Characters

The Kobold Kingdom

- Gaius Beldarus: The Kobold King. The former captain of an order of knights, he has a large build and a frightening visage. He gained a terrible reputation in a war many years ago.

- Sashalia Denan (Half-elf): Gaius's former adjutant. Her left leg was maimed in the previous battle.

- Dwaemon (Dwarf): A young dwarf on a journey to find a bride. He ended up in the Kingdom instead.

- Darke (Human): A swordswoman whom Gaius rescued from terrible abuse in her childhood.

- White Fog (Kobold): The kobolds' strongest warrior. She died battling adventurers and entrusted Gaius with the future of the village.

- Rain Grass (Kobold): A warrior and hunter, and a lifelong friend of White Fog.

- Red Eye (Kobold): The leader of the kobold farmers. His son is a close friend of Fluff's.

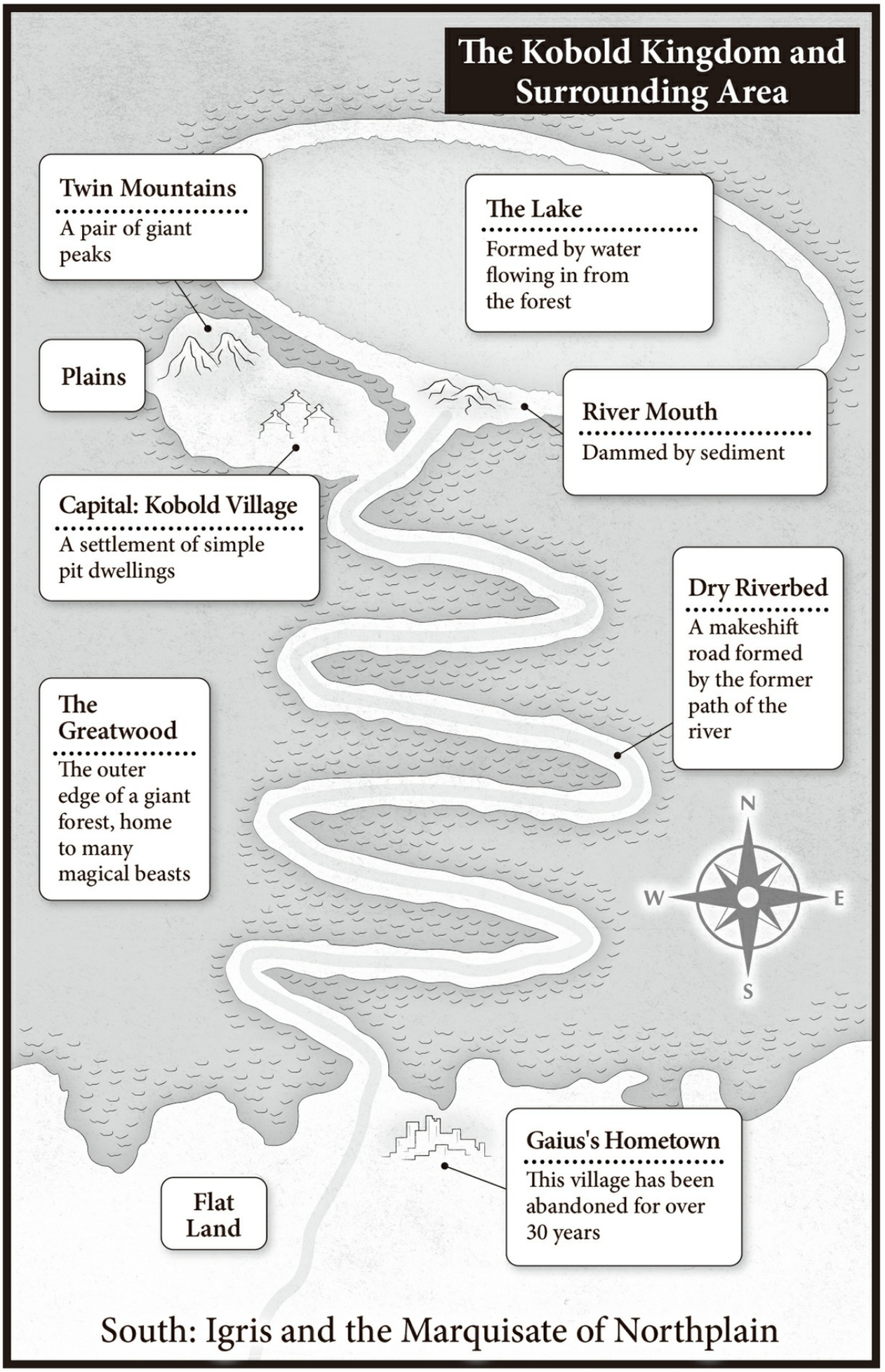
- The Elder (Kobold): A human-hating shaman, who nonetheless endorsed Gaius's enthronement.

- Fluff & Amber Blossom (Kobolds): White Fog's young son and niece, now orphans.

Keighley Faction of House Zigan / Adventurers' Guild

- Wyatt (Human): The guildmaster. A commoner-turned-knight. Gaius witnessed him carrying out a plot to secure power for Lady Keighley.

- Cyril (Human): An adventurer who concealed information from the guild, leading to major losses for the organization.


The Kobold Kingdom and Surrounding Area
Twin Mountains
A pair of giant peaks
The Lake
Formed by water flowing in from the forest
Plains
River Mouth
Dammed by sediment
Capital: Kobold Village
A settlement of simple pit dwellings
Dry Riverbed
A makeshift road formed by the former path of the river
The Greatwood
The outer edge of a giant forest, home to many magical beasts
N
W
E
S
Gaius's Hometown
This village has been abandoned for over 30 years
Flat Land
South: Igris and the Marquisate of Northplain

Chapter 1: Preparing for What Comes Next

Two days after Gaius Beldarus's coronation, Sashalia called a meeting in the Kobold Kingdom's assembly hall. Before the meeting, Gaius, Sashalia, Darke, and Dwaemon waited in the storage hut for the kobold men to join them. Soon, five little kobold girls came to bestow Gaius with his new crown.

"Your crown for today, Your Majesty!"

"Thank you, but, ah... You don't need to make me a new one every day, though," Gaius said bashfully as the flowery wreath was placed on his head. They'd even hung a chain of white flowers around his neck. His companions struggled valiantly not to laugh at the mismatch between his grizzled features and the cute ornamentation.

"But we want to! In fact, we'd like to make one in the morning and one at night! Everyone's fighting over who gets to make them!"

"A-Are they? Well, I don't want you fighting."

"It's okay! We're way stronger than the boys!" The girl flexed her muscles, as if to prove the point that the issue had already been decided.

The Kobold King hurriedly chided them not to use violence.

"Oh? You're putting wreaths around his ankles, too? That's a lot," Sashalia remarked to the fluffballs clinging to Gaius's legs.

"Yeah! These flowers smell really good!"

"They do have a very strong scent, don't they?"

"Uh huh! You know how the king's feet smell really bad, right? We all felt sorry for him, so we came up with the idea of putting flowers that smell good on him!"

"Well, the king's about to cry from how considerate you're all being, so maybe you should stop with what you've already put on him, okay?"

"Okaaay," the girls all said and shuffled out, though they didn't seem to

understand what was wrong with what they'd said. They were replaced by the men, led by Red Eye and Rain Grass, as well as the elder and his granddaughter Hopping Rabbit.

"Sorry for the wait, little lady... Hm? Why does our king look like his spirit has left him?"

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"Release the humans we captured?!" The shrill shout came from Rain Grass.

In contrast to him, the elder, who normally would have been the first to object, was sipping on boiled water, not looking the least bit perturbed.

"That's right. We don't have the resources to hold them and we can't spare anyone to guard them, either. We also can't afford to fight them if they get violent. Plus, we're not likely to get any more useful information out of simple adventurers."

"Then let's kill them! Some of them went after our women and children!" Rain Grass's hackles were up.

But Sashalia merely went on, calmly: "If there had been casualties among the non-combatants, we would execute them, but technically they only *attempted* them harm. We'll call it a royal pardon from our new king. Those we captured in combat will be released as prisoners of war, not criminals. We'll have them pledge in writing never to harm the Kobold Kingdom again. Of course, we can't count on them to hold to any such promises, so we don't need to hold on to the documents afterward."

Rain Grass opened his mouth to shout again, but Red Eye yanked on his tail to shut him up and asked, "There's a reason for this, right, Sashalia?"

"Yes. It's important for our future."

"All right. Keep going."

As the one who often took charge out in the fields, Red Eye commanded respect. The rest of the men all nodded in agreement. And Rain Grass had somehow ended up in Gaius's arms at some point during this, so he was behaving himself as well.

“As I explained before, compared to our humble kingdom, the outside world has an almost infinite population and resilience to match. The scale is just too different. Even if we win the next battle, or the one after that... It won’t be easy to keep winning forever.” Sashalia spread out a map of Igris and indicated the territory of the Kobold Kingdom, laying out the situation to the men. “That’s why our end goal is to have the humans give up on invading our kingdom altogether. We want their opinion of us to be ‘We can take some kobolds down, but it’s not worth the losses. They don’t have useful resources or land, so let’s just leave them be.’”

The group listened to the red-haired half-elf, looking back and forth between her and the map.

“And to make that happen, we’ll have to engage in dialogue with the humans and find common ground between us. And there may come a time when we need to negotiate with our enemies. We need to make sure they don’t think of us as vicious beasts that can’t be reasoned with.” Sashalia went on. “What I’d really like to do is demand a ransom for any prisoners of war who are nobility, which would conform to the human world’s notion of post-battle behavior, but... the people who attacked us were adventurers, so we can’t do that, unfortunately.”

Most of the men were cocking their heads, unable to get a good grasp on Sashalia’s logic. That was only natural, considering they’d spent their whole lives in the forest.

Sashalia was at a loss as to how to convince them, when...

“So basically, we want them to think, ‘if we fight with the Kobold Kingdom, we’ll get hurt, and there’s no benefit to taking them out, but they’re not monsters, and we can reason with them, so we should just leave them alone.’ So we have to make sure they know we’re easy to talk to,” Gaius broke it down for them.

At this, the men began nodding along as the light dawned. “I get it!”

“Right... That’s what I should have said...” Sashalia was a little ashamed that she’d gone on for so long without considering who she was talking to, but she soon pulled herself together with a quiet, “ahem.”

“I understand that you’re thinking about the future now, Sashalia. I think we should do as you say with the prisoners,” Red Eye agreed.

“Yeah!” the others chorused.

“Thank you, Red Eye, everyone.”

“But if we don’t get through their next attack, we’re not gonna be able to get them to give up, right?” Rain Grass asked, getting down off of Gaius’s knee.

“You’re exactly right. Which is why I’d also like to discuss our next battle here. I put the plan together rather quickly, so I’m sure it still has flaws, but I believe I’ve come up with a practical strategy we can use.”

“‘Practical?’” The kobolds all exchanged glances.

“Elder, Hopping Rabbit, could you come here, please?”

The elder and his granddaughter sat down on either side of Sashalia. Looking over the crowd, the old shaman took a deep breath and scratched behind his ear before starting: “Well, before we get into that, how about we start with a bit of a history lesson?”

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“I’ve told you before that we’re descended from goblins, yes? D’you remember that?”

A commotion went through the kobolds at the elder’s words.

“What?! Really?!”

“I kinda feel like I’ve heard that... maybe...”

The old kobold sighed. “Yes, that’s what I figured... Well, no matter.” After grumbling to himself for a moment, the elder began his tale: “Once upon a time, there was a goblin who met a divine beast in the Greatwood and fell in love.”

“Ooh,” the group stirred.

“The divine beast had beautiful silver fur, like a wolf god. After a great love affair, the two ran off together, their love producing a child. That child was our ancestor. That is why we kobolds have the form we do.”

“Aah...”

While Gaius and the kobolds oohed and aahed in wonder, the dwarf Dwaemon crossed his arms and marveled in a slightly different way.

“Got it on with a wolf, eh? Yer ancestor had interesting taste, fer sure.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that. Those proclivities are a lot more common than you’re thinking, young man.” Darke’s face appeared at the young dwarf’s shoulder, her movements like a snake.

“What?! Is that true, sis?!”

“Why, yes. I heard about it in a port town where I was working once. They bring female goats along on lengthy sea voyages for their milk, you see, and some of the sailors get so pent-up that they become very friendly with these goats, or so I hear.”

“Wow, ye’re jus’ a font of knowledge, ain’t ya, sis? I’m impressed! I really respect ye!”

“Heh heh heh. Good little boys won’t follow their example, though. You wouldn’t want to catch something nasty from them, would you?”

“Excuse me! Will you two please shut your mouths?!” hissed a voice.

The elder harrumphed once before continuing. “...Ahem... Moving on...”

Darke raised her hand before the elder could even begin his next sentence. “Question!”

“What is it, pale one?” The elder turned to her.

“These ancestors of yours, which was the male and which was the female?”

“Hmm? How does that matter?”

“One way is more exciting than the other, so I think it’s very important to know.”

“Oh, you bet. When I get back to Great Anvil, the cartoonists are gonna ask me about that when I tell ’em the story.” Dwaemon chimed in.

“Will you two *please* be quiet?” pleaded the same voice as before.

“Can I continue my story?” The elder asked with a sigh as Sashalia stared daggers at Dwaemon and Darke.

After a short break in which the red-haired half-elf punished the two troublemakers by pinching their noses, the old kobold resumed his tale.

“Our ancestor kobolds, the descendants of a goblin fairy and a divine beast, were blessed with the mystical power to seek help from the spirits. This allowed them to live peaceful lives in a corner of the Greatwood. And we’re still close with the spirits, aren’t we? Not like those barbaric humans or the elves who left the forest behind.” The elder paused, then continued on. “Because of our lineage, we speak half with our bodies and half with our souls. Our speech is easily heard by human ears despite our volume and the shape of our mouths, isn’t that right, Your Majesty? This is because we speak directly to the soul.”

“Come to think of it, Fog said something like that, didn’t she? I hear you guys talk about how souls smell all the time, too.”

“Indeed. When we speak to someone, we are also half-able to smell the scent of their soul. This makes it easy for us to tell what someone is like and what they’re feeling.”

That was likely why the kobolds hadn’t feared Gaius in the way that humans and animals did.

“Now, getting back to our ancestors. A few times long ago, some idiot or another saw fit to mock the ley lines of the Greatwood, causing periods of great growth of the forest. At these times, our settlements were overcome by the forest and magical beasts, and our ancestors were scattered. With time, our mystical power faded, our bodies grew smaller, and we ended up the way we are now.”

“Huh...”

“The power of our ancestors now only survives in the few of us who have the skills to be a shaman. The spirit-speak that we shamans use is the power the divine beast blessed us with, to commune with the spirits. We call this ‘soul howling.’ Our ancestors could speak directly with the spirits, but we don’t possess that much power now. Really, the best we can do is annoy them with chirps and whistles.”

The kobolds all nodded, saying to each other, “so that’s how it is” and “I get it now.”

Meanwhile, the elder muttered, “I’ve told you all this more times than I can count,” his shoulders sagging.

“Okay, so we get the stuff about our ancestors, but what’s that have to do with us now?” Red Eye asked Sashalia, crossing his arms.

“I’m glad you asked. I intend to employ your spirit-speak in battle.”

“Spirit-speak? But like the elder said, it’s just an ability to make weird noises. And we don’t even know who’s making the noises or where they come from. It annoys the shamans, so our parents teach us right away to never do it if we figure out how. I remember when I learned how, I did it as a prank once and my mom and adults all over the village yelled my ears off about it. It’s just one of those things your parents drill into you, like ‘don’t waste food’ and ‘go to the bathroom at night so you don’t wet the bed.’”

“Yes, that’s right. And I think that’s just the problem. The power of customs is frightening. Over the course of a few generations, or a few dozen of them, something gets branded as useless, annoying, forbidden, and everyone turns their back on an incredible power. I’m guessing there’s been absolutely no research or study into spirit-speak, has there?” There was a twinkle in Sashalia’s eyes as she spoke.

Red Eye knew just how despondent the half-elf had been only a few days ago. A mix of surprise, interest, and joy played on his face at her change in demeanor as he waited for her to continue.

But Sashalia’s next words were directed not at him, but past him, toward the entrance of the meeting hall: “Come on in, ladies!”

“Comiiing!” At her summons, the Kobold Kingdom’s most powerful faction, the housewife alliance, strode into the meeting place. Some carried sticks, others baskets full of rocks, and yet more even had large rolls of parchment with them.

“Come on, clear a path!”

“Get your butt outta the way!”

“Ow! Stop poking me!”

“You’re stepping on my taaail!”

“Mom?! What?! Don’t kick me!”

Over the protests of the men, the women roughly cleared the men out of their way over to Sashalia. They spread out a map that covered several pieces of parchment in front of her and quickly placed an array of small, different-colored stones on it. Then, when the map was ready, most of them filed out, leaving only a few housewives to stand around the map with their sticks as if in formation for some kind of ritual.

“Thank you, ladies.”

“Good luck, Sashalia!” replied several of the women as they left.

With a bashful smile, the half-elf turned back to the men. She cleared her throat, and extending her hands to draw attention to the map, declared: “Now, let me explain just how our spirit-speak tactics will work.”

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“As Red Eye said, all spirit-speak amounts to now is some annoying noise. However, your ancestors were likely able to use it to hold conversations. If you concentrate, you can control the rhythm and duration of the sounds you make.”

“None of you have had to do it, so you probably don’t know this, but this is part of performing spirit magic when you’re a shaman,” added the elder. “It’s like doing a vocal warm-up before singing, only you don’t make the sounds using your actual voice. It’s much easier than calling the spirits directly, so if you’ve got any talent you can learn it right away.”

“Oh... Yesterday afternoon, people were saying someone was chirping in spirit-speak. That wasn’t just some kid messing around?” Rain Grass asked.

Sashalia shook her head. “It wasn’t. It was an experiment I was conducting with the elder and Hopping Rabbit, and some of the wives and children that can use spirit-speak. I wanted to know how it worked and how far it could travel.”

“Oh yeah, somebody told me once that you can’t hear it if you’re too far away.”

Since it was considered nothing more than bothersome noise, no one had bothered verifying any of these things. After all, who pays attention to garbage on the side of the road?

“I had thought that the sound might have no limit, but we determined the range of spirit-speak from the village to be just about to the mouth of the riverbed and the forest’s edge. Beyond that, the sound became too faint to hear.”

“Oh yeah?” The men only reacted as if they’d just heard some useless trivia.

“...Do you mean for us to use it to signal to each other? Say, if we spot an enemy?” Red Eye had been listening with his arms crossed, but he spoke up when he thought of that. All the other kobolds also seemed to just now be realizing this noise could actually be useful.

“Are ye tellin’ me ye’d never thought of somethin’ so simple before?” The young dwarf looked around in exasperation.

“That’s just the way it is, Emon. But think of it this way: there are probably a lot of things in the human world that, to a kobold, would be considered illogical or inefficient.”

There are countless examples of someone with an outside perspective finding something obvious when it never would have occurred to those on the inside. Assumptions and blindness that come with customs and tradition are more serious than someone who isn’t part of that culture might think. It’s not rare for religion, tradition, or values to halt the progress of cultural or technological advancement for even hundreds of years.

“You’re totally right, Sashalia. If you hadn’t pointed it out to us like this, we probably never would have thought to change how we look at spirit-speak. It never would’ve occurred to us unless our village... I mean, our country, ended up in a situation like this.” Red Eye crossed his arms, as if convincing himself of what he was saying even as he said it.

“You’re right, this is much faster than sending messengers back and forth. The sound will travel farther than normal howling, and we don’t have to worry about the wind wiping it out, either. It’ll be perfect for the guards at the mouth of the river to report back to us... That’s what you mean, right?”

“Yes, that was my first line of thought, too, that we could use it instead of alarms or smoke signals. But this power could prove even more useful.”

The kobolds all cocked their heads.

“We can use the length and the pattern of the sounds to create a code. For instance, ‘short-long-long-long’ to mean ‘1.’ Or codes for places or actions. I have several ideas already, so I’m hoping to get everyone’s input before I decide on them. If we combine these patterns, we can send much more information than a simple alarm could. And in an instant! Imagine being out on a hunt and being able to coordinate your movements, even when you’re far away from each other.”

After Sashalia’s explanation, an older housewife let out a code in spirit-speak. That got a bigger reaction than anything else thus far from the men, especially those of them with shaman training.

“But Sashalia, it’s gonna be a pain to send and listen for these while we’re busy fighting,” one of the older men objected.

“Yes... That’s why those soldiers tasked with listening to and sending messages should be focusing entirely on doing that, not combat. I think we could call them ‘spirit messengers.’”

“Soldiers that don’t fight, huh...?”

It was only warriors that went on hunts. For the kobolds, battle was synonymous with hunting, so this was another idea that was obvious to someone from the human world that the kobolds would have never considered on their own.

The older kobold who’d spoken nodded to himself several times, deep in thought.

“Spirit messengers, huh? I’ve got no shaman training, so I don’t totally get it, but it seems like it’d be really difficult to keep track of everything everyone’s sending around.” Rain Grass looked very pensive, still in Gaius’s arms.

“I have ideas about that, too. Please look at this.” Sashalia directed everyone to the parchment before her, clearly expecting this reaction. “We’ll organize the information here.”

