

The OLD KNIGHT of a FRONTIER DISTRICT

~Prologue~

by Shien BIS

translated by Manlyflower
@ <https://manlyflower.com>

Table of Contents

Prologue.....	3
The Girl of the Gants.....	4
The Sword Fiend.....	27
The Old Herbalist.....	47
The Envoy and the Thief.....	68
The Attack.....	89
The Sunlit Courtyard.....	114
The Double Spiral.....	130
The Whereabouts of the Seal.....	151
Lies and Truth.....	165
The Letter.....	196

Prologue
Departure

Chapter 1

The Girl of the Gants

1

Baldo pushed open the double doors and sauntered into the gants¹.

A man who looked to be the shopkeeper was preparing food behind the counter.

He stole a glance at Baldo but continued his work nevertheless.

These actions were quite an affront to a knight, one of the noble class.

Of course, though there was a sword at his waist and armor on his person, both were old and covered in grime.

Certainly this knight did not look the part.

Baldo himself wished not for the attention.

Though not far from the Pacra domain, he had never before set foot in this town.

He wanted to see just what kind of place it was before leaving these lands behind.

1. inn

Pacra was but five days away, and yet it took him a month to arrive, for there was much that caught his attention on the way.

It was a strangely peaceful place for one so close to the gap in the Great Wall.

Baldo showed the man behind the counter two corlulose and negotiated their price.

He was in fact the shopkeeper after all.

Compared to other wild fowl, the corlulose was not in the least bit gamey and tasted quite fine.

They were hard to catch, being few in number and so timid.

Their feathers were beautiful and prized as accessories in the city, it was said.

The two corlulose were deliciously plump.

Not a scratch could be seen on their hide.

Not a drop of blood remained inside.

After a moment of discussion and with the promise of two nights of shelter, food, alcohol, warm water aplenty to bathe his body, horsefeed, and dried meats and bread, Baldo handed the shopkeeper the two corlulose.

This place was a gants, a shared dining hall and inn.

They were often built by the owners of mines or farms.

Occasionally were they funded by a collective of those who wielded authority in their respective towns.

Laborers were provided a set number of meals a day there.

For a certain price, travelers would also have access to the food and board.

“Clean yourself off before going up to your room, sir.”

said the owner, so Baldo left the building.

A girl thirteen or fourteen years of age followed him outside and proceeded to brush him off.

On his month-long journey through the mountains and fields, a great deal of dirt coated his clothes.

So too were his shoes caked with mud.

The girl continued to help him, and soon he was clean enough to go inside.

The rooms were all on the second floor.

Baldo ascended the stairs, belongings in hand, and went to his room.

He placed the items on the floor; he removed his armor and cloak.

He sat down on the bed; he took off his shoes.

Slowly he massaged the soles of his feet.

With the flow of blood came pain and fatigue.

Though his horse joined him on this journey, rarely did he ride it.

The horse came with him in tow and carried his belongings.

Baldo's horse was even further along in its years than he was.

Years ago, it had retired from service.

Any longer, and it would surely be slaughtered for its meat.

For that reason, he had chosen this horse to be his travel companion.

2

In a small corner of the continent's eastern frontier, the two houses Coendela and Norra had fought for many a year over the Great Lord's seat.

House Coendela had recently triumphed over the Norras, claiming the title of Lord of the greater Giguenza region.

The house Telsia that Baldo served too had no choice but to acknowledge their rightful authority.

The Coendelas called a meeting of lords and demanded that the earnings of the Zaliza silver mines be used in the reconstruction of the areas ravaged by the conflict for the next ten years.

A preposterous demand, truly.

The bounty of the Zaliza silver mines and Repoza bronze mines had both been under the jurisdiction of House Telsia since time immemorial.

As those who ruled over the Pacra domain—located at the gap in Jhan Dessa Roh²—it was their duty to repel all manner of cursed beast that might attempt entry.

The thought that one might try to plunder the coffers of the house tasked with that burden was absurd.

Not to mention, the lands ravaged by the conflict had been razed by the very Coendelas no less, so to claim that it was for “reconstruction” seemed laughable.

All they could do for now, however, was silently yield to the Coendelas’ insistence.

Baldo served four generations of Telsia lords, and deeply he respected the strength of their will.

So too did these lords generously reward Baldo’s bravery and loyalty.

However, Baldo declined every of their offers of additional land.

No longer did he have family.

Never did he marry.

Upon hearing of what came to pass at the meeting of lords, Baldo wrote a letter to his lord of intent to retire from service, surrendering his estate and finances thereupon.

Without so much as waiting for a response, he paid each of those employed by him a handsome bonus, secured their livelihood thereafter, and then left on his journey.

2. The Great Wall

The sum that Baldo left behind was to give the house Telsia a moment of respite.

This journey had no destination.
It was but a trip for Baldo to meet the end of his life.

3

The water's ready! he heard the girl shout, so he retrieved his equipment and headed downstairs, to the area behind the gants.

Next to the well was a gravel-laid washing basin, and further behind it was a large barrel filled to the brim with warm water.

Heavens, it seems they have a bath at the ready.
This will be much appreciated.

He leaned his sword against a small fence beside him and took off his clothes.

As he did, the girl handed him a wooden pail and said, Use this if you'd like.

He scooped some of the barrel's water with the pail and poured it over his head.

Over him came a sensation of pure bliss as the water flowed down his hair, beard, and body.

He scooped water once more and used it as he scrubbed himself clean.

After this, he lowered himself into the washing barrel.

Copious amounts of water spilled over the edge for Baldo possessed a towering figure.

Wow, your body is so large, the girl exclaimed with wide eyes.

With a great crackle did his his legs, hip, back, and shoulders all loosen up.

It can be said a knight's most essential of qualities is that of withstanding pain and suffering, yet it seems a month of walking and camping will still certainly take a toll on the body.

The pain he had repressed, ignored, and eventually forgotten came to life once more throughout all his body.

Yet this is what it means to be alive.

Though Baldo reveled in the happiness of his receding exhaustion, the oncoming pain caused him to wince.

Does it sting? the girl asked him.

Baldo's body was covered with scars.

Doesn't the water hurt with those wounds? the girl worried.

Baldo smiled softly and said back to the girl,

These wounds are ages old—long since have they hurt.

The bathwater felt divine, and it gave my body a jolt is all.

A scrub fashioned from a dried porpos fruit lay nearby, so he used it all across his body.

The water grew ever so dirty.

She washed his boots and garments atop the gravel.

While scrubbing the boots back and forth, back and forth, she asked him for the name of his horse.

It goes by Staboros,

he responded, to which the girl asked, What does it mean?

Someone I know bestowed upon it the name.

I never asked the meaning,

he answered.

I've already fed and given it water, she said, and I'll be sure to wash it later, though is it alright that its horn is so small?

Horses possessed horns, and so did many livestock.

They became smaller with age, and once they became too small for the eye to see, occasionally they brought with them a fit of madness.

There's nothing to fear,

Baldo replied.

Once an excess of dirt and filth had piled up at the bottom of the barrel, the girl opened it partway to release half of what was inside and once more filled it to the brim with clean water.

Baldo watched her carry the barrels of water around behind the gants, grunting as she did with her sleeved rolled up, and the scene brought no shortage of peace to his heart.

Truly, what a fine bath.

Hah-hah-hah!

The girl seemed happy as well to witness Baldo's merriment.

He stepped out from the bath, returned to his room, and laid flat on the bed, quickly descending into slumber.

4

Downstairs, the gants was teeming with activity.

Baldo retrieved his sword, descended the stairs, and sat down in an unoccupied seat.

Before long came the shopkeeper with stew, bread, a jar of distilled alcohol, and a cup to drink it from.

Taken aback at the generous size of the jar, Baldo poured some of the spirit into the cup and took in a hearty quaff.

The liquid burned his throat, settling deep into his body.

Before long, the warmth bore into his stomach, and his insides squirmed about.

The stew was made with meat and freshly picked vegetables, so a succulent smell started to drift about.

He scooped some with the wooden spoon and brought it to his mouth, chewing ever so deliberately.

Wonderful.

It was corlulose meat.

To an immaculate tenderness was it cooked.

As such, every bite brought with it further savoriness.

The vegetables too had thoroughly absorbed the flavor while remaining firm still.

An absolute masterpiece.

The man sitting across from Baldo turned to the shopkeeper and said,

“Gimme some of what he’s having.”

The shopkeeper said to him it was a special dish and so it came with a special price and then announced that very price.

“That’s way too expensive!”

the man exclaimed.

Baldo brought another spoonful of the stew to his mouth, and this time, he took a sip of the spirit before the flavor would fade away.

The deliciousness of the stew only brought out the taste of the alcohol.

As an indescribable bliss descended upon his body, he sighed,

Ah...

The man watched Baldo, gulped, and then finally yelled,

“Bring me the damn stew already!”

Similar voices started to come from the various tables all ordering the stew as if spurned on as well.

The girl ran busily around, delivering the bowls of stew and collecting payment.

It was not long before the shopkeeper announced he had no more left to sell.

As Baldo finished eating the stew and bread, the shopkeeper brought a small plate over to him.

On it were pieces of corlulose skin, grilled to a delicious crisp.

Basking in the envious stare of the man sitting across him, Baldo took a bite of the skin.

The taste of salt sprinkled atop provided an exquisite balance, and the addition of juice from some citrus-like fruit worked to eliminate the unpleasant oiliness, paving the way for satisfying aftertaste.

Paired with the spirit, it was a masterful union.

The man across the table inquired as to the price, and the shopkeeper responded with a figure even higher than that of the stew before.

For a good amount of quality charcoal was required in its making, was the reason the shopkeeper gave.

The grilled skin sold out more quickly than even the stew before it.

Neither did the alcohol lose out in popularity.

Lastly, the shopkeeper brought out a small bowl filled with stewed ingredients.

Unsure of the contents, Baldo inquired the shopkeeper as to what it was, and the man responded that it was in fact stewed corlulose giblets.

Can one truly eat something like that, Baldo wondered, but the skills of the shopkeeper were long-since evident, and the dish appeared truly delectable.

He ate a single piece.

I say!

There was nary a trace of pungency nor acidity.

It had thoroughly absorbed the light taste of the broth—perfection manifest for any and all who savor alcohol.

He took another bite even before he could come to his senses.

Mm-mm!

It tasted differently than that of the meat before.

Utterly and entirely different.

So was the consistency different, and so was the way the meaty juiciness exploded in the mouth on a wholly different level.

It was a flavor that seeped into every recess of his body.

It felt as if present in this dish was a taste completely different from the stew, bread, and grilled skin in his stomach.

Baldo was in a state of shock, and so the shopkeeper explained:

“This is all because you drained the blood so expertly, sir.

After seeing it done so well, I just knew I had to try making it.

I changed the water countless times and did my best to skim off all the impurities.

These are innards we’re talking about, so of course there’s gonna be a ton of crap inside.

But then again, cleaning them is what I do best.

The finishing touch was our local specialty, rock salt.

Depending on the ingredients, you see, the meat ends up smelling something fierce.

I can say this stewed dish here is the finest thing to come out of my kitchen in years.

With innards, you see, each part tastes differently.

Stuffed in this tiny little dish is a whole world of flavor.”

The man sitting across the table ordered the stewed giblets.

The shopkeeper responded with the price.

It was *even* higher than that of the grilled corlulose skin.

Not often is one presented with the opportunity to try a taste so rare, after all, and especially one made from ingredients of such a caliber.

The man paid the price no heed and had the shopkeeper bring him the dish.

Amazing! he exclaimed after a single bite, and the shopkeeper then drowned in the deluge of new orders.

The girl ran around, bounding with energy, and in the blink of an eye, there was no longer any left.

The shopkeeper ended up making a hefty profit this night.

Baldo was entirely satisfied as well.

Just as he thought to wrap his meal up, however, the bustling shop suddenly grew silent.

All stared at the entrance.

Three men had just strolled in through the open doors.

They had the demeanor of scoundrels, of those who caused only storms in their wake.

At the front stood a large man of considerable girth.

His left ear was deformed, and a large scar stretched across his left cheek.

He scanned the room with a repulsive glare and shouted,

“Well, well!

I’m ever so pleased to see you all in such high spirits!”

He slammed the battle-ax he had been carrying in his right hand on the floor and then belted, his face now contorted with malice,

“Of course, I’m certain your festivities tonight will prevent none of you from showing up to work on time tomorrow.

Oh, how about this!

Since all of you are having such fun, surely you wouldn't mind if I halved your breaks tomorrow!"

One by one, the customers in the shop stood from their seats and left the establishment.

The man with the battle-ax suddenly beckoned with his chin towards one of the men about to leave.

One of the scoundrels took the man to the corner of the shop and started talking to him.

It seemed to be particularly nasty conversation, one of debts and taking sisters for the night.

The man with the battle-ax then approached Baldo, sitting by himself.

He glared at Baldo's face and at the sword resting by his side.

Baldo sat upright in his chair, always ready to move, and kept his left hand free, always ready to draw his sword.

The man with the battle-ax then stared at Baldo's hands.

A knife and fork.

Most of the customers ate with their bare hands or with things like wooden spoons or skewers.

That was the norm.

What Baldo possessed at this moment was quite the item, however.

Each utensil was made of metal.

The knife in particular had upon it etched a beautiful, intricate design, and its surface radiated a silvery sheen.

It was grossly out of place in a countryside gants such as this.

Baldo brought the final bite of stewed giblets to his lips, unaffected by the man's bloodthirsty glare, drank the last bit of alcohol in a single gulp, and then finally heaved a sigh of satisfaction.

The man's bloodlust subsided as if put off by the display, and with the men who accompanied him he left the gants behind.

5

The shopkeeper came round to where Baldo sat with another cup and jar of liquor.

He filled Baldo's cup to the brim.

Was it as thanks for the night's profit or perhaps as recompense for the troubles that had previously transpired?

Deeply the shopkeeper sank into one of the chairs, and he filled his cup too with the spirit, downing the liquid.

Little by little came the shopkeeper's story of this town.

The area here rose to prominence by the cultivation of rock salt.

Following the death of the town's head, whom all respected dearly, a man named Brando arrived and wound up in charge.

Brando was himself a man of skill and magnanimity, however the five sons of his who were tasked with supervising the work lorded over the workers with an iron fist, terrorized the townsfolk for all debts they incurred, and in all their actions exhibited tyranny unjust.

Brando's estate possessed ample men of caliber, however it seemed in comparison with them the sons all paled.

The shopkeeper gave up on this place for it had no future and thus arranged to send his foster daughter to live under his cousin's wing, to the town of Mithra in the Palzamic Kingdom.

There was a school in Mithra.

The shopkeeper had exhausted all of his savings in paying the tuition and succeeded in trying to get her enrolled.

The girl was the daughter of his late sister, he said.

She would depart by carriage to the river town Lints tomorrow afternoon.

The one who would drive it was a friend dear and old, he said.

He would take her across the Orva River in a trading ship of the lord of Lints and then bring her along in a trading caravan to the town of Mithra.

He knew an official in the Lints domain and had requested all this of him.

Once his contract with this gants had expired, the shopkeeper too wished to travel to Mithra and open up a restaurant of his own.

Thanks to the corlulose you brought, I've come across a good sum, said the shopkeeper as he poured Baldo the last of the spirit.

Baldo saw in the shopkeeper's countenance the loneliness of a man sending away his precious niece and so he shared some of the drink in his cup.

6

Baldo upon returning to his room removed his sword from its scabbard and inspected the blade.

He put the lamp alight and shone it along the metal surface.

Here and there on the blade were the faintest traces of tarnish.

And so he took a cloth and gently removed it all.

This was the ritual Baldo observed at the end of every day, no matter how tired he was.

Once finishing his maintenance, he tried swinging the blade with his right hand.

When brandishing the sword upwards in a large swing, both his elbow and shoulder cried out in pain.

It appears yet again his old wounds would throb.

Swinging the sword from top to bottom would not work well either.

Baldo then tried swinging the blade up from left to right.

This approach would not bring pain it appeared as long as he did not overextend his right elbow.

If came the time he must use his sword, then this approach would prove best.

Surely if necessary he could ignore the pain altogether, but why purposefully maim one's self?

Baldo sheathed the sword and embraced slumber.

He did not wake until the afternoon of the next day, at which point he peacefully passed the time by taking care of his horse and inspecting his belongings.

If missing any supplies, he would buy more in town.

He would stay the night today as well and then depart posthaste on the morning of the third day.

7

There was a ruckus on the first floor of the gants.

Baldo left his bed and opened a fraction the door to his room.

He overheard this exchange downstairs:

“Don't be like that, keep.

Doncha think you're being awfully cruel here, tryin' to send such a cute girl away to the city without even telling us?

You do realize our old man owns this place, right?

Don't forget 'bout a little thing called manners."

The shopkeeper with traces of anger in his voice insisted, It's time for the carriage to leave, but the other men present clearly did not intend on listening.

The townsfolk had meant to keep the departure a secret as to hide it from the scoundrels, but the carriage driver had apparently let slip the truth.

Baldo started to equip himself.

Quick were his actions.

A strong light shone in his eyes.

Old were his traditions, that in moments of true he would waste no time in preparing for the fight.

He no longer felt any fatigue or pain.

"Half a year should do it.

Send her over to work at our old man's place.

Do that, an' we'll look past how rude you've been bein'.

We'll even go an' pay her for the work.

There's a lot were gonna be teachin' her.

A lot.

So?

Whacha think?

Not a raw deal, ain't it?"

one of the men added, and vulgar laughter followed.

Baldo listened to the exchange downstairs, and he put on his boots, equipped his armor, attached his sword, donned his cloak, slipped on his gloves, wore his cap.

Let me go! Stop! Don't touch me! he heard the girl shout with a heart of iron.

Baldo finished his preparations expertly yet with composure undaunted and with a loud thud did he swing open the door.

All those downstairs then looked up at Baldo.

Amid the tense silence came but the sound of Baldo's boots as he slowly walked.

Near the counter stood a man with a battle-ax.

Surely he was Machius, eldest of the brothers Brando.

The one sitting atop a table sequestered in a corner of the gants was likely the third son Geronimus.

Supposedly he was versed in the throwing knife.

Then the man at the entrance who in his grasp held the girl captive must be the fifth son Cainen.

In his left hand was a bow and on his back a quiver with arrows.

Baldo descended the stairs, creaking with his every step.

And he too carefully watched the scoundrels.

It appeared these men had predicted Baldo's entrance.

Were he to continue his descent, he would find himself on three sides surrounded.

His approach did not grow timid, however, and he now stood on the first floor.

The third son on the left glanced over.

Into the fold of his shirt he reached his right hand.

Baldo caught a brief glimpse of the man's suspenders and the throwing knives hanging from them.

They were rather large for knives meant to be thrown.

Next to the counter on the right, the eldest son reached for his battle-ax.

Standing at the front entrance, the fifth son let go of the girl and from his quiver retrieved an arrow.

Upon regaining her freedom, the girl rushed into the embrace of the shopkeeper who stood in front of the counter.

The three scoundrels directed their focus all onto Baldo.

It was then that a playful glee welled up in Baldo's heart.

For in this situation, he could make sport of his fierce swordplay and rob the scoundrels of their fighting spirit.

Failure would reward him with life-threatening injury, but Baldo did not hold his life dear.

This journey was after all one that would lead Baldo to the end of his life, so would doing so while saving the innocent common folk not be a fine way to go?

Would he receive terrible wounds regardless, Baldo would continue until all three were struck down and the last of the life left his body.

However, if at all possible...

It should go without saying that he would rather he could eliminate the men with minimal damage to his own body.

To the left Baldo turned and glared with intensity at the third son.

The third son gulped and tightened his grip on the knife.

Suddenly Baldo looked away and took three steps toward the entrance.

Taken by alarm, the fifth son notched an arrow.

Baldo looked away from the fifth son as well and stopped moving facing the eldest.

At this moment were the eldest son, Baldo, and the third son all in a straight line.

The third son was doubtlessly searching for opening into which he might throw his knife.

Then Baldo threw up his cloak with a loud flourish.

As the left part of the cloak hung over his shoulder, the sword hanging to the left of his waist was bared for all to see.

All who laid witness to this thought Baldo did so as to render his blade easier to draw.

His left flank was consequently now more susceptible to attack.

Baldo additionally untied the string holding up the left side of the cloak.

In doing so he revealed his left flank to even those behind him.

There were certain places one should aim a throwing knife.

These were for the most part anywhere in the stomach, chest, or back, and if the distance was sufficiently close, the face and neck too.

Baldo's cap, cloak, armor, and boots at this moment covered all of his body aside from his left flank.

The third son was surely resting his gaze upon that very exposed part of Baldo's body.

The eldest son then spoke as if no longer able to bear the heavy silence,

“Explain yourself, you senile fool.”

Though his tone was ever contemptible, so too was it almost hoarse, for perhaps the man was weary of his mysterious opponent or predicted an arduous fight ahead.

Baldo never broke the silence and took yet another step forward.

The third son behind him showed signs of activity.
Is he preparing a knife, Baldo wondered.

“You really wanna do this, huh?
All by yourself?”

Baldo took *yet* another step.
He must not be too eager.
The moment to strike shall be decided by the opponent.

“Well alright then.
If that's how you wanna play it...”

The eldest son signaled the third with a momentary glance.

Now!

“Draw your blade!”

shouted the eldest son at the very moment he jumped to the side, but Baldo in that instant had already begun to move.

To the right he twisted the lower half of his body, and with a thud, he slammed his ironclad boots atop the floor.

The toes on that foot pointed towards the third son.

That very third son had already begun to throw the knife.

The instant the knife left his fingertips was his face painted with shock at Baldo's actions.

Though Baldo drew his blade in that moment with ample force born from the rotations of his hips, his eyes drew steady watch over the throwing knife's trajectory.

The knife would not stray from its path, so he but needed to guide his blade with the right timing that the two might collide.

Clang!!

came the clash of iron, and the stricken knife pierced deeply into the floor.

Baldo continued the rotation of his hips yet as if he had never stopped and stored his blade back into its scabbard.

His cloak once billowing about with the wind beneath its fabric now came back down and covered his body.

Time froze in that moment.

The eldest son stared at Baldo, battle-ax still in both his hands.

His eyes were open wide.

His mouth agape.

Slowly did the reality of what transpired start to finally dawn upon the troublemakers, surely.

Out of the corner of his eye, Baldo saw the fifth son lower his arrow in shock.

The eldest son's expression finally betrayed his fear, or perhaps something akin to awe.

The third son behind Baldo surely looked the same.

One cannot blame them.

For by spinning around and striking down a throwing knife did Baldo show them an incredible feat.

Furthermore, it appeared to these scoundrels that he had turned around only after sensing that the knife was about to be thrown.

Though seen in the realm of storytelling, one might find it hard to believe such a thing was possible, moreso after seeing it with one's own eyes.

Baldo fearlessly turned his back to the third brother, armed as he was.

Though the eldest and fifth sons had their weapons at the ready, he still sheathed his blade upon striking down the knife.

This was nothing but a display of pure confidence that he could deal with attacks from any which direction.

Though clad in shabby attire, might this old man be a knight of great repute?

The three of them could not begin to cross swords with such a man.

Furthermore, If they made an enemy out of a vassal such as him, their entire lineage would face naught but destruction.

Such were the thoughts that raced through the minds of these scoundrels.

Baldo, though clad in calm demeanor, truthfully felt concern deep down.

The knife that flew at him was far larger and heavier than he had dared imagine.

By the sound it produced, he judged the material to be of high quality as well.

That which Baldo possessed was naught more than a light, short blade, one appropriate for a long journey.

He had left all of his treasures back at the manor.

Had this blade met squarely with the knife, it likely would have shattered.

It was truly harrowing.

After staring for a moment with unmoving eyes at the eldest son, Baldo turned to the shopkeeper, indicating towards the door with a nudge of the head.

The shopkeeper nodded with a sigh of relief and went with the girl towards the entrance.

The fifth son moved with a jolt as the shopkeeper tried to pick up the luggage, but a glance from Baldo stopped him in his tracks.

And so were the shopkeeper and the girl able to leave the gants.

Baldo took a step.

The three scoundrels immediately stiffened.

Baldo walked slowly forwards in the direction of the front doors.

The fifth son moved back, clearing a path.

Upon swinging open the doors and stepping outside, he was temporarily blinded by the afternoon sun.

The shopkeeper and the girl were dashing towards the horse-drawn carriage, stopped in the middle of the town's central plaza.

As he squinted his eyes, he was able to make out the face of the girl as she looked back at the shopkeeper every now and then.

It was glowing with happiness.

Outside were a number of townsfolk, watching the situation unfold with baited breath.

As if surrounding the girl they moved, blessing her with congratulations countless.

The carriage finally started to move as the last of the riders had boarded, and those that saw the carriage off waved their hands and shouted with vigor, lamenting the pain of a farewell.

The shopkeeper did shout as well, screaming the girl's name.

For him it wasn't enough, as he quickly set out, running after the carriage.

Be well! Be wary of the water you drink! he yelled, his voice now nearly a sob.

Send her off with all you have.

You have indeed raised that girl well,

whispered Baldo in his heart, and he removed his cap with his left hand and held it up high, bidding the carriage farewell as it disappeared beyond the cloud of dust.

Chapter 2

The Sword Fiend

1

Suddenly the fishing pole jolted.
It seems a fish took the bait.

Following a brief battle of endurance and the eventual triumphant victory, Baldo was in good spirits when a familiar voice entered his ear.

“It brings me great joy to see you are well, great Sir Rhowen.”

Baldo turned around and saw kneeling in the grass of the dry riverbed a knight by the name of Cedelmont Expenglar.

The two individuals behinds Cedelmont, both kneeling in similar fashion, were also familiar faces.

Behind them, however, was a rather unexpected figure, glaring down at Baldo from the horse he remained perched atop.

A knight named Yotish Peyn.

He was said to be the right-hand man of Cardos Coendela, lord of the domain of Dorba.

One would suspect Cedel might come, but Baldo never imagined House Coendela would send a messenger as well. Not to mention one of such repute.

“Sir Peyn, I ask you dismount your steed.”

Speaking down to a dismounted knight atop one’s horse in times of peace was considered a breach of etiquette.

As such, Cedelmont’s words were but a reminder of the obvious.

Yet Yotish’s mouth curled in clear displeasure.

“Sir Expenglar, this man is no longer a knight. He has cast aside the lord he once served.

One who is not a knight has no need for a knight’s courtesy.”

“Sir Peyn, the great Sir Baldo Rhowen has not cast aside his lord as you say.

In his Knight’s Vow, he swore to take the commonfolk as his lord, and never once has he broken it.”

“Hmph.

I suppose you’re right.

‘Galdegarsh Gwera,’³ was it?”

Jotish said while dismounting.

In his mannerisms was thinly-veiled ridicule.

Even Jotish, however, had to show restraint before Cedelmont, or rather House Expenglar behind him.

The name Expenglar carried weight in these lands.

Baldo told the three kneeling knights to stand.

Cedelmont remained kneeling yet, however, and staring directly into the eyes of his mentor, he said,

3. Knight of the People

“Great Sir Rhowen, I beseech you return.
Lord Galiera is racked with grief.”

