, but it had a good structure. She knelt on the ground, then slowly slid her arm deep into the earth, up above her elbow. She looked. She examined the roots, the soil, and the seed. This was a good garden. She could see the handiwork of the Loam here. They did good work. The flow moved well.

Maran found the seeds that she wanted. Like a farmer irrigating his fields, Maran changed how the earthen chi flowed, causing it to flow into the seeds. The plants woke. Inch by inch an foot by foot, the fruits and vegetables grew. As the flow grew more complex, Maran moved about the garden, changing the flow in more places, until she had what she wanted: tomatoes, peppers, and strawberries. She reserved some food for themselves, then took the basket to the market. Surprisingly, she did not need to sell her wares. The humans found her and asked where she got her vegetables. After a complex round of bartering with three cooks, Maran sold off the entire crop for far more than she expected, then used the funds to buy bread, cheese, eggs, and liquor.

Chapter 3: The Road East

Before the Griffon Empire, there was the great empire of Thule, forged from the ruins of the

Age of Heroes. Thule ordered three great roads built. One stretched from the western sea to Fort Resolute, the western capital, and then across the land to Jura City. A second road wound south, running along the sea coast to the great city of Charystos, then westward to land of Umma. A third road stretched south from Charystos to the great city of Rhakotis.

When Maran stepped onto the road, she stepped onto an ancient work a thousand years old. The Randsfjordens still beamed with pride as they built the road from one end of the world to another. In the dwarven tongue, the highways were called the Randsfjorden Ways. Traveling dwarves from all over the ancient world worked on that highway. The Hadeans called that artificial amalgam of traveling dwarves "Randsfjorden", creating a new class of dwarves.

The trio walked east, joining the throng of people leaving the city. This was a good day for travel, as the sun warmed the day, but the clouds shielded the sun. As they traveled, the people went here and there along the side-roads, soon leaving the trio traveling on their own. They were not truly on their own, as they could see other before them and behind them, but the press and the crowd of the city were long gone.

As they traveled, the clouds grew thicker and the air grew damper, developing into a blustery evening, damp and cold. The light grew dim quickly. Maran responded with a lantern. Altyn walked closer to Maran, anxious for the light. Zebra did not care. For ten minutes, he explained that he was an elf and that elves could see well in the dark. Maran stopped listening even as he spoke. She grew too cold to care. This was the same kind of cold that the clouds brought in, damp and deep. Maran could wander in snow-fields all day and be little bothered, but this damp weather chilled her deep. Altyn, likewise tempered to life in the high clouds, found the damp too cold. She responded by donning every robe that she owned. Maran studied poorly-dressed Zebra to see if he was cold. The man refused to show it if he was. He stood resolute against the cold, just like the daffodils along the road.

When they rested, they grew cold quicker. They did their best to find some shelter, but the wind seemed to gust from every direction at once. All that wind made their noses ache. While the rested, Zebra brought out his future "armor". This consisted of burlap sack, cord, and two bags of ash. Maran had no idea how he would turn that into any respectable protection. He spent most of his time rubbing the ash into the burlap, then laying more burlap on top. To Maran's surprise, he slow created an odd substance, both hard and flexible, yet inexplicably light.

Zebra frequently took the opportunity to talk about himself at such time. He spoke about himself often, at well-rehearsed length.

"In times of peace, swordsmen are uneasy," he began, indicating a new monologue, "I am a swordsman, in training and in blood. I learned my maneuvers, precisely and exactly. I learned the vulnerable points on the body, throat, chest, and thigh. I learned to fight with guile and speed. I learned to read my opponent. I learned happiness. To wield a sword is a sacred joy.

"When war came, I went to war. I learned the ways of the Intruder. No fortress and no defense could stop an Schandernan Intruder. We lived on the edge between life and death,

our audacity and fearlessness driving our courage. We left many officers dead in their own beds. Our missions were dangerous, and we always returned without friends. The gods of war are unforgiving. Too many of us went to Endhaven.

"With peace, I grew restless and wandered from my home in Schanderna, always seeking the thrill and danger that my heart craved. Time and again I sought the razor's edge. I traveled to the human world to fight in their cities. Sometimes I won. Sometimes I lost. Always I wanted more. I wanted to fight the best, and the best fought in Charystos. I traveled to the ancient capital of all the world, and there I fought the finest street duelists in the world. Those fights were good. I made his living letting blood on the streets, and I was happy.

"Happiness does not continue. Someone gets too brash, a stupid prince dies from his own hubris, and the world crumbles like a child's pretend house. The results were inevitable. A grieving queen is a storm unto the world. The announcement came soon after, 'Effective immediately, by order of the Queen of Charystos, and first Empress of the Malachite Empire, all dueling in the streets is forbidden on pain of exile or death.'

"We, the street duelers, thought nothing of this ban. The laws of Charystos are rarely enforced, and bribery cleared up most charges. Short of sending in the army, the Queen had no way to enforce her order. We continued our duels and the gamblers continued their betting. This did not continue for long. The Queen hired men who found us. 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. Svero was imprisoned. Many more followed. The last great to fall was Taruman, who 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 me, Svero won his freedom by turning me in. He will suffer for that. The Queen's men stuffed me into a bag, took my sword, and tossed me on a boat to Tasa Kora. I tried to duel in Tasa Kora, but the criminal syndicates there are bloodthirsty and have no honor. No self-respecting duelist took a fall. I spent what little money I had to leave, traveling across the Savage Seas seeking adventure. I used his last penny to pick my next destination: Fort Resolute or Kingston? Heads came up. The Griffon Emperor won. I traveled to Fort Resolute."

Maran had no idea what Zebra said after that. Zebra's incessant talking became a buzz in her head. What caught her attention was the name Svero. He was a dwarf of epiclybad reputation. That he consorted with such bad company worried Maran.

As the travel wore on, the clouds rolled in thicker. Mist sprayed across their face. They could now see their breath. The gusts settled into stillness, relieving them of one misery in place of another.

When trio finally spotted the inn, they all sighed with deep relief, each glad to be done with this day. Even Zebra greeted the warmth and the light with relish. In a move that surprised them, Zebra dropped his belongings, rushed to the nearest hearth, then pressed his hands directly into the fire, showing the same relief that a thirsty man might show when finding

water. He scooped out bits of flame, drinking them down rapidly. He eventually slowed, chewing on glowing embers instead.

Being fairly busy, the inn had little room. Maran secured them floor space in the common room. Altyn did not approve of this. She spoke to the innkeeper himself, re-explaining both herself, her position, and her gender. The innkeeper countered by offering her a private room in his rather large kennel. Altyn fumed at this, but kept her displeasure close to herself. She chose from the remaining floor-space, accepting her humble bed.