“On the map?”

“Yes,” the half-elf said, indicating the stones atop the map. “We’ll say each white stone is an ally. And each black stone is a group of enemies. It’ll be even easier to understand if we use different sizes of stones to represent the numbers in a group, or we could put symbols on them. These blue stones will be spirit scouts who we’ll have hiding up in trees or in bushes.”

Rain Grass and the rest of the kobolds watched the map.

“A scout reports the enemy’s movement. The ladies around the map receive the spirit-speak, and... if you would.”

One of the housewives standing next to Sashalia used a stick that had been fashioned into a T-shape to push a stone. The stone, which had been polished smooth, slid across the map with a faint noise.

“They move a black stone. Now, we need to give directions to one of our units.”

Sure enough, another housewife pushed a white stone with her stick in much the same way.

“We can even have several people doing this in multiple places at once.”

The housewives used their sticks to move the white and black stones around the map at the same time. It looked almost like several small creatures were rushing over the surface of the parchment.

“This is how we’ll keep track of our allies’ and enemies’ positions during battle.”

It was a fact for all humanoids, not just kobolds or humans, that a commanding officer can only be immediately aware of what’s happening within their ranges of sight and hearing. Their orders can only reach as far as their voice does. Beyond that distance, they must send a messenger or a signal using flares, horns, drums... That of course limits the contents of their message, naturally leading to a delay in the time it takes to be received. But with this new system, the kobolds could achieve overwhelming superiority in the speed and accuracy of their communications. Their commander could maintain a visual understanding of the status of the battle and the positions of their allies and

enemies. All armies strategized before battle using pieces atop maps, but no country on the continent had yet devised a way to update the board in real time. This was in the realm of dreams. Fantasy, really.

The men all gulped. Even the kobolds, who lived in the forest and had no experience with warfare, could instantly grasp what a boon this system would be.

“If we amass information here... let’s call it the command center... then there’s no need for individual squads to decipher every spirit-speak message. All the spirit messengers will have to do is send their reports to the command center and decipher the messages sent to them. As for the large amount of communication to the command center, the housewife alliance has enough members to handle that task.”

The fearless members of the kobolds’ strongest faction flexed and smirked. Their sons and husbands scrunched up their shoulders and shrunk, cowed.

“For kobolds who were born and grew up in the Greatwood, this might be hard to understand, but for humans, being in the forest is like being blindfolded. If they let their guard down, they could lose sight of their way home. On the other hand, you are sensitive to scents and sounds and have a great sense of direction, too. The trees do nothing to hamper your movements. Last time, the best we could do was lead the adventurers into the forest and run around, but now... with this technique, we could split up, slow them down, create diversions, maybe even team up to take them down.”

Sashalia paused there, then corrected herself, expression solemn: “No, we *will* take them down.”

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Dwaemon hummed to himself for a moment before speaking up. “But, y’know... Ye probably cannae do this on the move, right? If the old man’s back here commandin’, won’t that be a real blow to our fightin’ power? If we wanna take out groups of ’em in the forest or hold ’em off at the river mouth, I really think we’re gonna need the old man swingin’ ’is sword around.”

A stir went through the kobolds when the young man made his point.

Sashalia raised her hand to quell the commotion and answered the dwarf's question. "True, the command center is not something a fighter can take to the battlefield... And it is a heavy blow to our fighting power to remove Sir Gaius from the front lines. However, this strategy will be much more advantageous in the long run than what Sir Gaius alone could contribute in combat, as much as that is. We'll make up for the loss... one way or another."

There was a short silence that was broken by Gaius, who had been silent up to this point.

"No, Miss Sashalia, Emon. It's all right. There's a way to utilize this strategy without reducing the strength of our front lines."

Both of them turned to look at him at his unexpected words.

"Miss Sashalia, *you* will take command of our forces."

"Hwah?!" Sashalia lost her balance, and the housewives around her hurried to hold her steady. "Wh-Wh-Wh-What are you saying?! I'm not like you, Sir Gaius —I've never even commanded a small force, let alone an entire army!"

"Neither had I, until the first time I did. But I was a failure at the Knights Academy; you were salutatorian. You're much better equipped for this than me. And you've memorized all the military history documents in the archives, haven't you? That's more than enough of a foundation."

"U-Umm, but... I-I only memorized them! Memorizing and theorizing are nothing like real battle! Even I'm aware of that!"

Gaius knew how much work Sashalia had done, no matter how hard she tried to hide it, much like her sword training during their days in the Knight Order. Her face was bright red and she was waving her arms in front of her, somehow staying upright thanks to the earnest support of the wives.

"Of course. But you're also aware that all of my command experience was on the front line with a sword in my hand. I mostly fought under the orders of a general or the king. So I have no experience commanding an entire force from afar. Actually... This is a strategy no one's ever used before. As the one who came up with it, you're naturally the most qualified person to implement it. Out of everyone in the world."

The kobolds and Darke all nodded in agreement and looked toward Sashalia. She looked away with a groan.

“It has to be you, Miss Sashalia.”

“But Sir Gaius...”

“I was always this close to failing out of the Knights Academy... Actually, maybe they just let me graduate because we were in the middle of the war at the time... The princess and the king were always calling me a dunce... and it’s true. I was one. I caused you a lot of trouble when we were in the Order, too.”

“That’s not true...”

“But even so—Or maybe because of that?—I’m confident in my ability to judge people.”

“Are you...? You didn’t even realize how badly the blacksmith in Ryburgh was misunderstanding you!” Sashalia grumbled, lips pursed.

“A-Ahaha. I didn’t? I didn’t, did I...?”

As Gaius smiled awkwardly and scratched his head, Darke pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed.

“Say! If ye don’t wanna do it, how ’bout me? How’s ’at sound, old man?” Emon interrupted, waving one hand in the air enthusiastically and pointing the other one at himself.

“Hmm. The Great Strategist Dwaemon, eh?”

At this, the kobolds turned to the young dwarf, reacting with very different murmurings of surprise than how they’d responded before.

Emon’s words had become the spark for an outpouring of emotion from someone else, however.

“Gyaaaah! No! No way! Ahh, damn it!” Sashalia panicked, floundered, and then shouted as if all her thoughts were bursting out at once. “Fine! I’ll do it! I’ll do it, okay?!”

The kobolds all around shared their mutual approval of her decision. “All right! You’re in charge, Sashalia!”

“Yes, I think this is for the best~”

“I agree, I agree!”

“I don’t disagree!”

After her explanation of spirit-speak tactics, Sashalia had gained the respect and support of all the men. Gaius himself had asked her to accept the position, and none of the kobolds could possibly object to their king. They all knew how she had put her life on the line fighting to protect their women and children, and how badly she’d been hurt doing so. Their trust, friendship, and respect for her was already unshakable. The delicate half-elf was no longer a mere visitor. She was Sashalia Denan, comrade in arms to the kobolds.

Among all this celebration, Emon alone looked slightly dejected, until...

“I’m impressed, Emon!”

...Hopping Rabbit, the elder’s granddaughter who had been helping out Sashalia before, walked over to him. She gave the failed would-be tactician a deeply respectful look.

“Why’s that?”

“You got Sashalia to agree to do it by purposely suggesting the worst possible alternative! This must be a traditional dwarven negotiating strategy! I really am impressed! You’re amazing, Emon!”

“Whaaat...?”

“What did I say...? Why are you upset?”

The dwarf slumped his shoulders while Sashalia shouted to the celebrating crowd, “I’m gonna work you like mules, okay?! You’d better be ready! Graaah!”

Darke whispered in some of the kobolds’ ears and they responded with, “Yes, ma’am!” and “Aye-aye, ma’am!”

Gaius watched the scene fondly, then said to Sashalia, “We’re counting on you, *General*,” which caused her to jump and freeze.

“Sir Gaius? What did you just...? Why?” The half-elf turned to him jerkily, like an ill-fitted door.

With a smile only the Kobold King could make, he looked at her kindly (kindly for him, at least) and replied, “You are now the military commander of the Kobold Kingdom. It’s only natural that you should be a ‘General,’ isn’t it?”

“True, true,” Darke agreed with a laugh like a croaking frog.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait! Please, stop that! I couldn’t possibly!” The newly-appointed military commander tried to resist her new title, flustered, but all the fluff balls around her accepted it wholeheartedly.

“What the heck...”

“...That’s cool.”

“General! General!”

“Yay, General!”

“Ooh, General, you’re so dreamy!”

“Good luck being General, Sashalia!”

“Woohoo!”

“Nooooo!”

...This was how the Kobold Kingdom gained a new defensive strategy, as well as a military commander.

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After obtaining a king in Gaius and a general in Sashalia, the kobolds went to work in a truly astounding way. Under Sashalia’s command, they rapidly constructed a base of operations and began to formulate a defensive strategy.

They had always been a diligent and earnest bunch, but with the morale afforded to them by their new leadership, it seemed they were starting to develop beyond the states they had been in before, both mentally and physically. When she was alive, Fog had often objected to comparisons of her people to dogs, but when the fabled origin of their species was taken into account, it started to make sense that they had wolf-or dog-like sociableness and loyalty to their leader.

Sashalia was surprised to see the kobolds’ physical builds improving in such a

short time. When she brought this up to the village elder, the old man theorized, “Well, kobolds are half-descended from gods, so our whole race shares a spiritual bond. Perhaps if the group flourishes in their minds, it reflects in their bodies as well, I suppose?” Apparently, even he was not entirely sure.

Regardless, the psychological and physiological benefits of Gaius’s enthronement and Sashalia’s installation at her new post on the entire community of kobolds could not be denied.

*

“...Now this is unexpected,” Gaius muttered, impressed.

In his hand he held a rope woven from black linden fibers. In front of him was a tree-eating lizard, its eyes covered thoroughly with a thick cloth, plodding slowly along like a cow.

“These guys get real docile as soon as you cover their eyes. Maybe they think it’s nighttime so they get sleepy or something. They’re almost never active at night,” said Rain Grass. The flax-colored kobold hunter sat atop the lizard and spoke as if letting Gaius in on a secret. “So if you put a bunch of bewitching herbs on a tree and get ’em all loopy with them, you can put something over their eyes and then do whatever you want with ’em. When a lizard got too close to our old village, we used to hunt them like this and then dump them somewhere far away.”

“I see. I have to say, I wasn’t expecting it to be so easy.”

“Well, I make it sound easier than it is. They change their territories all the time, and it takes some practice to figure out what kinda trees they’ll go for. You gotta use a lot of herbs, too. Plus, you know, they *will* wake up and attack if you accidentally stick ’em with a spear, so you gotta be careful hunting them.”

“Ah, so that’s why.” He’d seen White Fog pierce a vital blood vessel on a tree-eating lizard in one blow before. Mastering that skill had likely been necessary for situations like this.

“Anyway, there’s plenty of preparation involved. It’s not like you can do this any time you happen to run into one in the forest.”

“Right. Oh, does this work on bugbears, too?”

“Nope. Must be because of those livers they got. The herbs don’t seem to work on ’em. So we either chase ’em into a big trap or use these guys.” Rain Grass patted the reptilian monster on the back.

“You use the lizards?”

“Yeah, they fight a lot with the six-legs. We use that. Tree-eaters are territorial and six-legs are just violent by nature. So if a bear wanders near our hunting area, we lead one of these guys to it. When they fight, the lizard usually wins, and the lizard’s easier for us to deal with, so it works out nice for us.”

“Wow! Amazing! That’s amazing, Rain Grass! This is stuff only forest-dwellers know!” Gaius spoke admiringly, eyes sparkling like a child’s.

“It’s not like I came up with it, stupid! This knowledge was hard-earned by my ancestors, who probably died figuring it out.”

“Mm... Experience built up over the generations... It’s a wonderful thing.”

“As for me, I learned it from Fog,” Rain Grass said quietly.

“...I heard you two were close as kids.”

“Yeah. She lived nearby and played with me all the time. She always looked after me, and my friend Sharp Ear too, since he was in diapers. Did you know? She was always leader of the pack of all the kids, even though she was a girl. She was so tough, one time she beat up five older boys all on her own.”

“Hmm... I never heard that, but I can imagine it.”

“Right?”

The two of them laughed together.

Maybe reacting to their laughter, the tree-eating lizard cried out sleepily, “Gweh!” The human and kobold were scared into silence for a moment.

“Anyway, that’s why she became a hunter so quick. By the time I got taken on my first hunt, she was already holding her own among the warriors of the village.”

Gaius nodded.

“She led our hunts for a long time, but she’d get real mad and hit you if you

screwed something up. It was real scary! I thought she'd mellow out a little when she took Sharp Ear as her husband, but no such luck! She was still a complete hard-ass. Everybody was bummed about that."

"Ha ha ha."

"...And Sharp Ear... He wasn't strong at all, so he shouldn't have pushed himself like that." Rain Grass muttered to himself, looking off into the distance.

Gaius had heard about this from the elder. When the kobolds' previous village was attacked by adventurers, Rain Grass had remained there, fighting until the end. He'd seen terrible things, fought on even while things slipped through his fingers, and come back alive to continue to protect the things that remained.

"Thanks, Gaius. Thank you for saving my friends' kid."

So Gaius accepted the warrior's thanks with a short "Mmm," acknowledging it without humility.

As the two continued on, letting the conversation drop, they eventually saw in the distance a group of kobolds waiting with ropes, cloth, and sticks to receive the lizard.

"Mmh, I kinda gotta take a leak after riding this thing... Hey Gaius, wanna go for a piss after we hand this guy over?"

"Sure."

The two warriors chuckled to each other and continued on their way to their fellows.

*

The hastily constructed command center in the village square was really nothing more than a flattened floor with a roof over it. Nevertheless, it currently served as the kingdom's brain and nervous system.

"Miss General, a spirit-speak report. They've finished installing a new trap. It's around here."

"Oh! Thank you. Umm, okay, here..."

After receiving a report from one of the housewife spirit messengers

stationed at the command center, Sashalia marked down the symbol for “trap” on the great map spread out before her. The map was a product of hard work on the part of everyone in the village, especially the kobold hunters who were always running around in the area. A human outsider would sum up the whole of the Greatwood as “a bloody big forest,” but those who lived within it were familiar with the density of the trees in each area and all the changes in elevation as well. The map had any useful landmarks and dangerous areas noted on it and included anything that Sashalia deemed necessary for a war map to have.

“They’re done here too, Missy.”

“Oh. Right!” She marked another area as another report came in.

They’d started out just using spirit-speak during the construction of these traps to practice using it in the case of real battle, but they had discovered that it allowed them to keep track of materials and personnel from the command center, leading to much more efficiency in their operations.

“Bloody Claw’s unit has almost finished transporting the materials, so instruct Leaf Tail’s unit to receive them and begin the next stage of the work.”

The lady Sashalia had addressed moved her mouth soundlessly, eyes on the map, then looked up at Sashalia and reported, “Sent... Mhm, and they sent back ‘Got it.’”

“We’ve gotten used to this pretty quick, huh?”

“Well, we do practice every day. I’d say we’re good at it.”

The spirit-space in which the kobolds with shaman training exchanged their soul howls apparently exhibited the flow of time differently than the outside world. It was difficult for a human to understand experiencing two different senses of time; it was likely only those who did experience it could truly understand the feeling.

The spirit-speak soldiers had memorized all the tactical codes they’d thought up with surprising speed. This was likely due to their quickened sense of time brought about by their shorter lifespans, their race’s inherent learning speed, and possibly just a passion for the material. They’d even quickly developed a

system based on regular pronunciation for uncoded communication, which was a delightful surprise to Sashalia.

“Sister Sashalia, can you help me with something?”

A kobold boy with rough, barklike fur had wandered into the command center.

“Now, Pinecone Fur, you know you can’t bother Sister when she’s busy,” said one of the ladies around the table.

“Aww, I’m sorry.”

Sashalia looked up from the map and smiled. “It’s all right, ma’am. What did you want help with?”

The boy’s tail wagged as he explained. “The little kids want me to read them picture books, so I asked Fluff to borrow some of Brother Emon’s, but I don’t even understand the titles.”

Sashalia glanced behind the boy and saw a crowd of small, fluffy children. The boys who were still a little too young to become warriors were looking after the young children in place of the busy housewives. Sashalia had taught Pinecone Fur and his friends to read, so he was looking to put that skill to use in entertaining the young children. Even the children were doing whatever they could to help out.

“Can you tell me which of these would be good to read to the kids?”

“Hmm... I haven’t read many of Emon’s picture books... Which did you want to borrow? One of the ‘Iron Knight Iwanoshins’?”

“Umm... They say, ‘The Priestess Repents, Part VIII,’ ‘A Lesson in Nighttime Etiquette with the Head Maid,’ and ‘Night Battle Drills with the Female General.’”

Fluff must have grabbed a stack from Emon’s secret stash and not from the books he had set aside for the children.

“...That priestess has got a lot to repent for, huh? I wonder how many volumes there are...”

“Does ‘repent’ mean something bad?” The young kobold cocked his head

with a curious sniff.

“No, I wouldn’t say that...”

“Okay, I’ll read them the priestess one, then.”

“You will not. I’m just going to take those.” Sashalia plucked the picture books out of the kobold’s arms.

The little kids gave a chorus of “awws” in protest, but accepted Pinecone Fur’s suggestion of a game of tag instead and all filed out of the command center.

“That was really tiring...” Sashalia sighed, shoulders slumped, to which the housewives all laughed.

“Ahaha! It’s hard work looking after the little ones. You’ve gotta make sure they don’t go off and get into trouble, so it’s no wonder it takes a lot out of you.”

“Helps that the older kids are watching over ’em now, though.”

Sashalia nodded along with the housewives, then put a hand to her chin and muttered thoughtfully, “Right, childcare... Why not a school while we’re at it...?”

“Uh-huh, they’re done here now, too... What is it, Sashalia? You seem distracted.”

“Huh? Oh, I’m sorry!” The red-haired general snapped back to attention and made a note on the map. “I was just thinking about the future. Like, maybe it’d be nice to make a school like they have on the outside. Oh, a school is where kids go to learn reading and writing and numbers...”

The housewives all looked at one another with blank looks on their faces.

“My goodness! This girl’s already thinking about after the war! Don’t get ahead of yourself now, dear.”

“Ahaha! Ain’t that confidence-inspiring? You’re right! We should all be thinking about after we win!”

“She’s way more dependable than my husband!”

“Come marry me instead of my hubby, little lady!”

The kobold ladies all surrounded their military commander, laughing and patting her on the head and shoulders.

Sashalia flushed and stiffened when she realized the implication of what she'd said, but she accepted the women's teasing.

...It didn't feel too bad.

*

"Brother Emon! Let's go play outside!"

"No way! Didn't ye hear the elder say it's gonna rain?"

Emon was inside carving parts for a trap with a knife when Fluff bounded up to him. There had been dark clouds in the sky since morning with a prediction of heavy rain later in the day, so all outdoor work had been suspended for the time being. Arriving home before Gaius and company, the young dwarf had taken the opportunity to craft some materials for traps.

"Big Sis is helping make ropes and Fishbone's napping. I've got nobody to play with but you, Brother Emon. Let's go play until it starts raining!"

"Why don't ye go take a nap, too?" Dwaemon grumbled, shifting to keep himself in between the fluffball and the knife he was holding. He would never send the boy away, however.

"Whaaat? But I'm not tiiired... Oh, this is perfect! Can I have it?"

"That's dangerous! Don't touch it!"

Emon snatched a piece of wood away before Fluff could grab it. It was a stick with a sharpened tip, dangerous enough that a child might injure themselves with it if they weren't careful.

"What would ye even use this for anyway...?"

"Well, for poking. It's kinda thick, though." Fluff stuck his tongue out and panted. Even though they weren't playing, he was excited to be getting attention from his "older brother."

"Poking... Ye mean 'spear of bravery'?"

"You're so behind, Brother Emon! Nobody plays that anymore!" Fluff cackled

impishly.

“Oh yeah? That’s good.”

“Now everybody plays ‘two swords of bravery.’”

“Yer all idiots, ye know that?”

“So, in ‘two swords of bravery,’ you take *two* sticks, and—”

“I got it, I got it. Figured it out from the name.” Emon shook his head, passing on hearing an explanation of the game.

“Hmph.” Two cheeks puffed out like little snowballs.

“Hahh... You’re so silly. Yer big brother worries about yer future.”

“Eheheh, do you really?” Fluff scratched the back of his head in imitation of a certain someone. The motion threw off his balance, and he went tumbling backward.

Emon scooped him up and sat him on his lap as he resumed his whittling.

“Hey, Brother Emon?”

“Yeah?” Emon set down the stake he’d finished and picked up a new piece of wood.

“Can you beat those ‘adventurers’ with these?”

“...Yep. We can.” Emon nodded after hesitating a moment.

“Are the adventurers gonna kill me and Big Sis? Like they killed Mom?”

The knife went still.

“...I’m doin’ this so that doesn’t happen.”

“...Okay.” The little kobold sniffled, ears drooping, and curled up on his big brother’s lap.

The young dwarf ran his hand over the kobold’s small back a few times. After a little while, the scraping of a blade against wood became the only sound in the house, until...

“Yep, tha’s right, there’s nothin’ to be afraid of! It’ll be jus’ fine! Don’t ye worry ’bout a thing!” Emon took a deep breath and laid down his tools and

materials, then picked Fluff up. He touched their noses together and said, “No matter how many times those adventurers come, I’ll beat ’em up and send ’em packin’, so don’t you worry.”