I do not doubt it,

thought Baldo.

The current lord of Pacra, Galiera Telsia, was a deeply compassionate man.

He saw Baldo, the man who served four generations of Telsia lords, as dearly as a brother.

With the passing of the previous lord, Vorra, two years prior, Baldo was Galiera’s most trusted of friends.

“Sir Baldo Rhowen, my lord as well thought you left with inadequate notice.

We have prepared land for you.

Houses Coendela and Telsia require your service yet,”

Yotish said, to which Baldo thought,

Quite the nerve to say those words.

Baldo knew not where these lands were located, but he knew they were without doubt part of another domain, certainly not under the Houses Coendela or Telsia.

Declaring the leadership of said land could only lead to conflict.

Baldo’s fame had spread far too wide.

Never have the walls under his watch fallen, never has he succumbed to insurmountable odds.

He was undefeated.

Though retainers of House Telsia were few in number, they repelled all cursed beasts, fought off all invaders, came down upon all the villainy in their lands, and Baldo was said to be instrumental in it all.

Yet now that reputation proved only a hindrance.

The current head of Coendela, Cardos, was a man of insatiable greed.

After obtaining the title of lord of the region he so desperately coveted, surely were his eyes now set on other domains as well, wishing for their taxes.

Years of conflict have exhausted his lands, however.

Though he mobilized endless waves of troops in the final months of his campaign, his coffers were now undoubtedly dry.

He had no choice but to keep the peace.

Had he Baldo in his employ, however, things would be different.

According to the resolution of the Meeting of Lords—though merely a pretext—Baldo and House Telsia were to be sent to cruel war and made to fought until the last of their blood.

This was the strategy he drafted.

Were he to remain in good health, Baldo would fight to the limits of his strength and could possibly secure the benefits of war for House Telsia.

However, Baldo had grown old as of late.

It would be not long before he met the end of his days.

There would be no greater disloyalty than to die and leave house Telsia embroiled in senseless war.

What if Baldo was not there?

A strategic piece would be lost, and the plans could not come to fruition.

Would house Telsia be used for everything they had without Baldo, no longer would the cursed beasts be held at bay.

Were that happen, Coendela and all the other lords would find themselves in cruel conflict with beasts both cursed and not.

He would likely lose control of the Great Seat.

Thus Baldo decided to part with House Telsia.

He could buy the house some time if he did.

It was fortunate that a new generation of retainers was being brought up.

Weather the storm, nourish the soil, prepare for the future.

For this, time was of the upmost importance.

Baldo's pupil, Cedelmont, was likely well aware of this.

Had he not tried once to convince Baldo to return, however, it would only do House Telsia harm.

Frequent are the rumors that twist context and reverse cause.

In difficult times, the House chased away their most meritorious of vassals, old as he was.

Such rumors will always be born.

Thus it was necessary for a retainer of House Telsia to seek Baldo out and beg his return.

To send three knights led by a man of such stature as Celelmont, this display already went far beyond what was excepted for a decrepit old knight born to a small military family in the frontier.

“Baldo Rhowen,

I await your answer.

Do not tell me you intend to refuse.”

This man was the only mystery.

What exactly was Cardos Coendela planning by sending him?

For him to call on his very nephew to try and stop Baldo from leaving seemed an impeccable show of sincerity.

Yet Coendela should have no need for such pretenses.

Stopping him and obtaining a strategic piece came above all.

If he couldn't be stopped, House Telsia would be given the responsibility to do so.

Now that this man came, however, only Coendela himself would bear the blame of failing to convince Baldo to stay.

Not to mention, this very conduct could only serve to anger Baldo in its discourtesy.

“Sir Peyn,

You must show restraint.

My lord has acknowledged House Coendela as the rightful possessor of the Great Lord’s seat, but that does not imply House Telsia serves under you.

Neither is Sir Rhowen beholden to the wishes of your house.”

For whatever reason, Yotish Peyn did not retort.

What did he come for, truly?

Cedelmont then continued in his attempt to dissuade Baldo from retiring for some time longer.

Baldo merely responded that, being unable to fight any longer, he wished to spend the last of his days in peace.

Though perhaps the wrong thing to say, Baldo couldn’t bring himself to lie that he left due to any sort of ill-will towards the house.

His reason for leaving could only be due to the ever-weakening nature of his physical and mental faculties.

It was imperative that Cedelmont and the two other knights listen intently to these words and spread them to a great many people.

Once his answer came to an end, Cedelmont reluctantly gave up on convincing Baldo and instead retrieved a pouch of money.

“It was Lord Galiera’s wish that should you not choose to return, he would at least bless you with a peaceful journey,”

he said, handing Baldo the pouch.

Hm.

What would happen if I refused, I wonder.
Surely there would be those suspicious that I did in fact harbor grievances towards the lord,

thought Baldo for a moment before he reached out to receive the money.

It was at that very moment.

There was a strange glint that shone in Yotish Peyn's eyes. Neither was it directed at Baldo or Cedelmont, but at the pouch of coins between them.

Though it was generous sum to an old traveler, it was not nearly enough to inspire greed in the nobility.

Once the knights of House Telsia concluded their farewells and mounted their horses once more, Yotish too left with them.

As Baldo placed the pouch in his horse's bag, he almost felt as if the man's glare was even from the far distance trained on him yet.

2

In the end, Baldo decided to spend the night in that very spot next to the river.

He began to collect stones as to build a little campfire.

Old Stabaros continued to graze on the grass as it always did.

Just when he finished arranging the stones, he heard the sound of two horses approaching.

One of the figures was Yotish Peyn.

No longer was he attempting to hide his bloodlust.

The other was a man unfamiliar to Baldo.

He looked less a knight, more a mercenary.

Yotish dismounted and said,

“Hey, Sir ‘Galdegarsh Gwera.’

I forgot to mention something earlier—completely slipped my mind.

Hope you don’t mind me coming back.

Let me introduce you to a certain someone.

Someone named Venn Ulir.”

Venn Ulir!

So this is the man!

He was the wandering knight known as the Rolo Spia.⁴

The stories say he was once a knight of a country in the midlands.

He possessed an unquenchable desire to challenge the strong in combat and before long could no longer remain in his country.

It was said he made his living as a contracted killer, slaying his targets in duels.

Perhaps he is now a borrowed blade of the Coendelas.

In moments of death, an invisible red crow will fly in and land on your pillow.

The moment one sees this red crow is the moment they perish.

They likened him to this folktale, and thus was he known as the Red Crow.

There were many fantastic rumors surrounding this man.

Above all was that he was not human.

That he was half demihuman.

Demihumans cannot bear children with humans.

It happens once in a blue moon, but the infants rarely survive the birth, let alone grow into healthy adulthood.

It was a curious rumor.

Perhaps it was created by one who bore great malice toward the man.

4. Red Crow

“So you’re Baldo Rhowen, huh?
I’ve been wanting to meet you.”

It was a deep, dark voice.

I’ve never met a man with such a piercing glare, thought Baldo.

There was not a warrior’s spirit in those eyes, however, nor was there any trace of madness.

All that radiated from him was a sense of quiet and rationality.

Tsk-tsk, came the sound from Baldo’s mouth as he removed his cloak.

He had put his sword on his waist the very moment he heard the sound of hooves.

Yotish Peyn and Venn Ulir tethered their horses to shrubs twenty paces away from Baldo and began to approach him.

Now they were but ten apart.

Venn Ulir raised his hand to stop Yotish in his tracks.

Don’t get any closer to him, were the words hidden in the gesture.

“Well then, Sir Rhowen.

About that certain something I forgot to mention—”

said Yotish as he glanced toward Venn Ulir, prompting the man to take four steps further,

“—would you mind dying for me?”

Venn Ulir unsheathed his sword the moment Yotish stopped speaking, and Baldo did the same.

What a fine blade, thought Baldo as he gazed at his opponent’s weapon.

The light that shined off it betrayed its quality.

A masterful work, forged with excellent materials aplenty.

It was a bit longer than Baldo’s blade and a bit narrower.

Baldo's sword could be wielded two-handed if desired, whereas Venn Ulir's could be held in but one.

It was the type of weapon fancied by a swordsman who trained in speed and technical prowess.

So too was his armor made of leather, allowing for nimble movement.

Upon first glance, the equipment the two possessed seemed not dissimilar.

Both had leather armor and a shortsword.

The truth of the matter was that the two were extremely different.

If they fought head on, Baldo's sword would but break in a single clash.

Baldo's preferred method of combat after all was to be clad in heavy armor, wielding a giant longsword.

For many a moon had he trained in this style.

For Baldo, the strikes of an opponent were not to be dodged.

They were to be received and endured.

There was no way Baldo could receive his opponent's attacks with his current equipment, however.

Not to mention his opponent was a notorious fiend with the sword and in some manner could be considered a knight.

Baldo seemed destined to lose.

"I ask you for a duel,"

said Venn Ulir.

A tad late for that, thought Baldo, though a small smile formed on his lips to see the man so strangely sincere.

If I am going to die, I might as well fight with every fiber of my being.

Though my left hand is lonely to be without shield,

thought Baldo as he said, Tsk-tsk, in response, Then I shall take you up on that duel.

Both men held their sword in their right hand.

Venn Ulir's blade came flying first, crossing the six paces between them in an instant.

Baldo stayed rooted upright in the spot.

Venn Ulir sliced his blade up diagonally from the right. Swiftly like a gust of wind.

Baldo pulled the left half of his body back and leaned back a fraction, narrowly avoiding the strike.

The tip of the sword passed a hair's width from Baldo's left eye, but he did not close it for he kept careful watch over Venn Ulir's movements.

With nary the slightest drop in speed, Venn Ulir changed the sword's trajectory and swiped up at Baldo's ribs from the opposite direction.

Baldo stepped forward a fraction with his right foot and swung with his sword, deflecting Venn Ulir's blade with a seemingly effortless swipe.

Realizing he could no longer guide his sword along its intended path, Venn Ulir pulled the blade to the left before the swing was completed and lunged forward towards Baldo's chest, attempting to finish the strike there.

Baldo had pulled back his sword and positioned it upright along the center of his body, however, so Venn Ulir instead aimed to meet the blade with his own, for he was wary of a counterattack to his head.

The two swords collided with the sound of metal against metal.

Venn Ulir's blade struck squarely against Baldo's.

Fortunately his sword did not break.

Baldo could furthermore match Venn Ulir in the contest of strength, so neither was his sword forced back.

In but an instant, Baldo had repelled his attacks thrice.

The Rolo Spia must scarcely believe his eyes,

thought Baldo.

Of course, Baldo was thoroughly surprised himself.

Those three strikes were nigh unavoidable.

The first strike came in a predictable manner, and so Baldo simply gauged the timing and pulled his body back accordingly.

He did not evade it by watching the blade.

He was able to knock aside the second strike as it reversed direction due to a particular technique he learned.

It was a technique he had seen many times forty-eight years ago, when he first learned the basics of swordplay from a wandering knight.

When he dodged the first strike and realized the blade was going to return from the opposite direction, he swung his own sword where he predicted the weapon to be, and by chance did he manage to hit it.

The third strike was an even larger coincidence, or perhaps more accurately the result of Venn Ulir misreading the situation.

This too was a lesson from Baldo's once-teacher, that if unable to predict the opponent's strike, one should execute a middle guard and try to perform a feint.

As Baldo did not know what to do, he faithfully brought his sword back into a middle guard, and Venn Ulir misjudged his intentions.

Baldo thought it a funny thing, that he would suddenly remember this lesson from forty-eight years ago and perform it so reflexively.

Baldo also realized something in that moment.

Venn Ulir was a man who was trained in orthodox swordplay.

Furthermore was he a man of extraordinary skill.

The nature of his prowess is fundamentally different from a layman like me, one tempered on the battlefield, thought Baldo.

Strength comes in many forms, one could say.

That was not all.

Though his skill was great, what truly commanded praise was his speed.

Venn Ulir's blade was frighteningly quick.

When learning to wield a weapon, natural talent plays a large role.

Some find themselves suited to it; others do not.

Speed, however...

The quickness of one's blade...

These are not things that can be achieved through talent alone.

Only countless hours of blood and sweat could birth a speed that miraculous.

Baldo realized that this battle-crazy wandering knight was the most dedicated man he had ever seen.

Chances were he truly, truly loved the sword.

Chances were he only held interest in the polishing of his own swordplay through life-threatening combat.

It goes without saying that this man was also blessed with talent in the shortsword.

This was not swordsmanship that relied on genius, however.

One could not achieve this level of speed and skill without sacrificing all else.

Venn Ulir gripped his sword with both hands and tried to push Baldo's blade from left to right.

Baldo responded to the force with but his right hand on the hilt and thought to himself, I see, so that's what he's trying to do.

Venn Ulir would apply pressure and then suddenly pull back, causing his opponent to lose balance, and then go in for the final strike.

Where is he going to strike?

The head?

The legs?

The legs, predicted Baldo.

Though it may have simply been a hunch, it was correct.

Correct though it was, Baldo could not evade it.

The sword fiend suddenly pulled his blade back and sliced down at Baldo's left leg.

With Baldo's unsteady footing, there was naught he could do to resist.

If Baldo could not evade, however, then he would not evade.

This was a foe he simply could not best.

If he could simply land a single stroke of his blade then he would be satisfied.

From a starting position, Baldo struck forward with his sword, aiming at the top of his opponent's head.

If he aimed for the center of the fiend's body, then it was more likely for him to land a blow.

There the sword fiend was—lowering his body, slicing towards a spot below Baldo's right knee.

There Baldo was—eyes carefully trained on the head as it moved, bringing his blade furiously down.

Even at this moment did the sword fiend react with marvelous speed.

Though he was facing completely forward at the time, he managed to twist his body around in a matter of moments.

Baldo's sword hit naught but air.

So too did the sword fiend's strike leave but a shallow wound.

As he placed all his weight behind this fruitless blow, and the fiend's blade left a gash across both his boots and shin, Baldo fell.

However, to fall as such would spell death.

He curled his body into a ball as he dropped, and in his left hand he grabbed a broken branch from the ground, using

his momentum and all the strength in his hand to throw the branch where he assumed his foe to be.

The girthy branch flew through the air.

Though a step into his twilight years, Baldo still retained his uncanny strength.

The fiend stepped to the right and avoided the branch, but his breathing could no longer remain composed.

The branch continued on its path, now toward Yotish Peyn instead.

Surely was he caught off guard, originally content to spectate.

The sight of the incoming branch flustered the man, and though he managed to evade, he fell back and landed on his rear.

He was a ridiculous sight.

A look of incredulity appeared on his face for a moment, and in the next was it flushed with rage.

“You old bastard!”

Yotish screamed as he pulled his sword from its sheath and started to rush toward Baldo.

The sword fiend grabbed him with his left hand and stopped him in his tracks.

“It’s not your turn yet.”

“Out of the way, Rolo Spia!
I’m going to cut this bastard down!”

Now! thought Baldo.

Now was the time for him to employ the trick he prepared.

After hearing a certain signal, Staboros had waited on standby behind the pile of stones that Baldo collected.

As Baldo stood up, he shouted,

Gedan!⁵

5. Fire!

and rushed toward his enemy.

The sword fiend was naturally aware of his surroundings, but Yotish had his eyes set only on Baldo.

From behind the pile, Staboros kicked the stones.

That certain signal was when before the duel Baldo said, Tsk-tsk.

He taught it to Staboros when he was young, as a practical joke.

As the stones collected were for a campfire, they were of considerable size.

From the kick, several stones were launched through the air toward the two enemies of Baldo.

The sword fiend was again able to dodge the rocks with aplomb.

As he did so, however, Yotish was released from his grip.

One of the stones struck Yotish square in the back.

Perhaps it was the stone or being released from the fiend's grip that caused Yotish to lose his balance and tumble to the ground before Baldo.

I hoped to land a blow on Venn Ulir at least once,
but alas, some things are not meant to be,

thought Baldo as he slit Yotish's throat.

There Yotish was—laying face-down upon the earth.

A pool of blood slowly grew from beneath him.

Baldo then entered a fighting stance once more to receive the sword fiend's offensive, but the man instead coldly stared at the collapsed Yotish, unmoving.

No longer did Baldo sense a desire to do battle from the fiend.

Baldo witnessed the scene with confused thoughts and then asked Venn Ulir,

Are you unhappy to see your employer perish?

“I’m not unhappy to see him die.

Neither is he my employer.

With him gone, though, it’s simply that I don’t know what to do after I kill you.

So I no longer have a reason to fight.

I will put this duel on hold for the time being,”

responded Venn Ulir.

Once the blood stopped flowing from Yotish’s neck, he tied the body to his horse, mounted his own horse, and holding the reins of both, disappeared into the distance.

3

Baldo covered the blood on the ground with dirt and moved to a nearby spot to set up camp.

As he made preparations, he wondered what exactly Yotish had been planning.

They clearly wanted him dead.

But why?

Perhaps they feared Baldo would take action against them.

Yet Baldo could do nothing to harm Coendela, for he was alone and possessed nothing.

Were they worried?

It was not outside the realm of possibility, but employing the services of a man such as Venn Ulir did not come cheap.

There were countless ruffians among their ranks, and with but ten of them could they make swift work of a single old man.

There were even some whose swordsmanship surpassed Baldo’s as he was now.

I wonder if he must keep it secret from his own flesh and blood.

Though, I suppose one would be hard-pressed to send their powerful vassals away.

Baldo himself rarely ventured far from the main castle's fortifications in his day.

If Venn Ulir truly wished for Baldo's demise, then how could one explain his peculiar actions.

He said he did not know what to do after killing Baldo, which implied that Baldo's death was not his aim, but rather something that came after.

Well then.

If they did not attack only to maim and kill me, then what does that mean?

Did they intend to use my corpse for something?

Is it perhaps something in my possession they desire?

But I've left behind everything of value that I owned.

Baldo suddenly recalled the strange glint in Yotish's eyes when he received the pouch of coins.

He had already checked the contents of the pouch but found there was inside naught but money.

So too was the bag itself exceedingly normal.

Baldo did not know what to think.

There was an even more pressing matter to attend to, however.

Dinner was ready.

The freshly-caught fish were sizzling hot.

He ground the delectable rock salt he purchased from the last town he visited and sprinkled it atop.

There was an irresistible smell.

Baldo retrieved a jar of alcohol and a cup from his belongings.

Upon his departure, Cedelmont gave Baldo three jars of spirit and called it a parting gift.

What a considerate fellow,

rejoiced Baldo.

It was surely a fine alcohol and surely as dry as Baldo liked it.

It was truly the most pressing concern of the night—in what manner is this spirit best enjoyed?

He decided to make a soup.

He decided to have just a bit of jerky.

Once the fish was grilled to the perfect extent, he took a small sip of the alcohol.

Incredible!

He bit into the fish.

Firstly into the meat on it's back.

Wow!

Freshwater fish often possessed a strong smell, but this one was utterly stunning.

Next he bit into the stomach.

Mm-mm!

Nary a trace of bitterness.

In fact it was almost sweet.

Perhaps because it was so fresh?

Perhaps because of the type?

Glistening oil coated the meat of the stomach—it was an inexpressible delicacy.

Such a sweet, fragrant experience could be said to be a privilege solely of the fisherman.

Ah, who cares about all that difficult nonsense.
I hunger, I prepare delicious food and spirit, I savor
it all.

There is no greater bliss than this.

The gash on his right leg continued to radiate pain, but
with more alcohol in his body would he soon forget it.

His hip continued to hurt, but what could be done about it
now?

No longer was he at the age to cower in fear of death.

He had done all he needed to do.

All that was left was to live as though truly alive and then
die.

As he gazed at the starry sky and the wind crossed the
river to brush against his flushed cheeks, Baldo enjoyed his
supper.

Chapter 3

The Old Herbalist

1

He awoke.
It was night.
A fire crackled.
He felt the warmth of Staboros by his side.

“A clever horse, there.
Seems it was also the one that pulled you from the river.
Even when I found you that horse was curled up beside
you, providing its warmth,”

came a voice from beyond a bonfire.
A woman’s voice.

“If you can get up, then do so and eat.
I used some of the dried meat you kept in your bag.
Some of the dried bread too.”

His body was wrapped in a cloak that was stuffed with
grass.
He tried to sit up, yet found it difficult.

His body simply refused to listen.

“Your clothes have long since dried.
I advise you to put them on first,”

the owner of the voice said as she stood up and approached Baldo.

It was an old woman.

So thick were the years painted on her face, that it was impossible to tell her age.

Her hair was white and her skin was covered in wrinkles, yet there was nary a wobble in her step.

With the old woman’s help, Baldo somehow managed to get his body to move like he wished it and so managed to put on his underwear, shirt, and pants.

He then started to eat.

In the pot from Baldo’s belongings there was a stew made from jerky and roots with the dried bread mixed in.

Slowly he ate the meal.

“I imagine you fell into the river because you were in poor condition and lost your footing, am I correct?

Though, I would rather you tell me the details.”

He told the old woman everything he remembered.

He was ascending a mountain when his body began to feel sluggish.

Then before long did his hands and feet start to grow terribly cold.

After that, his heart started to race, and his breathing turned rough.

Upon climbing down to a large stream to drink water did his head start to burn as if on fire, and it was then that he lost consciousness.

It was not food poisoning, nor was it chronic illness.

Never before had Baldo experienced something like it.

“Just as I thought.

Since the medicine was effective, I knew it must be the case.

Did you on your travels happen to spot a plant with spiny, purple fruits the size of a fist growing atop?”

I passed by an area where they grew aplenty, replied Baldo.

I'd never seen vegetation like it, so it left quite the impression.

Upon hearing this response, the old woman sank deeply into thought before saying,

“I'm sorry to ask you this.

Once you recover your strength in the morning, could you show to me to this location?”

Baldo was deeply indebted to the old woman.

To collapse on the road was to surrender all your valuables to any passersby, with but a small chance that they would leave you a single prayer in return.

He did not know how it was in the city, but to lose consciousness in the frontier, let alone a place so far from any settlements, one could not hope for anything more.

Yet it seemed this old woman had taken care of Baldo when he was on the verge of death.

For this withered old woman to move and undress a man as sturdy as Baldo was surely a daunting task.

So too did she dry his clothes by the fire.

So too did she remove Baldo's sword from its scabbard and allow it to dry.

So too did she warm his body with the fire and prepare him a meal.

It must have been difficult to gather all of the firewood as well.

She had apparently even administered such precious medicine to him.

Baldo was willing to do everything he could if the old woman desired it.

2

When the day dawned, Baldo's condition had not yet recovered enough that he might walk long distances.

He ate his meal and took the medicine made by the old woman.

It was a decoction of several types of herbs.
It could restore the body's vitality, she said.

When he asked the old woman her name, she responded that nowadays, they all called her the witch.

Though a nickname it may be, an unfortunate one it was.

What a terrible name 'witch' is.
Surely you did not give it to yourself.

The old woman then slowly started to recount the story of her life.

She used to live in a small village hidden in the mountains, far away from this spot.

When she was young, her mother brought her along through the village, and since she helped the ailing there, the villagers asked her to take up residence in the area.

Her mother was an exceptional herbalist.

She too was brought up in the herbalist trade and eventually followed in her steps, remaining in that village even after the passing of her mother.

Herbalists were a revered existence in the frontier.

If anything happened, people would come from far and wide to request her medicine.

For decades did she tend to the injuries and ailments of many, and although she did not experience much change over the years, that too became a form of happiness that continued into her elderly days.

Everything changed with the arrival of a plague.

She had learned of this affliction from her late mother, but the ingredients required for the medicine were expensive and uncommon; rare were they in the frontier.

One by one were the villagers infected by the disease, and soon the weakest of the lot started to die.

The woman herself possessed a strong body fortified by the consumption of many herbs over the years, and so she did not contract the illness.

However a girl she treated as if her own flesh and blood started to develop symptoms.

The truth was the woman did in fact have medicine enough for one dose.

It was left to her by her late mother.

So too did her mother leave a warning that she must only use this medicine on herself.

Disobeying her mother's words, the woman gave the girl the medicine.

Thus was the girl saved from the clutches of death.

The villagers learned of this and yearned for the remedy.

They were deaf to her excuses, that she had no more left.

When in the end the plague departed, the woman had naught but resentment from the villagers.

Even very the girl she saved hated her.

Her own parents were without medicine and succumbed to the illness.

Why didn't that old hag get sick? said one of the villagers.

Now that you mention it, that hag's been completely fine, said another.

How long has she even been alive? said another.

She was already an old hag the day my grandpa was born, said another.

She must be a tohrael⁶.

She didn't know who started the rumor.

However, no one questioned it.

6. witch

They were both human and inhuman—female existences that formed contracts with beyadrue⁷ and practiced black magic.

Through a beyadrue's blessing were they granted longevity, and they kept many secrets.

No wonder she could concoct such effective medicines.

Rather...

Was it truly medicine she fed us?

A beyadrue's protection required an offering in return.

Just how many villagers did this tohrael offer to the beyadrue?

Now it makes sense!

This very plague was certainly the work of the tohrael.

The villagers surrounded the woman's hut, tied her to a stake, and set fire to the entire thing.

The story of the old woman ended thus, and Baldo could not help but ask,

How did you survive?

“No idea.

The fact that I'm here means someone must have saved me.

Perhaps it was someone who was indebted to me or my mother,”

replied the woman with a smile, no longer speaking about the incident.

Had she truly been burned alive yet managed to escape death, that would make her the very definition of a tohrael.

Baldo however was a man with backbone and did not give easily in to superstition, and so he refused to believe anything he could not see with his own eyes.

7. devils

He had fought kaejel⁸ and knew there were curious creatures known as gylganos⁹, but he refused to believe in such existences as beyadrue and tohrael.

Many times before had he met tribesfolk who called themselves things like shatorli¹⁰ or torlira corlaché¹¹.

Though they did occasionally possess great knowledge, they did not have powers beyond the realm of mankind.

Their shanoh¹² and deybayu¹³ were but applications of little-known fields of study or at the very least mere sleight of hand.

Countless times had he heard accounts of beyadrue and tohrael, but in all instances they were but falsehood born from the darkness in the hearts of men.

Why then did this old woman then not harbor darkness in her heart as well, scorned and burned alive by the very people who received her blessings.

Just what was it that resided in her heart?

“The illness you contracted came about when you inhaled dust from a ruptured gheriadra fruit.

However that was not dust.

They are the very, very small eggs of an insect that lives in the fruit.

These eggs will only hatch inside of a human body.

Once they hatch, they will then attempt to turn their host into a more hospitable environment.

If you take medicine before the eggs hatch, then the eggs will die and the sickness will go away.

Once the eggs hatch, there is nothing that can be done to save the afflicted.”

8. cursed beasts

9. apparitions

10. sages

11. soothsayers

12. divination

13. miracles

The old woman opened her pouch and showed Baldo a small nut.

“If you grind this goliosa nut into a fine powder and then drink it, the eggs in your body will die.

Both you and I have just ingested it, and so for three days we will not grow sick.

Goliosa nuts have no other medicinal use.

Both gheriadra and goliosa are very rare, however.