Zebra talked around the common room, attempting to recruit more people. He did his best to excite those who sat there. None responded to his recruitment. Too many listeners were merchants or farmers. None wished to face the dangers that lie in the badlands. His listeners did wish him the best of luck, buying him a few rounds. Zebra drank copiously. Inevitably, the alcohol burned too hot within him and Zebra found a fight, so innkeeper kicked him out and he slept in the kennel with the dogs.

The next day's weather proved harder than the first. The winds picked up considerably, gusting all day. Altyn attempted several magical wards and aids to help them against the wind, but the wind would have none of that. To spite them, it blew harder. 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.

Beyond the inn lie the emptied lands of Whitthorn. Once prosperous, field after field now filled with shrubs and pines. The locals said that war and and fear had whittled this land down for generations. The farmers moved to safer lands, further from the goblins to the north. Further from the Feral Empire and certain slavery or death. Beyond Whitthorn lie the Mallaig badlands; a land of crags, crevasses, irregular forests, briars, and undergrowth. In this lawless land, the bandits now ruled.

On the edge of those badlands sat the heavily walled Hawick, a haven for travelers in dangerous times; a fallen haven. Few houses stood. Most burned to their foundations with only their chimneys remaining. A few were empty shells of stone and cinders. Among the few buildings still standing was the Hawick Inn. Her once bustling courtyard lie empty. No grooms brushed horses. No girls milked cows. No guests called for food. The place felt as cold as the wind outside. The fieldstone building stood as quiet as a monument, shuttered in iron shutters. The only hint of life were the chickens wandering about and smoke emerging from her hearth. Maran looked at her new friends. "Do we go in?" Altyn nodded yes, "I shall go. Open the door firmly for me."

Maran opened the door firmly, revealing the inside. Altyn strode into the empty great-room. "Hello!" she cried, "Innkeeper! Is there an innkeeper in this place?"

A graying black man emerged from the kitchen, surprised and happy to see people in his house. "Welcome, my friends! Please sit down. Take your ease. My house is open to you.

What can I get for you? What do you need? My name is Osei, I am the innkeeper."

"Food!" replied each of them.

The great black man laughed. "We have guests!" the man shouted to the kitchen, "They are hungry!" The man laughed again, "Manx will prepare you something. She is a very fine cook. You will enjoy this repast! Come, my friends, this way." He led them to a small room off the main room. The room contained its own table and sitting chairs. "You shall have the private room, reserved only for my best guests."

The innkeeper tried to light a fire, but the wood did not take for him. "I was never good at this," the man chuckled, "I should have the cook do this."

Zebra sauntered up, pushed the innkeeper out of the way, then started the wood burning with a touch. "Easy," Zebra boasted, audibly wondering how the innkeeper could be such an idiot.

The innkeeper grumbled for a moment, then laughed again. "I had forgotten you people, master Schan. I should remember these things. Who knows what else I have forgotten?"

After a whirlwind of preparations, with the innkeeper rushing back and forth, and many shouts from the kitchens, their table stood ready. Manx, a remarkably skinny and ugly woman, and Osei joined them for this meal. "This is like family," said Osei, "My family is far away. You understand, I am sure. So now I have new friends to join me." Maran and Altyn looked to no one. Zebra shrugged and reached for the food. Osei stopped his hands. "We must pause a moment, Master Schan."

Zebra glared back. Osei held his gaze, "We must pray."

Osei stood, opened his arms, then said a short prayer to the gods thanking them for the bounty before them.

What soon followed was a meal very welcome. The innkeeper did not lie. Manx cooked astoundingly well. They ate a dinner of potato soup, bread and cheese, eggs with milk and leeks, smoked meat, and short beer. Even if they were well rested, they would admit that this simple fare tasted far from simple. All the pieces worked well together, from the seasoning in the eggs to the milk in the soup. For dessert, Manx brought out a steaming bread pudding with a buttery sauce. This was all the more welcome for the windstorm that had rolled in, lashing the inn like an army of ghosts.

After dinner, they sat around in the comfortable chairs. Zebra smoked a stale cigar that he found on the mantle. Even he, a creature used to scraping along the edge of living, found the thing distasteful. Altyn told the smoke to flow out the chimney, and the smoke obeyed.

When Zebra finished his cigar, he picked up his things, put on his so-called armor, and strapped on his few weapons. "I am going out into the maelstrom," he said, "It is my intention that I shall discover the deployment of the opponent. This night shall disguise me. The wind is loud and the dark is very, very dark. My eyes can see in this, but theirs may

not. When I know where the enemy stands, we shall know the best place to find them, and proceed with the plan. Then Maran can get captured, we follow and rescue her, and we accomplish our goal. Do not wait up for me. Lock the door. I will get back in on my own."

With that, Zebra strode into the night, swallowed whole by the darkness. Maran and Altyn stood by the door, watching the elf leave.

Footsteps approached behind them. The innkeeper came. "That man does what he does, my friend. Do not fear for him. Come. Talk to me."

Osei lead them into the kitchen to a small table set aside for the servants. He poured several cups of sherry for them. Handing them around, he smiled. "It is a chill night tonight," he said, "It is a good night for friends. I will be your friend. I am good at that. I am sincere. This is a special talent that innkeepers have." He chuckled warmly, begging a smile from each.

Maran smiled a small smile. Osei saw this and responded with a deeper grin, then a laugh. "I heard your conversation. That is another innkeeper talent. Good ears. Listen to your customers. My customers talked tonight of danger. Now one has left and two pace. You may not be walking the floor, but in your mind, you walk back and forth over tomorrow. What will this be like? Did we choose the right thing? Why are we doing this? Is this worth the money? You do that." He paused again.

Osei pointed, "Look over there, on the wall. That shield and spear are mine. I have waited for battle, the same as you. I know that ache. I know that worry. You worry for your friend who have left you and who may not return. You worry for your friend who sits here with you, and your responsibilities to them. You worry about yourself, and all that entails."

Maran and Altyn both nodded.

Osei leaned over towards both, making each woman focus on him, "He will kill you if you let him." He held their gazes until his statement sank in. He did not accuse, he stated a fact. In the quiet, he let them pull away their veil and see their own truth.

Osei pointed to Maran, "You do a dangerous thing. I do not ask your reasons. I have been a soldier. I know how it is to fight that way. For now, he leads you. He does what he does, and he is very good at that. He is a Schan, and Schan are each flawed. In the moment, they think of themselves and no further. They think of what could be, rather than what is. They speak about possibilities, not practicalities. Like a fire, they leap to what lies before them, leaving ruin behind."

Maran looked down and around. She gathered her thoughts. "I am a Loam," she explained, "I have my nature as well. I wish that I could turn my back on this. I have thought of that many times. I have a commitment that I have made. I will make it to Broadford."