“...Yeah. And Uncle Gaius and Sister Darke are really strong, too.”

“But *I’ll* protect ye, so ye don’t need to worry.”

“Are you sure?” Fluff sniffed, tilting his head.

“Sure I’m sure! Has yer big brother ever lied to ye before?”

“I guess not!”

“Right?! Right?! Dwarves never lie!”

“Cool! Your farts really smell, but you’re so cool, Big Bro!”

“Ye got no right to complain ’bout me farts when ye come around sniffin’ ’em every time I do!”

“I get worried since they smell so bad.”

“Yeah, well, I’m worried about yer head.” Emon sighed, his shoulders slumping. Fluff licked him on the nose.

“So jus’ sit tight and watch yer big brother work.”

“Okay!”

Emon sat Fluff down on his lap again, but the kobold was snoring before he finished his next stake. He must have been pretty comfortable.

The young dwarf carefully exchanged materials so as to not wake the boy, continuing his work. And, as he shaved off splinters of wood, he muttered quietly as if to let himself hear the words, “That’s right. Next time, yer big bro’ll protect ye.”

*

At night, when everyone was asleep, a dark shadow prowled next to Gaius’s dwelling.

“...What are you doing?” A voice quietly but firmly asked from behind the prowler.

“Ack?!” The figure shuddered in surprise and slowly turned around. “J-Just doing some laundry.” The moonlight revealed Sashalia in her pajamas. And there was indeed a laundry basket on the ground beside her to back up her claim. It would have been a convincing excuse, if not for the hour.

“This late at night, Lady Denan?” The other speaker, hidden up until now, turned out to be Darke, clad only in her underwear. She was carrying a sleeping Fluff under her arm, who still twitched his paws gently in his slumber.

“W-Well, you know, I’ve been stuck in the command center all day lately, right? This is the only time I’m free!”

“I had thought that Blossom was handling the laundry these days.”

“I-It’s too heavy for a small girl like her, don’t you think?” Sashalia seemed to be having trouble speaking clearly, and she was clearly hiding something behind her back with her left hand.

“I would think it would be much harder for someone with only one leg to carry it, myself.”

“I-I-It’s just part of my military training. Physical exercises.” The general waved her right hand about, the movement causing sweat to drip from her chin down onto her nightclothes.

Watching her, Darke sighed curtly and said, “Lady Denan, from a hygienic standpoint, I can’t recommend burying your face in a sock. Mayhaps a handkerchief would better suit your needs?”

“I-I-I-I did no such thing!” the delicate half-elf denied, shrilly.

“Also, what you’re holding in your left hand is one of Emon’s socks, not Sir Gaius’s.”

“Hah! That’s not true! This is definitely Sir Gaius’s stench! I’m always smelling it, so I can tell! I wouldn’t confuse them, even in the dark!”

“Well, I daresay you barreled right into that one.”

“Aaaaah!” Sashalia clutched her head and writhed around on the ground in embarrassment.

“You couldn’t have said you could tell the difference from the size or

something like that...?”

For a little while, the sounds of Sashalia rolling around on the ground and groaning could be heard among the chattering of the insects.

“Wh-What are you doing dressed like that, anyway? Don’t you have any pajamas?” Only one of the brightest minds of the Igris Royal Knight Academy could change the subject so quickly and forcefully.

Unlike the flowing underclothes Sashalia usually wore, Darke’s undergarments displayed her figure for everyone to see. She did make an effort to wear clothes around Emon as much as possible, however, thinking the scars from her past abuses might be a bit too shocking for the young man.

“Fluff peed right on me in his sleep, see?”

Sashalia looked closer, and she could indeed make out that her colleague was clutching a bundle of sleepwear in her other hand.

Fluff had only just learned to stop wetting the bed, but after White Fog’s death he had started right back up again. Now he slept in diapers. Some must have leaked through in the night while he was curled up on Darke’s chest.

“I was thinking I’d bathe and change into my training clothes or something. And change Fluff’s diaper, too.” Meanwhile, Fluff himself was drooling and showed no signs of waking up anytime soon.

Darke took down a diaper from the nearby clothesline and checked to see how dry it was. She laid Fluff down on the grass and set about swiftly changing him. Sashalia watched her curiously, hiding the purloined sock in a pocket while the other woman wasn’t looking.

“...I’m surprised. I didn’t really take you for the child-rearing type.”

“Well, I’m not, so your instincts are correct.” Darke cleaned Fluff up, a faint smile on her face. The fuzzy pup wiggled once as if ticklish, but continued sleeping soundly. “The only things that matter to me are the things Sir Gaius loves and the people Sir Gaius cares about. And this little bed-wetter falls into both categories, so...here I am.” She gave her usual frog-like croaking laugh at that.

“...You use Sir Gaius as a basis for all your decisions, huh?”

“Indeed I do.” Darke nodded, placing the replacement diaper under the pup.

“Suppose I became Sir Gaius’s enemy, then. What would you do?”

“I *suppose* I would cut you down on the spot.” The black-haired former knight twisted around to the half-elf and gave her a rather crooked smile.

“You could agonize about it a *little*, couldn’t you?”

“Mm... I do think I would hesitate. Just a little, though.”

Of course, that moment of hesitation was probably the proof of Darke’s friendship. That was what Sashalia imagined, at least. The red-haired girl was starting to feel something for this colleague who was so unlike her, and she decided that if her feelings were reciprocated, well, then that was something to be happy about.

“Say, Darke.”

“...This isn’t good, Lady Denan.”

“What?! What is it?” Sashalia’s tone was serious to match the sudden grimace on Darke’s face.

“The little snowball’s fired a second volley...”

*

“Aha, I found you.” Sashalia called out to Gaius when she spotted him, leaning on her cane.

He was crouching on the ground in his farming clothes, his work done. In front of him were some burnt embers. The sword Stingfeather was stuck into the ground before him, the light of the setting sun reflecting in its blade, and some flowers had been laid out before it.

“Oh, Miss Sashalia. Are you all right, being up and about like this?”

“I’m fine. It’s going to be more trouble down the line if I don’t get used to it, anyway.”

“...I suppose you’re right.”

“I know I am! I’ve got a lot of work to do! So I have to give it my all while I’m doing it, right?” Sashalia flexed her right arm with a laugh. “...Flowers for Fog?”

“Yeah. And the others who died in the battle.”

Sashalia looked past him and saw six other piles of ashes and flowers.

“Spear Tail was a great archer. He was always the one to bring down deer on hunts. Leaf Ear played the flute. He always had it on his hip, and he’d perform for us on breaks while we were working in the fields. Dancing Spider drew amazing art on the ground. The kids were always bugging him to draw for them. Sitting Bear always knew where to find mushrooms growing. He brought some to share with me a few times. Black Stag had only just become an adult, but he was so responsible. He was always helping out on hunts and in the fields. And Sand Claw was always napping. If the weather was good, even in the middle of a hunt, he’d find somewhere to lay out in the sun, and Rain Grass was always yelling at him. But he was strong, too. He could carry twice what some of the other men could.”

“You knew them very well...”

“They were all so friendly with me.”

Sashalia made her way over to Gaius, her cane tapping the ground. “Speaking of napping, there was someone who’d died at Snake Bush who was like that too, wasn’t there? A knight named Randy Hudley. Billy was always chewing him out.”

“Snake Bush, eh?”

The Battle of Snake Bush was a large-scale battle that had turned the tide of the Five Year War. The Knights of the Chain had suffered heavy casualties in that engagement, according to the records of the conflict.

“It sounds like it was quite an intense battle.”

“Yeah. Even just in my own unit, there were almost sixty knights and soldiers who died... Randy Hudley, Roy Hoken, Sopar, Dexter, Harry, Cody, Aster, Vince, Jeff Sutherton, Derrick, Duncan, Dwayne, Harry Eliott, Shelly Eliott, Earl, Clarissa White, Dom, Graham, Giles, George, George Green, Andre, Ray Wollstonecraft, Gren Savery, Gus Savery, Ray Savery, Ann, Clave, Claire Sums, Zack, Gilbert,

Saki, Greg, Bugsy, Mickey, Hal Hoover, Ken, Jensen, Mallory, Eric, Hanson, Roxie, Charley, Raund, Erech Campbell, Leroy O'Connell, Riley Henderson, Martin, Shoho, Jack Carlisle, Richard, Samuel, Hans, John Stanley, Daniel White, Christiana, Jeff Soke, Quentin... We lost a lot of good people." The names came easily to Gaius's lips as he looked out into the distance.

Sashalia watched him, more than a little surprised. "You remember them very well..."

"Hm? I suppose."

"I heard the second battle to capture Moonglow Castle was a rough one. Do you remember all of them, too...?"

"I do," said Gaius, and he named another almost thirty people.

"What about Trincy?" That was another twenty names.

"The defense of Minoch." Ten or so.

"The second battle at Jerone." Twenty-five.

"The seventh defensive battle at Madentia." Twelve names.

"And the battle of Vesperia?"

"Miraculously, everyone survived that one. Though Shin got his arm broken by a mace."

"What did we have for dinner last night?"

"Huh?! U-Umm, err, hmm... kobroth?"

"...We had horned boar meat and a mushroom and egg stir-fry. Darke's going to be angry with you."

Gaius groaned, shoulders slumping.

Sashalia watched him and giggled.

"...Is it that amusing?" Gaius scratched his head bashfully. Sashalia smiled in response.

"It is." *It really is. He can't even remember what he had for dinner last night, but he'll never forget the names of each and every friend and subordinate he*

lost long ago in the war. That's the kind of person he is. Sashalia was delighted to confirm to herself that the person she'd chased after was exactly who she thought he was.

"All right, let's get back, Sir Gaius. Darke is probably finishing up dinner right now, and Blossom was helping her today."

"That's sweet of her. What about Fluff?"

"Fluff declared, 'I'll help!' and tried to put a beetle into the pot, at which point Blossom bravely subdued him."

"Don't really want to imagine beetle stew."

"We owe much to Blossom's reflexes tonight."

"Indeed." Gaius stood with a grunt. "Shall we?"

"Let's."

"Can you make it back on your own?" Gaius was concerned for Sashalia, who wasn't fully used to the cane yet.

"I can. I'm a little tired, though..." The redhead took a breath and asked with trembling lips, "C-Could I impose on you to h-hold my h-hand?"

"It would be no imposition at all."

Gaius bent down and Sashalia gripped one of his thick fingers in her hand. They took slow, slow steps back to the house. In truth, it was actually harder to walk this way, but Sashalia didn't mind that one bit.

*

"Are you really going to use this, Sir?" the young knight with unruly brown hair—Seligman—asked Wyatt. His movement caused the light coating of dust on everything in the room, an inner chamber of the armory, to whirl into the air. "It's too dangerous."

Seligman's attention was on a suit of red infantry armor being displayed on a stand. At a glance, it looked like an old-fashioned set of full body armor, but upon closer inspection it offered little protection to all but the most vital areas in order to lessen its weight as much as possible. It made sense that many who

didn’t know its intended purpose and function would assume it was a decorative suit, only fit for ceremonial use.

Battlefield tactics had long been dominated by the use of sorcerers and the arrow-deflecting methods they employed. In order to make their deployment practical, armor had developed into two divergent styles: one providing thick protection for magically supported soldiers, and one light enough to ensure mobility. With that in mind, the red armor appeared to fall into the latter category. Touching it was enough to make it obvious that aside from the torso section it barely qualified as armor at all. It should have been more realistic, then, to just wear the breastplate by itself, but there was a reason in this case for the red metal to cover the entire body.

“In the event that we are defeated in this battle, we will not get another chance. So I will bring everything I have to bear, and use everything I must.”

Wyatt’s fingers traced a black pattern that had been engraved in the red coating on the armor. It was a magic crest, a curse mark that had been modified for practical magical use. The magic staves that had come into popular use in recent years were made of a mithril alloy and employed a magic crest that worked to refine the magical elements inside of a caster. Using such a staff would allow someone with no magical abilities to fire offensive magic, though only of one type. In other words, anyone could instantly be counted as magical firepower with one of these staves. The utility of that was instantly recognizable to anyone involved with the military, which was why as soon as this realization hit, every major power began gathering up magic staves and the mithril needed to produce them. Some even melted down magic swords in their possession to extract the mithril from them.

This suit of armor was almost like a magic staff that could be worn over the entire body. It was imbued not with attack magic, however, but with a strengthening spell. The thin layer of armor over the wearer’s body was not meant for defense, but to enhance the wearer’s power and agility. It was offensive armor.

While he had been in the capital for his training, Wyatt had used his connections to obtain this failed prototype the Igris royal engineers had been developing. It had been used once in a trial, then put into storage.

“But you suffered injuries the last time you wore it. Burns, broken bones, dislocated joints.”

There was a reason it had been deemed a failure. Mithril was required to activate the magical seal, but there was no reason to use so much mithril, enough to make multiple staves, just to strengthen one foot soldier. The armor’s performance simply did not justify its price. Worst of all, this attack armor forced all the burden of its effects onto its wearer’s body. The strain of movement, of its weight, even the heat the crest let off when it activated. This was a problem that could have been solved by increasing the purity of the mithril alloy, but that solution was untenable.

“That only happened because I had it activated for too long. But now I know how to use it and what its limits are. My body and this Scarlet Plate will both perform better next time.”

“But there’s no reason that you should have to use it yourself, Sir.”

“Are you volunteering then, Seligman?”

“You jest.” The young knight gulped and shook his head. In actuality, it had become rather difficult lately to discern when his superior was joking due to the ghastly expression always on his face.

“Anyway, how are our preparations coming along?”

“We should have all our food, water, medicine, shields, and the carts and people to carry them ready by our departure tomorrow.”

“I’m impressed. You had barely any time to put all of it together.”

It had been about four weeks since their defeat, and Wyatt and his men had been preparing for their next assault ever since, enduring a burning impatience all the while.

“Thank you.” Seligman had a surname, but was a commoner-turned-knight. He had caught Wyatt’s eye in part because of his origins and in part because he was a promising, ambitious young man. “We were able to recruit a considerable number of adventurers right up until the last minute. We’re covering the expenses and offering a reward, after all. They’re all eager to make names for themselves along with some money.”

“I see. I suppose we can’t expect any solidarity between these adventurers when it’s still every man for himself.”

“Well, for them, everyone outside of their immediate party is another business rival. Even so, I was able to gather two hundred ninety-eight people outside of those who can’t totally be depended upon. Counting temporary hires pulled in from elsewhere, we have three hundred twenty-five total fighters.”

“So three hundred thirty-one counting you, me, Dawson, Heatley, Ashcroft, and Humphreys.”

As part of their cover-up for Lady Keighley of House Zigan, they’d imposed a tight gag order on the participants in their previous mission regarding Gaius Beldarus’s presence among the kobolds. They’d used both money and threats to accomplish this. If they hadn’t, there likely would have been a lot fewer recruits for this mission, scared off by the very name “the Black Rose of Igris.” There were many, in fact, who had refused to come along a second time even under the threat of punishment. However, Wyatt didn’t have the time or patience to convince them.

Of course, no matter how much money was thrown around, people would talk, especially when “people” meant dozens of mercenary thugs. The more time went by, the fewer other adventurers were likely to join the mission, and the danger of the Black Rose of Igris informing the other lords of Keighley’s plotting increased. If the lords grew suspicious of the Adventurers’ Guild’s actions and Gaius Beldarus’s presence and looked into things, that would be it for them. Wyatt needed to put an end to things himself before that could happen, no matter what it took to do it. He had taken the absolute most time he could spend on his preparations. This was it.

He would reduce that village to ashes. Exterminate the kobolds. Dispose of Gaius and everyone else involved.

As long as we can cover this all up, the situation can be salvaged. Wyatt told himself, tracing the pattern on the armor once more.

“If I don’t get rid of him, it’s over for us and for Lady Keighley. I’ll kill him... I will kill him.”

...No, that’s not right. That wasn’t it at all. Of course, avoiding his downfall

was part of it, but the burning emotion fueling him originated from elsewhere. That man had mocked him, had rejected him. A hero he had respected. And he, Wyatt, was going to take him down with his own hands. No, with every resource he'd amassed.

He'd used and abused all the authority he had to put as many pieces in place as he could. He'd even spent all his personal funds. He didn't care. How could he?

How much is any of it worth, really? If I don't defeat you, I mean nothing. If I don't destroy you, I can't acknowledge myself.

Gaius Beldarus. I set out now with the sole goal of killing you.

Chapter 2: Approach

[Forest Edge 2 to Command Center: Multiple enemies spotted.]

[Riverbed Entrance to Command Center: Enemies approaching. Number: over 300.]

[Riverbed 2 to Command Center: Enemy movement. Entering riverbed.]

[Riverbed Entrance to Command Center: Enemy detachment remaining in position.]

[Riverbed 1 to Command Center: Riverbed 1 in pursuit.]

[Command Center to Scout 2, Scout 3: Investigate enemy.]

The Kingdom received a report from a lookout and burst into a flurry of activity, but not panic. This was partly because everyone there fully expected another attack to be coming, and partly because their new spirit-speak system made early detection of the enemy and information sharing easy for them.

“The enemy combatants number between three hundred and three hundred fifty. There are also carts and people carrying supplies. A group of them have set up camp at the mouth of the riverbed, but...the majority are proceeding down the river.” Hopping Rabbit summarized the spirit-speak reports.

“Thank you,” Sashalia replied, returning her gaze to the map. “So they’ve entered the forest.”

She was seated in the command center, which was now taking on the purpose it had been built for. With her were Gaius, Darke, Dwaemon, and the remaining kobold warriors, all gathered for a war meeting.

“Will they come straight to the village?” Red Eye asked Sashalia, seated where he wouldn’t be in the way of the housewife alliance.

“No. They didn’t make camp at the forest’s edge, which means... it’s likely that they plan to spend a night in the forest, despite the risks. The sun would

set before they reached the village, and humans don't like to fight in the dark. Especially in the forest, they'd never want to attack at night."

"So we'll attack them while they're asleep?"

"As much as I'd like to say yes, I imagine they'll be expecting that and plan accordingly. It would be dangerous to pit our smaller numbers against their main force as well. And if we don't draw them farther in, we can't use our traps. We'll have to hold off this time."

Red Eye smiled at the words "this time." The fledgling general was planning to win. Win and fight again.

"However, that doesn't mean we have to let them get a good night's sleep. Rain Grass?"

"Yes'm!" Rain Grass answered vigorously from beside Gaius.

"Take five soldiers from our attack forces and hit them a few times before dawn. But avoid close-range combat at all costs. They wouldn't camp inside the Greatwood completely unprepared. They'll have watchfires and hidden sentries. You shouldn't get too close."

"We can't attack 'em even if they're vulnerable?"

"Absolutely not. It'll be enough to just fire arrows at them randomly. Then you can just hoot and holler at them; make them think you're attacking. All we want to do is prevent them from getting a sound sleep."

"Yeah, if it's hollering you want, Rain Grass is your man." A laugh went through the kobolds at Red Eye's words.

"I'm gonna remember that after the battle, ya jerks!" Rain Grass threw his fists up, promising revenge. Gaius picked him up and set him on his knee, holding him down and petting him vigorously.

"Wehehehehahahaheeheehee!" The flax-colored soldier squirmed, hollering with laughter, which just set off the crowd watching once more.

"When the meeting is over, take your soldiers and get some rest, Rain Grass. You'll want to withdraw quickly and rest briefly after your night attacks, too."

"Weeheeheehahaha!"

“Unlike last time, we’re facing a large, well-supplied force. They’re marching slowly, alert for ambushes, and so the fighting will probably begin around noon tomorrow.”

Everyone nodded.

“Wehehahahahoohoohoo!”

“Sir Gaius, Rain Grass, please be quiet!”

“Sorry,” they said together.

“...Now, we’ll take the formation I went over two days ago.” Rabbit quickly began lining up stones on the map, Sashalia dictating their placement.

There were three major combat units with different roles: the riverbed unit, led by Gaius, tasked with holding off the enemies coming down the river; an offensive unit led by Darke made up of the most capable warriors among the men; and a kobold unit to intercept the enemy in the forest. Furthermore, the riverbed and kobold units were divided into smaller squads, each with a leader and spirit messenger.

“We’re getting detailed reports of the enemy’s movements, so we don’t need to worry about a surprise assault. Tomorrow’s going to be a busy day, so I want everyone to get an early rest tonight. You may also drink, in moderation. Report back at dawn. You are dismissed.”

“Yes, ma’am!” replied the kobolds, heading home for the night.

“Want to come to my place before you turn in? I made some honey wine that’s just perfect right now; my wife’s filtered some.”

“Ooh, sounds good. Count me in.”

“Man, the stuff I made went bad.”

“You’re always trying to make more of it, so you put in too much water.”

It was a merry scene. They all understood the devastating difference in fighting power between them and their enemy, but there was no sense of grim determination or fear in the room. This was likely due in part to their life in the Greatwood, of which some amount of sacrifice was always a natural part. But they also had faith in Gaius and Sashalia, and the optimism their leaders

displayed.

The general watched as her soldiers left, then turned back to the map, muttering “Okay,” to herself. The board already displayed the locations of her enemy in black stones and her allies in white, and the army of adventurers moving down the riverbed was being adjusted every time a report about their movements came in.