For some inexplicable reason, wherever gheriadra grows in abundance so too shall goliosa.

I was shocked when I first came to this mountain.

I could spot goliosa nuts wherever I looked.

I must find and eradicate all patches of gheriadra.

This is the duty of an herbalist.”

She remains an herbalist to this day, thought Baldo.

I surrendered my fief, parted with my lord, left alone on a journey to my death, and yet I am still a knight.

Perhaps we are the same.

3

Baldo eventually recovered enough strength to move, and so the two departed.

He had no choice but to sit astride Staboros.

He was sorry for the horse, to burden it further with the weight of him and his equipment, but he did not feel comfortable tarrying any longer.

They continued along the stream for a bit, and in a stroke of good luck, it turned out the place Baldo fell was not far from their encampment.

He would have no trouble guiding the old woman then to the place with the purple fruits.

“Would you look at this.
Rarely have I seen so many.”

A section of the mountainside was densely packed with gheriadra.

The area covered by the vegetation seemed as if it could fit fifty huts.

Green stalks as thick as a finger were entwined all about each other, reaching up as tall as a man’s shoulder.

At the very tip of the stalks were growing a fruit each, covered in lumpy protuberances.

The fruits that were still small were green.

As they grew larger, the stalk they were atop began to droop down from the weight, and the fruit started to take on a noxious purple hue.

Once fully ripe, the fruit would apparently split open, releasing a cloud of eggs that would result in a mysterious illness.

The broken fruits looked as if they were a demonic maw, open wide and poised ready to feast on passersby.

“I’m amazed so few of the fruits have opened, considering the sheer amount.

How fortunate our timing was.”

If released, the eggs would be carried far away on the wind.

Though there were no settlements nearby, and travelers rarely came by these parts, Baldo could see how many victims might appear if left unchecked.

As Baldo was preoccupied with these thoughts, the old woman continued in an ominous tone,

“Once the eggs enter a person’s body, the host will fall into a slumber as deep as death.

The eggs inside the body hatch, the insects eat the host from the inside out, and then they continue to lay eggs.

The insects truly prefer to stay inside of the body.

Once they consume the inside of the body in its entirety, however, the eggs they lay even begin to spill outside it.

These eggs that ooze from from the body are then carried by the wind to find yet another host.

Once the situation unfolds to such a level, there is no longer any way to stop it.

The eggs released from a single host will wipe out a village, and in the end, entire kingdoms will crumble to ruin.”

Have there ever been kingdoms that fell in such a manner? asked Baldo.

Had these insects created such a catastrophe in the past, surely they should be more well-known, thought Baldo.

Heh-heh-heh, the woman gave an eerie chuckle,

“Perhaps there have been.”

4

The night was steadily approaching.

The two of them climbed down to the stream and set up camp.

Baldo caught fish, and the old woman foraged for edible plants.

Baldo filled his pot with water and placed it atop a makeshift firepit.

The old woman placed a meager amount of withered branches and leaves beneath the pot and to Baldo said,

“Light the fire, will you?”

I wonder if we could use a bit more tinder, thought Baldo, but carrying out the old woman’s request, he struck a spark

off some flint to set the dried leaves alight, and then deftly stacked the branches atop one another to create the kindling.

Eyes half-shut, the old woman opened both hands, palms toward the fire, and under her breath whispered some indistinct words.

It was as if a hum.

As she did, the fire jumped from the kindling and started to consume the branches.

To Baldo it was an unnatural scene.

The branches should have yet to catch fire, and yet they already had.

It was as if the flames contained a will, and it was prancing nimbly of its own volition.

In mere moments was there a vigorous fire to warm the pot, yet how could this be?

The flames were far too strong for the small amount of tinder that supported them.

So too were the branches that Baldo expected to reach their limit in moments still burning strong.

“For arts such as these to work, there must be a seed.

To create something out of nothing is the dominion of the gods.

There are few capable of such a feat.

If you have even the smallest of seeds, however, then you can make it larger, make it appear larger as well.

You understand the power with which the flames burn and the forces that cause the flames to rise, and then you call upon them.

The leaves, the branches, the fire, the wind—you call upon all of them.

The pot and the water as well—all of them,”

muttered the old woman, her two open palms swaying back and forth above the fire.

Before long did the water start to boil.

That was far too quick, thought Baldo.

The old woman retrieved the jerky from Baldo's belongings and tore off pieces into the water.

Then she added yam, mountain herbs, a trace of rock salt, and medicinal spices to the pot.

The tiny branches continued to burn without end.

“You see, that's the thing.

If you find you must contend against nohgelga¹⁴ and noh'el¹⁵, then it's quite simple.

You must see through the truth and strengthen your will.

If you can do that, you will find there is nothing to it.”

As he listened to the old woman's words, Baldo grilled a fish over the fire.

Part of Baldo wished to ask the old woman about the strange, ever-burning branches, but he somehow knew it was best for him to listen, engraving the old woman's words into his heart.

Perhaps Baldo witnessed something at this moment that would completely overturn the knowledge he cultivated over his life.

Yet he felt nary the slightest bit of menace or evil from this scene.

Perhaps he was witnessing things as they should be, properly existing in their proper form, yet he himself was simply never aware of this truth.

After leisurely finishing his meal did Baldo listen to the old woman's teachings, drinking the concoction she prescribed.

Staboros was grazing on grass nearby.

Aside from the fodder and vegetables, horses were creatures who often spent nearly half of their waking hours grazing on grass.

As it had two large yams today and time to leisurely eat in the morning, Staboros was in a fine mood.

14. sorcery

15. magic

As to conserve their strength, the two people and one animal went quickly to sleep.

5

A large stack of firewood was piled high before the old woman.

Many coynencilly trees grew nearby, bark thick with a natural oil, so Baldo picked up as many of it's fallen branches as he could.

To start the fire, they collected a small pile of long, narrow coynencilly leaves and thin, broad polpom leaves, dried and fallen to the ground.

It would be but a simple task to cut down the gheriadra stalks.

Though it would take some time to accomplish, it was by no means a difficult endeavor.

To do so, however, would leave the remnants of the stalks below the earth.

The roots of all the gheriadra in this area were connected, so it could be said in this whole area was in fact one large plant.

Gheriadra by nature lacked resilience; often did they wither and die even upon breaking through the earth.

Once they grew to a certain extent, however, did the plant suddenly turn robust, driving all other vegetation away and spreading its roots through the ground.

Thus to eradicate this accursed plant, one must with great flame incinerate it to its very core.

Then where do the insects that infest it come from?

asked Baldo to which the old woman replied that she did not know.

It was said that inside all gheriadra fruit were insect eggs without fail.

Perhaps they were not insects in fact, but some kind of plant matter.

Perhaps the gheriadra itself was not a plant in fact, but some kind of creature.

Were I to ever meet a great scholar in this field, I would certainly love to ask, said the old woman.

“Please do it,”

came the old woman’s signal, and so Baldo struck the flint.

Sparks danced from the stone and set a polpom leaf aflame.

In an instant did the small flame spread to five and then six other leaves.

Then the fire spread to the brown, withered coynencilly leaves, and the flames started to crackle.

Baldo backed up without a word as to not be in the way.

The old woman closed her eyes, brought her hands together, and began an indiscernible chant.

It was a barely-audible chant, soft and humble, yet before long did it start to grow in strength.

Never before had Baldo heard such words.

He could not even guess what they might mean.

The ballad she recited flowed forth with majestic cadence, as if from the mouth of a seasoned bard.

From behind, the old woman no longer looked small, no longer looked weak.

She opened her hands with grand expression.

Powerfully did the flames surge and climb, engulfing all of the wood.

Basking in the wave of heat, Baldo for a moment felt as if his skin caught aflame.

Baldo slowly started to descend the hill.

Once the flames started to spread, he should retreat to the marshes beyond the stream, was the advice from the old woman.

The horse had long been moved there along with the old woman's belongings.

If I truly need to retreat so far as to be safe, then what about you? asked Baldo.

“No harm will come to me, even if I'm set aflame—don't you remember?”

was the response the old woman gave.

Baldo was skeptical of the conclusions the old woman drew from her tale, but he followed her instructions in earnest, for she was a wise herbalist and surely had many tricks up her sleeve.

Baldo turned to witness the fire once more before leaving, and then suddenly spotted a giant rohwargle¹⁶ aiming to attack the old woman.

Baldo drew his sword and rushed to her aid.

Though the rohwargle bore the word 'wargle'¹⁷ in its name, it was in fact a member of the nahda¹⁸ family.

It appeared as if it were a giant wargle flattened into the ground, and thus was it given that name.

Its hide was spotted with green, yellow, lime, and brown.

It blended among the trees and grass, so it was strangely difficult to spot.

The entire front half of its body was a vicious maw, and the rows of jagged teeth that sprouted within inspired terror by their lethality.

Its outward hide was slimy yet tough, and furthermore it possessed an exoskeleton like armor just beneath it, rendering swords nigh ineffective.

16. armored toad

17. toad

18. lizard

The rohwarple that was making an attempt at the old woman was larger than anything Baldo had ever seen, even taller than a man.

I must make it in time,

thought Baldo as he rushed forward, yet the rohwarple at that moment opened its jaw and leaped.

So too did Baldo jump.

Just as the rohwarple's monstrous maw was poised to reach the old woman's body did Baldo slam himself against the side of the creature.

Baldo was thrown back, landing with a heavy thud atop the grass, but his reckless lunge was not in vain, for the rohwarple's attack barely missed the old woman, and it instead crashed into the pile of firewood, sending fiery sparks into the air.

Surely did the fire hurt, for the rohwarple flailed about in displeasure, sweeping the fragments of flame away, and slowly turned to look at Baldo.

As if recognizing Baldo as its opponent.

The best course of action would then be to flee and lead the rohwarple away.

As he tried to stand, however, did a fierce pain surge through his chest and hips.

Not good.

I won't be able to escape like this.

Thunk-thunk-thunk-thunk!

came the sound as the rohwarple gave chase.

Though its legs were short, the creature was uncannily quick.

It traversed ten or twenty paces in an instant, stopped to breathe once, then repeated the process once more—this was how the rohwarple moved.

For whatever reason, it could not run in a straight line.

It veered a bit to the left then a bit to the right, bounding forward in a jigsaw pattern.

In the final stage of its pursuit would it then leap upon its prey.

Baldo saw through the creature's movements in the very last moment, and he jumped to the right the very instant the rohwarble leaped.

Since he could not run far, Baldo devised to lead the rohwarble to a place thick with trees so that he could limit the creature's movements.

The rohwarble was even faster and more nimble than Baldo had predicted.

Baldo dodged the creature's third attack, however, running in a jigsaw pattern, and he successfully managed to escape into the forest.

So too did the rohwarble bound after Baldo into the woods.

Baldo hid behind a tree as thick as a man's thigh, but it snapped like a twig under the creature's leaping assault.

The splintering tree struck Baldo in his left shoulder, launching him back, yet as fortune had it, the blow saved him from the clutches of the warble's massive jaws.

Baldo continued to flee toward a place with several sturdy trees.

No matter how powerful this creature may be, surely it could not destroy trees that thick.

Furthermore was the space between the trees too small for the rohwarble to enter.

With this could Baldo earn a moment of respite.

With these thoughts, however, was a crucial miscalculation.

The warble jumped at Baldo.

In an incredible feat of maneuverability, the monstrous rohwarble turned its body midair, passing through the gap in the trees nearly completely on its side, and flew at Baldo.

At that moment, Baldo suddenly felt something with his left hand.

It was a piece of wood from when Baldo was gathering tinder.

The rohwargle's mouth was open wide.

Just before Baldo's eyes were rows of jagged teeth and a seemingly venomous bile that coated the inside of its maw.

Baldo thrust the piece of wood deeply into the creature's mouth.

It tried to close its mouth and rip off Baldo's left arm.

The wood, however, was stuck against the hinges of the jaw, propping it open and foiling the rohwargle's attempts.

Both Baldo and the wargle fell entangled to the ground.

The wargle's teeth were lodged inside Baldo's left arm, yet it could not pull it back.

Rage burned in the creature's murky eyes, and it opened its jaws as far back as it could go.

With every fiber of its being did the rohwargle wish to tear him apart.

Baldo did not escape.

Rather, he did the opposite.

Into the creature's mouth he leaped.

With the sword in his right hand, he stabbed deeply, deeply into the rohwargle's throat.

He tried to jam the wood in his left hand further into the roof of the mouth at the same time.

The wargle managed to partially bite down.

As the piece of wood propped open the back of the mouth, however, it could not kill Baldo.

The upper half of Baldo's body was now entirely engulfed in the rohwargle's mouth.

He continued to stab with his sword repeatedly into the recesses of the throat, changing the angle every time.

His goal was to pierce the heart.

To this the wargle thrashed violently about and sent Baldo flying.

Baldo was no longer able to stand; he could but raise his head to look at the creature.

The roh-wargle was now on its back, twitching and convulsing with a jolt.

Over time, its movements began to grow dull and sluggish, and then before long was it finally dead.

What an accomplishment, to slay a roh-wargle alone and with but a sword.

It seems I haven't lost my touch yet,

said Baldo to himself as he cursed his poor luck.

He could no longer move, let alone escape the oncoming flames.

His face, beard, and hands were all covered in the wargle's blood and fluids.

He craned his neck to look at the old woman.

What awaited him was an incredible sight.

The blazing flames jumped from tree to tree, encircling the mass of bizarre plants.

And then all at once did the fire converge.

It burned.

It burned.

The devilish fruits burned; the fire burned.

The heat could melt one's skin.

Yet Baldo did not pay attention to any of it—to his pain, to the heat, to the fire that raged as if with will and purpose.

A single woman stood before the blazing pyre.

She sang a song to which the fire danced.

Her hands were open, high above her head.

She was beautiful and full of youth.

Her once-silvery hair was now black and to her waist, and it billowed about in the fiery wind.

Her once-ragged clothes were now silky and translucent, and under the glow of the flames were the contours of her bewitching figure evident.

Baldo could only see the woman from behind.

Yet he somehow knew that her face would be youthful and possess a beauty that none would fathom could exist.

There was a holiness, strangely, enshrined in the fire and the woman who controlled it, and a wave of calm enveloped Baldo's soul.

Under the scorching winds did Baldo whisper the name of his patron god, and then all was black.

6

When Baldo came to, he had been somehow carried to the marshes and his wounds were treated.

The flames burned for three days and three nights until all of the gheriadra were eradicated.

For a month after that, Baldo and the old woman moved as one.

The old woman taught Baldo many a thing about medicinal herbs and treatments involving them.

So too did she impart a great deal of knowledge onto him about edible plant-life and how to prepare it.

Baldo even grew a little frustrated with the old woman at how many sludge-like decoctions she fed him daily, to strengthen him against sickness and poison.

Baldo asked her if there were any remedies for his poor hip and shoulders, to which she merely responded that neither was illness.

In the first month, they arrived at a place inhabited by people.

It was not far from the Great Orva River.

The distance between Pacra and the Orva took ten days at the quickest to traverse on foot.

Though it was true he came with his belongings, two months to cross that distance proved it was quite the slow trip.

A fine journey this was.

Bounding with curious experiences, rich with new knowledge.

Baldo decided he would write a letter to Pacra once he arrived at Lints.

He turned to give the old woman his thanks, but no longer was she there.

Chapter 4

The Envoy and the Thief

1

Baldo parted with the old herbalist and was once again alone.

The evening had almost arrived.

He entered the first village he encountered.

There was a river beside this town.

One deep and full of water.

This river was not one that came from the mountainous lands next to Jhan Dessa Roh.

Were that the case, it would flow from east to west.

This one, however, went north to south.

It was an offshoot of the Great Orva.

That meant that the fish contained therein would be different than what Baldo had experienced before.

The fish of the Orva were delicious and varied in kind.

I cannot wait.

Don't you agree, Staboros?

he said to the old horse that carried his belongings, but there was of course no response.

Baldo knew naught of this village save its name.

He had pictured it to be a smaller place, but there were a surprising number of inhabitants and a gants for good measure.

The gants itself was bustling with activity.

He tethered Staboros to a hitching post and entered the establishment, asking if he could stay the night.

“I reckon you could.

In fact a room just opened up.

You came at a truly great time.

I mean, today of all days?”

said the proprietress with enthusiasm, to which Baldo inquired about the occasion.

“My, you didn’t know?

His majesty was just crowned!

And a truly magnificent king, he is.

Who else would send a messenger to such a quaint, little town?

This very messenger bought a round of drinks for everyone here.

His majesty, King Wendellant, is picking up the bill!

Come, you must have a cup as well.”

The drink he received was watered-down mead.

It did not taste particularly good, but Baldo would not complain about a gift.

Thrice did they say cheers to the new king before Baldo could finish his cup.

He then ordered some distilled spirit on his own coin before asking further about King Wendellant.

The proprietress ran this and that way around the gants to take care of work as she answered Baldo’s question.

Beyond the Orva River was a kingdom called Palzam.

The Palzamic Kingdom had been at war against another great power, but they managed to come out victorious the year before.

So bloody was the conflict that many of the princes aside from the crown prince perished, however in the end did Prince Wendellant lead their forces to victory.

Prince Wendellant returned a hero, triumphant, yet with the relief of victory, the king could no longer resist the embrace of death in the last stages of his life.

Thus ensued many a conflict as to who would succeed the throne.

Prince Wendellant was older than the crown prince and a man of great ambition and accomplishment, but he was not thought to be a candidate for the throne, for his mother was of low birth.

Now was he the hero who saved the kingdom, however, and the military stood behind him thus.

In the end, it was decided that Wendellant would be appointed to the crown, and one year after the end of the war and the previous king's death did the coronation take place.

The new king then wished to spread the news of their victory and his coronation wide across the land, and so he send envoys to each and every region to bestow royal gifts and impart the details of his governance.

This was what the proprietress told Baldo.

She was frightfully well-informed for someone in a village so remote.

Baldo knew that the Palzamic Kingdom had ended the war, and that the man instrumental in their victory would succeed the throne, but he did not know nearly as much as the proprietress did.

Baldo could scarcely believe it.

The frontier was simply too vast, Palzam was simply too distant, the various towns and villages were simply too far apart.

Be it to collect taxes, to send troops, to administer the law—all of it was terribly inefficient and frankly not worth the hassle.

Over the years there had been several great powers in addition to Palzam that have claimed dominion over this part of the continent's eastern frontier.

Never have they managed to effectively exercise such rule, however.

For the Great Orva River thwarted all attempts.

The most realistic of approaches was to appoint lords to the region to represent their authority and thus rule by proxy, however many powerful countries including Palzam already engaged in such methods.

And yet though engage they did, it served no purpose.

As the great powers remained unable to understand and control the frontier, the local powers that governed the frontier changed on a regular basis.

It was not uncommon for entire towns and villages to disappear under the siege of kaejel or natural disasters.

The only things that connected the countries of the midlands with the frontier were the occasional traveler and the trade between them.

Though there were several countries to the west of the Orva River, only the Palzamic Kingdom established a trading port on its banks.

If you but cross the river at this point, you can participate in trade as well.

One can also travel directly to the kingdom by horse-drawn carriage from the port.

Those who wish to study and become something in the city have Palzam in their sights,

In the continent's eastern frontier is the name Palzam spoken with a tinge of familiarity and wonder.

No matter how much you shower them with wine, the folks in these parts will likely forget the name of the king within three days.

A commendable thing to do, indeed,

thought Baldo as he slowly ate some food when the clamor of the gants suddenly grew silent.

For a knight clad in splendid armor had arrived.

With a youthful, vigorous voice did the knight ask,

“I beg forgiveness for intruding upon your merriment!

Is there an herbalist present, or one familiar with sickness?

The special envoy to the frontier, Father Tode has suddenly fallen ill.

He complained that his limbs grew cold and that his head shook with pain, and now has he lost consciousness with a terrible fever.

Can anyone here save him!”

There was no chance that an herbalist would be around in a village such as this.

There were herbalists in Lints, but no one here could save the priest in such an urgent manner.

There was no one here who wished to be involved with this knight, *one from beyond the river*.

Baldo stood up and asked the knight for more details of the symptoms.

Might you be an herbalist, asked the knight to which Baldo replied that he was not, though he may be familiar with the sickness.

Baldo was then quickly brought to the residence of the village chief.

The chief himself was not present.

He had left to inform the neighboring villages of the envoy’s visit, as well as to provide with him with accommodations.

So too was the chief’s wife not present, for she was pregnant and staying with her parents.

There were but two girls there to take care of the meals and housework, yet neither could help with the sickness.

He thought perhaps there was someone in this village with medicinal knowledge, so he went to the pub for any help he could find, was the explanation the young knight gave.

Next to the priest with the title of special envoy was an older knight.

The young knight briefly explained the situation to him, and thus the older knight bowed to Baldo for his assistance.

Upon close examination of the priest did Baldo rule out the possibility of gheriadra.

It was a condition instead known by many in these parts as an overnight fever.

The old herbalist had insisted on a peculiar theory that it was transmitted by mosquitoes.

The body would be assaulted by a sudden fever, yet it would usually go away within two or three days if left alone.

Were the fever too high, however, one could descend into a coma and lose their life or become paralyzed in a section of the body.

Baldo explained that he was not an herbalist by trade but told the two what he made of the situation.

Furthermore, he said that he had medicinal herbs to lower one's fever and could administer them if the knights agreed as well as that it was important to warm the room up and make sure the man was sufficiently hydrated.

The older knight gave Baldo permission, and thus did Baldo grind the herbs, extract their properties, and feed the concoction to the patient.

It was fortunate that the man readily drank the medicine and water while unconscious.

They fetched a brazier and pot of water, and before long did the room grow hot.

Baldo sweated as he tended to the patient.

So too did the young knight display a surprising amount of skill as he helped.

Both of the young girls who took care of the house also did their best to stay of use.

The older knight never left the sick man's side for a moment.

Upright, clad in armor he stayed, paying the heat of the room no heed.

A bit past midnight was when the patient expelled a foul-smelling sweat, and both his condition and breathing grew calm.

The older knight expressed thanks to all those involved, and told them to take turns getting rest.

The day dawned and the man's fever had fallen, and so too did his symptoms gradually begin to disappear.

There's no need to worry any longer, said Baldo, so the older knight made it a point to stand from his seat and respond,

“I am truly and utterly grateful.

Words alone cannot express my appreciation.

It dawns on me that I have failed to ask you your name.”

Baldo did so, and the older knight continued.

“Are you perhaps Sir Galdegarsh Gwera?”

asked the man, and his ever-stern expression started to slightly melt.

2

“Can I interest you in more wine, Sir Rhowen?”

Baldo accepted Father Bali Tode's offer, and so an attendant came forth with a jar of wine and filled Baldo's cup to the brim.

The wine was of utmost quality, and the cup had intricate designs etched into its silver body along with a base at the bottom.

At first, Baldo was not impressed by this so-called envoy, for with but two knights and two attendants in tow was he sent to a place so remote.

So too was it strange for a cleric to come in such a diplomatic capacity.

It appeared, however, that this man was no ordinary cleric.

Not only did he possess items of such quality and a robust education, but there wasn't the faintest trace of vulgarity on his person that often accompanied corrupt members of the clergy.

The two knights were highly distinguished as well.

The older man was known as Zifelt Bowen.

He was a man of great skill, and likely a seasoned veteran.

Giving orders seemed to come naturally to him.

He sat all through the night and until morning next to the cleric with poise, and never did he falter.

The young knight was known as Shantilyon Graybaster.

He had put forth considerable effort to be of use, and although his perspective could at times be a tad inflexible, his dedication to righteousness and the protection of virtue was both amusing and dazzling.

The name Shantilyon¹⁹ itself was incredible, though Zifelt later told Baldo once out of earshot of the man in question that he was an unparalleled genius of the sword.

Of such caliber were these men that one would have second thoughts about the constant rumors surrounding the

19. King of the Sword

great countries, that they were but places of rot and degeneracy.

Although they were of such noble birth in their lands, Baldo was fond of how the two said nothing of it and were but knights above all.

The two attendants as well were both skilled and astute, and Baldo could not help but be astounded by how naturally he felt when they served him.

So too were a large portion of the dishes before Baldo prepared by the attendants, and their skills in the culinary arts were something special.

In essence, this was no ragtag assortment of unlucky nobodies, sent to the middle of nowhere by the whims of the new king.

Though they may have appeared to be so, they were in fact a highly capable group of individuals, one surely tasked with an important mission.

As for what the mission was, however, Baldo of course had not the slightest desire to know.

It was enough for him, truly, to have this opportunity—to enjoy wine without worry alongside wonderful people.

“I really must say.

I had told you I would go to any lengths necessary to reward you for your deed, but I had not dared imagine that this would be all I could treat you to, in a village so small as this.”

Upon looking at the healthy complexion and beaming smile of the cleric, Baldo could scarcely imagine it was only last night that the man was so ill.

The entire group was in great spirits at the cleric’s recovery, and so too was Baldo full of joy.

In the center of the table was placed a large dish with cooked fish atop.

It was jabo.

It was a fish that could only be found in the Orva River, and in these parts it was known as a knightfish.

Both because it was as fierce as a knight and because one needed the bravery of a knight to consume it.

Inside the fish there was poison.

One must never eat its skin or intestines.

A single bite would certainly invite death.

Though dangerous it was, its taste truly had no equal.

Upon catching a single one in the net did they immediately call for the proprietress of the gants to prepare it as she was familiar with the method.

The jabo was filleted and briefly seared, and then it was cut into small bite-size pieces.

Its flesh was extremely delicate, so to prepare it required dexterity, boldness, and uncanny precision with a knife.

If it was not grilled, the fish wouldn't develop its taste, yet if grilled too much, the depth of flavor would be lost.

Baldo took a piece and brought it to his lips.

A mellow sweetness started at his tongue and enveloped the entirety of his mouth.

The tender meat fell apart at the slightest touch of his teeth.

He savored that taste with great purpose and intent.

There were but the faintest variations of flavor in different parts of the fish, and each one billowed out and covered the others in layers.

The taste was as if rainbow manifest.

Before the meat had dissolved completely, Baldo took a sip of wine.

The fish melted into the liquid, and with both a buttery smoothness and a tinge of sharpness did it slide down his throat.

A deep exhale escaped his lips, and so did a crisp fragrance come through his nose, complexity lingering in its wake.

The white flesh of the fish possessed an almost understated flavor, yet even to the bold bitterness of the full-bodied red wine did it refuse to be eclipsed.

The wine was a Rauphwen Macalister aged for 43 years.

The cleric admitted that this 43 could not hold a candle to a such a miraculous fish, and he lamented that he was unable to bring anything finer for them to share on this journey.

I am but a layman in matters of wine.

This one here is in no way inferior to the jabo, I must say.

I am wholly in agreement, however, that wine must not be allowed to accompany us on our journeys,

Baldo replied.

Were one to take red wine with them, one that had been aged to exquisite perfection, and that very wine was agitated by the constant rumblings of a horse-drawn cart, it would take a year of rest for it to return to its former glory.

So too was it possible that it might never be the same again.

It was best to enjoy the wine in the land of its origin.

A young wine was then ideal for a bumpy journey.