"You can travel south, below the badlands and through Carmarthen," Osei suggested, "It is a long journey and dangerous journey, but many do it."

Altyn shook her head "no". She would not change her course. Maran shook her head as well. Carmarthen was still whispered in the Dwarven Halls. The Court of Ballantrae still feared from ancient days. Legend says that the dwarves built the road for the empire in order to avoid Carmarthen all together. If legend were true, Maran would rather face certain death from the bandits.

Osei opened his hands. "I still fear for you. I will not see him destroy you. I can not sit by. I shall go with you. Maybe my arms shall do you well, my friends. But first, we need a real plan. You will find the enemy, but can you destroy him?"

Maran shook her head, "We need to engage them in a fight and keep them in a fight."

"Exactly," agreed Osei, "How do you plan to do that?"

"They need a threat that keeps them in the field. Could Broadford send up a force?"

"They could, but they do not know where the bandits are. The bandits hide if the opposing force is too strong. They surprise and they retreat."

"They must have spies in Broadford," noted Altyn.

"Certainly," replied Osei.

Maran focused her thoughts, "Why are the bandits on a road where there is no traffic?"

This question paused Osei. "I had not asked that question. That is a very good question."

Maran tapped the table. "Look, they are controlling the area, not acting like bandits. What are they hiding? What are they protecting?"

She had the attention of both Altyn and Osei now. They both wanted to know the answer.

"What happened to this town?" asked Maran of Osei.

Osei shook his head, "The bandits came in and took many people away. They attacked strong and quickly."

Maran nodded, "You have good walls. They are in good shape. I bet somebody opened the gates." Osei nodded. Maran continued, "Why do bandits need those people? Where did they go? They either wanted to sell them as slaves or they wanted them as labor. I don't know about slaves, but labor matches my reasons for being here. My people believe that a dwarf group is operating a secret mine somewhere nearby. A bandit group would be good cover for that. From the mine, they smuggle the ore down to Broadford where the Ironmonger refine it. They then ship it out to the East."

Osei looked at Maran, "You have a very keen mind. I could not see that. I now feel that I must help you. I must insist. I must rescue the people from this town. However, that will not be easy. We must defeat the bandits. How do we keep them in the field?"

Maran quickly put together an idea in her head. "We need something to lure them out. Something sweet. We then take their hideout. By the time that they realize that the sweet thing has turned sour, they have lost their hideout. The trick will be holding their hideout. We don't have the manpower to do that."

Osei thought. "We can get the Appaloosa to help. They are natives nearby. They have a village just across the badlands. Their chief is no good, but there are many good warriors who would help me."

Maran looked to Altyn, "Do you have any way to magically send messages?"

Altyn responded factually, "If Osei personally knows the path and the recipient, I can send a bird."

"The Baroness and Sleeping Crow," he responded.

"Then we have a plan?" asked Osei.

Altyn looked toward Maran, staring her in the eye and asking questions slowly, "This is a very risky venture that you propose. Are you fully confident that this is a plausible plan? Do you believe that we have a reasonable chance of success? I want a frank assessment from you."

Maran stopped. She felt the intensity of Altyn's stare and knew that Altyn posed this question to her honestly. "The day will be hard," Maran replied, "But we can succeed."

"Then I approve," replied Altyn, "You may proceed with this plan."

Chapter 4: Mallaig

Zebra did not return that night, nor the next day. No one knew exactly when Zebra returned. Manx found him in the pre-dawn, sleeping on the kitchen table, scraps of food scattered about him. She responded by dumping water on him and uttering a string of expletives that woke the inn. She followed this with a broom, beating the man out of the room.

Her kitchen now cleared, Manx began her work preparing food for their journey. "Three days of food," she said, "You can never be too sure." She spoke and acted far colder than the previous day. She knew that they were going into danger. They heard her wail when Osei told her that he would fight with them. The woman yelled her heart out as only a soldier's wife could yell. In the heart of that swearing an all-too-real fear of death. Now her loved showed herself in the speed of her preparations.

Osei pulled out his armor from a trunk. Maran gasped at the beauty of it. Rather than being made of metal, the armor was composed entirely of overlapping seashells, varying white, gray, and black. The shells were arranged in an appealing pattern, making use of the

shading. When Osei donned the armor, he looked like a king.

"These are very difficult to find shells," Osei explained, "They are as hard as steel. The children look for these shells on the shore every day. In a year, my village could make two such suits. Our chief gives them as gifts. When I became his bodyguard, he gave this suit to me. I stood by him for many battles. We did not falter, even when the Union dwarves broke our flank. Three blows of a dwarven battle-ax this armor deflected. This chipped shell is the only sign of that battle. This is very good armor, indeed." Osei also showed a matching shield made of a single large shell.

Osei took his weapons off the wall. His spear had a jagged and curved edge. He showed Maran the details. "Leviathan tooth," he said, "Also very rare. My grandfather won it in a foot-race at the funeral of King Sombatu." His other items were equally exotic. His bow was made of leviathan bone, shark-bone, and squid tentacle, glued and tied into a powerful recurve. His arrows were tipped with a shark-tooth and fetched with fish scale. Most beautiful, his sword was a koa, a blade made by lining a blunt blade with shark's teeth. "The blade is beautiful and deadly against the unarmored. It is also delicate. Our chief had a blade made from dragon's teeth and wrapped in copper wire. Those teeth do not break."

Now ready for the road, they gathered in the inn's empty yard, amid the chickens and the ducks. Before the group departed, Maran took a moment to speak with Manx, "If I do not return, please get these steins to the Baron and Baroness of Broadford. I am sure that you will succeed." Maran had no doubt that Manx would deliver these items if necessary.

With light came clear skies. The evening storm had passed. The air hung cold and damp near the ground, but the sun promised a much warmer day. They left their few belongings behind, carrying only what was needed.

Zebra led them down the road, commenting as he strode. "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 to our advantage." As they walked, Zebra refused to meet Osei by the eye. When he did speak, he referred to Osei as "Rendlander."

A few miles later, they left the road, wandering through the side paths for a while, twisting and turning who knows where. Crags 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 nodded. This was her time to go further. She sighed, then handed her mace to Osei, dropping the food, taking off her armored coat and various other pieces of armor. Altyn picked up the sack of food, tentatively at first, then decisively, as if she were a hero by doing so.

Without her things, Maran felt naked. Even though these were new things, and she had never needed armor and weapons before, they were comforts 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, Maran 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 make a trail. If her friends could not follow her, she would far too easily face her own doom.

Zebra followed Maran closely. He watched as two bandits accosted her, throwing her to the ground. The smaller one yelled at her. The larger one threatened her. They argued for a while. Eventually, the small one forced Maran to drop her load and move deeper into the badlands. The larger one faded back into the greenery. Zebra bided his time, moving with care. One quick stab, just below the rib cage, took the bandit's breath, collapsing him to the ground. 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 sent man to Endhaven.