...They would have to mobilize the entire Kobold Kingdom. Their numbers would be a bit larger than last time, since this time they would be including boys and female hunters. But their defensive strategy required a good amount of personnel acting as scouts and spirit messengers, so their actual fighting kobolds numbered forty-five. With the addition of Gaius, Darke, and Dwaemon, the Kobold Kingdom’s full fighting strength was forty-eight people.

As for their enemy, more detailed reports had come in, estimating their numbers at three hundred thirty.

Forty-eight versus three hundred thirty.

The historical record had examples of armies facing such disadvantages and repelling their enemies. It had plenty. But though Gaius and Darke were skilled fighters, the forty-five kobold soldiers couldn’t be measured on the same scale as humans. And the battlefield was not a fortress or confined terrain that would make up for the difference in numbers. If this situation were an assignment at the Knight Academy, the instructor who proposed it would likely have his teaching qualifications questioned.

Sashalia let out a slow breath. *And if I were a student, I’d be the first to complain to the instructor.*

She’d conferred with Gaius, Darke, and everyone else, and come up with a plan. She was confident in it. She thought she was, at least.

No, I am.

Her spirit-speak information network was functioning better than she’d imagined it would. They were able to set many more traps than they’d initially planned to, and they’d had enough time to finish their secret weapon, too. She’d received a report from the hunters that they’d captured a crucial

component to her plan as well. Even better, morale among the kobolds was high due to their friendships with and trust in Gaius and Sashalia.

And they're going to die for my plan and my orders. She'd prepared herself for this to some extent, but it was hard to face now that it was right around the corner. She didn't mind fighting herself, but this was different. She had never experienced sending her comrades to their deaths before, and it made her heart ache to do so. *But everyone's already resolved themselves to this. I'm the only one still having second thoughts this late in the game.*

Gaius made a point to speak to her as the king sometimes, making it clear that she worked under his will as leader. She appreciated the thought. In a military organization, responsibility lay with the highest-ranking person, and that wasn't Sashalia. Logically, she understood all this, of course. *But still...* She bit her lip, nails digging into her upper arms. *No, that's exactly why. I have to make the most effective use of them. The lives of the kobolds.*

And in this situation, the only one who could do that was Sashalia. She would expend the lives of the kobolds because that was how she could repay their friendship and trust.

I will *defeat the enemies of Sir Gaius and the kobolds. I can't stand on two feet and wield a sword anymore, but I can support everyone from here. No, I can thrive here. I can stand beside him, here.*

Just try it, enemies of mine. However many hundreds of you come, you will all fall. Right here, this command center, this board... This *is my battlefield.*

*

The next day came and those resting to ready themselves for the battle awoke and set about making their final preparations.

Sashalia had already headed for the command center from Gaius's residence, and Darke and Emon were heading to the square where everyone was to gather. The last one remaining, Gaius, was speaking to the children before he left.

"You won't go away like Mom did, right, Uncle? Right? I don't want you to go away... Tell me you won't?" Fluff was mustering all the strength in his tiny body

to cling to Gaius's leg. Even if he didn't fully understand the situation, he could pick up on the strange air all around him.

"Of course I won't. I would never leave you." Gaius spoke calmly, gently patting Fluff's fuzzy head. "Blossom, take Fluff and go to Red Eye's house. Listen to what the missus tells you and take shelter with everyone there."

"I hate this. If I were a little bit older, I'd be able to fight with you, Uncle." Amber Blossom ground her teeth in frustration.

Gaius put his other hand to Blossom's cheek and stroked it gently. "It's just too soon this time."

And after soothing the children for a short time, he told Blossom, "Okay, I'm counting on you."

Blossom nodded reluctantly, sniffling, and pulled a whining Fluff off of Gaius's leg, teeth and claws and all, dragging him out of the house.

As he watched them leave through the entryway, Gaius could see non-combatants from all over the kingdom taking shelter in the same way as the sun rose. Similar scenes of parting were playing out everywhere, as fathers and sons went off to battle. Gaius watched them silently for a time.

This was something he'd seen countless times before. He was used to it. But that didn't make it any easier. *I pray their true partings take a much different form.* He took up his sword to make that a reality, and to fulfill a promise to a friend.

*

In the square, everyone was dressed in their battle attire, checking the status of their arms and armor. Gaius was likewise knelt down next to Claudette, checking the slack and knots on the ropes tied around his mud golem steed.

"What are ye doin', old man?" Dwaemon asked from behind Gaius.

"I don't know how many times I'll be crossing blades today, and weapons become unusable for all sorts of reasons. I'm taking plenty of spares on Claudette. Plus... I don't want to worry about magic and arrows."

Emon took a closer look at the golem and noticed weapons tied to Claudette's

body, almost like vegetables being strung up to dry in the sun. There were axes, spears, war picks, and Gaius's trusty faussar. "Aha, I get it, ye're hangin' all these weapons on 'er for armor." The pieces of metal hanging down the steed's sides did indeed look protective.

"Mm, there's that too."

"How're ye gonna ride her this way, though?"

"I'm not. She's just going to come with me. You could say she's my porter-slash-shield."

Emon gave a noncommittal humph before sulking and grumbling, "Aww, I wish I were in yer unit, too."

"Why? You have a very important mission."

Emon was stationed at the command center to defend it. This was partly because he didn't have the forest maneuverability or offensive strength required for their strategy, but also because Gaius had pushed Sashalia to station him there.

"I know. Well, see yeh." Of course, to Emon, it seemed he was being removed from the front lines because of his inexperience and not because he was more suited for a different position. Still, a younger Emon would have complained a lot more. The fact that he hadn't meant that the dwarf was learning.

"Emon."

"What?"

"I leave the defense to you. I know you'll protect them, no matter what it takes."

Tactics, suitability, the possibility of the enemy breaking through the defensive line... there were many ways Gaius could try to convince Emon, but he didn't mention any of them. He didn't need to. He knew that was all it would take.

"...S-Sure I will! 'Course I will! Just leave it to me!" The boy's eyes sparkled as he clapped a fist to his chest. "I won't let 'em lay a finger on Sashalia or any o' the old biddies at the command center!"

“I know you won’t.” Gaius patted Emon on the shoulder after seeing that the young dwarf had accepted his orders. He then headed to the command center to meet with the spirit messenger who would be paired with him.

*

“Caaaptain Daaarke, ma’aaam!”

“Hm?” Darke stopped when the unfamiliar voice called out to her. She turned around to see a blue-furred kobold stretching up to stand as tall as he possibly could.

“I too wish to join your attack squad, Captain Darke, ma’am! Please allow me to accompany your unit!”

“I believe Lady Denan decided the battle formations. I can’t say I approve of you abandoning your assigned unit.”

“I was not assigned to a position by Her Excellency!”

“That’s strange...” Darke cocked her head and thought for a moment, then turned back to the kobold and quickly hit upon the reason. The blue kobold was too young. “How old are you, pup?”

“I just reached adulthood a few days ago, ma’am!”

“Don’t lie. I saw you just recently swarming around Sir Gaius with the other pups.” He was probably the equivalent of a fourteen-or fifteen-year-old human. Darke didn’t know his exact age, but he was clearly still young enough to be called a boy. His body was well-developed enough that he was bigger than the average adult, however. Before living in this village, she probably wouldn’t have been able to tell the difference.

“I believe! In our current predicament! Even one more soldier could make a difference!”

“Why are you so intense?”

“The general taught me to read! And allowed me to peruse some of her textbooks and war records! I would conjecture that it is due to their influence, ma’am!”

“You’re a real studious one, huh?”

“I have also been diligent in my training! I am confident I would not hold you back, so please, ma’am! I beg of youuu!”

True, she also remembered seeing this boy participating earnestly in Gaius’s martial arts classes. She was sure he would be more skilled than the average kobold fighter...but he was young. “There are plenty of things you can do without having to join my unit, are there not? You could help the ladies in the command center like Pinecone Fur, or the spirit-speak scouts—”

“I do not possess the skills of a shaman!” The boy clenched his teeth in frustration. “This is the only way! That I may be of use to His Majesty King Gaius! And Her Excellency General Sashalia, who put her life on the line to become our shield!”

“Was the policy not to put children on the front lines not in those textbooks you read?”

“It was! However, Sir Emon has yet to come of age and he is counted among the combatants!”

“Sure, but he’s lived about fifteen times as long as you have. He’s like an elder to you guys.”

“However, if his life span is taken into account, his relative age is about the same as mine!”

He had that retort ready... Darke clucked her tongue in annoyance. “Emon’s fighting to protect you guys...”

“Just as Sir Emon desires to protect us! I wish to be of use to His Majesty, Her Excellency, and you, Captain Darke!” Shouting in a voice now half-plea and half-howl, the blue-furred boy put a fist to his chest. He was likely mimicking an Igris-style salute that he’d seen Sashalia or someone else performing at some point.

“Terrible. You’re not supposed to put your hand on your heart, you’re supposed to be raising your sword up in front of your eyes.” But it was almost like Darke was seeing a certain black-haired girl in front of her. The things they bore were completely different, but the path they were on was similar. It made her feel rather nostalgic. “There are idiots who lie about their age all over the

place, huh... Of course, it was the opposite way for me...”

Darke scratched the back of her head, a wry smile on her face. But she quickly stopped, a serious expression replacing the smile. “Your king is fighting to protect you! Knowing that, understanding that, do you still wish to fight, even if ignoring the king’s intentions could incur his displeasure?!”

“That’s correct, ma’am!”

“Very well! You may join my unit!”

“Thank you ma’am! I swear you won’t regret this!”

Darke reached inside her cape and pulled a dagger out of its sheath, throwing it suddenly at the blue kobold, who caught it without so much as a hint of surprise. “What’s your name, recruit?!”

“Blue Gale, ma’am!”

“All right, Blue Gale, come with me!” Darke spun around and resumed walking. Blue Gale hopped after her. “We’ll both accept our scolding from Sir Gaius later! So until then, you are not permitted to die, soldier!”

“Understood, ma’am!”

As Darke continued on, that voice at her back, there was a warm smile on her face unlike any expression she usually made.

*

“You want me to wear this?” Gaius asked when one of the housewives in the command center handed him a rucksack made of bugbear skin.

All the wives gave a firm nod at his question. They seemed quite confident in their craftsmanship.

“Yes. It’s lined with armor that we seized from the adventurers in the last battle. That and the natural toughness of the bugbear skin should provide a decent amount of protection.”

Gaius peered into the rucksack and found breastplates sewn into it as per Sashalia’s explanation. To make it lighter, there was no armor on the side that would be against his back, and it had been made to be fairly spacious inside. “I

get it. My spirit messenger will ride in here." There were handholds inside for a kobold to hold himself up with, and cushioning in case of impacts to the bag; anything to increase its occupant's chances of survival.

"Our strategy necessitates synchronization using spirit-speak. But no messenger could keep up with you in a melée, Sir Gaius. This will allow your spirit messenger to accompany you. Please...tolerate the extra weight."

"It's perfectly all right. I think this is a great idea. And hey, it's great work." Gaius laughed heartily and the housewives all puffed their chests out proudly. "So, who's coming with me?"

"Th-Th-That would be m-m-me!" A young kobold emerged, raising a trembling hand.

"Ah, Brown Turtle. I'll be counting on you."

"Y-Y-Yes! H-H-Happy to help, G-G-Gai—I mean, Your Majefty!" On top of barely getting the words out, he slipped on the king's title as well. It was clear to everyone there that he was out of his mind with nervousness.

"Hahaha. No need to be so stiff."

"I-I-I'm quite a-a-all right!" He said, clearly not all right at all. Sashalia nibbled on the knuckle of her index finger, unsure of how to proceed, when...

"You are not all right," came a hoarse voice, which everyone turned toward. An old kobold with drooping ears and fur that had lost its luster walked toward them, supported by a cane and tapping a fist against his stooped back. "Switch with me, Brown Turtle. I'll ride with him."

"E-Elder?!"

"Old man!"

"Hey, old-timer."

"Grandpa?!"

Various shouts of surprise came from the crowd, the final one a shocked cry from his granddaughter, Hopping Rabbit.

"I-I-It's not a problem. D-D-Don't worry about m-m-me."

“He’s right, Grandpa! You know you’re too old to do something like this!”

“Can it! Criminy... Listen here, Brown Turtle. Your job is not to get in that bag and let this big lug haul you around. It’s to keep your cool while you’re being tossed around on his back and concentrate enough to send and receive spirit-speak messages and convey them to him. The way you are now, can you do that?” His cloudy eyes glared at Brown Turtle from behind drooping fur.

“Uh, ugh, I... probably...”

“It’s too soon for you. But I can do it. After all, there’s no one in the village... no, in the kingdom, who excels at spirit magic more than me. I am naturally the most accustomed to spirit-speak. Isn’t that right?”

No one could dispute the elder’s words. Brown Turtle was surely feeling anxious about his assignment as well. With nothing more than a small whine, he went silent, flattening his ears.

“Fret not, young one. Giving an old man with not much time left one last chance to shine is just part of that... what was it, ‘elder care’? Whatever the little lady spoke of. I’ll take over this time, eh?” The elder winked at him and the young kobold slowly nodded, yielding his position to the old man. “...We’re all in agreement, then. I’ll ride in that thing. What say you, King?”

“The kingdom’s most skilled shaman will be accompanying me. Nothing could be more reassuring.”

The two of them stared at one another for a few seconds, then bared their teeth at each other in a grin.

“You’re all right with it as well, little lady?”

“Any sudden changes are inconvenient, but...this seems to be for the best. Come here, Brown Turtle. I’ll assign you a new post.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” Clearly relieved, Brown Turtle obediently made his way over to Sashalia.

The situation resolved, the housewives and other kobolds all set about returning to their various tasks. All that was left was for everyone to perform to their utmost at their own assignments.

...And just like that, the soldiers had their final rest, finished their preparations, and left the village to meet the adventurers in combat.

This was the Kobold Kingdom Army's first sortie.

*

Were they a regular army, the battalion would have had mages capable of deflecting arrows in its ranks, but unfortunately, no such magic-users were registered with the Ryburgh Adventurers' Guild. Of course, people who could use real "magic" were extremely rare in the largely human southern territories, and were much more skilled than the "sorcerers" who manipulated the magical elements inside their own bodies to merely mimic the miraculous. The truly powerful mages were kept close by royals and nobles, and would likely never fall to the status of a lowly adventurer.

This was why Wyatt and his men were forced to rely on a much more practical method than divine miracles to deal with the kobolds' arrows, which had caused so much confusion last time. Obviously they had neither the time nor the connections to hire a mage, but another reason they could not hire one was that many of the adventurers used bows or crossbows themselves. Arrow-deflection magic needed to cover large areas and last a long time, so it would neutralize the arrows being shot by their allies as well as any incoming missiles.

With their limited time, the countermeasure the Adventurers' Guild had thought up and implemented was to carry large but thin wooden shields. It wouldn't be inaccurate to describe them as nothing but boards with a handle attached to them; they were crude and offered little protection, but it was unlikely that the kobolds' thin, short arrows would be able to penetrate them. In any case, Wyatt had had very few options when it came to things that could be prepared and outfitted to each and every adventurer in his army.

The solution was laughably simple but ended up being the correct one, as the adventurers found when they entered the forest and their new shields protected them from the terror of the arrows. What proved even more effective was that the equipment could be repurposed for use in their encampment the night before the battle. Those who had participated in the previous assault had been forced to flee not only the kobolds but the setting

sun as well. This time, knowing the risks, the adventurers decided to make camp in the Greatwood for the night in order to have as much time as they could for fighting the next day. Of course, this forest was the kobolds' territory, and the veil of darkness was no friend to humans. Spending a night there would be the same as lying down with their vulnerable flanks exposed and shouting, "Come and get us!"

That was where this equipment came in. The humans entered the forest with caution and deliberation, using their many shields to create a dense circle. To those with military knowledge, they resembled a "tortoise formation" used by ancient infantrymen, all of them protecting one another with their large shields. Thus protected, they could leave some soldiers lying in wait for an ambush while others could rest in shifts. That was how the adventurers made their camp for the night.

The adventurers' instant shield walls, while almost resembling the kind of "fortress" a child might build, successfully defended them from the kobolds' raids. In fact, if the kobolds had launched a full-on attack, they would have been met with a sound counterattack. The only thing the guild hadn't been prepared for was the thoroughness with which the kobolds launched their harassment (and *only* harassment) all throughout the night. Every so often, they surprised the adventurers by shooting arrows into their shields, and prevented them from resting with hair-raising cries, eerie laughter, or panic-inducing yodeling. Even if the kobolds weren't attacking outright, the adventurers could get no rest by the time dawn came.

Mentally and physically exhausted, the adventurers were now trudging wearily up the riverbed. They were drowsy and hadn't recovered from any of yesterday's fatigue. Exhaustion dominated their minds and bodies.

Still, most of the adventurers were cocky. They simply had an overwhelming advantage in terms of fighting strength. Everything that Guildmaster Wyatt had explained to them, that the previous attackers had told them, and that those captured and released by the kobolds reported backed up their confidence. The kobolds were poor fighters, and there weren't many of them in the first place. The arrow attacks that had caused the humans so much confusion last time were nullified by the shields they'd brought with them. There were two skilled

humans among the kobold fighters, but any intelligent human who realized how outnumbered they were would surely not engage them. If anything, the most dangerous things the attackers might encounter on their march would be the magical beasts that lived along the edges of the Greatwood. With their numbers, though, they could handle as many as a dozen of the sort of beasts found in the area.

Some of those who had joined the group had done so in the hopes of finding valuable goods and making off with them on their own. For most of the adventurers present, this mission was nothing more than a profitable job with all expenses paid by the guild. The only people who didn't think that way were the six knights who were coming along, including Wyatt, and those adventurers who had participated in the last disastrous attempt and had still come along for a second try. Some of the newcomers even laughed at the "cowardice" of their leaders for demanding strict caution from them. Wyatt couldn't condemn the new participants for their confidence, of course. He was hampered by his own gag order about the details of this mission, including the presence of the Black Rose of Igris. That gag order was the reason for the stark difference in attitude between those who knew what they would be facing and those who didn't know what to expect from the mission.

So, most of the adventurers were under the assumption that the puny beast-men were simply incapable of putting up anything but the most laughable of resistances...until the kobolds cut into the rear of their company. How could they have known?

Chapter 3: The Defense of the Kobold Kingdom

Over twenty kobolds and one human burst silently from the foliage and rushed at the flank of the unaware adventurers.

“Ack?!” The first to cry out in pain was a large female warrior in infantry armor as she took a stone spear in the shin. She was better equipped than the typical adventurer, who often opted for lighter gear both out of fiscal necessity and due to the nature of their work, but her armor still lacked greaves. For the diminutive kobolds, that made the legs an optimal target.

A nearby sorcerer took another attack in the legs and doubled over.

A long-haired adventurer with a spear took a stone axe to the face when a flax-colored kobold leapt on him, and he fell backwards, unconscious.

Shouts of shock and pain instantly shifted the relaxed atmosphere to one of panic.

The individual doing the most damage to the adventurers was a human woman in a black cloak and a brimmed cap: Darke. She wove through the kobolds and darted past her enemies with an agility belying her five-foot-nine frame, heading straight for one man. Her target was one of the group’s commanders, a knight. He was marching within the group on foot to avoid being an obvious target for arrow fire, but a discerning eye could see easily enough from his equipment that he was no simple adventurer.

Darke reached the knight before he could turn around. She pressed herself against the man’s back and wrapped her left arm around him as if in an embrace. A quick stroke of her hand flicked the visor of the knight’s helm up, just as she drew a dagger from under her cloak with her right hand and thrust it into his face.

Plunge. The blade was a stiletto, a dagger specialized for stabbing through gaps in armor. The thin, sharp, awl-like blade easily pierced the knight’s left eye and entered his skull.

Twist. Darke stirred the blade around with a heated sigh. She then let go of the knife and her victim without drawing the blade out and turned around. It took only a short moment for her target to crumple, all bodily control gone. The sheer speed at which she accomplished this made clear how extraordinary her skills were.

“The bitch got Dawson!” A nearby man with a shortspear screamed, spittle flying, and tried to grab the black-clad assassin by the neck. Darke easily avoided the man’s arm, turning her back to him and dashing off. He tried to chase her, but was hindered when a kobold leapt at him and threw an egg in his eye. Not just any egg; this was a shell filled with ashes and spices meant to blind. The adventurer yelped and fell to the ground, at which point another kobold hacked at his legs with a stone axe.

...This was all they were capable of, of course. Some adventurers paid attention and guarded against the attacks, and some were able to fend them off by just shoving back instinctively. The shields all the adventurers had been equipped with were being used in several different ways, but they proved effective in defending against the kobolds’ attack. This wasn’t the purpose Wyatt had had in mind when outfitting his troops, but the wooden boards were able to protect those without armor. Some were even being put to use as walls to prevent kobolds from escaping their ranks.

“They got meeeee!” Whether the kobold’s shout was an act or genuine was impossible to say as it immediately became a pitiful scream. Those who merely had their attacks blocked were lucky; they had a chance to weave between their enemies and make it out the other side. But those whose escapes were cut off were met with the quick reflexes of their foes and the steel they wielded. Heavy blows broke their bones and slashes cut through fur and flesh. With the screams of their dying comrades at their backs, the escaping kobolds threw down their weapons and fled into the forest.