Thus did the cleric choose the oldest wine he could among those that would survive the trip.

“You speak nothing but the truth.

I had hoped that this 43-year red would endure the journey.

Alas, it still happened to develop a rather unfortunate bite.”

Surely enough did Baldo notice a slight, unpleasant tang on the tongue, though one could be convinced that it was just another dimension to the taste.

The wine allowed Baldo to savor this divine fish with even greater intricacy.

So too were the cleric and the two knights tasting this jabo for the first time in their lives, and now all were held hopelessly captive.

To be on the safe side, Baldo once again reminded them not to eat this fish unless prepared by a highly experienced chef.

“Sir Zifelt, you mentioned something about a ‘Galdegarsh Gwera?’ ”

the young knight asked, to which not the older knight but the cleric instead answered,

“Oh?

Have you never heard of the Knight of the People, Sir Shantilyon?

I cannot blame you, for it was a name that took the capital by storm more than forty years ago.

To think the day would come when I would meet the very man in the flesh.

Blessed Xyen, god of the stars, I thank you for your guidance.”

“Shantilyon,

You recall that upon being knighted, one must take a Knight’s Vow in the presence of a high-ranking member of the clergy, their lord, and their mentor knight?”

continued the older knight as the cleric was seemingly not going to explain further.

“I do.

I swore fealty to my lord and his majesty, the king.”

“Sir Rhowen,

I hear in the frontier, there is but a single knight that observes the vow.”

Baldo verified his claim and added that there were occasionally members of the clergy that chose to sit in on the ceremony as well.

“Shantilyon,

In this day and age we have countries and within them order, and it is from the relationships between lord and subject, in families established, that knights are brought into being.

This was not always the case, however.

There was a time when to become a knight was to build a House, to create another royalty, to raise a new town from the dirt and give it a lord.

To then choose a vow was to decide the fate of your house and your liege, and your ability to carry out said vow would shape how others would view the legitimacy of your knighthood.

To be a knight was to choose what you would offer your loyalty to, unfettered by any and all constraints.

This was what it meant to take a Knight’s Vow.

Upon hearing the contents of those three vows could one learn of their true nature.

Thus the method of vows in the frontier remains truest to the original.

Not only is it a vow of loyalty.

So too must one chose a virtue and a god to worship.”

The older knight paused as he took a sip of the wine.

“You must choose a virtue?

As well as a god to worship?

Does that mean one is not bound to any other virtues?

That they cannot pray to any other gods?”

The older knight cut a slice of thick ham and brought it to his mouth and responded,

“Of course not.

One who attempts to uphold all virtues, however, may at times find themselves unable to uphold any.

In current tradition, when asked ‘By which virtues wilt thou serve,’ one is expected to recite the list of thirteen virtues.

I will not say that it is wrong, but there are many a man who understand that vow to simply be a test of memory.

Well, I won’t dwell on that.

The point I’m trying to make is that in the frontier, one is still expected to choose a liege to serve, a god to worship, and a virtue to uphold in their vow.

That is how it used to be as well.

When I was still but an orderly of the knights, there was talk of a man in the frontier who took the commonfolk as his lord in his Knight’s Vow.

It was quite the rumor, making its way around all of the knights and squires in the capital.

‘Ah, that is what it means to be a knight!’ I recall thinking at the time.”

When that rumor originally circulated the capital, Baldo surmised that in most cases it was accompanied by words of mockery instead.

Zifelt had intentionally chosen to not mention that, however, and Baldo felt it spoke magnitudes to the depth of his character.

The young knight appeared to be deep in thought.

Father Bali Tode then kept the group entertained with his lighthearted wit as well as kept all of their cups full.

“Forgive my forwardness, but I must say you are still in marvelous physical shape for your age,”

said the cleric, alluding to the fact that Baldo went through the entire night without a wink of sleep to take care of his illness, and even now was staying perfectly awake for dinner.

If asked, however, Baldo would say a man who could not perform his duties after two or three days of no sleep was unfit to be a knight, and not to mention, taking care of the infirm did not require such physical expenditure.

“What training do you recommend, then, to bolster the body?”

asked the young knight.

Both he and the older knight took turns getting sleep once the cleric’s condition stabilized.

There were moments that night when the young knight caught himself starting to nod off in his chair, and so he especially was deeply impressed by how Baldo displayed nary a trace of fatigue.

To this Baldo simply responded that he ran.

The young knight was clearly perplexed, so Baldo explained further.

When Baldo was still a knight in training, he was made to run every day.

With a bag filled to the brim with heavy stones affixed to his back did he run circles through the hills and fields, and when he returned an exhausted mess to his mentor, that was when his training began, only to be later made to prepare the equipment, take care of the horses, clean up the training grounds, and so on.

Through this did he temper his endurance and fortitude and develop all of the muscles in his body, but there is no greater training than that of running, were the words his mentor often said.

He was once made to run for a full two days, Baldo continued to say.

“Shantilyon,

Often do squires these days complain of hellish conditions after but a mere half-day of training in armor.

You must take great care to listen to Sir Baldo Rhowen’s words.”

The conversation was full of life, and thanks to the cleric's generosity, so too was the food provided by the villagers delicious and the wine of wonderful quality.

To all present, the evening went by, bounding with a mirth second to none.

3

His body was heavy.
It was numb, unmoving.

Baldo awoke for he sensed a suspicious presence.

He managed to force his trembling legs to move and made his way to where his cloak lay.

In it was hidden an herbal panacea, for use in an emergency.

He placed the entire thing in his mouth and vigorously chewed.

Sword in hand, he stepped into the corridor and heard a sound coming from one of the rooms.

That's where the cleric should be sleeping.

In front of the door, the young knight was collapsed on the ground.

He was not dead.

It was simply that he was paralyzed and could not move.

Baldo walked up next to him could see that the young knight was desperately signaling with his eyes that something was amiss in the room.

From within could Baldo hear the sound of rustling and rummaging, as if someone was looking for items.

The ruffian was not attempting to conceal the sound in the slightest.

That could only mean the person was aware that no one could move.

Baldo drew his blade and leapt into the room.

“What!

H-How are you up and about!”

came the slow-witted reply from the man, and he immediately stopped his search, slung a sack full of what were surely stolen valuables over his back, and then quickly tried to make an escape.

Baldo grabbed an item immediately beside him and threw it at the thief.

It was a statue in a demon-god’s visage, meant to ward off evil.

Just as the ruffian was about to jump through the window did the wooden carving that surely weighed as much as a full-grown adult hit him squarely on the back.

“Yowch!”

Baldo pushed his legs to move so that he could give chase to ruffian that fell down outside.

Out of the corner of his eye, Baldo saw that the cleric was sleeping soundly in his bed.

There wasn’t a trace of harm done to him.

Baldo climbed through the open window and rolled out onto the ground outside.

The ruffian had stood up and was in the midst of trying to untangle his sack from the demon-god statue.

As he staggered forward did Baldo swing with his sword from left to right, aiming for the ruffian’s legs.

“Eek!”

cried the man as he jumped on reflex, avoiding the attack. It was as if he had eyes on the back of his head.

As he was himself unprepared for the sudden jump, however, his head collided with the branch of a tree next to him and he fell back to the ground on his back.

“Ow!”

With a hand on his sore head the ruffian leapt back to his feet and quickly shuffled down a slippery slope lush with grass.

Just as he did, Baldo once more hurtled the demon-god statue, striking the back of his head.

Now the ruffian was surely starting to feel the effects of the attacks as he stumbled to the left and right for five paces or so before falling with a thud, face-up on the ground.

Again, he quickly came to, and he shook his head to the left and right.

This time, however, he made no attempts to get up.

For Baldo had caught up to him and placed his sword above his throat.

Under the glow of the moonlight was the ruffian’s face surprisingly young.

Both of his hands were opened in a show of surrender, and for whatever reason was there a bright smile on his lips.

4

Baldo had an inkling of just who this ruffian might be.

Are you the one called Julchaga, he asked the young tied-up man, and without losing his calm did he reply,

“Wow!

Am I really that famous?

What a happy day.”

This Julchaga, also known as the Gorra Cheyzara,²⁰ was a thief of particular note in recent days.

He would put his targets to sleep with a homemade drug and make off with their valuables—not a single victim of his would die.

At first, Baldo attributed the paralysis of his body to the jabo.

Normally when consuming jabo poison would the effects appear quickly after.

Instead however, it was due to the wine and tea, laced with a drug by Julchaga.

There were undoubtedly many opportunities for him to do so, considering Baldo and the rest were preoccupied with the cleric's illness.

“What rotten luck!

I was tailing this esteemed envoy from the Palzamic Kingdom for a little while now.

I found the perfect chance to strike.

Those two swordsmen with him were—how can I put this—calamities walking about on two feet?

But that just inspired me more.

I have pride in my work, you know?

Once I got the better of these two, oh boy, would I be in a great mood for at least a month!

Though my god of trade, En Nu, is racking in quite the profit with this.

I promised him, you see.

‘Oh blessed En Nu, I will offer up but the finest of wines to your grace if you allow this humble one the chance to succeed!’

And the next day?

The cleric collapsed just like that, and then in the next moment made a speedy recovery.

Then night came ‘round and everyone went deep to sleep, creating the perfect chance.

20. Carrion Scavenger

‘Now’s the time to strike!’ it made me think.
So who are you?”

Baldo gave his name, and the Gorra Cheyzara closed his eyes and raised his face to the sky.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.

Jhan dessa roh!²¹

How could the very Galdegarsh Gwera be here of all places!

You are the one man I dared not meet!”

Baldo had defeated many a bandit over the course of his life.

The lords of each region rarely paid heed to the pleas of villagers outside their lands, and so did theft and banditry often go unpunished by them.

As such was Baldo the nightmare of all who perpetrated these crimes.

Fortunately the drug that the Gorra Cheyzara used had no lasting ill-effects.

All Julchaga stole were gold and other valuables, as well as some food and wine—he did not touch any information or documents.

A common tale about the Gorra Cheyzara was if he spotted an expensive piece of jewelry and a delicious piece of food next to one another, he would make away with the food without a moment’s hesitation.

There was no plot behind him.

He was but a normal thief—as simple as they came.

Following Baldo’s personal judgment, the Gorra Cheyzara was left to the village chief.

There was a well-off individual in a town some distance away who had placed a bounty on this particular thief, so by giving the man to the chief could he consider it a way for the village to make some money.

21. How could it be!

“This is the second time you have saved me, sir.

I will be heading toward the domain of Dorba now.

You have retired, Sir Rhowen, and are now traveling at your own leisure.

Might I interest you in joining our group for the time being?”

offered the cleric.

Dorba was the domain governed by Cardos Coendela.

It was the new center of the Greater Giguenza Region.

Baldo was attacked nearly in ambush by Cardos’s nephew and killed him in return—it was possibly the place Baldo wanted to avoid the most.

Baldo wished to travel to Lints instead, so he declined the invitation.

The cleric did not offer Baldo any gold or expensive items to express his appreciation.

Rather, he entrusted him with a single glass bottle filled with a certain distilled spirit.

Bottles such as these were quite the rare commodity, hardly found in the frontier in particular.

The alcohol inside seemed of exceedingly good quality.

“This one has quite the taste.

The best part about it is that a journey won’t do anything to spoil it, either,”

the cleric said with a smile.

Chapter 5

The Attack

1

Baldo arrived at Lints.

It was a port town, located on the banks of the Great Orva River.

Though there were many such towns on the Orva's eastern shores, none were as bustling as Lints.

For by crossing the Orva River from the port of Lints did one arrive at the trade town of Padelia, in the Palzamic Kingdom.

Of such scale was the Great Orva that one could not see the other side from its banks, and thus was even crossing this river a great feat.

The lord of Lints had in his possession a fleet of several large trading ships and used them to travel back and forth from Padelia to do commerce.

By coming to Lints could one purchase goods from the various countries of the midlands, at the center of the continent.

This town thus naturally prospered, and its lord fancied himself an earl.

Though he lorded over but a single town, the financial might that this single town represented put that of even the lords of the greater regions to shame.

As he walked down a street lined on both sides with food stalls and vendors, Baldo was shocked at the vigor of the town.

There was something so uplifting about being surrounded on all sides by such delicious smells.

Currently in his hands were boiled meatballs on a stick.

It was a mixture of a gamey wild fowl, torn into small pieces, some kind of fat, and what seemed to be mashed mountain yam.

There was a rich savoriness from the fowl mixed thoroughly into the meatballs alongside the fat.

There were traces of green inside too, likely lohas, pelis, or some other herb that was finely chopped and added to the mix.

It concealed the gamey aftertaste, and even accented each of the various flavors contained therein.

Of the three meatballs that were on the skewer, only the one closest to the top was covered in a thick brown sauce, and what an experience it was.

Baldo strolled down the street, smacking his lips with satisfaction, when a peculiar sight entered his eyes.

On the side of the street sat a man with a sign hanging from around his neck.

On the sign were the words: This man is for sale.

Many of the passersby would find themselves staring at the curious scene.

There were even some there jeering at the man.

One particular young man went up and inquired as to the price.

The man who was sitting down replied,

“A million geil.”

The crowd howled with laughter.

It was a sum not even the Earl of Lints could easily prepare.

It could only mean this man did not truly intend to put himself up for sale.

Perhaps in some manner of joke, or a peculiar advertisement, were the thoughts that ran through the heads of the crowd.

Baldo felt the man's voice to be familiar, and when he studied his face more carefully was he filled with shock.

So too did the man recognize Baldo, and for a moment their gazes were locked.

Baldo hinted with his eyes for the man to follow and continued to make his way down the street.

Staboros trailed behind him, belongings on its back.

The man removed the sign from his neck and facing the crowd he said,

“Shop's closed,”

and then he picked up a straw mat that was rolled up, carrying it under his arm as he left to follow Baldo.

Upon leaving the bustling downtown and arriving at a place with no prying eyes did Baldo stop.

The man walking next to him then said,

“We meet again, Baldo Rhowen.”

This man was Venn Ulir, the Rolo Spia.

2

This battle-crazy fiend, yet a peerless swordsman he was, had attacked Baldo slightly less than two months back.

Yotish Peyn was slain by Baldo, however so he instead retrieved the corpse and returned to his employer, Cardos Coendela.

Cardos was furious upon learning of his nephew's demise, and soon after delivering this news did Venn Ulir request payment.

"I fulfilled the obligations listed in the contract, so I had the right to be paid.

A right halfwit the man was, to ignore our preparations, disregard my attempts to stop him, and then act so foolishly—he was begging for death.

Instead Cardos screamed at me, 'I have no coin for a bodyguard who couldn't even protect my nephew,' and demanded that I bring him your head.

I told him that I would only allow additions to the contract once my initial fees were paid, but the man refused to compensate me.

This job was to supposed to pay a large sum, and originally he promised to pay me after.

I am in desperate need of money.

And so I set out to sell myself."

Venn Ulir told this story in a wholly uninterested manner, and Baldo replied once he was finished, An incorrigible fellow indeed.

The man seemed utterly detached from reality in his conversation with Cardos, and so too was it strange that he immediately sought to sell himself in the middle of town upon needing money.

This was a knight of far-reaching renown.

Though a million geil was perhaps out of the question, were he to simply display his prowess to the Earl of Lints could he likely manage to fetch himself a large sum in service.

He could even ask the other great lords.

There were myriad ways by which a talented swordsman such as him could earn money.

Even if choosing to sell himself in the town's marketplace, all he needed to do was display his great skill with the sword and surely would that attract wealthy buyers.

Yet he choose to sell himself while keeping his blade hidden, wrapped inside the straw mat.

Is it pride that compels him to act in such a manner?
Or is it a prayer of some sort, rather?

thought Baldo, though he did not ask.

Instead did Baldo reach into his belongings strapped to Staboros' back and toss the coin pouch contained within to Venn Ulir.

Does this amount satisfy your needs?

Baldo asked.

Venn Ulir unrolled the straw mat and placed the coins atop it as he counted.

Then he closed his eyes for a moment as if pondering something.

“Hm.

Ninety-three coins, I see.

Not even a tenth of the million geil I hoped for.

Still, you are the very man the rumors purport you to be, Sir Galdegarsh Gwera.

This amount may suffice.

I'll give up on the million for now.”

He put away the coins, stood up, and then continued,

“My lord,

I apologize, but I must request some time away.”

I did not give you that money with the intent of buying of your service.

You are free to do as you will.

“My lord,
where will you head from here?”

I have no plans.
Perhaps I will travel north.

“I understand.

I will require at least two months, and possibly half a year
at the greatest.

Once I have resolved my business, I will make my way to
your side.”

As he said these final words, the man walked briskly away,
allowing nary a moment for retort.

What a truly peculiar man.

I am quite fond of it however, Baldo thought.

3

Baldo brought Staboros back with him to the town’s
marketplace.

There were many things he wished to taste.

Never before had Baldo journeyed so far from depths of
the frontier in all his days.

There were no pressing matters to attend to as well.

Baldo could not suppress the fluttering in his heat, the
excitement of being in such a busy town.

Baldo was considering all of the stalls with a discerning
eye when a voice called to him from the side.

“Pardon my asking, but did you perchance arrive here
from Pacra?”

It was a young man who spoke, his appearance giving the impression of a servant belonging to an established trade family of some sort.

He was dressed in neat attire and possessed a well-mannered bearing.

Baldo replied,

I am from Pacra, as you say, but what business do you have with me?

“Lord Jourlan awaits you,”

was the reply the young man gave.

4

Baldo was brought then to the manor of the Earl of Lints.

They passed through the grand central gates and proceeded to the most distinguished building there, located deep in the property.

The structure was integrated excellently into the natural terrain of the land, and upon climbing the stairs did they arrive at a large room.

The door at the far side of the room was left open, and it led directly to a balcony overlooking a steep cliff.

From the balcony was a view of the Great Orva.
A truly exquisite view.

There were two chairs on the balcony with a person in each, and they were drinking tea while gazing out at the river.

“Hey gramps.
Took you long enough.”

I've been getting sick of waiting,”

were the words that came from a smiling young man, one named Jourlan Telsia.

He was the son of the sister to the previous lord of Pacra, Vorra Telsia.

He was a brilliant twenty-eight year old man, gifted both in the military arts he learned from Baldo and the academic studies he performed with his mother, Eidra, and so too was he a close confidant of the current Lord Galiera, earning a great deal of trust.

The elderly man sitting next to him made particular effort to stand up from his chair and bowed to Baldo.

To do so was to recognize Baldo as a knight.

“This is the first time we have met.

My name is Simon Epivaris.

Sir Baldo Rhowen, it is my greatest pleasure to meet you.

I would love to share drinks when the opportunity arises.”

This was the Earl of Lints.

He spoke with thunderous gusto.

Though somewhat older than Baldo, he was just as tall, and so too was his body sturdily built.

The man's demeanor radiated magnificence in every sense of the word.

Baldo assumed the man would be a capable one, skilled at moving goods and gold, yet he was clearly of a warrior mold.

Once they finished greeting one another, the three sat down in chairs on the balcony.

“It's because you were always telling mother that you wanted to see the Orva at least once, gramps.

I remember you were always talking to her about traveling the world and eating all of its best foods too.

If it's about the food then, Lints is the only place that comes to mind.

I figured you had to be coming to this port.

I told the servants here what you looked like and had them walk around the stalls everyday,”

Jourlan explained with a strangely proud expression.

“Mother passed away.

One day she said she wanted to go out into the inner courtyard, as her condition was a little better.

It was while her attendant was preparing some tea that she drew her last breath.

From her expression, she seemed happy and at peace.”

Baldo heard the news of Eidra’s passing, and the first thing that went through his mind was,

So I was too late.

Baldo had wanted to write about all of the wonderful delicacies he had eaten and drank on this journey of his in a letter and send it to Eidra.

The corlulose dishes from the gants of that salt-mining town.

The jabo and that quality red wine.

Baldo could almost imagine the smile she would have once she read it.

The next thing that went through his mind was,

Now does it truly feel like I have severed all my bonds with Pacra.

She seemed happy and at peace, were the words by which Jourlan tried to soothe Baldo’s heart.

To have such a son by your deathbed, knowing you can entrust everything to someone like him, no wonder she could be at such peace, thought Baldo.

“I’ve brought you a letter from mother that was addressed to you, gramps.

Apparently, she wrote it just before going into the courtyard.”

Jourlan mentioned that he was here primarily to sell furs and silver, as well as to deepen his relationship with the Earl of Lints, and just so happened to deliver the letter as it was convenient at the time.

Baldo knew, however, something like that was not nearly enough to prompt Jourlan to come at a time like this, especially not in person.

He most likely came with the express purpose of handing Baldo this letter.

He must have thought that he alone had to deliver this letter addressed to him.

Thus did he have his porters return early and give his knight escorts vacation so that he could wait alone for Baldo’s arrival.

These actions warmed Baldo’s heart dearly.

It was when Baldo reached out to take the letter that it happened.

A boorish voice came from the entrance, ruining the peaceful mood, and it said,

“I knew it had to be you, Baldo Rhowen.

Hand over the letter.

Princess Eidra must have given you something before you left, too.

Give it here.

I couldn’t find anything that seemed to be it in your belongings.”

It was Cardos Coendela’s bother and powerful vassal, Gyenzala Peyn.

Behind him filled in soldiers armed with weapons.

Both Gyenzala and his trips were filled to the brim with bloodlust.

For him to barge into the place where the Earl of Lints received his guests, accompanied by an armed entourage no less, was to imply that the man was serious.

He meant to slaughter all present.

4

“Explain yourself, Oswald!”

roared the Earl of Lints with a thunderous bellow.

His glare was directed at an individual standing behind Gyenzala Peyn.

“I’m simply following your advice, dear Earl, that in business, one must never let an opportunity pass you by.

Or should I call you father?

I’m afraid to tell you that I’m calling the shots now.

Could I trouble you to leave?

—leave this world, that is,”

said a rather young man, a wide smile plastered over his otherwise expressionless face.

“Sir Oswald.

If you kill your father, the Earl of Lints, you will never have the opportunity to become a knight.

You will as such never be able to inherit his title and domain.

Would those in the Earl’s service even agree to follow you?

I do not believe those across the river would be so fond of you either.”

“If it isn’t Lord Jourlan.

I do appreciate your concern.

I have of course made ample preparations.

When I am to be knighted, Sir Peyn here has offered to observe.

I care not about the fictitious title of Earl.

What I desire is the key that opens the small pocketbook that never leaves my father's possession.

With that key will I gain access to the receipts of his transactions.

For with that will I have no problems trading with the Palzamic Kingdom.

As for my relations with the lords of the frontier?

Lord Coendela has assured me he will take care of the entire matter.

Any servants of my father who wish to run their tongues will find themselves sustenance for the fish of the Orva!"

His manner of speaking was initially calm yet before long did a venom seep in, and by the time he had finished talking, his thin eyes were open wide, and his mouth was warped with emotion.

Through Jourlan's provocations did Oswald lay his entire traitorous scheme bare.

Oswald was the adopted son of the Earl of Lints.

Encouraged by House Coendela, he decided to try and wrest control of the house from his father.

He of course intended to murder everyone here.

Baldo suspected that there soldiers en route to the Earl's blood-related child as well as the homes of his inner circle.

Were this a normal trade family, one could not hope to continue to manage the business upon murdering their siblings and parents.

House Epivaris, however, was also a house of knights, a member of the nobility.

There were a fair number of examples in the past in which a member of a noble house successfully managed to wield their strength and claim the head position.

The frontier in particular often espoused the idea that those without power had no right to talk about what was just and good.

A paternal kinslayer would never be permitted, perhaps, but dead men tell no tales.

Coendela and Oswald were accompanied by twelve soldiers.

The balcony overlooked a steep and treacherous cliff.

Baldo had surrendered his sword upon entering the manor.

Jourlan and the Earl had nary single piece of defensive equipment, let alone weapons.

Their backs had been truly driven against the wall.

Yet there was not a trace of panic or fear on Baldo's face.

Swiftly he stood up and strolled with nonchalance toward the attackers.

What happened to the Rolo Spia?

he asked Gyenzala, to which the man's face contorted with rage.

"We got rid of that worthless good-for-nothing!

He failed to protect my son and then dared ask for a reward.

Then he cut down the two skilled knights that we had send him off.

I never want to see that mug of his again!"

was the reply.

Baldo had no need to inquire as to the nature of the "send-off."

Baldo sighed in deep resignation and muttered, What an exquisite fool.

"Are you referring to the Rolo Spia?

Or perhaps to me?

No, that must not be the case.

For how could there be a greater fool here than you, rushing so expertly to your doom.

You killed my son, Baldo Rhowen.
And now you will join him!”

Four lance-wielding soldiers rushed out at that moment and surrounded Baldo, pointing the tips of their weapons at him.

Gyenzala and Oswald both took a step back.

Behind Baldo, the Earl of Lints and Jourlan stood up.

Without turning around did Baldo predict their actions and commanded with strict authority,

Stay there!

It was not the kind of thing one said to their lord.
It was but a command from mentor to pupil.

“Yes, master,”

came Jourlan’s reply, a hint of amusement mixed into his tone.

Baldo could sense that behind him, Jourlan was starting to move.

He was mostly likely doing so to protect the Earl.

While he was moving to do so without a single piece of armor on his person, he was to wait for Baldo to procure a weapon.

This was what Baldo had implied with his words.

Baldo was thoroughly astounded by all of this.

It was as if the greatest catch of one’s life had simply jumped into the Coendela’s pockets, only for them to release it back into the waters.

Had the Rolo Spia, Venn Ulir, still served them at this moment, Baldo, Jourlan, and the Earl would have never stood a chance, even if all three were armed.

They would certainly be cut down in an instant.

Perhaps things would be different had they the proper armor, but even then was Venn Ulir’s swordsmanship exceedingly strong.

Could one say the same for these twelve men?

There were four soldiers with spears in the front.

There were six soldiers with swords in the back.

Their eyes were bloodshot and cloudy, not a hint of clarity could be seen within.

Did they hire a gang of thugs, unqualified even for banditry?

There was one individual of particular note in the back row—his leather hat covered his eyes and his sword shook as if poised to drop at any second, such an amateur was he.

The final two soldiers seemed to be of slightly higher quality, as they wore leather armor covered with several metal plates and stood as if protecting Gyenzala.

Baldo nearly pitied the men for thinking they could kill Jourlan and him with such a pathetic display of force.

Not a shred of martial prestige could be felt from their person.

Neither did the spears and swords they wielded seem to be of any respectable quality.

To pass up on Venn Ulir for these twelve men was to Baldo a decision that seemed to defy the limits of idiocy.

It was to toss aside a gorgeous gem in favor of a crude rock.

It seemed like father like son, neither of the Peyns despite their status as knights possessed even the slightest talent in combat.

If only they had sent two or three knights with but a modicum of competency.

“Do it,”

commanded Oswald.

The four men with spears surrounding Baldo thrust their weapons.

Their breathing was rough and disjointed.

Though chaff they may be, even their attacks could occasionally prove fruitful if done in unison.

Baldo grabbed the spears of the rightmost soldier and the one second from the very left with either of his hands and then leapt toward the chest of the latter.