Osei grabbed Zebra by the arm, glaring eye to eye, "You should have more respect for life, Schan."

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

The two locked wills. Troubled, Altyn called them back to their duty. "I will not have my men arguing during a mission. Discuss this after." She pointed into the bushes where the liquor jugs were. The two men had secured the "prize" for themselves. No one would be getting drunk. They needed to move with greater haste.

Movement remained dangerous. They dare not alert the watchers armed with bells. The peals would carry. Zebra moved ahead of Altyn and Osei, one by one killing the watchmen along the road. He spat upon them. "These are no challenge. They are rabble in rags. They fight with knives and clubs. I expected better. He is better than this."

Osei looked over the dead men, barely more than boys, closing their eyes. "Once, they were all slaves," Osei noted to Altyn, "And perhaps they still are slaves, if not in body, then in mind. They murdered my town, but they do not deserve murder in return." Osei shook his head, memories of the south coming back to him. He was a soldier back then, doing what he was told. Now he was not a soldier, and no one could tell him anything. He looked toward Zebra, "We kill those who fight us, and have mercy upon those who surrender. I will have it no other way."

Zebra frowned, looking irritated. He did not answer.

The troupe moved forward again, eliminating three more checkpoints. This time, Zebra killed the watchers rather than leaving them to slowly expire.

After half an hour, the trio made their way to an area dominated by pines and maples

overgrowing 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 cave.

Zebra pointed and commented on the fort before the. "He made this place hard to find. There's no easy way to move an army through here. He could easily escape long before any force came to bear, or break that force at a place of his choosing. Finding this place itself is a good trick. You can not idly see this place. That will work for us. The trees and ground cover will shield us as we advance. I can get in easily. I need you to set up a distraction. The sooner I get inside, the easier we can kill their leader. Take out the alarm bells first. Take the gate." Zebra started forward.

Altyn paused him, "Zebra! That is not our plan!"

Zebra flashed a frown at them. "Give me two minutes." With that, Zebra advanced, disappearing into the underbrush, despite Altyn's angry protests. Their plan was now to attack and win.

Altyn gave Osei a concerned look. Osei met her worried gaze, "As I predicted. Come, let us fight. Live or die, we have a one friend to rescue."

Maran's heart broke when they tossed her into an iron cage.

The bandit took Maran through a series of paths. She did her best to drop pottery bits. She found that fake "tears" hid her actions the best. Eventually the man brought her to a hidden fort, handing her over to the slavemaster. The slavemaster took her down into the tunnels and threw in a cage. Maran kept her composure the whole time. When the lock clicked, emotion overwhelmed her and she felt true real tears well up.

The bandits at the checkpoint had kept the liquor for themselves. The bandits here would not be drunk. They would not be an easy fight. Her new friends might die. She might be a slave all her life. Her steins might not be delivered.

When the human slavemaster saw Maran, he blanched. He had not expected to see a dwarf. "Put her in the punishment cage. Don't trust her. Don't get near her. You are no match." The guards poked at her with spears, guiding her into a cage. The locks echoes their snaps thought he chamber. The guards left.

Maran heard a voice from the other cages. "You're in now," said a woman's voice. Maran turned to see an assembly of hardened and dirty faces; women of woe. They were lean and hard women, naked but for crude skirts wrapped around their bodies, layer upon layer of dirt and grime on their skin, and layer upon layer of lash marks upon their backs. Maran counted, but lost count. Fifty or sixty women were packed into those small cells?

The woman who spoke stood there at the bars, her arms dangling through. You'll learn

yourself not to cry. It's one cup of water and one piece of bread until you die." The woman pointed to the ground. "You can sleep there." The other slave women laughed.

Another woman laughed, "We know about dwarves. He'll sell you to Carmarthen. He likes doing that. He hates his own kind." The intonement of Carmarthen caused Maran a shudder, unconsciously pushing her back to the bars.

The lead woman commented more. "There's no getting out. It's just digging and dirt, and sometimes sleep. If you get unlucky, the slavemaster fancies you." Maran looked back to the women. Their faces showed no expression. They were blank. No welcome. No hate. No cruelty. Nothing.

Down the halls, Maran heard a bellicose call. "Fire up the forge. We got a new dwarf." Maran turned around, looking back at the women, all chained at the hand and foot with iron shackles riveted closed. They had no hope of breaking those bonds.

"What are you going to do, dwarf?" laughed the spiteful woman, twisting her words into Maran's soul.

Maran opened her mouth to speak, then stopped. She did not know the answer to that question. What would she do? Like the slaves before her, she felt fear. In acting from fear, she was already a slave. A people who acted from fear were slaves. Her people were slaves. They could free themselves of unjust laws. They could make themselves equal in the world. Yet, they would still be slaves to fear. There was only one thing to do. She must remove the fear. In that brief second of realization, her soul jumped. She now knew the answer to her own question.

Maran turned to the women and met their their spirit. She addressed them with an assurance and an ease that surprised herself. "I am stopping this operation. I will personally unlock your cell. When I do that, I need you to help me. I can not win your freedom for you."

The women reacted with strange silence.

"Where is everyone else in this operation?" Maran inquired, needing to know.

Their leader spoke in reply. "Half of us are down in the mine. Half-on, half-off. The men are housed over that way. We can hear them."

Maran nodded, then she crossed her arms and thought. She moved the pieces around in her mind. She examined the possibilities. The numbers looked close. They walked the razor's edge.

"How many bandits are there?" This piece of information was among the most critical.

"There are around four hundred. I think."

"Where are the bandits now?"

"They heard that a military force was heading this way from Broadford. They only left a handful of men to guard us and the fort."

Good. Their plan had the desired affect. "Who leads the bandits?"

"One of your kind. Svero. He likes to kill things, but only if they fight back well."

Svero. She knew that name. She knew the saying. "Svero killed more dwarves than the enemy." He was a mercenary commander in the southern war. When you needed something questionable done, and you needed to succeed, you hired Svero. The last that she heard, Svero had been banished from the Union under penalty of death. Leave it to Svero run a secret adamantine mine by enslaving the locals and terrorizing the countryside as a bandit. If it was Svero there, she needed all her wits.

Zebra had a beef with Svero. Svero had Zebra's sword. Zebra was now here. Maran now saw Zebra's purpose for being here. That was going to be a problem.

Maran started on a plan, working through the requirements and the movement ahead. She needed someone to run out and get help. She needed the army outside to be pinned down by the threat of an attack. With an army heading toward them, the bandit leader could not send his full force against their own stockade. He will send a minor force, and they could hold against one of those until nightfall. By the night, if they were lucky, help could arrive.