“They’re fleeing! After them!” The eager shout came from a grey-haired warrior in leather armor who had just caved in a kobold skull with a mace. He was likely a leader of some team. Several of his companions nearby rushed into the forest at his command. Some others followed their lead, throwing down their shields and abandoning the wounded to run after them.

“This is all they’re capable of!”

“They’re nothing!”

“The guildmaster’s worrying too much!”

Their blood was pumping from the surprise attack, and they were invigorated after blocking the kobolds’ blows. They looked down on their enemies for their powerlessness. All these things encouraged the adventurers, driving them forward.

“Hey, that swordswoman in black was the one who’s worth twenty of these dogs, right?”

“Yeah! If we can get her head, we can live like kings for ten years!”

“Well, don’t just stand there! I’m going after her!”

“I’ll be right there as soon as I get the head off this dog... Hey, wait!”

Adventurers poured into the forest, not wanting to give their rivals who went in before them the chance to monopolize their prey.

“Guys, wait, we fell for that last time, and...” Of course, those who had been present for the previous battle hesitated to join them. They knew full well that they’d lost because they had been lured into the forest and led in circles. But for nine out of ten of the participants of this mission, this was their first encounter with the kobolds.

“If you’re too scared, you can just wait here in your own piss!”

“Did you get freaked out by these primitive little bastards and their rocks?!”

Once stirred up, their fervor and rage couldn’t be quieted. Worse, the only one who could order them to stop had already perished. Their colleagues’ half-hearted warnings would only be written off as petty jealousy. As a result, having lost their commander, the middle flank fell into disorder and a significant portion of its adventurers flooded into the forest. The warnings of the knights and Wyatt, who were at the front of the line, wouldn’t make it in time. There was nothing that could be done about it, but their long line of soldiers had gone to ruin.

In a mixed group like this with a cautious commander, all you have to do is

take their leader out and you'll be fine. That was Gaius's advice to Sashalia when she had questioned whether or not they could pull off the same trick they'd used in the last battle. Sashalia Denan deeply respected Gaius Beldarus, not only as a man but also as the Black Rose of Igris: she had faith in his experience, skills, and instincts. So she'd believed him, and crafted and executed a strategy based on his advice. Darke's swift execution of the group's commanding officer, with the help of their scouts and the kobolds' noses, contributed greatly to the success of this strategy.

[Attack team to command center: Enemy diverted.]

The report consisted of only two words, but in order to obtain those two words, they'd had to expend incredible effort and make terrible sacrifices.

Kobold deaths: four. Adventurer deaths: two.

These were the results of the first battle in the defense of the Kobold Kingdom.

*

As Darke ran through the trees, a kobold came up next to her, waving his arms.

"Hahaaa! I got one of 'em!" It was Rain Grass, who was part of her attack team. Just like in the last battle, he'd achieved results right away this time, too.

"How are our losses?" Darke was calm despite her successful assassination of the enemy knight. She knew full well that the battle was only just getting started.

"Leaf Tail got a cut on his leg. And...we lost Sand Head."

"We got an update from the command center. Two dead in squad four, one dead and one seriously injured in squad six," the young spirit messenger of the attack team reported to Rain Grass. She was a female kobold who often went on hunts and had been assigned to the unit for her combat experience and her strong legs. "The injured one can't run, so he's hiding in the bushes. Hopefully he stays hidden until it's safe..." The kobolds simply didn't have the power to

evacuate their wounded at this time. It was cruel, but they'd all acknowledged that in the planning stage. "Command has ordered squads four and six to combine."

"Lady Denan responds quickly, just like I expected."

That last attack had been carried out by the twelve members of the attack unit and four members from each of the six-member squads four, five, and six, for a total of twenty-four fighters. In just that clash, they'd lost six. That was a twenty-five percent loss, and they'd taken the opposition completely by surprise. The math made the overwhelming difference in the two sides' fighting power all the more apparent to the Kingdom's soldiers.

But that fact probably affected the enemy more than it did the kobolds. The sight and sound of the adventurers coming at them through the trees made that clear enough.

"Ooh, we got more on our tails than I thought we would."

"And if they catch up, we're done for, but we aren't allowed to flee as fast as we can... Yeesh, what a pain." Darke stopped even as she complained, drawing a blade from its sheath. It was a single-edged sword known as a hanger. One-third of the blade was double-edged and it was specialized for both cutting and stabbing. The sword was plain, basically just an extended knife, but it was sturdier than a longsword and often used for hunting by the common people. Recently, the people of the southern lands had been making them with longer hilts so that they could be gripped with both hands. Like Gaius, Darke was well-versed in all bladed weapons, but she gave particular favor to this weapon in battle.

"Oh, you gonna fight 'em?"

"There are some stragglers in the back. I think they need a carrot dangled in front of them."

"Sounds fun. I'm in." Rain Grass stood bravely by Darke's side. The axe he clutched in his hand wasn't the stone weapon he'd been swinging in the riverbed, but a fine piece of steel crafted by the blacksmith in Ryburgh. He'd left it along their escape route before the attack. Using stone axes and spears in their raid was part of their act to get the adventurers to underestimate them.

The other kobold soldiers had all switched to their steel weapons as well.

“Everybody else, keep going! We’ll meet up with you in a minute!” After ordering the attack team away, Darke turned to Rain Grass with a smirk. “Mm... You’re quite the manly specimen, aren’t you, Rain Grass? How is it that you’re so unpopular with the kobold ladies?”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Who says I’m unpopular?”

“I recall hearing as much from Lady Fog. Ah, perhaps the fault lies with the childhood incidents I’ve heard about, such as when you imitated a cicada in a tree and peed down from the branches, or when you waved a snake around and it bit you on the crotch... Oh, here they come.”

“Hey, wait a second! What exactly have you heard?!”

“Don’t dawdle, now.”

“...Ah, dammit!”

The two of them ran back the way they’d come and attacked three lightly equipped adventurers, the first who had taken off after the kobolds. While Rain Grass split a blond swordsman’s lower leg open with his axe, Darke removed the left hand of a dual blade wielder and the fingers from a fighter with a battleaxe.

“Okay, let’s go.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

They had neither the time nor the need to finish them off. They spun around and ran off again, leaving the adventurers there to hold their wounds and writhe in pain.

“This is one rough game of tag...”

Eventually, one of the knights or their commander Wyatt would come after them. The adventurers’ battlelust would fade. When that happened, their pursuers would regroup and fall back under Wyatt’s command. This was bound to happen; it was just a matter of time. And once the group had regained its unity, the kobolds would be out of plays to make against them. Before that happened, Darke and her teams had to draw as many of their enemies as they

could to the designated location.

*

“Dawson’s dead!” After receiving that frantic report from the knight Humphreys, Guildmaster Wyatt pushed through the line of stopped men as if swimming upstream. When he finally arrived at the mid-flank section Dawson had been in command of, he found that almost all of the adventurers from this portion of the force had been lured into the forest.

“Damn them...!” He muttered furiously, pulling the thin dagger that had stirred Dawson’s brain out of the knight’s face.

“Sorry, Boss. We tried to stop them.” A middle-aged swordsman who had been along on the previous expedition sighed and made an excuse for himself.

Wyatt nodded, resisting the urge to grimace. It was vexing, but this adventurer had no authority over the others or any real duty to him. The one who’d had the authority was the knight currently lying at his feet. Not to mention it was Wyatt himself who had tried to exploit the adventurers’ greed on this mission.

“How many squads... no, how many men entered the forest?”

“More than eighty, I’d guess.”

This time, he couldn’t hide his grimace.

Reflecting on his earlier mistakes and making sure his forces on the mission included troops with a variety of equipment had backfired. In the last battle, when the chain of command had been interrupted, the adventurers had all become a mob in the blink of an eye. With that in mind, Wyatt had thought to make use of adventuring “parties,” or teams consisting of individuals who often worked together. They often had fixed members with dedicated roles and operated as a cohesive unit, trusting and cooperating with each other. Adventurers generally opposed one another as business rivals, but they were close with the others within their own party, and party leaders understood their groups and how to command them. Wyatt’s aim was to have as many of these autonomous groups as possible, even though it would be harder to manage mixed groups of support units and fighters all battling together. His plan was to

treat his men like skirmishers or small platoons instead of having them fight in a close formation or a line like had been common until recently. It was a smart way to work with what was available to him, but in this case it had worked against him. Rather than an error in judgment, it was more apt to call it simple bad luck.

“This isn’t over yet...” The guildmaster in red armor grasped his jaw in one hand, covering his mouth in thought. Ever since the Five Year War, he’d preferred not to wear helmets so as not to obstruct his field of view. It was a dangerous practice, but he stood by his preference.

Gazing at the healers tending to the injured and the adventurers waiting for orders, he quickly gathered his thoughts and called together the remaining four knights, Seligman, Ashcroft, Humphreys, and Heatley.

“Seligman, Humphreys, take a hundred seventy of those remaining and continue along the river to the kobold village. If our information is right, the path should be flat, so it shouldn’t be a hard march. The enemy will likely try to lure your men into the forest again, so be prepared for that. You can proceed to attack the village when you arrive.”

“Sir!”

“Understood.”

“Ashcroft and I will take thirty and go after our diverted forces, reorganize them, and head for the village from the forest. I’ll leave thirty with you as well, Heatley. Stay here and command our rear forces in Dawson’s place. You’ll relay messages and treat the wounded here.”

Heatley looked a little miffed at being left with the rear guard, but all the young knights replied in the affirmative to Wyatt’s orders.

“The kobolds are clearly trying to pick off smaller groups of us in the forest, so Gaius Beldarus is likely waiting where they’re luring our forces. We don’t have anything to fear from anyone other than him and that woman with the black hair.” His subordinates’ expressions darkened when the name “Beldarus” came up. “I know I’m repeating myself, but Beldarus is our first priority. If we don’t take him out, all of Lady Keighley’s plans will be for naught. Any plans we have of advancement go up in smoke.”

“Is there no chance of him abandoning the village and fleeing?” Ashcroft raised his hand and asked his superior. He was growing a beard to try to hide his baby face.

“I’m afraid that’s impossible.”

“Is there some strategic reason for that?”

“No, it’s just what my gut tells me.”

“Your gut?”

“That’s right. But I’m as sure of it as I am that if I spit it’ll land on the ground. He won’t abandon those dogs. That’s not the kind of man he is. That’s why he won’t just ignore us attacking the village.” He took a breath there. “So I’m changing strategies now that the situation has changed. We’ll attack the village from two places at once with a main force and a detached force led by me. No matter where he shows up, or where he’s hiding, or what his plan is, if we attack the village, he’ll be forced to appear there.”

They were destroying the village largely because of Wyatt’s personal feelings towards Gaius. None of his subordinates knew that, though, and his new plan was sound, so the young knights all went along with it. With the number of knights they had, there was no way for them to execute any tactics more complicated than this, and if they stuck to their original plan of waiting until their full force arrived at the village before launching their attack, the over eighty soldiers that had been lured into the forest could all be killed or at best would simply be useless to them. He couldn’t just throw away a quarter of his full fighting strength before even getting started.

Having foreseen the possibility that they might have to enter the forest, Wyatt had also thought to bring along rangers, scavengers, and hunters who were familiar with the Greatwood. “Hubert’s crew are here this time too, yes? Send them with me. They should know some shortcuts from last time. Also...”

“Him?” At Seligman’s command, a small man in shackles was thrust forth out of the troops. He had a rope around his waist as well, like a criminal.

“You’re going to do some work too, Cyril. And don’t think you’ll be able to get rid of me like you did Hubert.”

The former hunter shrunk under Wyatt's reproachful eye, trembling and nodding desperately.

*

And so, the adventurers' forces were divided. Of course, even when split, each group of them had more than enough strength to crush the entirety of the kobolds' forces on their own. In fact, considering the ground they were now covering, it might have been even more efficient to split them up. Their foes were few and weak, so there was no need to come at them with overwhelming numbers.

In which case, their foe's only strategy was to surprise them again and lead their forces away. Either that, or attack them with arrows like last time. The adventurers kept their focus on the forest around them. They were on guard for surprise attacks from their blind spots.

Which was why when a man nonchalantly stepped into view in front of the main forces entrusted to Seligman and Humphreys on their march down the riverbed, they were more than a little surprised to see him. The man was a ways away along the winding path of the river, but they could see him through the trees that lined the sides of the dry bed. The newcomer was a frighteningly large man resting an axe on each shoulder. The way he ambled towards them with a horse at his side carrying his things seemed almost like a lumberjack on his way to work. But this man was carrying battleaxes, not woodcutters' axes—huge blades the likes of which would take a normal person both hands to lift. He, however, wielded one in each hand like some kind of barbarian warrior from a long-ago tale. This was no woodcutter.

"S-Seligman! It's him! He's here! Beldarus!" The knight Humphreys turned from his position at the front of the line and shouted. Like the currently recuperating McArdle, Humphreys had been present when Gaius had handed some bandits over to Wyatt, so he knew the man's face.

"Archers! Crossbowmen! Sorcerers! Get ready!" Humphreys bellowed to the adventurers under his command.

In the face of the Black Rose of Igris's physical strength, taking him out from a distance was a wiser course of action than engaging the man in close combat.

Wyatt had instructed each of the knights to do so. If this had been the beginning of a battle with an enemy army, it would have been a certainty that arrow-deflection spells would have been cast by enemy mages, but there didn't appear to be any such magic users present here. Not to mention how the man was simply walking toward them, along an open path, with clear visibility; there was no better target for a ranged attack.

"Why is he walking straight toward us when we outnumber him so badly...?" Humphreys had plenty of questions, but could see no reason not to start shooting. "Wait until he's in range!"

Bows, crossbows, and sorcery all required time to prepare a second shot, though the time varied between them. That was why, when shooting straight-on, it was standard practice to wait until you were sure to hit your target before launching your first projectile. Humphreys raised his right hand, signaling his ranged fighters to prepare to fire. He glanced behind him to check the status of his troops.

They're not ready yet?!

Well, since they were currently in a marching formation, there wasn't much they could do about that. The adventurers were in a long line behind him, without much room to spread out due to the narrow riverbed they were traversing. The men were crowding together as the column came to a stop, preventing any bowmen or sorcerers from having the room they needed to use their weapons. Gaius was rapidly coming closer, too close to target with blind, arcing shots that would have been effective against an army. The only ones who were prepared to fire on the man were those at or near the very front of the marching order who had direct lines of sight on him.

Gaius was now running ferociously, sprinting headlong towards them, almost like a little kid in a race. The sight might have looked comical to those who didn't know what was going on. But for those at the end of his sprint, it was nothing short of terrifying.

"Sh-Shoot! Shoooooot! Don't let him get close!" Humphreys yelled, panicked. He couldn't wait for those behind them to get ready. All he could do was let individuals fire whenever they were able to.

Those archers who had their bows drawn fired arrows, and the sorcerers who had mustered up the elemental energy within them fired magic bolts. *Whoosh. Fwoom.* Projectiles cut through the air on their way to their rapidly approaching target.

But none of them hit Gaius's body. His horse leapt in front of the man, shielding him with its body. An arrow pierced the horse's shoulder, a bolt gouging into its neck. Magic burst into it, blowing away the left side of its face. But the horse didn't stop; it continued running, protecting its master, even with a third of its head missing.

"It's a golem?!" Some nobles or royals imported these golem horses from other regions to show off their wealth and power. Humphreys had once seen a bronze golem horse on display at Lady Keighley's manor, and he'd heard from Wyatt about his commander once facing an enemy noble on an iron horse on the battlefield. However...he'd never heard of one being used as a shield in battle. Humphreys regretted even for a second underestimating the enemy who'd appeared so carelessly before them. Of course the former general would have a plan; appearing to be without one *was* his plan. Gaius Beldarus had approached the formation where it would be most difficult for them to counterattack him, bringing with him a shield to protect him from arrows and spells, and now he was close enough to begin cutting into them.

"P-Prepare your next shots!"

The crossbows were the slowest to reload, so they had no chance. The sorcerers snapped out of their stupefaction and began calling up elemental power. The archers were faster than them, but by the time they could aim, that man would be right on top of them.

Who would he target first?

Fuck! Fuck! I practically just raised my fucking hand and went, "I'm commanding here!" Humphreys put his hand on his sword hilt. He was too late. "Too slow," the eyes of the beast barreling toward him seemed to say.

There he is. He's coming. He's right in front of me.

An adventurer standing in front of Humphreys rolled to the side to dodge out of the way of the oncoming golem and the monstrous man following right

behind it.

Ahh... I should have done that, too. You're smart.

In the time it took that thought to pass through his mind, the golem horse's half-destroyed head...didn't hit him.

I dodged? It missed? I'm okay? No, that can't be. I mean, look, now he's swinging his axe!

*

Splutch. Gaius kicked the knight's body away, pulling his axe out of the fresh corpse's head, then twisted his body to behead a sorcerer next to him with a backhanded swipe from the same hand. Then, using his other axe, he severed an archer's right arm and swung down at a swordsman in front of him.

"Yipe!" The swordsman defended skillfully, diverting his blow. The fact that one of these fighters was skilled enough to block the heavy axe — even at the cost of his sword — was proof that this great slush of "adventurers" contained people of all different skill levels and abilities.

With an impressed grunt, Gaius caught his balance and decided to go after his still-galloping golem steed instead of attacking the man again. The front ranks of the group that he'd just hit were at the peak of their confusion and likely wouldn't be able to pursue him even though almost no time had passed. He had achieved his goal.

Catching up to Claudette quickly, Gaius leapt deliberately into the line of soldiers and swung his axes around him. It appeared chaotic, but his attacks were carefully planned. He focused on the long-range attackers, swinging his blade at archers, those with magic staves, and particularly sorcerers.

"W-Waaah?!"

"My hand! My hand!"

"Help—"

With each swing, arms and heads went flying, transforming the line into a scene from Hell itself. Those who survived would later describe falling under the terrible delusion that this one man would methodically cut through each and

every one of the one hundred and seventy men in their force. That was how savage a spectacle it was.

Of course, Gaius wasn't some immortal from legend. By the time he'd rendered a dozen men dead or otherwise unable to fight, he'd been hit some four times himself. Two of the blows had been weak enough that he'd caught them on his coat of plate, but the other two had reached his skin. One slash had gone through his leather armor and upper arm and a thrust had grazed his cheek. Both attacks had come from skilled fighters.

Shouldn't stay here any longer. As soon as Gaius thought that, his axe buried itself in an enemy's breastplate. Feeling the blade pierce flesh and metal to lodge itself in bone, Gaius abandoned it without a second thought, determining it too difficult to remove quickly.

"Claudette! Let's go!" Gaius called out to his trusty steed and fled into the eastern woods, kicking away any adventurer unfortunate enough to be in his path.

*

Gaius ran through the trees, zig-zagging along a serpentine path to avoid any projectiles fired after him. An arrow whooshed past his ear, and the shouts of the adventurers followed him...but he couldn't allow himself to escape completely. It was part of their plan, and his goal of protecting the village, for Gaius to lure the adventurers east of the riverbed and stop them there.

"Ah, how dreadful! Ohhh, dreadful! Just dreadful!" The elder popped his head out of Gaius's rucksack, wide-eyed and yelping.

"You okay, old-timer?" Gaius asked him, still running.

"Do you always do this sort of thing?!"

"Not always, no... I'd be dead if I did."

"You surely would!" On "would," a magic bolt slammed into a nearby tree and the old kobold squealed in shock. "Just so you know...! In that melée back there, I got a little startled and may have wet myself a bit! Forgive me!" The old man apologized, flustered.

“Hahaha. It’s to be expected for a new recruit in his first battle. Try not to let it bother you.” Laughing, Gaius had Claudette match his pace, and he plucked a war pick from the weapons adorning her back. Now he was armed in both hands again after losing one of his battleaxes earlier. “Why, in my very first battle, I was on the receiving end of a cavalry charge. I was so scared, I shit myself! Hahaha.”

“Huh?! Shitting yourself... That’s a bit much, isn’t it...?”

“Wha...?”

“...”

“...”

“Hahaha!” The two old men laughed together.

“All right, ya big lug! Incoming message! Five quick ones are going around us to cut us off! Be ready for them!”

“Got it! We’re pushing through!”

The two men glanced to their sides. Just as they’d been warned, they could see their prey through some trees, overtaking them.

*

Meanwhile, the assault team had led their pursuers deeper into the forest, striking them another three times as they did. Even Darke and Rain Grass were breathing hard now, and their force had lost another two of its members. One had been killed in one of their strikes and the other was heavily wounded, but they’d gotten a report that he’d managed to hide himself in a tree.

When the day had started, Darke’s attack team was twelve strong. They were down to eight now. That meant that the Kobold Kingdom’s full army of forty-nine had been reduced to forty-one now. On the other side, the adventurers had started with three hundred thirty-one, including several knights, and had been reduced to about three hundred. Looking at just the numbers, the kobolds were doing more than well for themselves, but in terms of ratio, their losses were huge. Their numbers were just too different.

The attack team was fulfilling their role, but they were becoming exhausted.