The third soldier's weapon pierced naught but air, and the fourth soldier managed to correct his aim and land his thrust upon Baldo's left flank.

The wound was not deep, however, for the man didn't move the spear with enough force to fully pierce his leather armor.

Baldo pulled the second soldier's spear with his left hand and swiftly robbed the weapon, then jabbing the end of said spear back into his chest.

This soldier was sent flying.

The first soldier pulled back his spear and thrust forward a second time.

Baldo grabbed it with his right hand and held it tight under his arm.

So too did the third soldier lunge forward a second time.

Baldo courageously allowed the weapon to strike him in the center of his leather chest-piece where the material was the thickest.

He then spun the spear in his left hand around and struck the fourth soldier square in the throat just as he was about to attack once more.

The spear snapped cleanly in two when it made contact.

The force of the impact, enough to splinter wood, sent the soldier sprawling to the ground, convulsing in agony.

The third soldier started to pull his weapon back.

Baldo tossed aside the shattered remnants in his left hand and grabbed the spear currently piercing his stomach.

The third soldier used all the might he could muster to pull the weapon from Baldo's grasp, but within his grip did it refuse to budge.

With a deep grunt, Baldo then used all of his strength to lift up the spear he currently held captive under his right arm.

The first soldier too was being lifted into the air, and he started to scream in fright.

Baldo launched the man over his head, and into a wall he flew, striking his head upon its surface and slumping motionlessly to the ground.

He then pulled the third soldier's spear closer to him.

There the soldier was, falling down toward Baldo after losing his balance.

With his left hand still clutching the spear, Baldo balled his right hand into a fist and send it upward into the left side of the man's head.

In but a single instant did the man lose consciousness and fall to the floor.

Baldo then retrieved a sword from the waist of a felled soldier and tossed it behind him with a single, Catch!

“Ha-ha!”

was the oddly-gleeful reply from Jourlan.

Baldo assumed Jourlan managed to deftly catch the sword by the hilt, but he did not turn around to check.

“Wow!”

exclaimed the Earl with incredulity.

Watching Baldo throw the sword without looking and seeing Jourlan catch it with almost-practiced ease—surely was he captivated by such a feat.

All of these events happened within but the span of a measly several breaths.

The soldiers in the back line were dumbfounded, jaws hanging open and rendered unable to move.

Baldo spun the spear in his left hand around, pointing its metal tip at the aggressors.

It was a rough, shoddy spear, but in Baldo's hands did it appear to be the fangs of a savage beast.

Holding this weapon at the ready to confront the ruffians, he asked,

Is it fine if I kill the one called Oswald?

The Earl realized the question was directed toward him and succinctly replied,

“Yes.”

It was then that someone suddenly gulped.
The hunters were now becoming the hunted.

“K-K-Kill them!”

Oswald’s order came shrill as a scream.

At the same time did Gyenzala also yell to his two bodyguards,

“Go!”

With swords in hand did the eight soldiers then rush at Baldo.

He brandished his spear in a wide arc at the same height as their heads.

It was with a force that threatened to remove their skulls from their necks.

The soldiers all recoiled with fear at the swing and tried desperately to halt their advance.

Baldo then sprinted forward to the right.

Standing there were the two personal guards of Gyenzala.

It came as no surprise that the two swiftly managed to regain their composure and slice toward Baldo with their weapons.

The guard on the right gripped his sword in his left hand.

As he raised his weapon to strike down at the enemy did Baldo then grab his raised left wrist, using the man as a shield as he dashed into the guard on the left.

The two bodies collided and fell entangled to the floor.

As he let the wrist of the left-handed soldier go, so too did he rob him of his sword.

The remaining six soldiers were attempting to surround him.

Baldo immediately spun around to the right and with his sword sliced the soldier standing right behind him over his shoulder.

The blade went through the man's arm, sending his hand and the blade it still gripped flying.

Then did he flourish the spear in his left hand like a whirlwind as he partially twisted his body to the left, driving the sword in his right hand through the tip of another soldier's shoulder.

Into the left shoulder the sword dug, traveling through the man's body and reaching the chest before the sword snapped in two.

Humph, what a piece of junk,

grumbled Baldo out loud.

One of the men let loose an odd cry and swung his weapon at him.

Before the blade could even begin its descent did Baldo slam the broken sword atop the man's head.

The sword, possessing only half of its original length, rent the soldier's leather helmet in two and deeply fractured the man's skull.

As if frozen, the man continued to hold his blade high before slowly slumping back lifelessly to the ground.

The man was cross-eyed now, looking almost as if he were glaring at the hilt that now protruded from his head.

"Aieeee!"

came a pathetic screech as Oswald bounded for the entrance.

He pulled along one of the soldiers as he did, no doubt to use as a shield.

Baldo gripped the spear with both hands now and lunged forward.

Into the stomach of that soldier did he drive its tip.

It plunged entirely through the man, and out came it from the other end, skewering Oswald alongside him.

Baldo continued to rush forward and stabbed the spear up into the wall next to the entrance.

There was a *twang*, and with that were the two men now fixed in place.

Both of the men were writhing in immense pain.

The spear could no longer endure the weight of the two men, and quickly did it break in two.

Perhaps seeing an opportunity now that Baldo was once more without weapon, Gyenzala and his two guards sprinted toward him in attack.

A fine decision to attack in unison with the three of you.

Yet, it is not *quite* sufficient, I'm afraid.

All of you are too close together.

And three is not enough.

The two guards raised their swords above their heads.

Standing in the middle, Gyenzala pointed the tip of his shortsword at Baldo as if intending to thrust it.

Gyenzala was at the end of the day a knight.

These pathetic excuses for swordsmen could not hold a candle to the pressure that he radiated.

Baldo took two steps back and then suddenly leapt forward.

The strikes from the two guards could not descend in time, for they were thrown into confusion by the sudden closing of the gap.

With his right foot, Baldo kicked at Gyenzala's hands.

With his hands, Baldo grabbed the raised wrists of the two guards on either side, locking them in place.

With his sword repelled did Gyenzala crash into Baldo's body, sending the man flying back.

Baldo crushed the wrists of the two guards with monstrous force, causing both of the men to drop their weapons.

Their bones started to snap with several small pops, and Baldo then lifted them both up, spun them around, and slammed them into the wall.

A sword was sticking straight out of Gyenzala's chest.

Baldo had originally intended to kick the sword away, but perhaps he had unintentionally drove the blade back into the man.

The rest of Oswald's soldiers lost the last bit of their fighting spirit and did not move.

A single soldier stood up.

It was the one who had been trembling so fiercely before, one who had not made a single attack.

Baldo lauded the man for standing up, but noticed he wasn't holding a sword.

Perhaps one of Gyenzala's guards had taken it from him.

Then the cowardly soldier started to run.

—run toward the balcony.

He was clearly disoriented.

He ran outside with great momentum.

Jourlan stepped into the man's path, as perhaps he felt bad letting the man run to his death.

The cowardly soldier slipped by Jourlan.

As he did, he snatched the letter from Eidra that peeked out from from inside Jourlan's breast pocket.

Before anyone present could come to their senses did the cowardly soldier jump off the side of the balcony.

The moment he did could everyone see a smiling face looking back at them.

The face of Julchaga, the Gorra Cheyzara.

He had grabbed the railing the instant he leapt over the side, killing his forward momentum and dropping directly down.

Both Jourlan and the Earl of Lints looked over the side, down to the rocky crags below.

So too did Baldo come over.

They saw the thief in the distance, jumping from rock to rock with dexterous ease down the cliff, headed toward the banks of the Orva.

“Wow!

What an incredible fellow!

Look at him go as if he were a monkey,”

exclaimed the Earl.

He had truly seen something incredible.

He then turned around to examine the room and looked at Baldo with a sense of wonder.

“Truly.

You possess incredible strength.

We were but three unarmed men against fourteen fighters.

I thought for sure we were done for,”

he continued, his voice quivering with emotion.

Jourlan replied as if nothing of note had happened,

“If even a hundred yimela²² banded together could they not do battle with a golaon²³.”

22. sheep

23. tiger

For a second, a smile appeared on the bewildered Earl's aged face.

“Ever since I was young have I heard tales of the gallantry of Sir Galdegarsh Gwera.

It has always been a dream of mine to see the strength by which he fought.

I never would have fathomed that dream would be fulfilled in such a manner.

You have showed me something incredible.

What bliss this is, truly what bliss,”

said the man with a magnificent smile.

5

Oswald made it sound as if the manor was surrounded on all sides by his men, but in reality there were not so many.

All of those who had learned of or at least had an inkling of his demise had already ran off, and the rest simply had no idea what was transpiring.

So too were there assassins sent after the Earl's son and most trusted retainers.

Some of them escaped back into the shadows after learning of the plot's failure, and the others were revealed through their suspicious behavior and had been taken into confinement.

Thus did none of the assassinations succeed.

Gyenzala too died before long.

“Just what is the double spiral?

Just where is the seal?

Tell me, Baldo Rhowen.

Tell me!”

were the last words from his mouth.

Baldo knew naught of a double spiral or seal.

Jourlan did not know either.

Before the fight had taken place, Gyenzala shouted for Baldo to hand over the item that Eidra had entrusted to him, yet there was no such thing.

After he died, the three men then met with the Earl's most powerful retainers to discuss how best to proceed, eventually agreeing to deal with the matter directly and above board.

The Earl then wrote and sent a letter detailing the events of that day—how Lord Jourlan Telsia, Lord Baldo Rhowen, and he were enjoying a fine afternoon when they were suddenly attacked by Gyenzala Peyn who announced he would take their lives, only to be defeated by the courageous Baldo—and asking what Lord Cardos Coendela made of such events.

Until he received a reply would he hold on to Gyenzara's corpse, he added.

To House Coendela, the trade routes that the Earl of Lints oversaw were of critical import.

To Lints, House Coendela was merely a single customer among many, albeit one of slightly larger size.

Were House Coendela to lose their place as a distributor of goods among the region, the neighboring domains would surely start to have items delivered directly to them instead.

The financial foundation of House Coendela would then start to crumble.

By no means was House Coendela in the position to earn the Earl of Lint's displeasure.

“I await his excuses with baited breath,”

the Earl said.

Baldo had a feeling the eventual response would only infuriate the Earl, but he kept such thoughts to himself.

Jourlan was filled with constant remorse that the letter from his mother to Baldo was stolen by the thief, but Baldo was not so crestfallen.

It did not eat away at his heart as much as his own failure to send her a letter before her passing.

The next day, Jourlan left for home.

“It has been a good while since I last saw gramp’s exciting swordsmanship.

It made for the perfect parting gift,”

were the words he apparently left with the Earl before setting off.

Baldo had initially intended to browse the food stalls, but it was not meant to be.

He could not even get up from his bed at this moment.

It was because he went all out without consideration for his frail body that his hips and right shoulder cried out with pain.

I suppose even the mighty golaon cannot defeat the passage of time,

sighed Baldo with resignation.

Chapter 6

The Sunlit Courtyard

1

On the banks of the great, rushing Orva did Baldo sit and take in the scenery without a word.

It was the third day of Baldo's stay in the Earl of Lints' manor.

The pain in his hip had slowly started to subside, allowing him to finally get out of bed, and so he decided to take Staboros for a quick ride.

The horse seemed happy to have its master atop its back.

Baldo was sympathetic, for during the entire length of the journey so far had it been relegated to a pack mule.

Just how old are you now, I wonder,

asked Baldo out loud, but of course there was no answer.

He looked back through his memories.

It was the same year Eidra was wed into House Coendela that she had given Staboros to him.

That meant it had been in the year 4,241.

Staboros was but two years old at the time.

The year was now 4,270, thus more than twenty-nine years had passed since then.

You're thirty-one years now.
What a long life you've led.

Horses that were raised by humans generally lived until they were around twenty, and horses in the wild only half that.

Baldo had on occasion seen horses that lived even until forty, but considering all the horses younger than Staboros who had already died before, he could say with certainty that Staboros' life was a long one.

I suppose I will never know the meaning of your name, now.

When Eidra had given him the horse, she had specifically told Baldo at the time, "The name's meaning is a secret."

Thus did Baldo never inquire about the name from then on.

Even though the two had been by each other's side for so long.

2

Eidra was born in the year 4,226.

Baldo was fourteen at the time, and it was his fourth year as an orderly in the service of her grandfather, Elzera Telsia.

Even more than her father, more than her mother, more than her brother and her personal maid did Eidra hold affection for Baldo.

So too did Baldo dote on this rapidly-growing girl in his own way.

—by taking her around the mountains and plains.

The wilderness of the frontier was a treacherous place.

The Pacra domain ruled by House Telsia were beset by an even more exceptional danger than the neighboring regions, for they were located at the opening in Jhan Dessa Roh, and often were there kaejel and beasts affected by them wandering about.

Baldo was of course able to tell which areas posed a meaningful danger to the girl, and by the time he was twenty was he a proper knight and one already recognized to be among the best in the service of House Telsia, a lordship teeming with men of incredible martial talent.

Even then did the voices of concern persist, but Eidra would always reply with a smile,

“Baldo will protect me.”

Aside from its danger, so too was the wilderness a great teacher, bounding with endless fun.

Eidra grew taller by the day, and Baldo tempered his body and soul to unimaginable heights.

Eidra was eight years old when the head of the house at the time, Elzera, passed away.

It was into Baldo’s chest that the distraught girl had shed her tears.

It was the same when her mother died as well.

Eidra grew to be a beautiful woman, but there was a dauntless nature about her; she preferred armor to dresses, a shortsword to the sewing needle.

It only made sense, for her name also belonged to one of the three goddesses of battle, who were tasked with selecting the heroic souls that would ascend to Galdegatt Lyen²⁴.

“Perhaps I should have given her a different name,”

24. The Garden of Knights

muttered her father Heidra, and Baldo could only think to himself it was a bit late for those sentiments.

3

A certain incident took place when Eidra was twenty years old.

Baldo had just returned to the castle upon defeating a gang of mountain bandits when he saw many people scrambling about.

There was a large signal fire set up in the central courtyard.

The head of House Telsia at the time, Heidra, quickly made his way to the castle gates and asked Baldo,

“Have you seen Eidra?”

Baldo replied that he had not, and the man’s expression turned ashen as he said,

“I see.”

Apparently she had taken two soldiers with her and left the castle to greet Baldo on his return.

Heidra had allowed her to go on a whim after calling for two soldiers to escort her, as she was familiar with the path.

It was apparently still bright out when she did so.

Her older brother Vorra was currently stationed at the stronghold guarding the gap in Jhan Dessa Roh.

Now it was already night.

The color drained from Baldo’s face as well.

From a bird's eye view did the mountain path seem as if it would be simple to traverse, but it was often that people traveling through the trees would suddenly find themselves disoriented, losing all sense of direction, location, and distance.

That she wasn't back by this time was a sign to Baldo that she could no longer return on her own.

It was nigh impossible, however, to conduct a search in the forests at this time.

For under the veil of night did all paths, tracks, trees and rocks seem to be one in the same.

Yet Baldo mounted his horse once more in an instant and to the men accompanying him he commanded,

Light the largest torches we have atop the highest points of the keep!

You must not let their flames dwindle until dawn arrives!

and he pulled the reigns of his steed.

Just as he was about to depart, Heidra said to him,

“Take this!”

and handed Baldo a single sword.

It was the cursed sword, Morra Gravielo²⁵.

Baldo removed his sword from his waist and attached the cursed sword in its place before making haste.

Thankfully were there two moons in the sky.

With naught but the faint moonlight weaving through the dense trees to guide him did Baldo ride.

If she left the castle to meet me, then I must find where she took the first turn to the right.

She often rode with me on my horse, so perhaps she thought the distance to be shorter than it actually was.

25. That which Rends the Darkness

She must have turned right too soon,

he guessed.

With those thoughts in mind, Baldo remembered a similar looking road that branched right.

He arrived at that path and turned right in an instant.

The path then went on, winding to the right and left.

The path was truly similar, so Baldo could understand mistaking it for the correct one.

Then he arrived at a fork.

Right?

Or left?

Which did the princess choose?

Both options were feasible.

It all depended on how she mistook the path.

Were he to make the wrong judgment now would he likely seal the girl's fate.

Oh goddess!

My patron goddess, Patarapoza!

Be my guide in the night!

Lead me through this forest clad in darkness!

It was the first time since his knighting ceremony that he called the name of the goddess to which he pledged his worship.

The reason he chose this goddess of darkness was because there were none who proselytized in her name.

He simply wanted to avoid the possibility that one from the church of his god would preach holy matters to him—there was nary a shred of devotion in his heart.

Then from the darkness of the night did something start to delicately float upward, perhaps an answer from the goddess of darkness to the cries of one of her few adherents.

It was a massive face, glowing faintly in the dark of the night.

It looked almost like a human's, almost like a monkey's.

The base of its neck seemed to melt and disappear into the darkness, but Baldo could tell its body was far smaller than what its head would lead you to believe.

Its great eyes were half-closed as if with drowsiness, and it slowly blinked as if one with its breaths.

Paduli orra²⁶.

It was a spirit that often appeared in folktales of the land, and occasionally were there those who swore they witnessed one in the deep recesses of the frontier's forests.

Baldo had never seen one before, but he knew there was nothing else it could be.

There were many strange and curious creatures beyond Jhan Dessa Roh.

Surely this was but one of them.

The paduli orra opened its tired eyes a fraction and looked to the right.

I am in your debt!

To a goddess were his words far too crude and to a beast were his words far too polite, yet he left them all the same as he rode off on the right path without a moment of hesitation.

He rode.

He rode.

And just as his heart started to fill with worry that he had chosen the wrong path did it happen.

I hear a sound!

There were traces of a struggle about.

Baldo rode more swiftly than wind through the trees.

There they are!

26. Sage of the Forest

In an open clearing Baldo spotted a the corpses of a dozen or so beasts and a motionless soldier on the ground.

There was another soldier there, protecting Princess Eidra behind his back, and covered in blood was he, plunging the sword in his hand into an enemy directly before him.

It was a zeyu-ceebea²⁷ that had turned into a kaejel.

It was often said that beasts would turn into kaejel upon basking in the ghastly aura of gyelganos, but Baldo knew not of the legitimacy of those claims.

There were many knights who had witnessed such gyelganos, but Baldo was not among them.

It was without doubt, however, that kaejel originated from common beasts.

Upon transforming would their body grow a size larger, and their temperament would turn crazed and fierce.

Their strength would become immense, and their flesh would inexplicably harden.

Even a creature so weak as a rabbit would upon becoming a kaejel turn into a force to be reckoned with.

The eyes of kaejel glowed red.

When one appeared would be the beasts around them be struck with a fit of madness as well.

They would often appear from Jhan Dessa Roh with a group of beasts in tow.

It was the sworn duty of House Telsia to keep their advances at bay.

Baldo was thankful to Heidra for the blade he was given.

A zeyu-ceebea was a formidable foe, even had it not turned into a kaejel.

It was about as tall as a fully-grown man.

Its long arms, however, possessed far greater strength.

Its claws were long and hardened.

27. mole-ape

It was uncannily nimble, and its hide was inconceivably tough.

It would be a great feat for a common weapon to injure a monster like that.

Elgwordra²⁸ were blades forged for the sole purpose of felling these creatures.

There was a special material mixed into the metal, it was said.

Only the blade of an elgwordra was able to tear through the skin, flesh, and bones of kaejel.

So expensive were they that one could buy a castle with their worth, so House Telsia had but one in their possession.

The zeyu-ceeba was likely drawn by the smell of blood and arrived only moments ago.

Were this not the case, the soldier would have long since perished.

Knowing that an ally was near, a faint smile formed on the soldier's lips as he cast a glance at Baldo.

It was then that the kaejel pounced toward the two, possibly noticing the small opening.

Baldo drew his sword without stopping his horse and barreled into the kaejel with full momentum.

Right before the soldier and Eidra was the kaejel blown away to the side.

So too was Baldo launched from the horse, and together with the kaejel did they fly into the thicket.

The elgwordra was pierced into the kaejel's heart.

However, the kaejel's claws also stabbed into Baldo's back.

It was at a place unprotected by armor, thus did the claws dig deeply into his body.

As he glared into the eyes of the monster before him, Baldo continued to press the blade ever more.

28. cursed sword

Blood sprayed from the kaejel's body, dyeing his armor a deep red.

It opened its maw and tried to rip apart Baldo's face with its sharp fangs.

Baldo moved his head to the right at that very moment, and instead did the kaejel's jaw sink into Baldo's left shoulder.

It easily tore through the hardened leather of his shoulder guard, and its fangs tried to tear his shoulder from his body.

Yet Baldo merely continued to drive the blade deeper.

Suddenly, the strength drained from the kaejel's body.

The red in its eyes did fade.

The monster finally died and fell to the ground.

When he turned around, Eidra flew into his chest, sobbing tears that she no longer held back.

Baldo brought his arms around her without a word.

Ignoring the blood staining her clothes, Eidra continued to hold him tight, her tears never ceasing.

4

It was fortunate the two soldiers had been brought back from the brink of death.

Lest Eidra suffer irreparable damage to her heart.

The events of that day forever changed Eidra.

It was as if she had become more feminine.

She started to conceal that boyish sense of adventure she once had and instead showed a kind, thoughtful facade.

No longer did she show a desire to always take the reins, but instead took a step back, simply supporting the actions of others.

She started to hone her skills in cooking and needlework.

Three years passed after that day.

Baldo left for the stronghold located at the gap in Jhan Dessa Roh for a three month assignment.

When Baldo returned three months later, he first heard news of the betrothal between Eidra and Cardos Coendela.

Eidra gave Staboros to Baldo as a gift, and she left for the domain of Dorba.

Cardos was twenty-six years old at the time.

Though a bastard child of the previous lord, he had inherited the title three years earlier following the sudden, inexplicable deaths of his father and brothers.

Under Cardos' reign did House Coendela rapidly expand their influence through aggressive means.

Over and over, they engaged in armed skirmishes with their age-old nemesis, House Norra.

Over and over, they raided and plundered villages and towns under House Norra's protection, with tenuous excuses.

So too did they plot against House Telsia, located between the two domains.

A year prior, in the midst of an unprecedented emergency, during which seventeen kaejel had simultaneously appeared, did House Coendela in their despicable cowardliness launch an offensive on House Telsia's main keep.

It was only due to the gallantry of Baldo, returning by chance because of the injuries he sustained from the kaejel, that they were able to kill two of House Coendela's generals and force their retreat.

Then came the sudden proposal from Cardos, that he wished to make Eidra—know across the land for her beauty—his queen, and she resolved herself to agree, so that House Telsia and its lands could know peace once more.

Yet in the end, the marriage did not bring the houses together.

Cardos sent Eidra not to their main castle, but to a small, faraway manor instead.

It was located beside a beautiful lake and was certainly an appropriate place for her to await the arrangements of their marriage.

The year passed, however, and Eidra continued to wait in that manor, the day of the ceremony remaining in endless uncertainty.

To declare he wished to make Eidra his queen was to state he intended to take her as his main wife.

Yet to be a main wife was to take care of domestic matters in the main castle, not to be left to rot in a manor far away.

Such was the treatment of a concubine.

House Coendela's incredible display of disrespect did not end there.

With unimaginable audacity did they, but a mere year and a half later, send Eidra back to House Telsia.

—a baby in her arms.

Escorting her back to her home were but a single personal maid and four servants of low birth.

House Telsia sent a messenger to demand an explanation, but a corpse was all that returned.

As if that alone did not satisfy them, House Coendela launched an assault on a territory under Telsia's control, claiming they were investigating the source of their insolence.

Heidra and Vorra were driven mad with indignant fury, and they mobilized all of the knights stationed at the stronghold in their counterattack.

Though the lands controlled by Telsia were not large, their knights were all among the elite, tempered beyond reason through their fights with the kaejel.

They made quick work of the invading army and sent them running.

House Coendela never learned.

Over the next twenty years did he launch five separate attacks on their borders.

To the east of Pacra—in which House Telsia’s main keep was located—was the gap in Jhan Dessa Roh, the ideal spot to defend against those from beyond it.

Yet to the west, if one looked, was a spot that could also be considered of vital military importance in the region.

If they managed to wrest control of that location from House Telsia could they then set their sights upon the entirety of the eastern frontier.

It was with such wanton ambition that Coendela did desire Pacra.

So too did they vastly underestimate the terror of the kaejel.

5

Eidra and her son Jourlan were warmly received back in House Telsia.

Eidra deeply loved her son.
So too did Baldo dote on the boy.

Eidra was given a place to live within the castle grounds and there she spent the days with her son.

The house where she lived, built somewhat high up in the castle’s annex, was a quiet, peaceful place, as if existing in another world.

The cozy little courtyard at the center of the estate was always bathed in sunlight, with flowers blooming at all times of the year.

When Baldo returned from service did he always visit this annex.

Eidra would set up a table in the courtyard and pour some tea.

There sat Baldo, Eidra, and Jourlan.

Around the table the three laughed merrily at conversations meandering and absurd.

It was a stange, tender little world.

Baldo was not talkative, nor was he skilled at doing so, and all he could discuss besides weapons, horses, and combat was the topic of food.

Eidra would always listen to his tales with glee.

So too was she a glutton, and her eyes would sparkle upon hearing of his experiences eating some tasty food from some place.

“How grand would it be, to travel the world and taste all of its food!”

were the words she always loved to say.

After some time, she took to gazing at the Great Orva in the distance, from the castle’s tallest tower.

“I would love to go to the banks of the Orva one day.”

These too were words that came often from her lips.

Around the time that Jourlan was knighted did her condition start to fail.

After her older brother Vorra passed, she would often be confined to her bed.

Eidra was delighted to see the wonderful growth of her son.

He was exceptional in both academic and military studies, and he learned much from both books and the world.

He had a perfect, healthy body, a handsome, symmetrical face, and rolling golden locks that seemed as if taken from a painting.

It was almost uncanny how dignified the boy was.

Though members of the Telsia family all possessed a refined disposition to some extent, Jourlan was even then exceptional, and even in moments of violence did he have a sense of grace about him.

He was both serene and cheerful, magnanimous and with panache, yet when he made up his mind was there a resolve hidden within that could will the mountains to move.

He was truly heroic, in every sense of the word.

There was not a trace of Cardoso in him.

Baldo could only thank the blood of his ancestors.

Jourlan became the pride and hope not only of Eidra and Baldo, but of all the men and women of Telsia.

The current lord Galiera relied on this cousin of his, ten years his junior, like he did no one else.

So too was he an excellent example for Galiera's children.

Baldo's other beloved pupil, Cedelmont Expenglar, also became a splendid knight.

It was because Jourlan and Cedelmont were there in House Telsia that he could leave on this journey with such peace of mind.

6

As Baldo was lost in his thoughts, Staboros suddenly nudged him with its muzzle.

Darkness had fallen over the Orva at some point.

The wind was cold.

Baldo stroked Staboros' head and said,

Shall we return to the roost?

At that moment, he looked to the skies in the west and saw something flying through the air.

It was a yent nahda.²⁹

High up in the sky, from the distant horizon it flew.

As Baldo watched, it crossed the Orva, flew far above his head, and then disappeared into the distance, beyond Jhan Dessa Roh.