In the meantime, she had to get the slaves, men and women, to stand up and defend themselves. That was a harder challenge. These people were not up for a true fight, especially not a fight against dwarves.

Maran's thoughts were disturbed by a group coming to retrieve her. "Time to get the new one chained up," echoed bitterly through the room.

With two guards in town, a particularly strong and ugly dwarf stamped up to Maran's cage. He was of the high cast. He was Hadean. The dwarf examined her like he would examine a wild animal. "That's not a dwarf, that's a Loam. Keep her pinned. They are vile and cunning." One guard pushed his spear into the cage, forcing Maran backwards while the second unlocked it. With a nod from the ugly smith, the guard opened the cage and the smith reached in and grabbed Maran in a rather effective arm-lock. They pulled Maran from the cage and marched her roughly to the smithy to receive her new chains.

The smithy itself was a hot little room, cramped and dusty. Dust and soot covered every surface. The tools lie scattered apart, pell mell. Maran frowned at its poor condition. No self-respecting dwarven smith would leave his forge in such condition. This smith showed no apologies as he dropped her into stocks, clamping them shut. "You are too damned treacherous," he said, patting her cheek, "Gotta use a few extra precautions. Now you will get the chains that you have always deserved."

The guards wrapped manacles about Maran's hands, wrists, and throat. Just an hour before, these would have brought despair to Maran. Now they meant nothing. She was not defiant,

as some men may be. Instead, she saw the chains on her as nothing but physical chains on her being. They were placed on her both to restrict her and to humble her by evil men.

The smith applied the rivets, sealing the chains onto her. When finished, he doused them with water. The guards released her from her stocks.

Oddly, Maran had never worn iron before. The metal felt weird. For the first time, she felt that power that other dwarves felt when they wore metal. For the first time, she understood a bit more about smiths and their forges, and why her people should not use iron, even if given the chance. It was hard, and jealous, and coveted wealth. It made dwarves more like dragons, covered in hard scales and hoarding wealth beneath the earth.

Echoes of thunder interrupted Maran's thoughts. Echoes of "attack" moved up and down the corridors. Men scampered. Maran noticed that the thunder had a regular rhythm. Allyn must be up there. If everything went as plan, Zebra would arrive soon. IF Zebra arrived. Reconsidering the plan, she needed to resolve this on her own.

Noticing her expression, the smith picked up his hammer. "This is your doing," her accused.

Maran did not wait for the smith to murder her. She pushed one guard into the brazier that held the coals. The man fell into the coals and screamed that echoed through those stone corridors.

The smith moved around Maran, seeking to drive her into a corner. She knew better and she needed to even the odds. When the second guard moved too close to her, she performed "giant grabs a tree". She grabbed the guard's spear, wrenching it from his hands, whipping the butt up into the man's jaw, sending him flying back first onto the floor. The upward spear now slid down her hands, where she flipped it around. She was now armed.

The dwarven smith now stood alone against her. Her life was not safe. "I always wanted to kill a Loam," the smith bragged, "I always wondered what your insides were like."

The fight that followed would make her grandfather proud. Maran used every trick that he taught her to defend herself. She found uses for every little move and every little adjustment. That kept her alive as the smith tried to wear her down. Her saving grace was a life in the thin air. Wearing down a mountain dwarf is a losing bet. The smith tired before she did, and that lost him his life.

One thrust is all that you need to win a fight. Maran's spear bit into the dwarf's upper thigh, severing a blood vessel. The smith collapsed, his blood spraying across the ash and the coals, slipping down to the floor. The smith knew that he was dying.

"I was never a good dwarf," he said to Maran, forthright and honest, "I robbed, enslaved, and murdered. You must be my punishment. There is no other possible explanation for losing to a Loam." He tried to speak again, but could no longer form words. As he slipped away, Maran grieved for him, she grieved for herself. Dwarf should never fight dwarf.

A few minutes later, Zebra found Maran staring at the carnage before her. "MAGNIFICENT!"

he exclaimed, breaking the solitude of her moment, "You killed the smith in his own smithy. The Lady truly is with you. Come. We must search for their leader."

"Svero is not here," Maran interrupted, "If you want any chance at your sword, you need to listen to me. We don't have much time. If we are going to win, if you want a shot at your sword, we must act fast. We need to control this stockade as soon as possible."

Zebra looked surprised, then grinned his wicked grin. He pulled out Maran's mace. With a few swift blows, the weapon shattered the iron chains binding her. "Lead on," he granted her.

Chapter 5: The Compound

Amid the butchery of their victory, Maran summarized her knowledge to her allies, "We have a cave here filled with several hundred slaves. We must free them, but there are four hundred bandits out there. I figured this out. We can win this, but we have to act fast. Those bandits are out there because they were deployed to engage Broadford. We need those tribesmen of yours, Osei. They must get moving here as fast as possible. I need Svero, the bandit leader, to see us as a feint, but he can't ignore us. He will split his forces, sending a small detachment to us. He can't afford to commit more with an army in the field. We can hold against a small detachment. Osei, can you get those Appaloosa back here?"

"I can make it out of here. I can run like the wind."

Osei stripped his armor. He retained only his koa, a shark-toothed sword, and his bow. Zebra let him out the gate. Osei ran. He slipped up a storm gully and disappeared. The bandits, still in disarray, did not act against him.

Even as Osei left, Maran re-inspected their position. She assessed the situation quickly. "Altyr, I need you to climb the tower. Take command of the topside. Hold the wall against all casual snoopers. Attack them with all the flash and pizzazz you can muster. Make them fear us. Fear is more important than effectiveness."

Maran pointed up, "Zebra! Get up that rock and hold it against all comers. If we lose it, we lose."

Zebra smiled in response, unable to hide his delight. He quickly scanned about for the equipment that he needed, picking a crossbow off a dead man. On an impulse, he patted the dead bandit down, finding a cigar on the corpse. "This smells pretty good," he said, "It's better than that eastern stuff. Charystos always had really bad tobacco." With a salvaged crossbow and a brace of bolts, he climbed the rock with astounding skill. Maran supposed that only dwarven mountaineers could climb like that.

Maran's next job was the slaves. Still wearing her broken chains, Maran walked down to the women's slave pens, mace in hand. The few bandits that she encountered fled when they saw her. She had no idea where they went and she did not care. Their fleeing heightened the drama of her entrance. She needed drama. The women stood and paid attention when

she strode into the room, walking directly toward the toughest women in the room.

"I need you," Maran stated, waiting for no answer, "I need eight volunteers for topside. They must know how to handle crossbows. I need eight more women to run food and water to the walls. The remaining women need to man the kitchens." She then handed over the keys. "Make it quick."

Turning around, she hustled over to the men's area. The women were easy. They had already seen her fulfill her promise. The men would be harder. She had to win them despite being both a woman and a dwarf.