Noticing Darke in particular starting to slow down, the adventurers couldn't hide their excitement. They scrambled after her, racing to see who would be the one to take her down. Their fervor was understandable. Wyatt had put a sizable bounty on the head of every kobold warrior, using guild funds both public and private and even throwing in his personal funds to pay for them. If an adventurer took home three kobold heads, they'd be paid enough for an average commoner family to live in luxury for an entire year. This was an unprecedented bounty. They'd even get half for exterminating non-combatant villagers. And the female fighter who stood with the monsters was worth twenty of their heads. If they could take out the ringleader commanding the kobolds and conspiring against the Marquisate of Northplain, they'd receive fifty times the bounty. Wyatt had actually stood in front of them all at the guild and left a mountain of gold coins on the receptionist's desk before they had set out, showing them that his bounty rates weren't empty promises. This was a true once-in-a-lifetime, get-rich-quick opportunity for easy money.

Slowly but surely, the adventurers closed the distance between them and their attackers. If the pattern held, the monsters would turn around and try to hold them up again soon. That would be their opportunity.

And right when the pursuers took up their weapons in anticipation...something happened.

*

"Houghf—" A breastplated warrior tumbled down with a rather unladylike exclamation, as if she'd tripped in the dirt.

An adventurer who had been behind her ran past, sparing her nothing but a glance and a smirk. A club-wielding man from the woman's party caught up to her soon after, and grabbed at her arm to pull his companion to her feet.

"Wait! Don't!" the woman shouted, swatting away her party member's hand. At her strange reaction, he looked down and groaned, spotting the problem. The fighter had fallen into a small pit, dug down about thigh-depth. Wooden beams were set along the sides of the pit's walls, each with several nails sticking out of them, pointing downward.

Yes... the woman had run straight into a fang-filled mouth hidden under some

leaves. When she'd tried to pull herself out, the long nails on either side of her had dug into her like fishhooks. Any further pulling would only cause the nails to dig deeper into her flesh. Even squirming would further deepen her wounds. To save her, she'd need to be dug out, and the trap dismantled around her.

Thinking it would be difficult to accomplish this on his own, the club-wielder waited for more members of their party to catch up with them so he could ask them for help. If they took the time to free her, the whole party would end up far behind those pursuing the kobolds.

...But the trouble didn't end with only this one party.

The adventurer who'd sneered at the fallen warrior raised his axe to strike at a kobold who'd tripped, and felt his boot snag on something. In the next instant there was a *whoosh* as a long, flexible object snapped through the air and whipped him across the abdomen. The blow doubled him over, the impact more than stopping him in his tracks.

"Ah...gah...?" The impact had knocked the breath and the contents of his stomach out of him and he'd almost lost consciousness, but as he came back to his senses, he pushed aside the object that had struck him with trembling hands... *slip*... He felt something wet and looked down to discover himself pulling a sharpened stick from his navel. The "whip" that had struck him was a strong, supple branch. The strength of the blow had likely come from the flexible branch snapping itself straight, and several stakes tied to the branch had gouged into his abdomen. The thing his foot had touched was the tripwire for this trap.

It was a primitive trap, really, but it had still packed enough punch to pierce through his leather armor.

"Aaah?! Ah, aaah, ahhh..." The man fell to his knees, groaning as a sequence of feelings took hold: surprise, then pain, and finally resignation. His midsection no longer able to support his upper body, the adventurer toppled over onto his back on the grass.

"Fhoo, fhoo, fhoo..." His eyes were wide as he tried to regulate his breathing. Every time his chest rose and fell, more blood oozed from the holes in his gut. At this point, his only hope was for someone to find him and help him. But with

the stakes having gouged all the way into his internal organs, it was unlikely that the healers the guild had brought with them would be able to save him with their first aid even if someone did find him.

A scream went up somewhere else. This time, it was a long-haired man in a deep blue cloak who stood as short as a child.

No, he wasn't short; he was probably over six feet tall. His head was just lower than it should have been, for the simple reason that he had fallen into a pit trap. It wasn't even that deep; they'd all probably dug similar pits as children, horsing around in fields. The problem was that this pit was full of thin, sharpened stakes sticking up out of its floor.

The pit had been hidden by dirt and grass, and when he stepped on it the force from his fall and his own weight had impaled his feet, calves, and thighs on countless tiny spikes. The man was wearing a breastplate over chainmail, which was considered heavily armored for an adventurer, but all that protection was powerless against a trap that targeted only his legs.

"Fuck! Fuuuck! It hurts! It hurts! Help me! Somebody help me!"

"Hey! Hold on!"

Luckily for him, another member of his party was nearby. The second man, wearing well-worn infantry armor, quickly doubled back to his wounded comrade and set about helping him.

What was unluckier was that that man then set off another trap.

His foot brushed at a wire concealed by leaves, releasing a sphere held in place on a nearby tree. The sphere was a ball of thorns made up of stones and lumber held together by rope to weigh it down, with countless sharpened stakes sticking out of it.

Ka-shunk. Once released from its bonds, the ball swung like a pendulum and impacted the man's shoddy helmet, the thorns piercing his face.

"Rrgh." With a short grunt, the poor victim crumpled powerlessly to the ground. The spikes pulled free of his head, wet with various fluids now leaking from new holes.

All the man in the cloak could do now was scream, his savior gone.

In other places, more and more traps of various designs like these were sprung one after another, injuring or killing their victims.

The forest was quite large, and the chance of falling into the pits dug haphazardly between the trees was very small. It was impossible that every spot could be a trap. That was why it didn't take much time or detailed analysis for the adventurers to realize that it wasn't by chance that this was happening. They'd been skillfully led here, to a killing ground of deadly traps.

Those bushes. That bed of grass. The carpet of fallen leaves before them.

Where were the wires? Which was a trap? What was lurking there?

Before long, everything looked like a trap. In fact, it seemed that the only likely safe place to stand was on the tree roots. The adventurers hesitated to even step off of them.

...Everyone stood still. On top of being lured here, the adventurers were now trapped in place.

No, to be precise, they weren't held in place by the traps themselves; it was the fear the traps had instilled in them. No matter the reward, there were few who would leap into that sea of traps with no plan. This was exactly the reaction Gaius had been anticipating, and that Sashalia had planned for.

However...

"Don't panic, you idiots!"

Just before their fear could crescendo to pure, unthinking terror, someone arrived to metaphorically seize them all by the scruffs of their necks and shake some sense back into them.

It was their leader, who had chased after them to regroup his forces, the knight in the red armor, Guildmaster Wyatt.

*

Wyatt's chest heaved as he caught his breath, turning a sharp glare on the nearby adventurers. "There's no reason to chase after them! They're not going to abandon their village! If the dogs run, all we need to do is march to their

homes and burn them down! Those beasts are using tricks like this to keep us from getting there! Are you all too incompetent to understand that?!”

The shouts doused the adventurers’ spirits like a bucket of cold water.

“Use your heads! Do you think they could stop dozens of us with simple pit traps?! You fools got full of yourselves and did exactly what they expected!” From the victims he’d spotted on his way here, Wyatt was sure he’d seen through the kobolds’ plan. “You don’t want to set off their traps, do you?! Of course you don’t! So pull your heads out of your asses, work together, and test the ground before you move forward! That way you won’t get caught in them!” His simple countermeasure was something any idiot could understand. All he wanted was for them to think about how to get out of the current situation. Just doing that would stop them from panicking. The adventurers close enough to hear him *were* regaining their calm. “Tell the others what I’ve said! Repeat my words! Make sure everyone who’s still chasing them hears!”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

“Hey! Stop! Come back! Tell everyone!”

“Back! Back!”

“Got it! Heeey! Back this way, back!”

“We’ve got one trapped here! Help us!”

“Send help. But be careful.”

“You over there! That’s enough! Come back for now!”

“I can’t move! Somebody help me!”

Voices bounced back and forth between the trees. But, unlike the earlier screams, these voices were rational, with purpose to them. Wyatt had restored the group’s crumbling morale with his tirade.

“This is as good a spot as any.” Wyatt looked around and got the attention of his subordinate still shouting out orders. “Ashcroft, gather everyone here. This space should be big enough for us to reorganize.”

“Sir!”

“You there, start checking for traps. Just around here where we’ll be gathering. And be cautious.” One after another, he gave orders to the adventurers he’d brought and the rangers and hunters he’d hired, and they all set about their tasks with “yes, sir”s.

“Now, Cyril. We’re closer to the village here, yes?” Wyatt glared at the shackled former hunter, and the latter shivered.

“Y...Yes. Much closer. If we head straight that way, we should end up in the field where the village is. I found a shortcut that this intersects with. It’s easy to walk here, which makes it like a landmark. I remember it very clearly, so I’m sure of it.”

Wyatt nodded wordlessly.

“A-Anyway, Guildmaster, could you remove these shackles? I won’t be able to defend myself if something happens. And I don’t think you need my guidance anymore.”

“No. In fact, I’d like to have your legs bound, too. It’s your fault we lost so many last time. I’m only keeping you alive until we’re through with this mission.”

“B-But sir...”

The surrounding adventurers all turned to Cyril with loathing, some of them even spitting in his direction. It wasn’t that the dead Hubert had been very popular among the adventurers, or that they felt a solidarity with their own, but they still couldn’t accept what Cyril had done.

Eventually, the stragglers caught up. Those who’d rushed ahead returned and the injured were being retrieved. The corpses would have to wait. During all that, a few more fell victim to more hidden traps, but as no one was off on their own anymore, they were able to get help quickly and it didn’t lead to another mass panic.

“Looks like things aren’t going as they planned, either.” Ashcroft said. Wyatt turned away from the healer he’d been speaking to and looked in the direction Cyril had said the kobolds’ village was. He spotted the beasts and that swordswoman watching the gathering adventurers with regret.

“It’s pretty obvious what they were trying to do now. But with this many of us together, they’re not even going to get close anymore.”

“Looks like it.”

“We’ve suffered significant losses, but we can start getting back to our plan now.”

If they could send the injured to the rear, then the remaining members of their parties would be able to fight without misgivings. Their whole force wouldn’t have to be halted here. Thanks to Wyatt catching up to them, the group that was lured into the forest had been mostly recovered.

That should have been the case, anyway...

Hyooh.

Hyooh.

“Huh?” Cyril had been crouching to rest his weary, shackled arms, but he suddenly stood. The hunters who had finished checking for traps nearby also started glancing around warily.

“You hear that?”

“Yeah.”

“Th-That was a warning! I’m sure of it!”

As Cyril and the hunters conferred, faces serious, Ashcroft asked, “What do you mean, ‘warning’?”

“That’s the first sound it makes when you enter its turf. That reedy whistle. Where could it be? Where is it?”

“What are you talking about...?” Ashcroft was scratching his beard in frustration when he saw it: an adventurer carrying one of the wounded on his back screamed and suddenly went flying.

“Wh-What was that?!”

“A magical beeeast!”

From the bushes emerged an enormous reptile, its torso alone easily twelve feet in length.

The hunters who saw it screamed. “It’s a lizard! A tree-eating lizaaard!”

Its huge mass barreled toward them at an incredible speed, closing the distance in an instant.

“I’ve got it!” A mace-wielding warrior in full armor yelled bravely, standing in front of the beast. He raised his shield and took the full force of the lizard’s rush head-on. The impact sent the man flying into a tree, where he crumpled into a heap at its base. He didn’t get up. His heavy armor may have saved his life, but no one dared check.

The tree-eating lizard charged into the area where the adventurers were reorganizing and bit down on the arm of the man closest to it with a sickening crunch of bone. It swung its tail, injuring yet more men.

The group once again fell into chaos.

“Surround it! Surround it and kill it! There’s more than enough of us to deal with a magical beast! Stay calm!” Wyatt drew his sword and berated the scattering adventurers. At that moment, another tree-eating lizard leapt out from the trees and knocked over a chanting sorcerer, trampling over the man’s face.

That’s when Wyatt saw the black ropes around the lizard’s neck and legs.

“Those are...” Their sudden encounter with these monsters was no coincidence. The kobolds had captured the lizards beforehand and then released them at the humans after luring them here. The lizards, which were instinctively territorial, headed straight for the adventurers when released, throwing them right back into the chaos they had just been fighting to escape.

...Capturing such huge beasts and keeping them here wasn’t something that could have been done on short notice. Wyatt realized that even his own attack on the kobolds had been part of the kobolds’ plans.

“That can’t be! How could they be so clever, so precise?!” Now that he truly understood the Kobold Army’s ruse, Wyatt clenched his fist and shouted. His pulse raced, blood hot from the shame of playing right into their hands.

“S-Sir Wyatt! What do we do?!” The panic in his subordinate’s voice irritated the commander, but they had to deal with the magical beasts before them, and

couldn’t let the soldiers they’d finally gathered together scatter once again.

“Ashcroft! I’ll take them down one at a time! You just make sure those adventurers stay here!”

It’s all right. It’s all right. I can cut down two lizards easily, as long as I have this armor. It’s going to take a lot out of me, but I’m ready for that. This is fine. It’s within expectations. Telling himself this, Wyatt took up his weapon, Sword Eater.

Right as he was about to step forward, a scream reached his ears.

“Waaaaah!” It was a kobold’s voice.

“They’re going to attack *now*?!” Wyatt turned around, activating his Red Plate. He saw one of the little monsters running around out of the corner of his eye.

“Eeeeee!” The dark-brown-furred beastman ran straight toward Wyatt, crying out in what seemed like terror.

“...Just one of them?”

The frenzied beast wasn’t even holding a weapon. Something was clearly off about this. That much was obvious, but Wyatt had no idea what it might mean.

“Eeeyaaaaah!” The kobold Wyatt had thought was charging him instead clung to a nearby tree and scooted up it, moving like an insect.

“What is it...?” The guildmaster stared blankly up at the kobold, detached from the tumult and chaos around him for a moment, until bringing his gaze back down to find out what the kobold had been fleeing from.

Gwooooooun. Something was howling, crashing through the trees, causing branches and leaves to shake.

“That’s...” Wyatt had been on several missions to put down these creatures when they wandered out of the forest, so he instantly recognized it. A magical beast that anyone with a passing familiarity with the Greatwood would know for its physical characteristics and its infamous ferocity.

It was a huge beast with thick brown fur and six legs as thick as logs. It had sharp fangs and claws like blades. It was a bugbear, in a mad rage due to the

spear sticking out of its back.

*

[Attack Team to Command Center: Magical beast release successful.]

[Command Center to Attack Team, Kobold Squads 3, 4, 5: Understood. Begin attack.]

Watching the sublime confusion of the adventurers from the cover of the trees, Darke had her spirit messenger report back to base.

"...It's finally time!" Rain Grass said with a grin.

"Yep, everybody's rarin' to go, aren't they?" Darke responded, a smirk of her own on her face. "Blue Gale! As a reward for taking one of them down, I'm giving you an important task now!"

"Thank youuu very much, *ma'am*!" The blue kobold accepted his role proudly, blood from his kill still on his fur. He gave the item in his hand a vigorous wave and then plunged it into the ground.

It was a simple banner; an emblem drawn in charcoal on an animal hide. The charming image of a kobold's hind paw. A kobold's front paws grew into fingers as they aged, but their rear paws remained the same and kept their distinctive shape. Similar flags went up in the locations where the other squads were hiding.

They'd all butted heads debating this symbol. "I don't think we need to spend time or effort on this," Sashalia had commented, but Gaius had laughed and told her, "No, it's very important."

It was just as Gaius had said. Everyone had been waiting impatiently for the moment to raise these flags, and for what came next, too.

"Well, everyone, it's time for our counterattack." Darke unsheathed her sword swiftly. She pointed it at their enemy and took a short breath, shouting out what the kobolds had been waiting for: "By our fangs!"

"By our fangs!" came the response from the valiant warriors.

Chapter 4: Counterattack

“I didn’t hear anything about this, Seligman!”

There were still injured adventurers and corpses lying in the riverbed from Gaius Beldarus’s assault.

A middle-aged man with one eye and a scar running from his forehead to his jaw was yelling, enraged, at the knight who now commanded their main force. “You never said anything about the Black *fucking* Rose of Igris being here!” The man commanded one of the most skilled parties registered with the guild and was normally a calm, quiet person, so seeing him with so little composure was more than a little shocking to Seligman.

“This is a highly political issue. And in the first place, did you really think there would be such a vast bounty involved if it was any old bandit?!” The young knight refuted the man’s complaints with a bitter expression on his face. His tone was harsher than it needed to be, but he was shaken by having instantly lost a colleague and several soldiers, as well as irritated at their opponent having taken the initiative against them.

“Well, you’re right about that! It had better be vast! I was there, with the Allies, in the Five Year War, and I fought against that monster! Get a good look at this scar! *He* gave me this!”

“Ha! Well, that’s perfect! You get your chance at revenge, fifteen years later!”

“Are you an idiot?! Haven’t you heard the name ‘Slayer of Fifty’?! I was... The whole squad I was in was...”

“That’s even more reason, then. Fifty? We’ve still got almost a hundred and fifty men closing in on him. That’s three times fifty. Use your head!” Seligman used this argument as an opportunity to get a good grip on the current situation himself. “In fact, if you let him get away now, you might never get another opportunity for revenge.”

“I...”

“Now, go. Corner him, take his head, and bring it back here. It’ll make you some good money, and you’ll have your revenge, too. You’ll even become known as the man who took down the Black Rose of Igris. But if you let him get away now, all you’ll be left with is the fact that you were too scared to face him.”

The adventurer lowered his one eye to the ground and debated for a moment, but eventually he clucked his tongue and swore, gathering his party members and heading into the forest after Gaius.

Seligman watched him go and told himself: *That’s right. I should think of this as good luck.*

Gaius had appeared not before the guildmaster, but him. And with the death of his colleague, this was an opportunity for him to monopolize all the credit.

Seligman, the young knight who took down the Black Rose of Igris, who had fallen to being a lowly bandit. Regardless of what really happened, that was what the truth would be.

That’s right. Luck is on my side. I won’t get another chance like this.

He made himself think crass thoughts to shake off the shock of earlier. It wasn’t an admirable attitude, but it was necessary to encourage himself.

*

“In the bush on the left there! One hiding!”

Gaius lifted his battleaxe up and threw it in response to the elder’s warning. The axe was chipped in places and starting to warp from smashing through several adventurers’ defenses, but it still succeeded in flipping through the air and slashing into the bush, drawing a short scream from the assassin hiding inside.

“Good work, old-timer!”

“Trying to ambush a kobold in the forest! Laughable! Behind you, to the right! It’s an archer!”

The Kobold King turned around and saw a bowman and crossbowman taking aim beyond some trees. “Claudette!” Before he even shouted, his golem horse

got in front of him and knelt down. Gaius slid down behind the golem, and in the next instant: *Whoosh! Fwoosh! Whap! Thud!* Several projectiles sliced through the air above him or punctured Claudette's body. The hardest impact to the golem's body likely came from a crossbow bolt. These weapons packed more than enough punch to pierce infantrymen's armor when there was no arrow-repelling magic on the battlefield, but the stones Gaius had added to Claudette's clay and dirt body had prevented any bolts from piercing through her. This was a technique he had learned from his experience in battle.

"Oh, how dreadful! How dreadful!"

"Keep your head inside, please!"

Gaius used this opportunity to remove one of the weapons tied to Claudette's flank, then he heard...

Rou...

...the sound of magical elements being refined, the distinct "chanting" of a sorcerer gathering energy to cast a magic spell. Two of them, actually, from the strange distortion of the sounds.

"Hey, lug! We're cornered!"

While the two old men were running around trying to avoid their enemies, they'd been led into a crossfire the adventurers had been preparing. When he caught on, Gaius muttered "pretty impressive," and took off running, a fresh headsman's axe in his hand to replace the one he'd thrown into the bushes.

...*aaa...eee*...

When the sorcerers' chanting finished, one magic bolt went off and missed the sprinting Gaius. He blocked the other with the wide blade of the headsman's axe. The torrent of magical energy caused a third of the blade to shatter, and a fragment of metal nicked Gaius on the chin. The mass of iron was of course still large enough to smash skulls with, so when Gaius reached the sorcerers chanting for a second spell, he swung at one magic user with enough strength to splatter the sorcerer's grey matter. The war pick in his other hand, its blade bent from Gaius's rough handling, cracked into the neighboring sorcerer's cheekbone, piercing his skull and ending their spells.

“Did you get ’em?!”

“Yep, moving on!”

Normally, he’d reunite with Claudette to replace his failing weapon, but he had no time to do so now. Crossbows took a long time to reload, but they were accurate and powerful. He had to disable the crossbowmen before they could have another chance to fire. He took off again without even taking time to catch his breath and zig-zagged through the trees to the area the earlier shots had been fired from.

The crossbowmen weren’t reloaded yet, just like he’d thought, but the archers were already loosing their next arrows. Reluctant to get any closer to them, all Gaius could do was move sideways through the trees. On top of that, there were some master archers with the adventurers who were able to aim and shoot faster than Gaius expected. He’d abandoned Claudette, who could act as his shield, and she was too far away to reach now. Loaded down with weapons and rocks as she was, she couldn’t keep up with her master’s top speed.

Stab. An arrow suddenly protruded from the leather around Gaius’s gut.

“Ugh?!”

“Hey, big guy!” The elder had been muttering something to himself, but he popped his head out of the rucksack at this.

“I’m all right, old-timer. The plate underneath stopped it.” Only Gaius’s armor, which was much thicker than a normal coat of plate, could have done that. The angle it hit at was good, too. But his good luck wouldn’t continue forever, and he couldn’t keep dodging forever, either. Plus, a crossbow bolt would definitely pierce his armor.

“Please put your head back inside. That’s not safe.”