Yent nahda never landed in places populated by humans, never made contact with them either.

I wonder if they too fight amongst themselves?

he suddenly, inexplicably mused.

29. flying dragon

Chapter 7

The Double Spiral

1

So good was the hospitality provided by the Earl of Lints, that it nearly made Baldo uneasy.

Both the savior of his life and a peerless hero of great renown, Baldo was treated as if he were a guest of the highest order.

So too did the members of his house serve the man that saved the head of the family with great devotion.

The most distinguished retainers of the Lints domain came one after the other to shower Baldo with gifts.

They handed him extravagant weapons, clothes, and jewels, and some even gave him items as large as furniture, putting Baldo at a loss for where exactly to put it.

He graciously accepted the more down-to-earth items like armor and a cloak.

The many swords he received, however, were far too garish.

For a journey like this, of an old man to the end of his life, his current old sword was the most appropriate companion.

He told the Earl of Lints that he would leave everything he couldn't bring with him at the manor, and asked him to take the items to the House Telsia.

The Earl was more than happy to oblige.

Some days later, after Baldo had fully recovered, Simon Epivaris, Earl of Lints, came to Baldo dressed in his best formal attire.

“Lord Baldo Rhowen.

Allow me to express my deepest gratitude for the actions you took in saving my life and this estate.

I had believed my adopted son to be a man of morals, yet he was naught but a treacherous villain.

I must offer my sincerest apologies, for through my ineptitude did I expose Lord Jurlan and your honored self to senseless danger.

It was truly perilous, yet through your unparalleled courage and unyielding determination in the face of injury did we come out alive.

This is my eldest son and heir, Werner.

This is my wife, Helena.

On their behalf do I yet again express our gratefulness.

House Epivaris will never forget our gratitude and friendship for as long we walk the earth.

Forever will our doors be open wide to you.

If there is anything we can ever do to be of use to you, we will go through hell and high water to see it done.

Please accept this small gift, a token of but a mere fraction of our appreciation,”

the Earl said, and as his family all lowered their heads to Baldo, a servant of the family brought a tray to the table next to them, a great deal of large, gold coins atop it, wrapped in a cloth of high quality.

Each of those coins seemed to be worth around ten gold coins of normal size, and in front of Baldo were what seemed to be a hundred of them.

Baldo accepted the gratitude, and so too did he extend his own friendship, but he refused the money.

Although this attack itself was perpetrated by Oswald toward the Earl of Lints, House Coendela had organized this from behind the scenes with Baldo and Jourlan's lives in mind.

One could almost say that it was through association with Baldo and Jourlan that the Earl was put into harm's way.

But the Earl insisted,

"That is not the case at all.

After questioning some of the men that we captured, we learned that Oswald had been scheming with House Coendela to seize the family for himself for many years now.

Had you not been here at the moment he decided to attack, I'm afraid I would no longer be among the living today.

It was because you were here and thus they decided to carry out the plan, that I was saved.

The fact that I am here right now is your doing.

Not to mention, I would never dream of taking back a gift I have already given."

Then I will have to trouble you to give it to House Telsia, replied Baldo.

"Unfettered by greed, and with only thoughts of your lord, indeed.

However, Lord Rhowen, were I to do as you say, the world would think I was not giving that money to you, but to your House Telsia.

Even if I were to keep it a secret, it would surely see the light of day before long.

I am a businessman in the eyes of many, not a knight.

Men of business do not give great sums of money for no purpose.

I do not wish to invite needless trouble to House Telsia's doorstep.

I promise that I will find some way to make sure House Telsia receives our support.

So for now, Lord Rhowen, please accept this sum.”

Baldo had no other option than to nod and agree to the gift.

He could not physically carry around the gold, however, so Baldo told the Earl that he would accept a million geil for now, and then ask for the rest when necessary down the line.

“That will do perfectly.

That means in the future, someone may come to collect the rest of the sum on your behalf.

That being the case, perhaps we should decide on a means of confirming their identity.”

Baldo asked for some parchment and an inkwell.

The animal parchment they retrieved was of considerably high quality.

It was incredibly white, thin, and covered in a glossy sheen.

A strange smell tended to accompany animal hide parchment, but this one exhibited none of that.

Baldo knew not of the animal from which it was made.

When the inkwell came, Baldo dipped his right index finger into the ink and then pressed it against the tip of his left.

He then pressed both fingers onto the page.

When he removed his fingers were there two prints left atop the paper.

The Earl watched his actions with confusion, so Baldo explained,

The patterns on one’s fingertips are entirely unique to the individual.

In several countries in the midlands do they occasionally press ink-covered fingers onto a page in lieu of a seal, and they call it a fingerseal.

As there are no two fingerseals alike, it proves an effective means of confirming a man's identity.

If ever an individual comes bearing a fingerseal that is identical to this one, then I ask you to entrust the remainder of the sum to that person.

It's possible I will some day in battle lose one of these fingers, so I have left both my left and right should that happen.

The Earl was thoroughly taken aback by this knowledge, thus he pressed his own fingerseal onto the parchment and compared it with that of his family.

"I see!

Each of them are entirely unlike the other.

I must say.

I never would have imagined Sir Galdegarsh Gwera was as clever as he was strong,"

laughed the man.

This was something Baldo had learned from Eidra in the sunlit courtyard.

In the brief year or so that she had been wed to House Coendela, she had picked up a great deal of peculiar information, fascinating Baldo with it as well.

The thought suddenly occurred to Baldo,

That double spiral Gyenzala was on about, was it perhaps the fingerseal?

Baldo told these thoughts of his to the Earl, and he replied,

"A fascinating idea.

That could mean someone left a fingerseal in the shape of a double spiral.

Perhaps they are searching for that individual.

Or perhaps they are searching for a deed or written vow sealed by that individual.

I suspect that may be the case.”

Gyenzala did not appear to know the spiral was a fingerseal, mentioned Baldo.

The Earl agreed,

“That seems likely.

For he did ask what the double spiral was, if my memory does not fail me.

That must mean they are searching for someone or something, with but the single clue of a fingerseal, left behind by one who was not of their family.

And the Coendelas wish to find the answer before anyone else.”

Baldo had similar thoughts, but he could not deduce anything further.

He was not the kind of man to think this and that of such subtle, complicated matters.

It was a curious thing, that those ruffians were so obsessed with Eidra’s letter, but in the end, she had already passed away.

So too was Baldo very familiar with how Eidra approached these kinds of matters.

If Princess Eidra truly knew of some incredible secret, she would not simply write of it in a letter.

It would be far too roundabout, far too time-consuming, and far too dangerous.

She would have certainly consulted her elder brother first, or perhaps Jourlan or Cedelmont.

If she wrote a letter to me, then its contents should only be for my eyes,

Baldo surmised, and no longer did he concern himself with those matters.

How could they know anything of Eidra, whom they chased from their lands and who never left the castle of Pacra again.

There were many in House Telsia whose sheer intellect dwarfed his

He could not imagine ever being of use in a situation such as this.

2

Baldo observed the food stalls for the first time in a good while.

Of course, he did not only look.

He bought many curious dishes here and there and ate them all.

While he stayed in Lints Manor, they of course provided him with no shortage of delicious foods in the evening and healthy, easily-digestible dishes in the morning.

Baldo was entirely satisfied with their reception, but there was something decidedly different about the food from the streets.

Since he was here in Lints, he was planning to make the most of it and eat to his heart's content.

“Hey, boss!

You're looking right as rain this fine morning,”

came a familiar voice from behind Baldo.

It was Julchaga, the Gorra Cheyzara.

“Get me something, will you?”

The next stall was selling some grilled, sandwich-like food, so Baldo bought two and handed one to the young man.

It seemed difficult to eat on the move, so Baldo sat down next to a waterway.

Julchaga sat down next to him.

“Hot-hot-hot!
Wow, that’s something else.”

Baldo had never eaten something like this before.

Water was mixed into flour to make a runny batter, grilled in thin circles on a hot slate, then folded in two.

Inside was freshly-caught fish that was briefly seared and then coated in a sauce made from fermented bean paste, sugar, and spices.

The smell of cooked bean paste wafted past Baldo’s nose and thoroughly whetted his appetite.

It was given to him nestled in a large leaf.

The leaf simply appeared to be a cheap alternative to a plate, yet the soft, watery smell that came from it added an almost refined depth to the dish.

Baldo followed Julchaga’s example and took a courageous bite from the side, sighing in satisfaction at the wonderful taste.

He was smiling before he realized it.

“I’ll get us some sweet rice wine.
I need some money,”

said Julchaga, and with the coins from Baldo he gulped down the last of the snack in a single bite and climbed up the side of the embankment, disappearing among the crowd in an instant.

Just as Baldo finished his as well did the young man return with two bamboo containers and a cup’s worth of piping-hot liquid inside each.

“Here you go,”

he said, handing Baldo one of the containers, and then he pulled something out of his breast pocket.

It was something wrapped up in an old rag, traces of steam and a delicious smell escaping from the sides.

“It’s made from some kind of potato and a bunch of vegetables.

They boil them all and mash it together in a paste.

Then they shape them like this, long and thin.

All they do is grill it a little and sprinkle some salt on top.

This stuff is really good; you have to take my word for it,”

he said, placing the bundle between them.

The two snacked on them while slowly sipping the rice wine.

“Betchu never thought I’d jump off the cliff like that, did you.”

I certainly did not, replied Baldo.

“Betchu were amazed at how I jumped down the rocks like that, weren’t you.”

I certainly was, replied Baldo.

“Boy, I’m such a genius.

Putting me in a real bind, ya’know?

Nearly making me blush with all those compliments.

But didja know?

I was scared straight during that jump!

I was prepared to die the entire time.

There’s no way!

This is impossible!

I’ll never survive!

I was thinking this stuff the entire time, but I had to tell myself I could do it.

And I did!

I really am amazing, aren’t I?”

I imagine it was terrifying, just like a knight’s battle, replied Baldo.

Julchaga looked at him with surprise.

“Wow.

I never knew.

The stuff I do and the stuff you do, boss, are just one in the same, I guess.”

The rice wine had a certain bite to it, like there was some secret ingredient added, and it warmed up Baldo’s body.

There were many boats passing by in the waterway.

The rippling of the water never ceased.

And then, all of a sudden—

A scream rang out.

Baldo looked to the source of the noise and saw that a young child had fallen down the banks on the other side of the waterway.

The scream came from a woman who must’ve been the mother.

The child fell with a splash into the water.

He started to sink, flailing madly around.

Baldo quickly stood up and started to run.

Julchaga was even quicker, and with incredible speed did he fly from his seat and leap into the water.

He launched through the waterway with the momentum of his jump and in an instant had he grabbed the child.

For nearly the entire width of the canal, Julchaga had been underwater.

A ship full of cargo was right next to them.

Seeing that a child had fallen into the water, the helmsman quickly changes the course of the ship toward the banks.

In that very change of course was where Julchaga had surfaced with the child in hand.

He desperately tried to move away from the ship.

The child in his arms was squirming in a panic, however, so he was only able to move at a snail’s pace.

The prow was mere moments from colliding into him.
Tightly he held onto the child, and he closed his eyes tight.

Yet the impact never came.

For it was Baldo who with a large piece of wood and herculean strength did he manage to push the boat off course.

There was a sound of creaking wood mixed amongst the splashing of the water.

So too were there screams from the boat, from being pushed so suddenly to the side.

The boat's course rapidly moved away from the banks.

Baldo pulled the large piece of timber back from the prow and put it down near Julchaga.

Grab on!

he yelled.

Julchaga clung to the piece of wood while holding the child.

The two of them were slowly pulled to the shore, and finally onto the ground.

The woman who appeared to be the mother scooped the child up in her arms and profusely thanked the two, tears in her eyes.

To his savior, Julchaga asked,

“How come you're on this side of the waterway?”

Baldo left the swimming to Julchaga, who seemed to handle it so easily, and he instead traversed the distance by air, leaping across three boats in succession.

Just as he arrived on the other shore did he spot a large piece of wood sticking out from the water, thus he pulled it out and used it to push the boat away from the two.

Julchaga's eye were wide with disbelief as he listened to this explanation.

Oh, that's right!

I can't forget to return the wood, can I?

said Baldo as he once more pierced the wooden pillar into the water.

It was a mooring post, for ships to be tied and anchored.

They were meant to resist the force of powerful currents, so they were naturally difficult to remove.

"What a monster!

I'm amazed you managed to jump across all of the boats like that too!"

he exclaimed.

Baldo replied,

I was unsure the entire time, but I had to tell myself I could do it.

And I did.

I really am amazing, aren't I?

Julchaga heard this and a brilliant smile formed on his face.

He then sneezed in the next moment and sniffled.

Once more did he smile.

A kindhearted trader collected some old wood for the two and started a fire.

The surrounding crowd also went to look for things that could serve as tinder.

Julchaga stripped down to his bare skin with nary a hint of trepidation, wrung his clothes dry, and then warmed himself up next to the fire.

The woman turned out to be the mother in the end.

She took of the child's clothes and then took off her coat as well, wrapping it around him.

Only his head poked out, and he too warmed up next to the fire.

He continued to snuffle in his mother's embrace, but before long, he drifted to sleep.

There were many people around the fire now, rejoicing at the child's safety and discussing the exploits of Baldo and Julchaga with fervor.

Many of the stall owners with a shrewd eye came by as well, selling their food and drinks to the crowd.

3

When Baldo decided to return to Lints Manor, Julchaga tagged along.

The guards at the front gate received the two with courteous manners.

Julchaga raised a single hand with a single,

“Hey,”

before walking past them with nonchalance.

The steward of the manor announced that distinguished guests had arrived, and Julchaga followed up,

“He's certainly right about that!”

With the steward's acceptance was Julchaga thus provided with dinner and a room to stay in as well.

The Earl of Lints was the only other person who attended dinner that day.

He wasn't in the slightest bit surprised by this guest's shabby appearance, and when it came time to toast, he asked,

“May I ask for our distinguished guest’s name?”

and so Baldo introduced him as Julchaga the Thief.

Julchaga’s face naturally jolted a bit, but the Earl merely continued,

“Then a toast to my new friend, Julchaga, who I hope will join us tonight,”

and he calmly held up his cup.

The distinguished guest, Baldo, then held up his cup next.

In his toast, he prayed for the continued prosperity of Lints and for the good health of all those connected to it as well.

Julchaga was the third to raise his cup.

“A toast to this mansion’s safety and peace, cheers!”

he announced.

Once the toasts had finished, the table was set with appetizers.

As he served the two guests himself, divvying up the many delicacies on the table, the Earl asked Julchaga with a serious expression,

“I wonder if you might be that thief of great renown, known as the Gorra Cheyzara.”

This is not your first time meeting him, Simon, mentioned Baldo from the side.

“Oh?”

I must say I’ve done everything in my power to *not* meet him, however,”

replied the Earl in a puzzled tone, to which Baldo responded that this was the man who made off with the letter and leapt down the cliff.

For the first time did surprise color the Earl's face and he said,

“Oh, that monkey-like one—”

and then continued with boisterous enthusiasm,

“Excellent!

You are truly among the finest of thieves!

How blessed am I, to invite not one but two of this generation's greatest talents.”

Baldo laughed merrily with him.

Though Julchaga didn't make any noise, there was a giddy smile on his lips.

4

“It was soon after you caught me.

I was all bound up and on my way to be traded for the bounty.

That was when we crossed paths with that Gyenzara guy and his posse.

One of his attendants knew who I was was, you see.

The guy intimidated the people transporting me and made them hand me over.

Well, if I'd been taken for my bounty, they'd string me up without a doubt.

He told me to work off the debt I owed him for my life.

To dress up as a soldier and nab the letter and seal.

The second he told me my opponent was going to be Baldo Rhowen, boy did I start to feel faint.

But once men lose their resolve to take on the impossible, it's all over for them, you know?

I had to wait patiently for my chance.”

“You were shivering in your boots, weren’t you?”

“Please don’t do me so dirty, Sir Earl.

That was but an expert performance to lull my opponent into complacency.

Really, you must believe me!

What can you do, though.

All of my allies were almost instantly wiped out, and I only managed to get the letter!

Where was the seal in the end?”

“Ha-ha-ha.

So you came for that too?

What an interesting fellow.

Neither Sir Jurlan nor Sir Baldo have the faintest idea of where that seal may be.”

“Huh?

You don’t know either, boss?”

I do not, replied Baldo.

“Jhan dessa roh!

So there was never any treasure from the beginning!

This is why you can’t trust an amateur.

They simply never do enough research at the start!”

“Why is House Coendela so obsessed with that letter in the first place, Julchaga?

All this talk of spirals and seals—where on earth does it all come from?”

“Yeah, apparently it was a messenger from the Margrave of Gadeucia that mentioned it.

And Gyenzala talked about it to a guy called Balkra.

Gyenzala was saying that the messenger would be able to prove their identity with the double spiral and the seal, and so there would be no issues from then on.”

“Huh?

The Margrave of Gadeucia, you say!

Now that you mention it, I’ve heard House Coendela is on very close terms with the margrave.

I recall that they are relatives, in fact, connected through Cardos’ mother.”

The Gadeucia margravate was located in the eastern lands of the Palzamic Kingdom and included the trade town of Padelia in its jurisdiction.

The lord of this region was Maldos Archeos, a knight of Palzam and a general with great influence.

“And Balkra, you say!

Balkra Meganon?

So he has also come.”

Balkra Meganon was one of the most powerful retainers of the Dorba domain.

So then you must have given that letter to Balkra, stated Baldo.

“That’s right.

I really am sorry, boss.

That was a letter addressed to you by the princess of Telsia, wasn’t it.

The thing is, you see.

When that old Balkra guy read the letter, his eyes got real wide.

‘The hell is this!’ he said.

‘There’s not a single thing of use written here!’

Boy was he angry.

On the inside, I was fed up with the guy too.

‘You’re the one that got me to steal it!’ I thought, but of course I didn’t say it out loud.”

“That was a wise decision on your part.

Yet why did he desire the letter from Princess Eidra so badly?

Does it perhaps have something to do with the spirals and the seal?"

"Who knows?

It looked like that old Balkra guy had no clue either.

I mean, he was complaining to Gyenzala nonstop.

'Cardos is far too tight-lipped as always!'

'Enough of this nonsense, and tell me what on earth is the goal of all this!' he said.

Gyenzala would only say that he'd tell him after they obtained the seal.

That 'Baldo surely has it!'

That 'he will certainly be the one who knows about the spiral too!'

That 'there must be some clues in that letter!'

—and other things of that sort."

"Humph, a whole assortment of nonsensical things.

That reminds me, Sir Baldo.

Sir Jourlan asked me to not trouble you with any unnecessary worries, but there was a peculiar happening recently.

Shortly after you left Pacra, a messenger from House Coendela came to request that both Lady Eidra and Jourlan be taken into their family.

Such a request after nearly thirty years of abandonment.

Were their attempt to succeed, they could poach such a talented knight from Telsia, and even if they failed, they might sow seeds of mistrust toward Jourlan among members of the family.

The request was thought to be a such a ploy.

House Telsia spurned the messenger, of course.

Yet House Coendela refused to relent, and after sending multiple requests did they finally send a young maid, asking that she be allowed to serve the Lady.

This too was a suspicious request, but if House Telsia refused even this, it would give the Coendelas an excuse for retaliation.

They reluctantly assented to the maid, and against their expectations did she perform her role admirably.

Lady Eidra was quite fond of the girl too, I heard.

The girl would occasionally send letters back to the Coendelas, but Jourlan would always check their contents before sending them off.

Surely did this girl know how the family saw her.

The letters merely contained details of Lady Eidra's health and of the chores she performed around the house—nothing out of the ordinary.

After Lady Eidra's funeral, that maid returned to Dorba.

With this new information, I suppose we can assume the girl was sent as to check Lady Eidra's belongings."

After this long story of his, the Earl took a large sip of his alcohol, perhaps to ease his dry throat.

"Speaking of which, Julchaga.

If you have come here looking for the seal, you will find nothing.

Sir Baldo has no idea where it might be.

You will have wasted your time."

"No, no, that's not it.

By stealing the letter, my debt to those individuals has been cleared.

I haven't been in contact with that old Balkra guy since then.

Not to mention, he's such a drag to talk to."

"Then why have you returned to this town?

There is currently a warrant out for your arrest, for the attempted assassination of the Earl of Lints and two knights of Telsia.

In fact, there is a wanted poster up for you.

Your life will be forfeit if you are found, you know."

“Come on, let’s not dampen the mood.

You can’t blame me.

I came all this way to Lints without trying its famous street food.

How could I possibly leave without sampling some?”

“Ha-ha!

So the street food is worth risking your life over?

What an interesting lad.”

“That’s right!

I had not a single coin to my name, however.

Just as I was thinking I might get to work, I happened to spot boss over here.”

“Oh?

And what did you do once you spotted him?”

“I said, hey, get me something will you?”

“You what?

I’m not sure whether I should consider you a fellow of great courage or one of dim wits.

What did Sir Baldo do to you then?”

“He got me something.”

The Earl grew silent and looked at Baldo.

Baldo wordlessly brought the cup to his lips.

Julchaga then regaled the Earl with the tale of what happened after that.

The entire time was the Earl interjecting with many oohs and ahs.

“On that topic, boss.

I still haven’t paid you back for getting me something to eat.

Is there anything you want me to do in return?”

asked Julchaga.

Baldo asked if Balkra had already returned to Dorba.

“I’d say so.

He said he would meet up with a royal envoy, saying something about showing him around a certain lakeside estate.”

Baldo was deep in thought upon hearing that and then further asked if Julchaga was capable of covertly delivering a message to said envoy at that estate.

“Course!”

came the reply and a sly little wink.

The Earl then came over and filled Julchaga’s cup.

Normally would the lord of an estate only fill the first cup, letting his servants take care of all subsequent drinks.

It appeared the Earl was quite taken with the young lad, however.

He would praise him for being a virtuous thief, saying there was nothing wrong with a fellow of extraordinary pride in his well-tempered skills, skewed though his path may be.

It was also possible the Earl was trying to dissuade the young thief from targeting his estate in the future.

The feast lasted joyously late into the night.

Chapter 8

The Whereabouts of the Seal

1

Baldo borrowed a horse from the Earl and rode east with Julchaga.

He had originally requested a horse for Julchaga as well, but the young man in question instead said,

“Well, the thing is...

I really appreciate the sentiment, boss.

But I have—what should I call it—pride or stubbornness in my craft?

If you rely on a horse in my trade, it’ll be all over for you,”

and other excuses of that nature before eventually continuing on foot.

Baldo continued on horseback then, galloping at full speed, and would you know it, Julchaga never fell behind—that was the kind of extraordinary man he was.

Baldo of course knew the trip would last many days, however, so he didn’t push the horse too far.

On the night of the fifth day did they arrive at a small village.

It was a place under House Telsia's protection.

In exchange for tax and a corvee did House Telsia then use their martial and governing might to shield this village from harm.

The details of this agreement manifested in various ways.

Telsia's main castle was far away, and not often did they send patrols to this area.

The mere fact that House Telsia would repay all ill-intent directed toward this land in kind, however, undeniably brought tranquility to its inhabitants .

The mayor of this village allowed the two to spend the night at his house.

The next morning, Baldo entrusted Julchaga with the care of the horses and made his way to another house.

It was a beautiful building, despite being so far in the countryside.

The head of this house was an elderly woman.

“Well, who would have guessed it!

Sir Baldo Rhowen.

I am so happy to have the honor of your visit.

Really, what an honor it is.”

This elderly woman was once the personal maid to Eidra.

Even when Eidra first went to the Coendelas to marry Cardos was she by her side.

Some time later, she retired from her role and returned to this village to tend to her ailing mother.

At this point, Baldo did something that he had never done before.

He asked the woman what happened in the year and a half that the two of them stayed at the Coendela's lakeside manor.

It turned out to be a long story.

When the tale finally concluded did Baldo at last understand the truth of the matter.

He still did not know the whereabouts of the seal, however.

So too was he unclear about Cardos Coendela's exact aim and if his own predictions were correct.

What he did know, was that it was imperative that he meet with the envoy as soon as possible.

Were they to encounter Cardos while still in the dark, they might find themselves facing a perilous end.

If the envoy's group were in fact slaughtered, this entire region would face naught but the fires of war.

Baldo returned to the mayor's house.

As the two of them were drinking tea, Julchaga's ears suddenly perked up.

He opened the window and started listening carefully toward the forest.

Eventually did Baldo start to hear the sound as well.

It seemed as if several horses were en route to the village.

They were quickly approaching.

Baldo and Julchaga told the mayor to say nothing about the two of them and left the house.

Julchaga took the two horses and hid them in the woods.

Baldo went behind the house and kept a careful watch on the situation.

Before long, five knights on horseback approached.

At the front of the pack was a knight clad in black armor and a black cape on his back.

Both his gloves and boots were the same color as well.

The four knights who followed behind were also fully dressed in armor, but the one at the front possessed long, luxurious black hair, billowing freely in the wind.

He had a black mustache and beard, and they exuded a sense of both savagery and refinement.

There was a gleam in his eyes, as if amidst a dream.

His stature was of daunting proportions.

It was the man known as the Panzaar³⁰, Jogg Woad.

He was a bastard child of Cardos Coendela and the inheritor of his branch family.

He was supposedly two years younger than Jourlan, making him twenty-six this year.

Though he possessed unrivaled arrogance, so too did he have the strength to back it up.

It seemed the blood of the Coendelas ran strong within him.

The five men demanded to know who the mayor was and then barged into his house uninvited.

Jogg sat down in a chair one of his underlings provided and leaned his sheathed greatsword on the table in front of him.

There was beautiful finesse contained within the way he handled his sword.

Yet when he sat down on the chair, it was as if he turned into a savage brute.

He stuck out both of his long legs in front of him and leaned his left elbow on the table, stroking his chin with his thumb and index fingers.

He gazed at a certain point on the wall, but none could guess what might have caught his attention.

The mayor and his wife were both dragged into the room and made to stand before Jogg.

“How much does this village pay to Telsia in taxes every year?”

asked one of the knights next to Jogg.

The mayor answered.

Jogg continued to silently rest his chin on his left hand, scratching the side of his nose with his ring finger.

30. windstorm

After a moment, he then listlessly raised his right hand and opened it to show all five fingers.

He had never taken off his gloves.

His gaze was still directed at that particular spot on the wall.

The knight who spoke previously nodded after seeing Jogg open his hand and said to the mayor,

“Then from now on, you will be paying five times that to House Coendela.

You are no longer obligated to pay taxes to Telsia.”

The mayor couldn't stay silent after hearing such a tyrannical declaration, and he immediately raised his voice in protest.

The knight unsheathed and raised his sword, meaning to cut down the mayor where he stood.

At that moment did Jogg suddenly stand and send the knight flying with a kick.

The knight crashed into a wall, broke all the way through, tumbling onto the dirt outside.

Jogg's luscious black hair drifted up, temporarily caught in the wind, and then soon settled back down.

“You imbecile.

Kill the mayor and it'll no longer be easy to get them to pay us taxes and follow our orders.