Maran saw no guard, presuming that he must have abandoned his post. She quickly spotted a stool and mounted it. "Shut up and listen to me. I just killed the smith and his two cronies. I did this while chained. You can see the chains. My friends and I now control this fort. That was easy. Keeping it won't be as easy. Svero is a tough opponent. I want volunteers to defend the walls. You will be outnumbered. You may die. I will be there, too. We live or die together. Don't come of you have any doubts. I only want volunteers. We must hold, and hold the first time. There is the smithy corridor up the corridor. Free yourselves."

Maran tossed them the keys. She needed them people to free themselves. She needed the ones who faced their fears and went beyond. The first battle would be the hardest. Doubt is the real killer, not skill. Defenders who doubt can not prevail.

Running up the long incline, Maran traveled back to the stockade, climbing the left-hand tower to join Altyn. "I gave them a talk. I hope that I get enough volunteers to defend the wall. I'll give the women crossbows and put them in the towers. By my figuring, we need hold off a company. That means that we need thirty defenders at a minimum and fifty to hold."

Altyn responded factually. She did not doubt her words. "I am a trained Astrean wizard. I am worth twenty men. Your plan will work. Someone trained you well, groundling."

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 knew that these were toughest men and women. They were the strongest and boldest of the slaves. These people would defend the best. Maran made note of their faces. When the less steady slaves came forth, she would need to disperse them among the steadiest men.

The women who volunteered were military women. They were hardened before they ever worked the mine, wives and daughters of mercenaries. They laughed at joked at their new freedom while checking their triggers and their ammo. They had the runners bring up buckets, washing their grime and washing way their fear. Seeking dignity, they donned the bloody clothes of their dead enemy, baptizing themselves in blood.

Maran counted the minutes remaining. Half an hour to the road? Half an hour to move

forces down? Another half an hour to prepare an attack? Some bandits might be closer. The bandits might know better paths to take to the road. When should they expect an attack? Maran would only bet on an hour. That hour went by slowly and far too quickly. Even as they gathered weapons from the dead, they heard activity beyond the trees. The enemy gathered wielding their hatchets against small trees. Maran knew what that meant: siege ladders. The battle was underway. Maran yelled an order, "Shoot at any stray person that you see. Keep them hopping."

The noises and shouting continued for a while, their work busying them. Little by little, the bandits fell silent. When they were fully silent, they should have attacked, but they did not. Maran paced and wondered. What were they up to? Why were they not attacking? They could count heads and know that they had the advantage. She did not have enough people. Seeking any advantage, Maran turned over tactics in her mind, but could find none that would win the day. She was positive that Altyn and then ten on the left side could hold. Maran doubted that her own five could hold, even with her helping.

Maran considered how bandits could attack. Would the bandits attack a single point? Would they feint at one point, then attack at another? Would they break into three groups? If she knew exactly what they intended, she might be able to hold them off. Even so, that was wishful thinking. What Maran really needed another ten or twenty steady men. A few more men came forward, but she dismissed them. She could see their eyes. They were not ready to hold.

A clatter interrupted Maran's thoughts. Stray crossbow bolts clattered down the great rock behind her. Maran looked up. Fine gray smoke drifted from Zebra's position. Seconds later, a few more bolts flew downward, striking random places. Maran bit her lip. The bandits were on the hill, just like she expected and she had no one to reinforce the position. Zebra had to hold. Maran crossed her fingers hoping for luck. "Keep it up, Zebe," she said to herself. Win or lose, he bought them time.

Altyn's whistle brought Maran's attention back to the ground. She signaled to Maran's right, where a group slowly advanced down the storm gully, sheltered from their fire. Those men were almost on their doorstep. Maran sighed to herself, "Outmaneuvered."

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

Below him, a platoon of bandits slowly advanced up the steep hill, driven by a dwarven sergeant. Zebra waited patiently. Those men were not close enough yet. Their terrain was too easy. They could run. He wanted them in rougher terrain where they were easier targets, and where they could not run away so easily. Observing them, he worked out his attack plan. He would attack a bandit, then the dwarf who lead them, then another bandit, and then the dwarf, until the dwarf was dead. Once the dwarf was dead, the demoralized bandits would break.

When Zebra the men moved close enough, he stood, aimed his crossbow, and fired. His

eager 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 dwarf. The shot bounced off the dwarf's helmet. "Dammit," he grumbled, watching the smoking streamer drift away.

Quick as the devil, the dwarf identified where the shots originated and ordered his men to ready their weapons. When Zebra popped out to shoot, they fired. Their shots went wild. Zebra killed man after man, but every shot against the dwarf bounced off some metal pieces. "Dwarves are like dragons," he reminded himself. Both had cold hearts, hard scales, and an insatiable lust for gold.

The exchange of shots continued, each round giving Zebra less and less leeway to pop out. The dwarf spread his men out, slowly surrounding the rock and exposing all the angles. Zebra cursed. His tactics were not working, especially as that damned dwarf 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 traded sides a few more times before the shots came too close.

His options narrowing, Zebra wedged himself into the safest cleft he could find. That wasn't enough, but it was enough for him to shoot with some cover. The men advances as little as they could, eager to not get shot. Unfortunately for Zebra, those men had a hard-nosed dwarf sergeant pushing them forward. They feared their sergeant more than death.

Zebra counted. Seven firm hits. Fourteen bandits left? He might get three or four more? The numbers looked bad. It was best to kill the dwarf. He popped out and shot at the dwarf again. Miss! "Dammit," he swore as the bolts clattered around him.

As Zebra tried to think of some new, cunning plan, an agonized scream caught his ear. He looked around the rock to see Osei drawing his great whalebone bow for a second shot into the dwarf. The dark man wasted no motions, drawing and shooting arrows in rapid succession, killing bandit after bandit. With their sergeant dead, the humans panicked, stumbling down the hillside for safety.

Zebra gave Osei a smoldering look. This had been Zebra moment of glory, and Osei had quenched that. "The dwarf was my kill," he objected.

Osei pointed to the edge. "The battle is soon afoot. You may yet get your chance."

Maran saw Osei climb down the cliff, her heart leapt with joy. She prayed for good news. She threw her arms around the tall, dark man. "You made it!"

"I brought Appaloosa!" said the man, "Help me into my armor."

As he dressed, Osei explained that the Appaloosa should be hiding in the storm gully to the right of the compound. They had twenty warriors ready to move in when Osei gave the word.

Maran's brain whirled in amazement. This changed everything. Quick as a snake strike, Maran had a new plan. "I need them to stay hidden," she said, "We are using a panic strategy. When the bandits are attacking and bunched up, we call in the reinforcements. That will confuse the bandits. Hopefully, they panic." It was a desperate strategy, but it would win them their first engagement with a minimum of casualties.