“Just charge in, you dunderhead! I can stop them!”

His declaration seemed like it had to be a joke. He’d given no reason for Gaius to believe him, and nothing about the old kobold suggested he could back up that claim. Nevertheless, Gaius immediately responded, “Understood. I’m counting on you,” and sprung out from his hiding place, bursting forth in attack.

He roared as his feet pounded the ground. Gaius didn't doubt his partner for one second.

"Grwooooooooh!"

The archers flinched at his unexpected charge, but quickly took aim. The crossbowmen gave up on reloading and drew their close-range weapons, which was a smart decision. But at that same moment...

"Wind spirits! Answer my plea!" With the old kobold's cry, a fierce gust assaulted the bowmen. The gust blew up a torrent of fallen leaves and pelted the archers with dirt.

"Ubh?!"

"Ack!"

"My eyes!"

It was just wind, just dust; it couldn't hurt them. But it bought more than enough time for the mad beast rushing towards them to sink his claws into them.

The first man fell, the point of the war pick buried in his skull. The broken axe crashed into the side of the second's head. Abandoning the damaged pick, Gaius grabbed the sword hand of one of the crossbowmen and dragged the man's arm to plunge his blade into an archer's throat, wielding the sword and the man as one weapon. A temporary accomplice to end the third man's life, the crossbowman then became the fourth victim when Gaius buried his axe in the man's face. Another crossbowman watched all this, slack-jawed, until Gaius caved that jaw in with a gauntleted blow, making him the fifth to die. The poor man next to him had gotten so much dust in his eyes that he immediately became the sixth as an axe smashed into him before he even regained his vision. The redheaded woman set to be the next in line dodged Gaius's slash by a hair's breadth and tossed her bow down, scrambling to run away. Gaius's axe lodged into the trunk of a tree, and the rest of the archers gained a chance to flee as well. *Shff.* Gaius picked up a bow and arrow from one of the corpses and shot one of the fleeing adventurers. Seven...and the last. The rest had escaped behind trees, out of his line of fire.

Most of them had abandoned their weapons to flee as fast as they could. It was unlikely that he would again be the target of a fusillade any time soon.

Gaius panted to catch his breath as he pulled his axe from the tree, but the blade was even more chipped, its wooden handle broken in the middle. It wouldn't survive another attack. Same with his war pick.

"Good work, old-timer. They don't call you the Kingdom's best shaman for nothing."

"Well, the spirits have their own matters to attend to. Keep in mind that I can't use that trick whenever I want."

"I understand." Gaius heeded the elder's warning. Claudette finally caught up to them and trotted next to Gaius. He took his large sword, the as-yet-unused faussar, off the golem's back. "How's our strategy coming along?"

"Things appear to be going well for the attack team. And the little miss has messaged you to begin getting ready."

"Guess we've gotta head back to the river, then."

"Guess so. Well, you got another fight in you?"

"Indeed!" Shouldering his faussar, Gaius set off in that direction.

*

Now facing three tree-eating lizards and one bugbear, the adventurers that had been lured deep into the forest were completely in a panic. Some fell to attacks from the beasts, others stood and faced them, and were slaughtered for it. Some began to retreat whether or not they'd been ordered to, and some ran off randomly into the forest and fell into kobold traps in their terror. As more and more of them fell victim to these horrors, the adventurers quickly broke away from the area Wyatt hoped to command them in and lost all semblance of a cohesive group.

Amid all that...

"Nrrah!" *Zuuuum.* The patterns along the length of the Scarlet Plate lit up as Wyatt activated it for a second time, lopping off the head of a tree-eating lizard with his Sword Eater. The magic crests engraved in the armor temporarily

enhanced his strength, giving him the power to hack through the beast's neck.

"Gaaaaah!" Wyatt screamed once more. This time his shout was not part of his attack, but a reaction to the pain the strengthening had on his body as the spells channeled power through his joints, muscles, and bones. The burden the impossible movements had on his body tormented him. The pain would cause a normal person to collapse or writhe in misery. The fact that Wyatt did nothing but shout in reaction was proof of his mental and physical fortitude. *...This isn't something I can use more than a few times.*

He sheathed his sword and looked around, catching his breath. In the time he had been fighting that one magic beast, the adventurers had scattered every which way. The knight Ashcroft was nowhere to be seen either.

"Guildmaster!"

Wyatt turned at the voice. A sorceress was running toward him.

"Oh, thank goodness! I don't know where anyone went!" She must have been anxious, separated from her party. She was out of breath, running as fast as she could toward him until a spiked ball fell from the trees above her and impacted the top of her head.

"Tss..." Wyatt couldn't help the hiss that escaped his lips as she toppled forward. The impact had caved in her skull and the thorns had pierced her skin. She didn't move an inch after falling to the ground; her death had likely been instantaneous. The wretched sight reminded Wyatt that the area he was in was too dangerous to run through blindly. He wished he could run around and gather up his scattered companions. They had to defeat the beasts, regain control over the panicked adventurers, and reorganize themselves properly. But if he wasn't careful, he'd fall victim to one of those traps.

"Could this be any more vexing..." Even his irritation was likely part of the enemy's plan.

Taking a deep breath to get his emotions under control, Wyatt kicked Cyril, who was crouched down next to a tree and shivering, and motioned for him to stand up. *I'll get my allies together. We'll defeat these beasts. We'll head straight for the village, watching out for traps. Slowly but surely.* He simplified the situation, put everything in order, and confirmed it with himself. Wyatt had

always used this technique to calm himself when things got out of hand. He'd survived the Five Year War by doing so. He would get through this in much the same way, and he'd continue to do so in the future..

"...All right." He put the still-shackled Cyril in front of him as a trap detector and shield and slowly began to take action to get himself out of this situation.

*

The second and third kobold squads found themselves chasing after a small group of humans. They'd gone after a group that had escaped from the magic beasts but was stuck now, not knowing where the traps around them hid.

Of course, it wasn't coincidence that they'd found this group. Sashalia had selected a target for them to attack based on information her spirit messenger scouts had sent her about where the nearby traps were set and the distance between groups of adventurers.

"Hah! Rah!"

"Yaaah! Yah!"

"Hoh! Toh!"

Their shouts and appearances were adorable on their own, but both sides were fighting for their lives in this battle. The spears, crafted by the blacksmith in Ryburgh, stabbed out at the adventurers' legs and bottoms. They were almost like hunters, driving their prey into position.

"Ah?!"

"Oh! He fell!"

"This one fell!"

"No! Nooo! Aaaaaah?!" One man tripped on a tree root, while others succumbed to their wounds and were rendered unable to run any farther. One by one, the spears took them down.

One adventurer, who had let others flee before him to act as bait, fell into a pit trap and let out a reverberating scream as he was impaled on the spikes below. Needless to say, this was all according to the kobolds' plans.

“Did we get ’em all?”

“The ones lying there and there are still alive.”

“Finish off the sorcer’ and leave the other one be. We’ve gotta move.”

“Orders from the miss. Squad two’s moving on.”

“Gotcha.”

“Squad three’s that way. Be seeing you.”

The kobolds plunged their spears into the groaning sorcerer at their feet, then hurried on to their next mission.

*

One adventuring party had luckily managed to mostly reunite under their leader Maureen, a swordswoman. Considering that the best most of the other groups could do was scatter and run for their lives, the fact that this group had stuck together while seeking safety marked them as a decently skilled and lucky bunch.

Having escaped the magical beast ambush, the party regrouped and set about finding some other adventurers to meet up with. They proceeded to strike at and pat the ground around them, avoiding any grass, bushes, or piles of fallen leaves. Even with all their precautions, they just barely managed to evade two traps. After some time, they finally met up with another group.

“Hey, if it isn’t Aubrey’s crew.”

“I see you made it out alive too, Maureen. You’ve got the devil’s luck.” A young man with close-cropped hair, Aubrey, gave a relieved sigh and smiled wryly. The restraint he showed in not running up to the other group on sight explained how his group had made it this far.

“I’ll settle for your glum mug. Frankly, I’m happy to see anybody right now.”

“Same here.”

There was nothing wrong with having a larger group if they were going up against those magical beasts or even fighting kobolds. Both parties agreed to band together and face the forest.

“We can’t find Anton, and we don’t know where the traps are, so we can’t go looking for him. What about you guys?”

“We’re still down Philander and Sylvester.”

“You seen the guildmaster? Hell, I’d even take Ashcroft and his baby face right now.”

“Nope. Not since everybody split during the chaos.”

The leaders faced each other and reported their current statuses. Then they looked around, confirming their situations, and sighed together as if following a script.

“...We should just continue on to the village. We were supposed to be pretty close already, right?”

“Yeah, should be.” Right when Maureen nodded, the bugbear gave a great roar in the distance and the whole group froze reflexively. They glanced around nervously, but the monster wasn’t anywhere near them.

Aubrey sighed yet again. “...Maybe we should just go on ahead and attack the village on our own.”

“Just us?”

“It’s like the guildmaster said: they only dragged us into the forest to protect their village. If we start setting fire to it, the kobolds’ll lose their cool and have to come face us themselves.”

Maureen debated the suggestion for a moment, but she turned toward the direction she’d come from and squinted, then took a breath and agreed with Aubrey. “That’s probably a good idea. Even if we head back, we can barely move with all the traps, and we can hardly fight magic beasts with footing like that. It’d probably help our guys more to hit the dogs’ den and draw them out of the forest.”

The two party leaders had enough experience to regain their calm and decide how to proceed. They had a nimble member of their parties climb up a thick, tall tree nearby and gauge the direction and distance to the plain they would find the village in. They knew about the twin mountains from Cyril’s

information, so they were able to determine the location of the village fairly easily.

“Yep, that should be right.”

“Okay, let’s go.”

They quickly began to move toward the village. The group, now eleven strong, kept an eye out for traps, evading three more. They then immediately triggered one, but escaped with nothing more than a scare, arriving at a narrow path between the trees soon after.

“It got a lot more walkable all of a sudden.”

“Look, all the trees are stumps. Guess the dogs were gathering lumber here.”

They looked around and spotted some piles of logs as well. The kobolds must have been temporarily storing them here.

“In which case, there should be a path for them to carry it all back to the village. If we can follow that, we’re golden.”

Everyone nodded at Maureen’s words before catching a sound none of them expected to hear.

Rou...aaa...eee...

“An incantation?! Is there a sorcerer nearby?”

“Tyaah!” *Bzzzap!* There was a sound like lightning crashing through the air as something impacted Maureen’s head. It was a torrent of magical energy. The energy hit the side of her head and dispersed around it with enough force to knock her unconscious instantly.

“Wh-What was that?!”

Rou...

They could hardly take in the situation, but it was clear enough that it was an enemy attack and that a second shot was coming. The adventurers looked around and dove for cover behind the logs.

Aaa...eee...

Everyone hid behind piles of logs, and there was no second attack. Since

they'd lost their target, their enemy had likely paused their incantation before finishing casting their spell. One astute adventurer estimated the enemy's position from the angle Maureen had been hit from and the areas they were under cover from, then popped his head out to take a look and read the situation.

Bzzzap! Right when he ducked back down, magical energy burst into the logs, splintering off a chunk of wood.

"The dogs have a barricade that way, and they're shooting magic bolts from behind it... they've got staves!"

Their assumptions were all wrong. The kobolds they had been picturing were primitive, savage monsters, barely able to hold spears. They had never imagined that the beasts would be able to use magic weapons developed by humans.

"Damn it, they swiped those from the last battle."

"Right, the humans with them must have taught 'em how they work!"

Even as they spoke, the next shot slammed into the logs. They all reflexively ducked their heads down. The small arrows the kobolds used with their little bows wouldn't kill them even if they were hit by a few of them, and their minimal armor would probably deflect them anyway. But that wasn't the case for the magic bolts these staves shot. Those would bore holes in the adventurers regardless of the physical size of the shooters.

"Calm down and aim better."

"Sorry, Red Eye."

"I'm tired from using all my magic. Switch with me. I'm gonna cool the staff in water before it gets too hot, too."

The adventurers could hear the kobolds conversing from somewhere out of sight. They could hear them preparing another shot, too. The kobolds clearly understood how the magic staves worked.

"Hey, how's Maureen?"

"She hasn't moved at all! I dunno!"

“We can’t just sit here. I’ll go around and attack them from behind!” An axeman leapt out. Moving quickly, he avoided a magic bolt shot at him and successfully dove into the bushes on the other side of the path between the trees.

“That guy’s got guts.” Aubrey gave an impressed whistle.

The axeman would be protected by the trees as he approached and he would probably be able to destroy the kobold’s defensive encampment. However...

“Agh! Aaah!” The axeman’s anguished cries sounded from the bushes, telling his companions that he must have triggered some trap.

“Dammit! There are traps on the side of the path?!”

“Look closer! There are nets over there!”

“Goddammit! The barricade, the logs, they were waiting to ambush us here from the beginning!”

...An ambush. As soon as that word was uttered, doubt surfaced in Aubrey’s mind. They’d probably cut the trees down here to create an area with no obstacles for their staff shooting. That made sense. And by planting traps on either side of the path, they could keep the adventurers wary of launching counterattacks against them. “...Why would they leave lumber we could hide behind...?” He gasped and looked up to see another group of kobolds with staves up in the branches of a thick tree. Right when Aubrey opened his mouth to swear, the kobolds began chanting.

Bzzzap! Aubrey hurriedly stood and a magic bolt from Red Eye’s staff squad stabbed into his neck. The short-haired leader toppled to the side without so much as a sound.

Next, a spur of magic stabbed deep into another adventurer’s thigh. The man screamed in shock as the attack pierced him down to the bone, a scream of pain quickly following.

...The adventurers had been lured straight into a kill zone the kobolds had prepared for them. As a result, three more of the originally eleven-strong group were shot dead and two dropped out of the fight after falling into traps as they fled. The only two adventurers remaining were left to scurry back to the area

where the magical beasts were still rampaging.

*

“You figured out how to spot the traps?” asked a younger adventurer with spiky hair.

“Yeah,” came the female hunter’s subdued reply. “Look...see those fallen leaves?”

The adventurer looked at a pile of brown leaves. It took him a moment to notice a twig standing up in them, with a small flag fashioned out of bark rope tied to it. “Huh, didn’t notice those.”

“If you don’t know about them...you have to really look closely...to see them.”

The man gave an impressed grunt and was about to step closer to get a better look, but the hunter quickly grabbed his sleeve.

“Earlier...when the dogs were running...they avoided the spots...with these flags.”

“I get it. They didn’t fall for any of their own traps ’cause they made markers for them.”

The hunter nodded again. “Plus...there shouldn’t be so many leaves...at the bottom of this kind of tree. I think they brought leaves from somewhere else...to hide the traps. There were a few other areas...like this, too.”

“You’re smart!” The young man’s eyes sparkled with true admiration.

“I’m in the forest a lot,” the hunter muttered, scratching her nose and brushing a strand of hair out of her face, embarrassed. “So...we just have to avoid these flags...too. It’s easy...once you realize what they’re doing.” She avoided the marker and went through some other trees. “If we follow their example...we won’t fall for the—waaah?!” An unmarked arrow trap triggered, shooting her in the left thigh. “Oww...oww...”

“Are you stupid?! You didn’t figure it out at all!”

“Ugh... So what are those flags...?”

Naturally, the flags were another ruse from the Kobold Army. Based on

Gaius's experience, they'd set all manner of misleading markers on the traps. The kobolds were able to keep track of the traps because of the command center's management and because they had marked them with scents that only they could distinguish. Their complex web of traps was not something an intruder could easily negotiate.

*

Four of the five members of a different party had managed to escape together. They stopped running once the magical beasts were no longer in sight and crouched down in some bushes at the orders of their leader, a man with a scar on his face.

"Hey Boss, isn't it gonna be hard for the others to find us in a place like this?"

"That's fine. It's better for us if they don't."

"What do you mean?" A bowman with curly chestnut-colored hair wrangled into a ponytail asked the scarred man.

"We're gonna pretend we got lost in the forest and retreat back to the entrance."

"Why?! They killed Lionel! We can't just leave!"

Lionel had been the party's main frontline fighter, a brawny man with a falchion and a round shield. When he'd been struck by the bugbear a short time ago, his head had snapped around to face behind him and that had been that. They hadn't had time to retrieve his body, of course.

"That's why we're getting out of here. We've all got clear roles, right? That goes for whether we're escorting a caravan against bandits, lending our strength in some conflict, slaying magical beasts, or fighting other parties, right? Well, our party can't function anymore."

The bowman groaned and swallowed his retort. Just as his leader had said, when the party was acting together, Lionel had always drawn the attention of their enemies so that their archers and sorcerers could handle the offense. There was no denying that their party couldn't exert their full force now.

"It's too bad what happened to him, but if we stay here, we're all gonna get

wiped out. And I have no intention of dying or letting you guys die either."

"...We got it, Boss." The other two nodded along with the archer.

Their leader's decision could be called heartless, but it was likely the right choice if he wanted his team to survive. And "his team" didn't include the other adventurers of the guild, or Wyatt and his knights. They were more like people in the same business who sometimes worked together, but nothing more than that.

...And so, this party would return alive, save one unfortunate victim. The same thing was happening with other adventuring groups; several parties were leaving the battlefield with most of their fighting power intact.

*

It was possible for the kobold squads to lure the enemy into traps and trick them, but when that was difficult, someone needed to fight them directly. Darke's attack team existed to pick off small groups when that was necessary.

"Here we go!" With that laidback shout and a depraved smirk, Darke stabbed her curved blade into an adventurer's neck. The adventurer tried to put up some last feeble resistance even as he coughed up blood, but the black-clad swordswoman anticipated it and dodged back, silencing her target with one last blow. Nearby, Rain Grass and Blue Gale were coordinating with their teammates to finish off the other two adventurers, racking up their own achievements in battle.

In this latest series of fights, one more member of the attack team had been injured, so their number had dwindled to about half of what they'd started with. However, they still possessed the spirit and strength to take down adventurers who were broken up into small groups.

"Sheesh. They work you pretty hard back in the Public Safety Bureau, but that's nothing compared to the treatment you get in the Kobold Kingdom. I've gotta update all my records. My average time-to-kill has gone way down since I was fighting bandits out on missions for the public safety bureau. His Majesty the King is gonna owe me a hefty bonus for all the work I've done after this! He'll pay me with his body!" She shook the blood off her sword and gave her croaking, frog-like laugh. Her expression was the same as it always was, so it

was hard to tell how serious she was being.

“Information from our scouts. There’s another group, more than ten, heading this way,” Darke’s spirit messenger reported, looking nervous.

“Ten might be a bit much, Darke,” one of the warriors with her warned.

“So they’ve managed to put that many people together. I agree, I don’t think I want to face that many head-on either.”

“What shall we do, Captain?!” the spirit messenger quailed.

“Well, don’t panic. Our beloved Lady Denan will surely come to our rescue.” There was a flippant smile on her pale face as always.

“Orders from the Command Center. ‘Retreat to the northeast and lead them to the hidden depths.’”

“There. See?”

“Ah... That spot...” Rain Grass responded in a low voice, wiping adventurer blood off his face.

“There...?”

“I don’t really want to go there...”

The kobolds all nodded, revulsion on their faces. They couldn’t help feeling some amount of sympathy, even for their enemies.

*

As they headed through a thick grove of trees, the adventurers ran smack into a group of dogs, who panicked at the sight of the humans.

“Aaah!”

“What are they doing here?!”

The kobolds screamed and ran away from the humans coming from the trees, some of them even throwing their spears down in terror.

Fundamentally, there’s an unbridgeable gap in the fighting strength of a human and a kobold. It’s impossible for a small group of kobolds to fight a large group of adventurers head-on and win. Their earlier skirmish in the riverbed

had proved that.

“Don’t let ’em get away!”

“Hell no! I’m skinning those fucking mutts!”

“That blue one’s mine! That thing killed my partner!”

The adventurers rushed after them, burning with a desire for vengeance and unwilling to let this opportunity slide. It wasn’t just about the money anymore. The adventurers had been terrorized by these primitive, inferior beastmen, and their rage wouldn’t be quelled with anything less than the gruesome deaths of the little monsters.

“Wait! Wait for me!”

“Are you stupid?! Get up!”

A panicked kobold tripped, spurring on the sadistic adventurers even more. The ground must have been muddy from the rain a few days ago. The sludge would be hard to run through, but it would be a simple matter to catch up to their prey and finish them off. ...But it was more than just hard to walk through. By the time the humans realized that, quite a few of them had already entered the area. The ground was covered with fallen leaves and thick weeds, and it wasn’t until they were deep into this part of the forest that they realized that this wasn’t just an ordinary layer of mud. The adventurer in front suddenly sank up to his stomach in the muck, and the one behind him crashed into him. It was then that they finally realized that they’d charged into a swamp.

“Stop! S-Stay back! Stay out! It’s a swamp pit!” The second man screamed as he sunk halfway in, just like the man in front of him.

The humans piling into the area tried to turn around and get out, but about half of them failed in their attempts to escape as more and more came in from behind. Meanwhile, the kobolds who’d entered the swamp before them had all scrambled out to the other shore, as other kobolds hidden in the trees tossed ropes out to their kin.

“Urp... Somebody, help me up.”

“Hey, wait a second, my foot’s stuck!”

“Let go of me, dumbass!”

“Well, what am I supposed to do?!”