Don't attack the men and young women.”

He returned to the chair as if nothing was amiss, and with those few sentences did he once more return to stroking his beard with his elbow resting on the table.

He again started to stare at that particular spot on the wall.

The other knights then tried to intimidate the mayor, forcing him to agree to their one-sided demands.

Yet with a quivering voice did the mayor continue to refuse.

One of the knights grabbed his wife and pulled her away.
Another drew his sword.

They were planning to set an example by slaughtering the woman.

This time, Jogg did nothing to interfere.

It was at that moment Baldo appeared at the front door.

The knights stopped moving and glared at him.

Jogg looked leisurely behind him and, upon seeing who it was, raised an eyebrow.

Both of his eyes opened wide, and within them was a burning madness.

He grabbed his chest with his right hand as if trying to tear skin from bone, then with crazed eyes and a ferocious smile did he say,

“Baldo Rhowen.”

2

Baldo and Jogg had met on the battlefield twice before.

The first time was when Baldo was forty-eight and Jogg was but sixteen.

Baldo saw the boy was full of ambition, but alas, his physical and martial prowess had not yet caught up to his spirit.

His sword was unrestrained, and he could not see through the actions of his opponent—it could not even be considered a proper fight.

Baldo couldn't bring himself to kill the poor lad, so he simply knocked the boy off his horse and let him go.

The second time was when Baldo was fifty-four and Jogg was twenty-two.

Jogg had grown so much as to nearly defy recognition.

He wielded a large greatsword atop his horse and broke through a great many of Telsia's knights, defying all odds and logic.

Baldo stopped the greatsword with a shield in his left hand and sliced Jogg across his chest.

Jogg looked as if he was shocked to the core.

Baldo watched as this young man escaped under the cover of his allies, and he thought, Come a couple more years and there will be no one left who can defend against his blade.

Baldo was now fifty-eight, and Jogg was now twenty-six.

Without a proper sword or armor, how could Baldo possibly hope to contend with Jogg as he was now, brimming with spirit.

Not to mention the four knights beside him.

It would also be disadvantageous for Baldo to have his location known, especially at a place not at all far from House Coendela's main base of operations.

Yet Baldo could not merely stand by and watch as the mayor's wife was killed.

Well, I'm sure things will work out somehow.

And if they don't, I'll die in combat and that will be that,

thought Baldo, convincing himself to make his presence known.

Baldo showed himself to the men in the house and then walked outside without uttering a word.

Jogg and the four knights accompanying him followed behind.

Jogg removed his cape and handed it to one of the men with him.

He unsheathed his sword and handed its scabbard to another.

Turning to his men, he ordered,

“Wait here.

None of you are to get involved.”

Once he was about twenty paces away did Baldo turn around.

His right arm loosely dangled down, and his left hand held his scabbard tightly in place.

Jogg inched forward.

One step, two steps, three steps.

His gaze was trained on Baldo’s sword.

A twisting, entangling gaze it was.

As he walked forward, Jogg spun his sword around.

From the bottom right to the front.

From the front to the left.

Above his head and behind him.

From behind him to the right.

One rotation, two rotations, three rotations.

Upon reaching the right distance between him and his enemy would he surely then attack with unrivaled speed and destructive force.

Jogg continued to carefully watch Baldo’s sword.

Baldo knew his sword would immediately shatter into fragments if it ever met that greatsword head-on.

Not to mention he was old and frail now, thus he had to avoid a direct clash.

Baldo stepped slightly forward with his right foot and moved his center of gravity along with it.

He meant to time his breathing with the advance, lunging forward and dodging to the right of his opponent.

Once he did, he would strike at the man’s left flank.

That was his only chance at victory.

Just as he was about to grab the hilt with his right hand was he struck with terror.

I cannot move it!

His right hand was frozen in place.

Baldo desperately tried to muster the strength to do so, but his right arm refused to budge.

Ever since he was young had he trained this arm beyond its capabilities.

His right shoulder had often started to cramp up and throb in recent years, and he found he could no longer raise his right arm directly upwards.

So too would he occasionally be assaulted by a wave of pain depending on how he used it.

It was an unavoidable reality, and Baldo was prepared to meet the day when he could no longer raise a sword at all.

Yet to think it would happen today of all days!

Jogg mercilessly continued his advance.

Now!

Baldo rushed forward with all of his strength the moment he saw the chance.

His right arm was still as unmovable as ever.

Baldo gripped the hilt with his left hand instead and did the best he could to unsheathe the sword.

Jogg seemed to have predicted Baldo's intentions.

That too was the reason he never pulled his gaze away from Baldo's weapon.

Had he instead focused on his hands or legs, it was possible Baldo could have deceived him through a feint.

So he only looked at the sword.

The very moment Baldo drew his sword and attacked would also be the very moment he perished.

Baldo finally managed to extract the sword from its sheath.

It was because his sword was short and his arms were long that it was even possible in the first place.

His right hand still remained immobile.

There was no longer any chance for Baldo to slice his opponent's left flank.

He adjusted for the timing by leaning back.

It was fortunate that he did so.

It was precisely because Jogg was focused with such determination on the instant Baldo drew his blade with his right hand that his own sword came but a moment too late.

Baldo slid forward on his right foot, and the greatsword, clad in a fierce gale, passed over his head.

Knowing that he had failed to catch his prey, Jogg continued to spin his greatsword around on the same trajectory and clenched the muscles in his left leg.

Into that very leg did Baldo's blade travel.

Baldo rested his sword on his left arm and used the momentum of his slide to slice the sword against Jogg's leg.

It was a desperate, painful attack, but thanks to Baldo's weight and momentum as well as the fact that Jogg placed all of his weight onto his left foot at that moment, the attack was surprisingly powerful.

Having slipped past his opponent, Baldo twisted his body to the right.

His left knee touched the ground, and with his right knee still upright did he quickly kill his velocity.

Dirt was kicked up into the air.

Baldo stood up the moment he stopped his slide.

His left hand held the sword in a reverse grip.

He was three and a half paces from Jogg.

A single step forward would put his greatsword in range of striking Baldo.

Jogg himself turned around, keeping close watch on Baldo's movements as he slipped past him on his left.

He placed all of his weight on that left foot, pivoting around it and swinging the greatsword in a large arc with him.

After bearing that injury on his left leg, however, it seemed he could not support the pivot.

His posture broke, and as he was sweeping up with the blade to the right did it drift off course.

Baldo would not allow this perfect opportunity to pass him by.

He rushed up to Jogg and attempted to slice him with his sword, still reversed in his left hand.

Baldo underestimated Jogg, however, who was still young and limber.

He bent both of his knees, lowering his body, and forcing himself back in a workable posture, he slammed his greatsword against Baldo's chest.

The moment the greatsword brushed past his left elbow and dug into his chest, Baldo knew then that death had finally come for him.

It should have come for him.

But it did not.

The instant his greatsword came into contact with Baldo's chest did Jogg suddenly stop the swing in its tracks.

Baldo's sword sliced through naught but the wind, dancing in the air.

Jogg stared at Baldo's right arm, dangling lifelessly at his side.

The flames of combat still burned vigorously in Baldo's eyes.

He stared defiantly at the man clad in black, nary a trace of fear or hesitation in his gaze.

Jogg continued to look at that right arm.

That right arm that hadn't moved once.

Jogg's entire body started to relax.

Without muttering a word, he pulled back his sword and turned to walk toward the rest of the knights, completely exposing his back to Baldo.

He once more sheathed his blade, jumped atop his horse, and silently left the village.

Though there was hesitation painted on their faces, the knights who had come with him followed closely behind.

3

Once the five men were completely out of sight did Julchaga come running from the woods with the horses in tow.

He tied the horses to a hitching post, approached Baldo, and asked,

“Is your chest okay?

There was quite the sound when it hit.”

I don't feel a thing, remarked Baldo as he walked into the mayor's house.

He slumped down into a chair and said to the mayor, That was quite the ruckus, wasn't it.

The mayor was about to thank Baldo profusely for saving his wife, but he waved his hand for the man to stop and instead asked for a cup of water.

He greedily drank the entire thing and then took off his breastplate.

As he was doing this, he was gradually able to move his right arm again.

Baldo was grateful to see it.

There was a great gash across the breastplate.

He would have certainly died had Jogg not stopped the blade.

Yet, although it was a direct hit, there was surprisingly little pain after the fact.

What protected him from the brunt of the impact was in fact a small table knife, hidden in his breast pocket.

No wonder the strike produced such metallic sound, thought Baldo.

After receiving the blow, the knife was slightly bent.

“Wow!

What a pretty knife.

It tickles my thieving spirit,”

said Julchaga with alarming straightforwardness,

“Let me see it for a sec.”

Baldo handed him the knife.

Julchaga looked at the item from various angles for a moment and then made a peculiar request:

“Can I take it apart?”

I highly doubt that’s possible, replied Baldo, but instead came the response,

“Hold on a sec,”

Julchaga pulled out a pouch and from it retrieved some small tools, using them to fiddle around with some spots on the knife.

Suddenly, the knife split cleanly in two.

Inside was a metal, square-shaped item.

Julchaga took it out and gave the thing a look before continuing,

“This is made from holy silver.

It's small, but it looks like there's some kind of family crest engraved on it.

You think this is the seal?"

Baldo took the small item and stared fixedly at the design. It certainly was a seal.

Now that he thought about it once more, Eidra had in fact given this knife to Baldo upon returning to Pacra.

It had been so long ago that he never once associated the item with this whole incident, and in fact considered it to be something that had always been his.

Even when asked what Eidra had given him, this knife never once came to mind.

Why did the princess give me this knife?

As Baldo was pondering the question, there was a mischievous glint in Julchaga's eyes as he gazed at the holy silver seal.

Chapter 9

Lies and Truth

1

What pompous architecture, indeed.

thought Baldo.

This was the main castle of House Coendela, located in the heart of the Dorba domain.

He strongly desired to have an audience with Cardos Coendela, thus for the first time in his life did he step onto these grounds.

Baldo was alone.

Julchaga, the Gorra Cheyzara, seemingly vanished into thin air some time before they arrived.

Baldo thought the young thief ought to at least say hello, but alas, it was just like him to stay out of sight.

Baldo was allowed through the gates without any resistance, much to his surprise.

Which could only mean Cardos had predicted his arrival.

“Hello, Lord Rhowen.

It has always been a dream of mine to have you visit my castle.

It appears today was the day it came true.
Care to join me for a drink?"

Cardos welcomed Baldo with outstretched arms.

There was no one else in the room.

Baldo assumed there were knights hidden behind the tapestries on both sides of the room, but at this distance, they wouldn't be able to reach him in time.

This place was in a far corner of the castle, and he did not see anyone else on the way here.

Perhaps he was confident Baldo would not hurt him, or rather *could* not hurt him.

Perhaps he was complacent, for Baldo's weapon had been taken from him upon entering the castle.

No, I doubt any of those possibilities are the case, thought Baldo.

Cardos was not a man who trusted in others.

The more powerful his retainers, the less he trusted them.
The more gifted the individual, the less he trusted them.

If he showed them any weakness—
If he revealed to them any secrets—

He would be usurped.
He would be left in the dirt.

It was because the man was possessed by such thoughts that he would not even have his closest vassals beside him in this moment.

His worries were entirely founded, for he was such a man who schemed, backstabbed, and usurped a throne to sit in the position he had today.

“It appears you have been sniffing around an awful lot these days,”

said Cardos as he poured a distilled alcohol into two cups. I know everything, it was as if he wanted to say.

He handed a cup to Baldo.

Both of the men raised the cups to eye-level, and Cardos said,

“Ywe la shante³¹,”

to which Baldo responded in kind.

Yes, ywe la shante.

In other words, the following matters were to remain under an oath of secrecy, and if either of them broke this oath would they by the blade atone.

As he watched Baldo chant the words, his eyes were curled in glee.

“Oh, and praise the new year,”

he added.

Around three cycles ago did the new year dawn.

Thus, Baldo was now fifty-nine.

“Anyways, have a seat.”

Baldo sat down, and Cardos did the same.

“You came here at the perfect time.

I was hoping I could explain what happened exactly.

Have you perhaps heard that a Meeting of Lords will convene five days from now?”

I have not, replied Baldo.

“I was going to tell them this at the meeting, but I see no reason why I cannot tell you in advance.

31. Beneath the sword

I will be announcing that the greater region of Gigenza under my rule, as well as the surrounding regions will soon be officially incorporated into the Palzamic Kingdom.

I imagine I will be given a title appropriate for one able to unify the entire region.

I'll become a margrave, I presume."

Baldo's expression did not change.

"I heard Jogg was quite rude to you the other day.

He has a terrible habit of being impatient.

It seems he was a tad rash this time.

My House Coendela would never dream of wresting a territory from House Telsia's control.

Rather, all of the domains in these lands will soon belong to Palzam.

House Coendela will naturally be responsible for all trade and tax collection in the region then, as its sole unifier.

I promise to treat every lord in the region with the appropriate courtesy."

After drinking all of the spirit, Cardos filled his cup back up to the brim.

He swirled the liquid beneath his nose, inhaling the fragrance with apparent pleasure.

"Aren't you curious as to how this is all possible?

It is because I have the support of the Palzamic Kingdom.

As for why I have that support, I wonder if you can figure it out.

The reason is, you see—

The King of Palzam is in my debt, as I was responsible for bringing up his son!"

There was a pause.

"You are a boring man, did you know that?

Most would be rendered thunderstruck at such a reveal."

Baldo remained silent yet, staring directly into Cardos' eyes.

Cardos took another sip and continued his story.

2

“It all happened thirty years ago.

That's right.

Exactly thirty years ago, in the summer it started.

I desired to make Princess Eidra mine.

At that very moment, however, did something occur that prevented me from welcoming her to this castle.

There was a relative of mine who wished to have his daughter become my main wife.

The individual in question was the very same person who helped me claim the title of lord, thus I could not so easily reject their request.

As I was busy taking care of these matters, I had Princess Eidra stay in a manor somewhat removed from this place.

At the same time did the previous lord of Gadeucia, Margrave Deusan Archeos, suddenly entrust me with a young boy, asking me to take care of him.”

Baldo narrowed his eyes a fraction and paid close attention.

“I wonder if you were aware that my mother hailed from House Archeos.

That young boy was Prince Wendellant.

He was nineteen at the time.

His mother was of low birth, but she was a woman of divine beauty and sagacity, earning her the favor of the king.

Thus was she killed.

Prince Wendellant would've shared the same fate had he stayed in the royal capital any longer.

No, I suppose he wouldn't have been safe anywhere in the Palzamic Kingdom.

That was why he was sent to a place like this, one in the middle of nowhere.

There was no way the young man could live here in the castle, however.

I needed a safe, inconspicuous location.

And that lakeside manor was the perfect fit.

Yet that was where Princess Eidra resided.

I moved her to an annex across the lake.

It would only be but a little while longer before I could bring her to the castle.

I urged Prince Wendellant to stay away from the annex.”

Cardos closed his eyes as if lost in his memories.

“That was a mistake.

Although the prince appeared to be a fragile, academically-minded young man, he was in fact brimming with a curious, adventurous spirit.

Thus did he sneak into the very place he was told to avoid.

It was then the two met.”

He rubbed his temples with his right hand.

“The prince fell hopelessly in love at first sight.

I do not know how Princess Eidra felt, but I imagine she was fond of the young man as well.

The prince came before me with his head touching the ground.

Please give Eidra to me, he said.

I had never in my life been so tormented by a decision.

Not even when I worked up the resolve to slay my own flesh and blood.

But alas, I gave my assent in the end.

I held no consideration for his status as a prince.

Often do those in such a position find themselves purged or disappearing without a trace, after all.

There are no shortage of princes and noble children in the many countries.

However, this was a golden opportunity for me to have the margrave in my debt.

The prince in fact told the margrave that he had snatched my wife-to-be from under my nose.

As such did the margrave pull some strings and provide my house with countless benefits through various dealings.”

Baldo looked at the ceiling.

The room was rather dark, located in the recesses of the castle, but there was a window open as to let in some light.

From that window came a sunbeam.

“Their honeymoon lasted for over a year.

Princess Eidra gave birth to a boy, and the prince named him Jurlan.

Around that time, the Palzamic Kingdom started to find itself embroiled in political turmoil.

To the prince, it was the chance of a lifetime for him to return.

He thus left Princess Eidra and the newborn in my care before departing for the land of his birth, a place teeming with conspiracies.”

There were specks of dust dancing amidst the beam of sunlight.

Without the light, Baldo wouldn't have been able to see a thing.

“I sent Princess Eidra back to her home.

I couldn't bear to have her near me any longer, seeing that she now belonged to someone else.

The prince seemed to have forgotten about her entirely as well.

In the twenty-eight years since he left, not once had he even sent a letter, after all.

Surely anyone else in my shoes would have come to the same conclusion.

But this was not the case.

Two years ago, the Palzamic Kingdom finally triumphed over their nemesis.

Prince Wendellant returned a hero, and his greatest rival for the throne, the crown prince, perished.

The prince sent me a letter.

In it, he conveyed to me that he wished to have Princess Eidra and their son at his side at last.”

3

“He gave me a letter meant for Princess Eidra as well. In it, he wrote of his undying love for her:

’Twas for you that I tempered my mind, my blade, and my soul, and became a man of virtue.

That I might be worthy of your companionship.

’Twas for you that I gathered many allies to my side.

That I might create a safe home for you.

’Twas for you that I accomplished many feats and rose to great heights.

That you might be proud of your husband.

’Twas for you that I treated my subjects with benevolence and empathy.

For I knew that was what you would want.”

Why does a bastard like you know what was written in that letter,

were the words that threatened to escape from Baldo’s mouth, but he held his tongue.

“He did not send Princess Eidra any letters over the years out of concern for her safety.

There were many unsavory gazes trained on Prince Wendellant.

Gazes from individuals who wished to attack the prince where it hurt the most.

By writing a letter to Princess Eidra would he only be informing these men of her existence.

And of the existence of his son, with royal blood flowing through his veins.

Had they found out, I suspect the princess would have been kidnapped and his son slain.

That was why he desperately suppressed his desire to do so and instead chose not to write any letters.

He must have written the letter then immediately upon securing a place for himself in the kingdom, upon having real power, and thus believing he was able to protect these two people he loved the most.

That letter made it clear as well that he was in fact a prince of Palzam.

Did you imagine I was caught off guard by this development?

Of course not.

I wasn't worried in the slightest.

After all, I had the prince's son in my protection.

A young man named Zeyon.

After relinquishing the princess to the prince, I took several more wives shortly after, and one of them gave birth to a boy at around the same time Eidra did.

When I sent the princess home, I switched Zeyon with Jourlan.

To prepare for the small chance that the prince would ask for him."

Zeyon was the eldest son of Cardos and his main wife.

His hair was the same blond as his father.

Jourlan's hair was almost a platinum gold.

King Wendellant's was surely a similar color.

"I wonder if Princess Eidra told you about the switch?

I doubt it.

She promised ywe la shante, after all.

No matter how dear you were to her, she would never break that kind of promise.”

She certainly did not say anything.

Of course, she said nothing because all of that was probably a lie in the first place.

The problem however, was what evidence Cardos was planning on using to turn that fiction into reality.

“Of course, when the first letter came, Prince Wendellant was only a hero of war and a great general, nothing more than that.

Though the crown prince and several of his brothers perished in the conflict, the matter of royal succession would not be a simple one.

There are seven ducal houses in the kingdom that possess the royal lineage of the founding king.

In many cases would fierce negotiation among those houses occur, and in the end, a crown prince would be chosen by their ability to placate all of the parties involved.

The king died, however.

With him dead, there was no longer anyone who could designate a new crown prince and bestow them with that right.

No one else, aside from those who already possessed the right to succeed the throne, could join the race.

It was at this point Prince Wendellant, thought to be in low contention for the crown, moved with lightning speed.

The entire royal capital, nay, the entire kingdom was possessed by fanaticism at his triumphant return from war.

In spectacular fashion did he manage to claim the throne.

That was when his letter for the princess came.

’Twas for you that I took the royal crown for my head.”

“This must be a joke, I thought.

That final line shocked me to my core.

Not only had that prince survived, but I never thought he would have managed to raise himself to such an exceptional position.

Let alone become the next king.

I was raising the king's son as if he were my own, but I had already sent his beloved queen back to her home.

I asked House Telsia countless times to send them back, but they refused.”

Baldo nodded, as he had recently heard this as well.

“A messenger came from the margrave.

And with him a messenger from the kingdom itself.

I told them the truth.

Of how dearly princess Eidra loved her home and how she returned, leaving her beloved son in my caring hands.”

It was a well-known story in the frontier, of how Eidra was wed into House Coendela, yet made to return to her home without any ceremonies or having ever step foot inside their main castle.

There was no way he could try to hide it now.

“I then told the messenger the secret.

The secret that I had in fact switched the two sons at their birth.

As Princess Eidra was feeling unwell, it was impossible for her to travel.

I suppose it is impossible for us to verify that the child I raised was in fact the son of his majesty, King Wendellant, I told him.

I imagined even a member of House Telsia would find it a considerable challenge to tell fake from real, let alone a simple messenger.

He may not even be able to tell if Princess Eidra herself was genuine if he saw her, I said.

This messenger was actually related by blood to my mother, you see.

As such, he told me a little secret.

‘Oh no, there’s no need to worry about that!
His majesty has never one forgotten your kindness, Lord
Coendela.

He would never doubt your words.

Not to mention, we can verify their identities with the seal
and double spirals.’ ”

That explains it, thought Baldo.

He now clearly understood Cardos’ motives in sending a
personal maid to Eidra’s side.

It was just as he expected.

“Spirals, he said.

I hadn’t the faintest of ideas what it might be.

The messenger refused to disclose anything more.

He did, however, tell me a bit about the seal.

It was something the king had entrusted to the princess.

Only the royal family are permitted to possess and use this
particular item.

It’s made with a special kind of metal, using a special kind
of process, and supposedly it cannot be forged.

There is a certain mark on it, each seal bearing it in a
different spot, and the details of these positions are recorded
in a royal ledger.

I searched far and wide for this seal.

It was when I learned that Princess Eidra did not have it,
however that I then realized something.

Perhaps she had given it to someone?

Lord Baldo Rhowen.

It was you.

You were the one she relied on the most—there was no
possibility it could be anyone *but* you.

Yes, you, the man who time and time again proved a
persistent thorn in our sides and who even now is bringing
disaster to this house!”

The thought suddenly occurred to Baldo—though no
direct connection there may have been—what if Cardos
simply wished to take Eidra as his wife to spite him?

Perhaps he only saw Eidra as a means to an end, a way to rob Baldo of that which was precious to him.

“No sooner than he was coronated did the new king send an envoy to each region to convey his majesty.

Only the envoy to the frontier, however, was tasked with a special assignment.

Princess Eidra had only days before.

—in the care of the maid that I had sent to accompany her.

I of course took great care to mention this to the royal envoy.

The king tasked the envoy with bringing his son to his side.

As Princess Eidra was no longer in this world, the seal remained the only way for the envoy to verify the son’s identity.

Oh, I suppose you still don’t know what the messenger meant by the spiral, do you?

Apparently it’s a poem, you see.

It was a love poem Prince Wendellant had given to the princess next to the lake.

Just like two spirals melting into one did we meet on the shore of this lake, or words to that effect.

The prince and the princess were the only two who knew of this poem.

Were she truly in love with him, she would surely never forget it.

By remembering this poem could she prove she was the true wife of the king.

Were you aware there was such a poem, I wonder.”

Baldo shook his head.

He did not know.

“Alas, she died.

There would be no way he could ask her of the poem now.

Only the seal remained.

Nothing else could verify their identity.

Then a peculiar thing happened.

With that one strike from Jogg to your chest did the whereabouts of the seal suddenly become clear.

Then through the schemes of a man in my employ was that seal retrieved from your person.

I must say, I really struck it rich with that one.

That little whelp, the Gorra Cheyzara, took me for all I was worth.

But that's just how important the seal was.

The esteemed envoy paid a visit to this castle five cycles ago.

Upon hearing my story and with the seal as proof did they confirm the identity of Zeyon Coendela to be the true Jourlan Ceigarth, possessor of royal blood, and take him back to the capital.

Well, though he is the king's eldest son, his mother came from an insignificant, no-name house in the frontier, so I doubt he will ever earn the right of royal succession, and in fact, he may never amount to much in the first place.

If fact, I predict they may simply expel him from the capital altogether and kick him back into the wilderness.

He is the son of the king's beloved, however.

Once the two meet face-to-face and can realize their familial bonds, then I'm sure before long, Zeyon, or rather Jourlan will receive a tremendous amount of support.

He is the true son of the King of Palzam, after all."

Cardos now stripped away his cordial facade and glared at Baldo with ferocious, savage eyes.

"Baldo Rhowen.

The second you left House Telsia on your journey, I thought for sure you had me.

You've been getting in my way no matter where I went, and I had finally thought I could force you to do my bidding, but that was all for naught.

Then I heard the matter of the spirals and the seal, and when I learned you were headed to Lints I panicked.

I thought you must have been headed toward the kingdom, with both the seal and the secret behind the spiral.

But that was not the case.

You knew nothing, and you did nothing.

I knew everything, and I obtained all that I needed.

Lord Rhowen, serve me.

If you do not, I will make sure House Telsia loses everything.

And I will not stop at their land.

I will hold them accountable for driving Princess Eidra to misery and to her death, and I will slaughter every last one of them.

Serve me, Baldo Rhowen!

Give me your answer!”

4

Baldo didn't spare the man a single glance as he howled his threats and instead continued to watch the specks of dust floating in that sunbeam.

They were even livelier now, after Cardos had given such an animated speech.

The dust must be thinking it's making quite the commotion now.

Yet it doesn't realize just how small it is.

were the thoughts that came to Baldo's mind.

Cardos was surely interpreting the silence that descended upon the room to be a sign of Baldo's uncertainty and anguish.

In his aggressive tone was an unmaskable trace of delight.

I wonder where the envoy is now.

muttered Baldo.

“The envoy departed ten days ago.

I’m sure he has already crossed the Orva and is on his way to the royal capital by carriage as we speak.

There is no longer anything you can do.”

I’m glad to hear it, Baldo whispered as he pulled out a single-page document from his coat and placed it on the table before him.

Cardos picked up the parchment with a distrustful glare and read its contents.

After a moment did the color drain from his face.

“Y-You churl!

H-H-How did—“

On this page were listed numbers and dates.

Those numbers were that of money.

The Margrave of Gadeucia sent Cardos a large sum of money every year.

The money was to be Eidra’s living costs and her son’s education expenses.

Never once had this amount ever made its way to Eidra.

It had been used in its entirety to maintain Cardos’ position in the family as well as spread his influence across the land.

As he himself had confessed, Cardos assumed that the prince had forgotten about Eidra entirely.

Despite the fact that the lord of the margravate had changed over the years, they followed the prince’s orders to send money without fail, and so Cardos thought there would be no issues with misappropriating said funds.

The margrave owed him, thought Cardos.

Perhaps he thought it was only natural that he received such a reward.