Osei proceeded to bark and yelp to the tribesmen. "I told them what to do," he informed Maran, "I also told them to remain silent."

"Good," said Maran, "Because our reprieve is over. Those bandits that you killed will be reporting back, and the main force will soon start its attack. If they can't take us the easy way, they have to take us the hard way."

Zebra proved her correct, yelling down that the bandits were massing on the pathways, ladder in hand. They prepared to race to the stockade and attack.

Maran had crates piled at the gate and climbed up. She could see both ends of the stockade wall well. Osei stood defending the right wall, while Altyn manned the left tower. She directed the fight from the middle. Should the bandits go for the gate, she was also their last-ditch defense. She cocked her own salvaged crossbow and readied herself.

With a unheard order, the bandits moved forward. At their head, a Hadean dwarf lead them. If the Union knew what she was about to do, she would be hung. Maran aimed her crossbow, uttered a brief apology to her god, then fired.

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 sprinted across the open strip far too quickly. Reload.

The battle now happened, and battle happens fast.

Maran ordered her women 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 volleys. Between orders, she fired her own weapon.

The bandits split into two even group. The first group aimed for the left wall. That was their strong wall. Maran concluded that they desired to put the defender's attention on the strong wall, then send an equally strong force against the weak wall. Maran thought it a sold plan. That plan also meant that the bandits did not know about the Appaloosa Perfect. She had the edge.

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 crossbow women, hoping beyond hope that they could shoot again. As the first bandits reach the top of the ladder, the women let loose another volley into the knot of bandits on the ladder. Many fell. More climbed onto the ladders.

Just as the next bandit reach the top of the ladder, Altyn Tag stood from her stool. She gripped her folded parasol by the middle, pointing it toward the ladder, and blowing it apart in a blast of thunder and lightning, sending wood and bandits flying in random directions. She lifted her arms again, this time intoning words that cut across Maran's being like blasphemies across a temple. For a brief second, Altyn truly was the center of the world, and everything revolved around her. That moment passed. The thunderclap that followed detonated with solar brilliance, imploding into a distorted darkness. When Maran's sight returned, the bandits and body parts lie scattered like straw on the ground. Some picked themselves up in panic, extracting themselves from the mass of blood and corpses. Most did not move, nor would they again.

Altyn stepped back, brushed the dust from her dress, and sat down up her stool as if she had passed an exam.

Maran gazed numbly at the carnage. She had never seen such butchery. She had never imagined that Altyn would deliver this. Perhaps Altyn had presented her with a strange gift that she would never have otherwise understood. This was why her people avoided war. The harvest of war is misery and death; a harvest so poor that it starves the soul.

Half-finished some profound thought, Maran suddenly realized that 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. They needed reinforcements. Maran redirected the defenders to the new position. The left flank's sergeant, a heavily armored dwarf, survived the onslaught uninjured, backing away towards the right flank. When the crossbow women fired a volley at him, he responded by throwing axes, killing one woman outright and mortally wounding a second.

Altyn's cacophony had distracted the attackers so well that they did not notice the Appaloosa arraying themselves for their attack. Maran could not take credit for being that smart in her planning. It was Altyn who chose well.

The Appaloosa drew their bows silently and fired into the mass of men. Many died. Many screamed. Maran winced. The second volley killed even more men. Eager for blood, the wolf-people yelped their war cries, barking and howling. They threw down their bows and leapt to the carnage. Butchered and battered, the bandits' will flagged. They fled pell-mell, racing for safety. Only their dwarf stood, fighting all who faced him. He wounded four fenrid and killed three before he himself died.

That death did not need to happen.

With that death, Maran heaved a sigh of relief. The killing ended. Her impromptu company had held and they had survived their assault with a victory. Looking at the writhing wounded on the ground, the bandits had lost significant numbers. Maran reminded herself those people could be her own people if she guessed wrong. Among her own people, very few were wounded. They were lucky.

Laughter brought Maran's attention back to wall. The crossbow women were taking pot-

shots into the wounded bandits, slowly murdering their former captors. Maran cracked with anger. "By the holy gods above and below, have mercy. Appaloosa, dispatch the wounded quickly and bring in the weapons." The women groused but obeyed.

Maran slowly settled down. She detested the aftertaste of battle in her mouth. There had to be a better way. Where did she go wrong? If it was anywhere, it was with Zebra. This whole plan, from beginning to end lay in Zebra's paradigm. She dueled with Svero as surely as Zebra had, letting blood for honor. That way stank of evil. She stank of evil. She lead everyone into this, and it was she who had to leave everyone out. She did not know what that looked like yet.

The absurdity of fighting for peace struck her in that moment.

The most important thing for Maran to resolve was priorities. What mattered most? To Maran, freeing these slaves mattered the most. There were some here. Somewhere near here, there was a mine and the rest were there. She had no idea where "there" was.

The Appaloosa drifted back in as Maran pondered the situation. Altyn ordered them up the rock. She understood the defenses.

As Maran expected, victory fed confidence. More slaves stepped forward to help. The impossible was now possible. She gained forty men and women ready to defend the walls. By Maran's reckoning, the bandits would need about two hundred men to reliably take the stockade. That would be halve their forces while they feared an encroaching enemy. If Svero were wise, he would hold off retaking his stockade.

After the redeployment, the waiting began. No one knew what the enemy would try, or when. Maran idly ate through Manx's lunch. That woman worked miracles with food. Maran soon felt revived, and even more sure that she had everyone going in the wrong direction. No amount of lethal force would gain her what she valued.

Unexpectedly, the enemy showed again. "Dwarves!" yelled a woman from the tower.

Maran ran to the rail. The dwarves carried branches. "Hold you weapons," cried Maran, "They signal for parley." She looked to the crossbow weapon. "Unload your weapons." When the women complied, she yelled down to the dwarves, "Come forward and speak."

A trio of Hadean dwarves walked forward, defended head to toe in their immaculate iron armor. Two were guards flanking with shields, covering the dwarf in the center. "That would be Svero," Maran yelled to her crossbow women, "Do NOT shoot! If you shoot, they will kill you. I guarantee it." She did not need to say that. They remembered the axes.

Maran looked to the rock to see Zebra clambering down. He scrambled down the cliff side as quickly as he could, leaping onto a shed roof with a resounding boom, then rolling from there to land on the ground. Zebra scrambled up Maran's pile of crates.

Svero approached to within twenty yards of the tower. "I want to talk. You can send three."

Zebra responded for her. "Svero!" he shouted with accusation.

Maran yelled back while she had the opportunity. "We'll talk!" She then looked to Osei and Altyn, "I want you two. He'll stay behind."

Zebra repeated his challenge. "Svero!!! Come out and fight!"