Perhaps the family saw this money to be a sign of the margrave’s implicit support of Cardos.

Only a few knew the truth, that the prince had once lived here in secret.

Eidra had no chance to learn of this financial support.

Cardos was certainly aghast that Baldo had managed to find out.

The amounts were all written clearly on the page.

Were one to conduct an investigation of his subjects and using the records in the castle, they would find that of the money the margrave sent to Cardos, none of it was used on Eidra herself—there was no way him to cover anything up.

Baldo still looked at that sunbeam, paying no heed to Cardos who had fallen into a panic, and as he watched the dust play about, he started talking as if to himself.

In the countries at the center of the continent, they refer to those many wrinkles you can find on the tip of your fingers as fingerseals.

No two patterns are the same, and so they serve as a means of identifying an individual.

By dipping their finger in ink and pressing on a page can it also be used in lieu of a traditional seal.

Apparently, they refer to the print left behind by such an action as a fingerseal as well.

Not to mention, one's fingerseal remains the same throughout their entire life, it is said.

If you take the fingerseal of a newly-born infant, you would be able to ascertain the identity of that infant even decades later.

In the royal family, it is tradition to take the seals of all of an infant's fingers fifty days after their birth.

Supposedly, the fingerseals of those connected by blood share a bit of resemblance.

The first king of Palzam was said to have a fingerseal like a double spiral.

They were recorded in a very detailed painting, and that recording has been passed down ever since.

They believe that the closer one's fingerseals are to the first king's, the stronger the royal blood is in their veins.

That is also what serves as proof of one's eligibility to enter the order of royal succession.

That was why Prince Wendellant was in contention for the crown as well, despite his mother being of low birth.

Thus, twenty-nine years ago, when the child was born in that lakeside manor, did the prince carry out the traditions of his family and take the fingerseals of that child, fifty days following his birth.

They were just like his father's.

Thus were they just like the first king's.

I imagine the prince was brimming with joy.

Perhaps he felt it was akin to fate.

After finishing his story, he finally looked at Cardos.

The man was frozen in his seat, as if a stone statue.

His spirit was nowhere to be found, and it looked as if the man had aged twenty years.

Baldo then delivered the final nail in the coffin.

Prince Wendellant had the fingerseals from the very start.

I imagine he is holding onto them dearly even now.

Baldo said no more.

There was no question as to what fate would likely befall Zeyon now.

Upon arriving in the capital, he would instantly have his fingerseals taken.

It would then come to light that he had in fact been impersonating the prince.

So too would Cardos' own lies and crimes be revealed, despite his considerate, accommodating treatment of the envoy.

King Wendellant would surely be possessed with a fury like none other.

Cardos was now drowning in confusion and despair, but there was still one thing that left his rational mind perplexed.

Why had the envoy lied to him about the double spiral?

Why did Baldo know so much of King Wendellant?

The answer was obvious.

The envoy knew that had he told him the truth behind the fingerseal, Cardos would have feared his own destruction and committed a heinous deed against the man and his group.

That meant they took Zeyon along with them with the full knowledge that he was an impostor.

And that they also knew the location of the true prince.

They would not dare return to the king otherwise.

The one who gave Baldo these numbers was the envoy, then.

Baldo and the envoy had come into contact with one another.

While the envoy had been residing in the Coendela's annex, Baldo met with him in secret and told him everything he knew of the situation, as well as showing him the knife and seal.

The envoy pressed the seal to leave him proof and then temporarily returned it to Baldo.

Baldo then gave it to Julchaga, asking the young thief if he fancied a quick profit.

The lad agreed to take part in the plans immediately, for he was quite the trickster at heart.

He left the matter of the double seal to the envoy.

With a small chuckle, the envoy, Father Bali Tode replied,

“I'll think of something to tell him.

I'll make the story as engrossing as I can.”

Thus when Baldo heard the account of the poem from Cardos, he was taken aback by how much of a romantic the cleric appeared to be.

5

“D-Do you... intent to kill me, then?”

came a weak raspy voice.

Baldo looked, and there was a old man sitting before him.

There was none of the visage he once had, brimming with a fierce, malevolent spirit.

In the seat opposite Baldo was now a withered, decrepit figure.

His eyes were sunken and watery.

He seemed as if he would snap in two upon being picked up.

As if there was nary a hint of strength in his body save for the amount necessary to move his mind.

He was a powerless, trembling man.

What a terrible way to age, thought Baldo.

This was supposed to be a clever man.

Though he had a penchant for force and violence, he ruled his lands well and effectively wielded authority.

But everything changed when Prince Wendellant returned a hero of the battlefield and wrote that he wished to be with his wife and son once more.

For it was clear in his letters the sheer depth of the love he held for them.

What this man did at the time was from a strategic perspective the correct thing to do.

Sparing no expense, he exhausted all of his resources in order to force House Norra to submit and claim the Great Lord's seat.

And he succeeded.

Once he became the Great Lord, even a prince would find it no small feat to take revenge on him for personal reasons.

After all, the fact of the matter was that he merely sent his wife and son back to their original home.

There was still the crime of embezzlement, but the severity of that would pale in comparison to the favor he owed Cardos for sheltering him and even surrendering his to-be wife.

It was decided that the prince would inherit the throne, however, and thus was everything turned on its head.

Were he to be caught embezzling funds meant for the growth of the king's eldest son, it would turn into a crime of grave magnitude.

Not to mention, what would the king think of the stories of Cardos' treatment once Eidra went to the capital?

Were Jourlan to obtain power and authority in the kingdom one day, he could provide powerful protection to House Telsia as well.

All that awaited the Coendelas were decline and ruin.

He desperately racked his brain for a solution.

For a path of survival.

That was when he considered sending an impostor instead.

Yes, it must have been then.

The reason he called a Meeting of Lords and declared that he was going to take the profits of the Zaliza silver mines from House Telsia was for information.

He wanted to see if Princess Eidra knew the true identity of the man who gave her a son.

If House Telsia themselves knew.

As he watched them reluctantly hand over these resources, Cardos had his answer.

House Telsia was not aware of this potential backing they possessed.

Baldo did not know whether the messenger sent by the margrave came before or after the meeting was called.

It was at that moment, however, Cardos learned that a seal and double spiral were required to prove the identities of the king's wife and son.

This man then impudently requested for Princess Eidra and Jourlan to come to his castle.

Chills crawled down Baldo's back at the thought of what would have happened had they done so.

As they refused, he insisted that he at least send a maid to her side.

As much as she looked, however, she was unable to find the seal or anything that resembled a spiral.

At the same time, he heard that Baldo, dearest confidant of the princess, had left the Pacra domain immediately following the Meeting of Lords.

The house's stalwart guardian, who never once left their lands, disappeared from Pacra.

To do such it at such a time, in such a manner unlike him.

Cardos was struck with disbelief.

Yet, he then learned Baldo was heading toward Lints.

He started to harbor the belief that Eidra had entrusted something to Baldo that could serve as proof or was perhaps in the midst of trying.

With that perspective, it was no wonder Yotish held such suspicion toward the bag of gold given to him by Cedelmont.

So too did he understand the purpose behind Gyenzala's attack.

Yet both ended in failure.

Not only did they fail to effectively use the Rolo Spia, their greatest tool, they even dismissed him from their employ.

To think had you only given Venn Ulir one more chance, I would surely be dead by now, said Baldo.

"I-I never dismissed him.

In fact I even told the man I would add to his reward if he killed you.

It was that halfwit Gyenzala who chased away the Rolo Spia, even sending men to kill him.

Lost us two perfectly good knights."

This man was truly driven into a corner.
And driven there by his own hand.

It was a reality that King Wendellant owed a great debt to Cardos, and had he not attempted to pass off his own son as the prince and instead confessed the truth to the envoy, he would have certainly come out unscathed.

Yet he did not send the letter to Eidra, instead opening it himself, and that would render it impossible for him to confess.

So too did his years of taking funds from the margrave for his own personal use, without telling Eidra a thing, come back to bite him now.

In the end, all that he had on his foundation of lies and untruths was but an unsteady castle, held together by schemes and deceit.

Just how happy must he have been to hear the news of Eidra's passing?

If only she was dead could I cover everything up, he surely thought.

Of course I must find a way to kill Jourlan, but first comes the matter of deceiving the envoy.

Lies too require proof.

As the envoy and his party were resting at the lakeside manor and Cardos was racked with worry did Julchaga then appear to him with the seal in hand.

He immediately jumped at the offer.

With this seal was he now able to perfectly trick the envoy.

With this seal was he now able to have his very own son as Palzam's eldest prince.

It was as if the heavens themselves sprouted up from the depths of the underworld.

Now did it all come crumbling down.

This mountain of lies and betrayal would have never been revealed if not for the illuminating light that was King Wendellant's coronation.

As Baldo was the one who had Julchaga go Cardos with the seal, it could be said that he had been the final nail in the coffin.

What a pitiful thing you've become.
Is this really the man who so toyed with all of our
lives?

thought Baldo.

A bubbling sensation started to appear in his chest.
A sizzling sensation started to burn in his head.

Deep, deep down had this feeling been repressed for so many years, and now was the seal on this fury starting to come apart, boiling up his throat.

While they risked everything they had to keep the kaejel at bay did Coendela's forces continue to persistently weaken their strength, resulting in the senseless loss of beloved friends and subordinates.

They were dragged without reason into the conflict between Coendela and Norra, wasting the lives of so many knights and soldiers.

Through taxes he robbed the commonfolk for all they were worth, forcing daughters into prostitution.

He destroyed roads and ruined the businesses of simple men who had devoted their entire lives to their trade.

And not only that.
And not only that!

There was Lady Eidra!

That woman whose spirit was pure, radiant light.
That dignified, exemplary, kindhearted soul!
The world was made to think she had given birth out
of wedlock, forcing her to live in the shadows.
How bountiful her life could have been!

How many of this world's wonders she could have seen!

Baldo forbade himself from having these thoughts.

Princess Eidra was not so weak as to have her life ruined by such a man as Cardos.

Her soul burned with a flame both great and bright, and it was not something a scum-dwelling wretch like him could ever hope to tarnish.

That was what he continued to tell himself.

And yet.

And yet!

That very man was sitting before Baldo now.

That very man whose greed and lack of concern for anyone else led him to perpetuate such cruelty.

It made him remember all of the lives he trampled upon.

It made him remember all of the happiness he robbed.

His stomach started to boil.

A whirlwind tore through his head and his vision was dyed crimson.

No longer could he suppress the fires of rage that burned throughout every corner of his body.

Cardos stared at Baldo, his eyes wide open in terror.

The man before him was more terrifying than any savage, monstrous kaejel he could imagine.

It was as if the flames of hatred in his body were boiling the very air that enveloped the two of them.

And then it happened.

Baldo stood up, kicking the table aside, and lunged at Cardos, holding the scruff of his neck in his left hand's iron grip.

He forced the man back.

In an instant was Cardos pinned up against the wall behind him.

There was an set of armor there for decoration, old but exquisite.

Baldo held the man up in the air with his left hand and grabbed the sword from the armor with his right.

When the cups of liquor fell to the floor and created a ruckus, the tapestries on both sides of the room were flung back and from behind them flew two knights into the room.

They were both fully clad in armor and wielded spears.

The two men aimed to piece Baldo on both sides, but as they came forward were they assaulted by a wave of palpable fury, unrelenting like a flood.

The knights stopped in their tracks as if struck by lightning.

As if their bodies were bound to the spot.

Continuing to dangle Cardos before him in the air, Baldo brought his head nearer, and looking down at the man did he ask,

You said the Meeting of Lords was five days from now, correct?

Cardos nodded as if in a daze.

You are to return all of the resources you stole from the Zaliza silver mines to Telsia, as well as all of their taxation rights at the meeting,

he commanded, and then added,

And you are to rescind all the unfavorable requests you have made of the other lords as well.

Again, he could only nod.

It was at this moment that several retainers of House Coendela filed into the room.

Perhaps they had heard the sounds as well and came to save their lord.

The room was small, however, and the first couple of people who entered froze on the spot under the strange, oppressive atmosphere.

A sword was pressed against their lord, thus they could not easily take action.

Even those that attempted to move and approached the wave of Baldo's fury—a force that seemed to manifest and warp the very air around him—would find themselves inexplicably paralyzed.

Baldo released Cardos, took a step back, and held out his left hand.

To the man's dumbfounded expression did he say, Give me the letter.

Sweat poured from his brow, but he reached his hand into his breast pocket and retrieved the letter, handing it to Baldo.

Once he made sure the letter was in fact from Eidra, he stowed it away in his own coat.

He then took two more steps back and said in a calm, restrained tone,

Let me tell you something.

Despite all of your attempts, Lady Eidra led a tranquil, blissful life.

There was nothing a vile cur such as yourself could do to someone like her.

Thus there is nothing for me to avenge.

However...

If and ever...

If and ever you again dare to lay your dirty, wicked hands on Telsia, and make even the slightest attempt to hamper our sacred duty...

Baldo brandished the blade in his right hand as if it were a strike of lightning from the heavens.

Before such speed, such power, such ferocity, no one would dare breathe.

The sword in his hand sank into the helmet of the armor next to Cardos, traveling halfway through and into the wall behind it.

Such a piece of armor should have easily stood up to even the sturdiest of blades, and yet with a single strike was it ripped apart.

Cardos fell to the floor, his legs trembling beneath him.

Baldo turned around.

His eyes were red with blood.

The fires of rage burned from his entire being.

The men in his path could almost feel their skin melting from the heat of his gaze.

He walked forward.

The vassals of House Coendela moved to the left and to the right to clear the way.

Even though he was unarmed, not a single soul tried to attack him, not a single soul tried to restrain him.

The soldiers who filled the narrow hallways backed up as well, falling over one another to make room for this man.

It was as if with every step did the fury surrounding him bulge and swell.

It was as if with every breath did the flames in his heart grow more ferocious.

All those who witnessed his face knew.

—knew that they had seen a demon incarnate.

After passing through the two areas, Baldo retrieved his sword from the anteroom, went directly into the grand hall, and then made his way to the corridor that led outside.

Admist all of these men, scrambling with terror upon seeing Baldo approach, there was one man who held his ground.

It was Jogg Woad.

He held an unsheathed greatsword in his hands.

Baldo paid him no heed, and continued to step forward undaunted.

Jogg raised his blade directly above.

Baldo suddenly pulled his sword from its scabbard and rushed toward him.

Before Jogg's sword could fully descend did Baldo meet it squarely with his own.

His old relic of a weapon could of course not hope to contend against a sword so large.

Yet he could not be bothered with such details as he was now.

He struck the sword with his own, clad in a furious frenzy. There came the sound of clashing metal.

Yet his sword did not break.

Was it an incredible coincidence?

Was it held together through the sheer force of Baldo's will?

How could it not shatter?

Baldo continued to push Jogg backwards.

Neither his elderly body, the pain in his shoulder and hips, nor the gradual decaying of his strength mattered the least bit.

He was, at this moment, an unparalleled force, one that could even rival the power he possessed in his heyday.

Though both were the same height, Jogg had a slimmer frame.

Overall was Baldo a size larger than his opponent.

One cannot fight kaejel though technique alone.

Without weight behind your blade, your strikes will not contain any power.

Without muscle, you will lose in contests of strength.

Baldo had tempered his body into a weapon that could crush even kaejel, thus in matters of muscle did Jogg stand no chance.

Clank!
Clank!
Clank!

came the sound of Jogg's boots, pushed back ever so slowly, his body creaking under the pressure.

Baldo's superiority was evident in the eyes of all who watched.

The retainers of House Coendela, who were all familiar with Jogg's monstrous power, could not find the strength to utter a word.

Although he was forced back, however, he refused to submit to Baldo's spirit and glared into Baldo's eyes, close enough to feel his breath on his skin.

Those very eyes were brimming with the joy of life-threatening battle.

“Stand down, Jogg!
Stop it!
Move aside!”

Cardos had finally come to his senses and rushed toward the two, stopping the fight.

It was evident beyond a doubt that Baldo was in collusion with the royal envoy.

So too was he Jourlan's mentor and the man he considered to be his own father.

If Baldo was hurt here, the situation would get even worse.

Additionally, although Baldo had demanded the letter, he did not question Cardos' status as the Great Lord.

If they killed Baldo, his dreams and ambitions would be all for naught.

“Baldo Rhowen!

I vow that I will someday kill you!”

Hearing these words from Jogg Woad at his back, Baldo left Coendela Castle behind.

Epilogue

The Letter

1

Baldo came to the banks of the Great Orva today as well.

He didn't wear any of his leather armor, nor did he have on his leather cap.

Staboros was by his side.

The cold wind blew ceaselessly by, playing around with his long hair and beard.

He thought back to what happened at the Coendelas' castle.

Why did I lose myself to such rage?

He had originally never planned to kill Cardos.

As if it were a mantra did he repeat it to himself many times before approaching the castle.

If Baldo killed the man now, the state of peace that had descended upon the land at last would be shattered in an instant.

War would erupt, demanding blood for blood, and the people would suffer.

So too would Telsia suffer harm, thus allowing the kaejel to run rampant throughout the lands.

The result of the which would likely be the gradual weakening and eventual destruction of House Coendela.

Yet the peace of the commonfolk was more important than bringing Cardos to justice.

There would be tranquility if Baldo allowed Cardos to remain the Great Lord, while keeping the man in a humble position.

If King Wendellant were to mete punishment upon the Coendelas, however, Baldo would naturally not object.

If it happened, he was at least thankful for the mere fact that Telsia would not be swept up in the war between Palzam and the Coendelas.

Cardos assumed that King Wendellant only wished to have his and Eidra's son at his side for sentimental reasons, that he wouldn't bestow upon him the right of royal succession.

That was wrong, however.

King Wendellant was forty-nine, yet Jourlan was his only son.

For a king to display regal authority required an heir and in fact, when the Chamber of Elders last convened to choose a successor to the throne, many of them found his lack of children problematic.

At the time, one of the elders said as follows:

Although it was never revealed to the public, Prince Wendellant did unite with a woman in holy matrimony, and they have a single son who is now twenty-eight years old.

Furthermore, that child bears fingerseals nearly identical to that of the first king's.

He then displayed these prints to the rest of the chamber.

This was a powerful force that propelled the prince to the throne.

Thus, though it was not made public, Jourlan already possessed the right of royal succession by the decision of the Chamber of Elders.

It was also erroneous to assume that they would look down on his mother for being born in the frontier.

Curiously, there was a story oft told in the Palzamic Kingdom that portrayed the first King of Palzam bestowing the role of defending the gap in Jhan Dessa Roh to his dearest friend.

Upon hearing this woman was the princess of House Telsia, who valiantly dedicated their lives to defending against the invasion of the kaejel, they were struck with a profound impression of the lady.

Additionally, the fact that House Telsia did not possess a court title instead worked in their favor, and thus the chamber had already agreed to interpret her standing as being equivalent to that of a marquis.

The wedding between King Wendellant and Eidra had already been finalized after he returned from the frontier as a prince and consulted with his mentor and close friend, a man in the priesthood.

Although the bride was not present, the ceremony of vows had taken place regardless.

It may have been an arduous process, but as the prince had managed to get the signatures of three qualified observers, it was an official ceremony without any possible room for doubt.

Yet he kept it hidden from the realm of politics.

After receiving this explanation and seeing the official documents, the Chamber of Elders ratified the marriage.

Baldo heard this account from the very man who helped Prince Wendellant finalize the marriage between the two.

In other words, he heard it from Father Bali Tode.

His position as a cleric was only a temporary measure, and he said upon returning to the kingdom would he join the privy council.

Thus unbeknownst to Cardos, Jurlan already had a position in the kingdom of unimaginable prestige.

No one could predict how easy it would be to hold onto such a position.

Everything could change, depending on Wendellant's health and lifespan.

But for now it was okay.

Cardos would not dare to do anything reckless either.

It had been many years since a Great Lord rose to power in this region.

He would not be removed from his position either.

Baldo prayed for a future filled with happiness and peace.

2

Thus did Baldo not need to concern himself with such matters.

The most important issue to him was why he had felt such fury.

That is a problem, thought Baldo.

Was all of the rage I felt toward Cardos born of my love for Princess Eidra?

Or did I take action purely out of spite for the man?

He deeply thought.

He deeply thought.

He deeply thought.

And then he came to a conclusion.

There was certainly spite contained in those actions.

I thought he must face a reckoning for all the things he did to Princess Eidra and House Telsia.

At the very least, I wanted his wicked deeds to see the light of day.

But that was not all.

I could not forgive the man for trampling upon the weak, the guiltless commonfolk.

That was why I gave in to my anger and engaged his men in battle.

It would be unforgivable for any other reason.

Thus with my actions can I preserve the legacy of the princess.

The princess would be proud to see her knight so thoroughly uphold his vows.

If I acted purely out of a personal grudge, I would have killed the man.

There is no greater vengeance.

The hatred that festered within me was for the commonfolk, and for the tranquility of their lands.

It was to do as the princess would have wanted.

It would be unforgivable for any other reason.

Is that what you want to hear, princess?

At that moment, Baldo felt as if he could hear a melody coming atop the surface of the water.

One in Eidra's voice.

It was a melody called "The Pilgrim Knight."

It was a song Baldo had learned once from a wandering knight and passed down to Eidra—a terribly, terribly ancient melody.

Ah, it appears the princess is happy with my choice, he thought.

3

After Baldo had secretly conversed with Father Bali Tode at the lakeside manor, he wrote three letters and handed one to the cleric and two to the thief, Julchaga,

The first letter was addressed to King Wendellant.

In it, he explained the entire situation as well he could from his knowledge.

As proof, he included the knife that originally housed the seal.

The second letter was addressed to Jourlan.

In it, he told him the situation as well, and instructed him to take all of his fingerseals and hand them to Julchaga.

The third letter was addressed to the Earl of Lints.

In it, he asked him to deliver Jourlan's seals to the margrave, and thus to King Wendellant.

After leaving Baldo's side, it took Julchaga one week to arrive at Lints with Joulan's letter in hand.

It was with frightening speed that he completed these tasks, considering the destinations were so far apart.

One would hardly believe the man never used a horse.

After leaving the Coendelas' castle, Baldo did not stop by Pacra and instead went directly to Lints.

He did so as to return the horse he borrowed from the earl.

He did not go to Pacra, because he was still unable to decide what to do with his life from here on.

He still had to report to House Telsia about the situation as it was, however.

Julchaga was in Lints when Baldo arrived, thankfully, thus was he able to deliver a message on Baldo's behalf.

Baldo intended to write them a letter initially, but he could not as his right hand once more refused to move.

Julchaga had an exceptional memory, however, so he had already memorized the general state of affairs.

Baldo simply wrote House Telsia to ask the young man for any details and sent him off to report to the family.

Father Bali Tode had probably already arrived in the royal capital by now, and Baldo suspected he was in the midst of explaining everything to the king.

He imagined the king would send once more for Jourlan, and it would be then that the two could meet.

After that, Jourlan would possess much more than mere fame and status.

Yet Baldo knew Jourlan would be able to take care of himself.

And then yet another thing dawned on him.

What should I do now, he thought.

He no longer had any reason to go away on his journey.

There was nothing preventing him from returning to Pacra.

There was nothing preventing him...

Baldo reached into his coat pocket and winced.

Ever since he went on a rampage in the Coendelas' castle had his right shoulder grown stiff as if bound by shackles and constantly radiated pain.

It was difficult for him to raise his arm from the shoulder even now.

Baldo endured the pain as he retrieved the letter from Eidra and read it once more.

It was just like her to use paper made from soi leaf.

She had always hated animal skin parchment and scrunched her nose at the smell.

My dear old friend, Sir Baldo Rhowen,

Firstly, I would like to congratulate you.

You have finally been set free into this great big world.

Through a peculiar course of events, you joined in the service of House Telsia, and with sincerity, love, and gallantry have you blessed the people of these lands with peace.

There is no one who does not know of your bravery and dignity.

But I know you are like a bird, one that does not belong in a cage.

There was a part of you that always yearned to fly far away, high above the clouds.

I remember the small table in that tranquil courtyard of ours.

With you, me, and little Joul.

You told us so many fascinating stories of the forests, mountains, and kaejel.

Many, many stories of combat.

Every now and then came the accounts of some curious food you had tried.

To you, both combat and unfamiliar foods were the very definition of adventure.

Your tales were always brimming with the excitement of a new encounter.

As I listened, it was as if I was right there beside you on that adventure.

Ah!

Those days were truly fun.

The three of us with our exciting stories in that sunlit courtyard—I wonder if we looked like a family.

Now you are free.

Spread your wings and embrace the wind, and let it take you far, far away to the distant reaches of this world.

And occasionally—and only occasionally is fine—if you could write me a letter of all the marvelous sights you see and all the fantastic foods you try, there would be no greater happiness in my life.

I hope you will forever be in good health.

With my eternal love and friendship,

Eidra

I suppose I could return, but I no longer need to worry about House Telsia.

What to do?

To go forth?

To return?

Baldo looked up to the sky.

Enveloped in a cold wind did it stretch higher and higher, to unimaginable limits.

It was as if the sky reflected the scenery of Baldo's heart.

The years had taken a toll on his mind, that much was made clear.

So too had he gone berserk at that infernal castle of the Coendelas.

His heart now was clear and free, like he had never felt before.

Right.

Let's set off on a journey.

This entire distance from Pacra to Lints amounts to but a mere speck of the continent's eastern frontier.

The frontier is vast, and the areas in it inhabited by people are only a tiny fraction of the entire thing.

Yet even that fraction is far bigger than any person could traverse in their lifetime.

Let's go on a journey.

That's right.

And not only that.

Returning to House Telsia would only allow Cardos to keep an eye on me.

That which you cannot see is far more terrifying than that which you can.

He will not be able to do any harm, for I could always be watching.

Even if I lose my life on this journey, he will forever fear my gaze as long as he doesn't find out.

I will never forget my gratitude to House Telsia, but it's fine now.

I have performed my duties for many years.

Surely there will be no harm in enjoying the last bit of time I have left in my life.

Right.

Let's go on a journey after all.

Let's go somewhere I've never gone and see something I've never seen.

Let's eat curious, delicious food aplenty.

I do not believe I have many more years left in me, but let's set off on a fantastic journey without anything to hold me down, living as through truly alive and dying a true death.

Baldo resolved his heart and tore Eidra's letters into shreds, letting the wind take them where it pleased.

The pieces of paper were caught by the breeze and fluttered over the Great Orva, eventually disappearing to a place no one would ever know.

Although he couldn't see it from here, far up the Orva stood the sacred mountain, Fusa.

It was said that when people die, their souls gathered atop Fusa and were guided by the holy spirits to the garden of the gods.

I wonder if the princess' soul too dwells in the fluttering winds of Fusa.

Hm.

Then I suppose I will go north.

I will head for Fusa.

I've heard it takes even longer than a year to arrive there on foot, but I am in no hurry.

I should take as many detours as I wish, searching for rare sights and delicious food to try on the way.

If I arrive at Fusa with life in my body yet, then I will consider then where to go next.

Next to Baldo, thinking of all the places he would go, was Staboros watching with a joyous look.

Thus the old knight's journey began.

End of the Prologue