Svero laughed in return. "Tazebra, I still have her, you damned weasel. I won her fair and square. You reneged." He drew the beautiful and flame-like Schan blade from its sheath. The metal glistened and sparkled, dancing flame-like. Its beauty caught them all by surprise. Even Altyn muttered a small "Wow" upon seeing that blade.

"You betrayed us!" exclaimed Zebra, pointing his finger with great accusation.

Svero laughed again, "I was only into dueling for the money. Once the money was gone, the Queen paid better. If you were a dwarf, you would have done the same."

"I want my sword back! I challenge you!"

"This is not the time for challenges," Svero yelled back, "Talk or no talk. I have twenty dwarves that say we can kill the lot of you. You can fight or you can talk."

Maran grabbed Zebra, "Zebe! Look at me. Look at me!! I need you to stay here. I need you to stay behind. I know that you want to duel him, but this is not the time. You've trusted me so far. Trust me now. I need to go out there. If I am betrayed and killed, and you know that Svero betrays, we need someone here to lead the last ditch defense. It will be a desperate defense. It will be crazy. I need you to do that. Can you do that?"

Zebra thought about what she said. Maran wondered if she had said the right thing or not, watching the intense and expressionless gaze of the Schan. After some seconds, he responded, "I prefer my satisfaction, but that can wait. For you, and only you, I will stand last in the breach. I will trust what you decide, although I have reason to believe that your decision will not be to my satisfaction."

Maran sighed, "Thank you."

Zebra personally opened the gates for Maran, Osei, and Altyn. His eyes glowed red with an inner fire, and his hair smoked lightly. The depth of this passion scared Maran a little, knowing that inside him was a wildfire that would burn all around him.

As the trio approached, Svero motioned for them to stop, holding up one finger. His own men stepped back and away from him. Osei and Altyn did the same for Maran. The two dwarves met in the middle.

"Aha!" Svero exclaimed, "I should have known. A Loam! I've warned my fellows about you people for years. I told them that you were far sharper and harder than you seemed. I was right. You fought a tough fight, Loam woman. I am Svero. You should know that name. General Svero of the Rhakotian Expeditionary Force, Blasphemer of Earth, Duelist Elite,

Bandit King, among other things. What is your name?"

"I am Maran, Sir, daughter of Heurek, and Envoy of King Oro," she replied, polite even in this moment of war.

"I hail your tactical skill, Maran. You have promise. I wish that I could train you myself. Who was your grandfather?"

"Teurek, sir."

"Teurek! Well, you have quite the able grand-sire. He could have been King of the Loam, you know. All he had to do was take it. They would have elected him. He plays a sharp tactical game. I never understood why he didn't take the position." Svero paused for the moment, absorbing the implications of his situation, then resumed speaking, "I am rude. Please introduce your unique fellows. They are quite the team. An air wizard of Astrea and a Rendlander native. Am I correct?"

Maran pointed, "The Astrean is our patron, Altyn Tag. The Rendlander is Osei."

Svero nodded, "The Astreans are famous. Their wizards are well trained and politically unmatched. Watch her. You are her stepping stone. As for the Rendlander, I recognize his armor. He looks like one of King Mundasu's bodyguards. The were tough. One of them could take on a dwarf. I never did kill Mundasu. I hacked one of those suits of armor three times and didn't even draw blood. And the Schan. You have yet to see what he can do, I bet. Be careful. He'll kill you."

Maran changed the subject, "Sir, what do you want?"

"To the point. I like that. I want our dead with their armor and weapons."

Maran could not deny this request, but she could not comply. "There are three dead. You may take them and their armor. I can not guarantee their weapons. I will do my best to return those to you, but I can not guarantee them. I will have my people bring the corpses down."

Svero inquired, "Who killed my smith?"

Maran looked him back in the eye. "I killed him in self defense."

Svero nodded. "That is regrettable. He was a Hadean. I will let that stay between us, but I will use that fact if necessary." Maran nodded. They both knew what that meant. For a Loam to strike a Hadean under any circumstance carried death, even in self-defense. For a Hadean to kill a Loam was a fine of 10 standards and a goat.

Svero pointed to the gate, "Now for the true demand. I want you to surrender."

Maran frowned, "I believe that we can hold against you."

Svero shook his head, "You may win, but the casualties will be terrible. I do not think that you can win. I do not think that you are willing to stand the slaughter."

Maran put her facts together. A hunch occurred to her, "I believe that there is a force chasing you. I believe that they will catch you if you linger and fight. If that happens, you will surely be destroyed. I offer you this in return: if you take us to your mine and hand over the remaining slaves, then you pass through those gates. As we have not yet found any money here, I will also bet that you get your gold. You may keep that."

"I am impressed!" declared Svero, "You read this situation well. I could not ask for better. If you grant me a small boon, I will agree."

Caution, Maran asked, "And the boon?"

"A question: why are you letting us through when you have the tactical advantage?"

"War does not advance my agenda, nor does it advance the agenda of my people. We could rebel and have our independence, but we would leave our brethren without a moral compass. Your tactics must match your goal. Our goal is peace, not war."

Maran looked back to her allies. "We deliver the dead dwarves and their equipment. He takes us to the remaining slaves. He takes his his gold stash and escapes through the tunnels."

Altyn and Osei both signaled their assent. Osei yelled back to bring out the bodies.

Maran resumed her conversation with Svero, "Where will you go from here, if I may ask?"

"I'll go under the badlands, through the Old Kingdom, and out to the east."

"The Old Kingdom?! That under Carmarthen!"

"Yes, but they don't go down there. If you know your way around, you can avoid trouble. If you ever get the chance, go there. Those halls are beautiful. They took all the valuables when they left. Not a scrap of gold in the place. It's nothing but old statues and murals, with the occasional library. That's where I learned about the mine."

"I am going to make peace with Carmarthen. Those halls will live again."

Svero looked surprised. "I would call anyone else a damned fool. You are Teurek's student. You might just do it. I don't know how, but you might. If you get stuck, talk to the Mother of Storms." The Mother of Storms was the god of gods. No greater being dwelt upon the earth. She resided in Endhaven, the land of the dead. The ambitious went to her and bargain, and they always paid more than they bargained for. This was not a topic that Maran wished to follow.

Negotiations completed, Maran walked back to the gates. "Open the gates. We are not surrendering. They are coming through. They will deliver the remaining slaves to us."

That day, soldiers from Broadford shattered the bandits that held the road. The soldiers impaled the survivors, leaving their corpses to rot among the blossoming trees. Many survivors fled south to their hideout, only to be met with death. More fled into the badlands, killed by the terrible creatures that lived there.

Maran retrieved her steins from Manx and gave them to the the local Baroness. In public, she thanked Maran for the gift, then forgave Maran. She was a mercenary wife who had too many husbands. She saw the value in a negotiated settlement.