“Seriously, can someone help me up? I’m kind of in trouble here.”

“Uhh, you’ve got like four leeches on your arm, dude.”

“Wha...Yaaaaaah!”

“Somebody... Somebody help me up...”

Those who just had their feet stuck were not so bad off, but the ones who’d rushed in first were stuck deep and were in danger of being completely consumed by the sludge.

One of the adventurers must have had experience with this sort of situation. “Shut up! Stop moving! You’ll just sink faster if you struggle!” The scrawny man at the back of the pack hadn’t fallen into the swamp. He set about helping the stuck adventurers with four other people who had lagged behind or had escaped on their own. They quickly got ropes out of their packs and tied them to thick trees with sturdy root systems, affixing them firmly with tight knots. ...That was the moment the black swordswoman hiding in the thicket attacked.

First, she stabbed a man who’d just knotted a rope, then flashed her sword wide to the side, slashing a woman in the stomach on the way. There was a young man in chainmail about to throw a rope into the swamp; with both his hands occupied, he was powerless as Darke shoulder-checked him, throwing him into the sludge himself. The other two fell to kobold attacks by sword and axe, one falling into the swamp and one to the ground. Then, the final blow...

“Captain! What shall we do with the remaining humans?!” Blue Gale asked, breathing heavily.

“Leave ’em. They’ll sink,” Darke answered, wiping the blood off her face with one of the corpse’s cloaks.

Behind her came a cry: “We’re sorry! We’ll leave you alone! Please... Please help us!”

“Come on! We’ll never come to the forest again! You can’t just leave us here!”

“We’ll do anything! We were just hired by the guild! It’s not like we chose to come here! Right?!”

The stuck adventurers begged for their lives, slowly sinking deeper all the while, their screams growing more desperate.

“These impudent maggots... They dare beg *me* for their lives? Why would I waste a precious opportunity to be of use to him?”

Blue Gale recoiled in fear, smelling something dark and fiery coming from his captain’s soul, but...

“...However. I suppose I *could* save you later, if you swear to never do any harm to the Kobold Kingdom.” Darke twirled her fingers, narrowing her eyes and laughing with a crooked smile on her face. “How lucky for you~! Her Excellency, our general, is just the cutest little thing, so compassionate and hardworking and always thinking of the future. Oh, but her cuteness is the most important thing, of course.”

The adventurers all held their breath, listening to Darke’s words as she swayed on the spot and looked down at them.

“L-Later...? Like, when?” A man on all fours in the mud asked weakly.

“Well, after the fighting’s over, of course. As long as you stay still, you’ll probably be all right. If you’re lucky, that is.” Darke turned her back to the pleading adventurers. During all this, the kobolds who’d acted as bait and crossed the swamp had come back around to this side. “Okay! Time to get going!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Okay.”

“Sure thing.”

The attack squad pumped their fists into the air, tails wagging. They took the opportunity to replace their weapons with new ones from a stock hidden in the hollow of a nearby tree and set off, Darke leading the way.

Just one flax-colored kobold remained, staring at the adventurers stuck in the swamp.

“What is it, Rain Grass?”

“Hm? Oh... just...” The kobold warrior responded in a much more subdued tone than usual. “Something I have to do...”

He picked up a spear one of the decoy kobolds had dropped and turned to one of the adventurers who was stuck up to his thighs in the swamp. “Hey, long time no see. I’ve been I’d see you again.”

“H...Huh? W-Wait a second. We don’t want to fight anymore...” The man’s cheek twitched with panic as Rain Grass aimed and threw the spear as hard as he could. “Wai—”

Right as he shouted, the man with long blond hair fell back into the swamp with Rain Grass’s spear sticking straight up out of his eye, but the blow wasn’t enough to kill him instantly. Now trapped by the thick, heavy mud, the man was unable to stand upright and slowly began sinking down into the muck, screaming. “Help! Help me! No! I don’t want...gbbbbh!” The mud entered his mouth, then his windpipe. His gruesome, wordless moans continued for a short time until his face sank completely beneath the surface, leaving behind only a few bubbles and his spasming, clutching hands, which soon stopped moving and fell down under the surface. All the adventurers around him could do was watch.

“I’m done. Sorry for the wait. Okay, let’s go.”

“Hmm.” Darke didn’t ask him his reasons. She didn’t admonish him either. She could guess the reason he’d done what he did.

The flax-colored kobold realized Darke was being considerate and quietly explained himself as he walked past his comrade. “He was one of the ones who came to our old village. I remember him very well.” The kobold warrior gave a quiet, forlorn whine. “But now...I’ve gotten justice for Fog’s husband.”

*

The spirit messenger with the attack squad was receiving a new order from the Command Center. “Message from Command. Two adventurers are being attacked by one of the bugbears. We’ll have to pass by them on our way to our next objective.”

“Ooh, how frightful. Careful not to draw the bear’s attention, everyone.” Darke shivered exaggeratedly.

“Haha, eh, if he comes our way, we’ll just pelt him with this, right in the nose!” The kobold patted a leather pouch at his waist. The bag was stuffed with white flowers that only bloomed in this season that gave off a unique scent. The beasts didn’t like the smell, so the kobolds had been using the flowers as a bugbear repellent for a long time. Recently, they’d even been used to disguise the smell of a certain king’s feet.

“Just as reported! Over there, the bugbear is...huh?!”

Blue Gale gasped, and he wasn’t alone in his astonishment. The attack team looked beyond the trees and saw, just as they’d been told, a bugbear attacking two humans. There was an overwhelming difference between the strength of a human and that of a magical beast. The humans, then, naturally should be ripped apart by the bugbear’s claws and falling prey to its fangs. However...

“Nnrraaah!” With a shout, a man in red armor actually *caught* the bugbear’s massive paw in one hand as it swiped at him and pushed its arm aside. He took up his sword in both hands and swung it, slicing through the bugbear’s thick fur and driving the blade into the beast’s neck. “Ogwaaah!” The man shouted in pain as patterns drawn over his armor began to light up. A few seconds later, the bugbear’s head had been completely severed from its body. The beast’s body thudded to the ground and the man leaned on his sword like a cane, holding himself up.

“No frickin’ way... That guy caught the bear’s arm.”

“Quiet, Rain Grass. We’re withdrawing.”

“Hm? O-Oh. Yeah.”

But they were too late. The man in the red armor looked around as he was catching his breath, and his eyes landed squarely on the attack squad. He picked up his sword again and gave them a glare that made them shudder even at the distance between them, and then suddenly he was charging.

“Well, this fellow’s certainly trouble,” Darke muttered with a cluck of her tongue. It was Wyatt, guildmaster of the Ryburgh Adventurers’ Guild; the one

man Gaius had warned her not to cross swords with.

Chapter 5: Divide and Conquer

Gaius's return to the riverbed was quickly interrupted by some adventurers. They had surrounded him with archers and sorcerers to avoid close-quarters combat, and now that their target was heading in a single direction, they were moving to tighten their encirclement.

"There's... over a hundred." Gaius muttered as adventurers closed in around him, seeing them armed with all sorts of weapons: swords, spears, axes, clubs, and others. He likely didn't have to worry about the ranged fighters, as the approaching adventurers meant that they were just as likely to hit their own if they tried to attack, but a wall of bodies had soon formed all around him, closing off any avenue of escape. This formation sent a clear message: their aim was to gradually wear down his strength and finish the Black Rose of Igris off once and for all.

Once he had been completely surrounded, six adventurers emerged from the group and began walking forward towards Gaius. ...To be more fair, it seemed more like the rest of the adventurers were purposefully hanging back, as if allowing this group to make the first move. The six had the rest of their force wait behind them and gathered into a smaller ring around Gaius.

One of them addressed Gaius, breath hissing out through the bucket-shaped great helm that covered his face. "So you're the Black Rose of Igris."

A stir went through the other adventurers. "That's Homer..."

"It's Homer the Mad Bull!"

The man certainly had a presence that seemed to deserve the nickname. He wore thick, heavy armor all over his body, and it was likely that he was being supported by several sorcerers at once in order to carry it, but from his stature alone he was clearly a man with more than a little muscle on him. The giant warhammer he wielded made his strength obvious as well.

Gaius nodded. "People have called me that. It's not a good nickname for an

old man, is it?”

“Hmph. My name is Homer. Homer the Mad Bull. I’m the man who’s gonna flatten you now.” The great bullock of a man declared, his voice muffled by his massive helm, and raised the warhammer with its head angled downward in a stance Gaius recognized as the “bulwark.” Contrary to his name, he wasn’t just some berserker. “Now face my hammer, Bull Stomp—”

“I’m Dionysius, the knave with the raging spear! The strongest man in the guild!” The interruption came from a slender man with red hair knotted at the back of his head. He wielded a spear with a large blade that brought to mind the tongue of an ox, aptly named an ox-tongue spear.

“Death Scythe Spike here! Spike Fire!” Next was a man with long, dark blond hair, a rare scythe wielder. It probably wasn’t his real name. He faced Gaius in a low stance sometimes called the “ladder” stance.

“When they say ‘Meteor Melinda,’ they mean me!” The dark-skinned woman wielded another rare sight, a pair of flails. A flail was a bludgeoning weapon, with the striking portion attached to the handle by chain. It had originated from a farming tool used for threshing. The weapons she carried were horseman’s flails, made especially short for use by cavalry.

Melinda swung a flail, creating a *whoosh* of wind and then skillfully stopped the movement by catching the ball on one of her pauldrons, striking a pose with the weapon. She looked to be a capable fighter, one with good control of her weapons.

“Uhh... I’m Chas... Sorry... Just Chas.” The man who named himself with some embarrassment was the one who had parried Gaius’s blow on the riverbed. He was a plain-looking, middle-aged adventurer with unkempt black hair and heavy stubble, but his defensive ability proved his overall fighting skills. He wielded an ordinary longsword, likely borrowed from someone else. Gaius took one look at his sword and his eyes and knew that this man had cut down countless people before.

“Matthew.” The last man to speak was perhaps the most conspicuous of the six. Besides a pair of gauntlets, he wore no armor, just pants without even a shirt. “Everybody at the guild calls me Massacre Matthew.” He was almost ten

feet tall, all bulging muscle, possibly making him stronger than Gaius. He had red skin and a robust physique, and from his rugged, sandstone-like forehead grew two horns. It was clear at a glance that he was not human. He held a two-handed sword that was seventy inches in length, but he handled it like a short sword.

“You’re a pure ogre... That’s a rare sight.” Gaius was impressed by the ferocious man’s very presence. His guess was correct; Matthew belonged to a race called ogres, and sometimes oni. Their strong builds and valor gave them a reputation all across the continent for being a race of fighters.

“When I was traveling in the western countries as an attendant to the princess, I met a military officer from the ogre country. He was a fine warrior, both in skill and demeanor.”

“I was born in Muirfield and raised in Grenwyk. I’m a citizen of the Kingdom of Igris. Ain’t never been to the so-called ogre country and I don’t know who my parents were.” Matthew spat out, aggravated. The words revealed the complex, bitter path he’d walked in life. “‘Black Rose of Igris,’ I hear you’re a quarter troll. You must have suffered too, but I’ll end your suffering here.”

“I wouldn’t say that. I’ve always had very kind people around me.”

“Oh yeah? Ain’t none of ’em around you now. Get ready to die.” Matthew raised his two-handed sword high in the “roof” stance. The destructive power of the blade when swung down by this man would be immense.

“Kind of a strange bunch you’re facing off against, dunderhead,” came a voice from behind Gaius.

“Yes, they do look like a handful, don’t they? I’d say four of the six are real threats.” Gaius answered, then took a deep breath and turned to face his enemies with a proper fighting stance.

“I suppose I should introduce myself as well. I am Gaius. Gaius Beldarus, King of the Kobold Kingdom.” His deep, solemn voice resounded. The adventurers behind the skilled six backed up and groaned, intimidated by his threatening presence.

“P—Pfffhahaha?! Kingdom?! Of kobolds? The dogs? You’re ‘king of the dogs’?

Woof, woof! Ruff, awooo!” Spike Fire came out of his battle stance and pointed at Gaius, laughing. “Are you seriously telling me this old man calls himself ‘the Black Rose of Igris’ and he’s out here in the middle of the woods playing king of the hill?!”

That was enough of an opening. Right when he finished talking, Spike’s head was suddenly flying away, rustling in some branches and leaves in the distance. Nobody saw it hit the ground before it was out of sight. Survivors would later remark that it was like a great gust of wind going past them.

“Wh—”

“Hrmm.”

“Hey now...”

Those who remained could only reevaluate their understanding of the Black Rose of Igris’s strength after he’d instantly closed the distance between himself and Spike to put down the latter. It wasn’t that they hadn’t reacted at all. They were moving. They were moving, but Gaius wasn’t giving them any opportunity to attack.

Grrh. Gaius let out a low huff of breath, and the adventurers saw it: the Black Rose of Igris baring his teeth in a smile.

“Now that we’re all acquainted, let’s get started.”

...No, that wasn’t right. He wasn’t smiling. This was a lion baring its fangs.

*

“Don’t think I’ll be a pushover like that loser!” The first to charge at him was the man who’d called himself Dionysius, “the knave with the raging spear.”

The blade of the ox-tongue spear was long and heavy to increase the weapon’s might. Dionysius’s favored spear had a blade length of almost twenty-four inches, making it plenty effective at slashing as well as thrusting. Dionysius utilized his weapon well; his specialty was a thrust that transformed into a slash. If his opponent moved in the way that he predicted, they would get a lashing from his ox tongue.

However, Gaius neither jumped back nor dodged to the side. Instead, he took

a great step forward, closing into where the spear's long reach was unable to touch him with the deadly blade, and grabbed the weapon's shaft with his left hand. Before Dionysius could draw the weapon back, Gaius yanked it forward, causing the lancer to lose his balance and topple toward Gaius.

Wham! Almost like he was squashing a cockroach with a broom, Gaius brought his faussar down and split Dionysius's head in two. Without even a chance to cry out, the so-called "guild's strongest" met his end.

"Gwoh!" Matthew the ogre took the opportunity to bring his sword crashing down. Gaius dodged the blow, but Chas was by then waiting for him with his longsword at the ready.

Gaius brought his faussar up to block, but the middle-aged adventurer feinted with a vertical chop and swiftly shifted to a horizontal slash instead. This was a technique which allowed one to easily manipulate their sword's movement and control a fight. There was a *ting!* as metal clashed on metal; Gaius had anticipated the feint and moved his own sword accordingly to block the oncoming attack. Loathe to turn this into a contest of pure strength, Chas didn't push the attack, instead jumping back with an irritated cluck of his tongue.

That was as far as Gaius's skill could take him, however. He had nothing left to block Melinda's attack as she darted up to him from behind, swift as a swallow. Her horseman's flail drew an arc as she swung it into his side, and the blow connected with considerable force.

This was a weapon meant specifically for bludgeoning armored foes. The strike hit Gaius's coat of plate, rattling his organs and bones even through the thick armor. That one attack would have felled a normal fighter.

"There we..." she began, but this was no normal opponent. Gaius had realized that he would be unable to avoid her blow and had steeled himself to take it. "...go?"

There was the sickening sound of flesh and bone being crushed. In exchange for landing a single hit, Melinda took a blow to the face from the hilt of Gaius's faussar. Anyone could see that the weapon had caved her face in.

"Urgh..." With a groan of pain, Gaius leapt away from his foes, nearly turning a cartwheel to get the most distance. He'd managed to avoid the full force of all

of his opponents' attacks. The elder was wailing from his pouch on Gaius's back, but he had no time to concern himself with the old kobold.

"Aw, fuck! He got two of 'em in an instant, the monster." Chas took up his stance again with another cluck of his tongue. Matthew reacted to the word "monster", but Chas noticed and continued derisively, "Not you. Obviously."

That's when Homer finally stepped forward, armor clanking. His heavy arms and armor, and his position relative to the others, had prevented him from joining the exchange of blows. If the mad bull had been involved, the Kobold King may not have still been standing. Of course, Gaius knew that, which was why he'd specifically drawn the ox-tongue spear-wielder to attack him.

"Would you hurry it up, Homer?" Chas shouted irritably. "Because of you, our six against one is down to three against one in no time flat."

"It's three against two!" A voice came from the Kobold King's back, but the adventurers didn't seem to hear it.

"It's not my fault," Homer replied. "Dionysius was too hasty."

"Well, yeah, but..."

"Doesn't matter. I'm more than a match for him on my own," boasted the ogre.

"Would it kill you to be a little cooperative here, Matthew?" Chas responded.

Gaius took a look around as the three bickered. None of the other adventurers made any move to assist them, not even the archers or sorcerers. They all seemed to defer to this group, or perhaps they feared them too much to get involved. Of course, they could also be considering the possibility of accidentally hitting their allies.

"Old-timer. Get a message to Miss Sashalia for me, if you would."

"Will you make it?" the old kobold asked after Gaius whispered his plan to him.

"We're short on time. We should have them get started. I'll get through here and head for the river as fast as I can."

"Got it," the elder nodded and slipped back into the rucksack.

*

The knight Heatley had taken over the late Dawson's role as the leader of the rear guard. He was currently stationed a little down the river from where Darke's attack squad was, gathering and treating the injured from the Adventurers' Guild. They lay all over the ground as they waited for treatment, filling the riverbed with their cries of pain. Some had lost their fighting arms to the Black Rose of Igris; others had been impaled on spikes in traps and could no longer walk. One man had been attacked by a bugbear and was deemed a lost cause after being carried here, so they'd just left him on the ground. He'd breathed his last only a moment ago. Others were bleeding worse than they'd initially appeared to be; it was likely that only about half of the injured would survive their injuries.

"This wouldn't have happened if they'd come at me instead of Dawson," Heatley grumbled, chewing on the inside of his cheek. He was half irritated at the situation he now found himself in and half annoyed at the ease with which his colleague had been dispatched by the enemy.

The young man, who'd once brought down a band of thieves all on his own, was the most skilled of the knights under Wyatt's employ. However, because of this, he had a tendency to rely too much on his own strength and look down on those around him. Knowing that, Wyatt had purposely stationed him at the rear instead of sending him upriver with the main force. It was hard to say if this had been a smart use of his subordinates or not.

"It's getting cloudy," the young knight muttered, looking up at what was visible of the sky through the trees. The healing sorcerers they'd brought along who had been tending to the adventurers' wounds with magic followed his gaze and looked up as well. As Heatley had said, clouds were starting to pass across the sun, gradually darkening the forest even though it was the middle of the day.

"It's pretty hot. It's not gonna be good if it rains."

"Yeah, that'd be a pain."

They were treating the wounded under the open sky, and there was no time or manpower to put up tents. If it started to rain, it would take even longer to

get the injured stabilized, and it would be harder to keep them there.

“Mhm,” came the half-hearted reply of one of the sorcerers, as he moved on to his next patient without so much as a glance at Heatley.

“...Hmm?” Next to them, a bearded adventurer who had been bandaging one of the injured stood up and cocked his head with a puzzled look on his face.

“What is it?”

“Well...do you hear rain?”

“Hm?” Heatley strained his ears. “...I do. Has it already started?”

“I don’t feel anything.” The young knight and adventurer exchanged a mystified look.

Their ears didn’t deceive them. Not a drop of water was falling, but they clearly heard the sound of rain under the darkened sky.

*

The agile Chas would block and deflect Gaius’s attack. Matthew would then strike with a quick slash, and while Gaius’s movements were restricted, Homer would swing his hammer.

Or, Homer would block Gaius’s attack with his heavy armor while the other two struck at him. They were improvising, but using their various strengths to their advantage as they worked together.

They launched a few blows, jumped back, then struck out again. The three men had come at Gaius in this way six times now. Change came on the seventh.

Chas struck at him first to limit Gaius’s movements. His aim wasn’t to do damage; it was to force him to react, limiting the number of decisions he could make. So he was casual as he made his move against Gaius, intending to dodge or deflect the return blow as he’d done before.

Snap! This time, instead of attempting to strike at Chas, Gaius aimed *only* for his opponent’s sword. Chas’s longsword was rendered useless when about two-thirds of its blade snapped off.

“Ack?!” Chas hesitated, and a huge fist grabbed his right hand. Gaius swung

his arm back and threw his enemy somewhere behind him without looking. The black-haired adventurer flew through the air with a strangled cry and crashed hard into Matthew's face as the ogre was preparing to hit Gaius from behind. His huge frame swayed, a grunt of anger escaping his lips.

Homer didn't miss his chance. His hammer drew an arc in the air, swinging down at the Kobold King's grey hair. It was a full-strength blow to end things with a single crushing strike. He wasn't thinking about defense; in their previous exchanges, Homer's armor, helm, even his gauntlets had been able to block the blade of Gaius's faussar completely. His own monstrous strength and the assistance of several sorcerers made this impregnable defense possible. He'd probably be able to deflect a magic bolt, too. Gaius had taken all this into consideration, of course.

Deftly dodging, Gaius slid his blade along the handle of the hammer, directing its course toward the ground. He then swiftly lifted his faussar, striking the hands with which Homer gripped his weapon. The strangely thick gauntlets, almost like hammers themselves, once again did not yield to Gaius's blade. However, the shock of the blow was more than enough to weaken Homer's grip. Not missing the opportunity, Gaius dropped his faussar and switched weapons to the hammer that had just escaped the Mad Bull's hands.

"Ah—" That was all Homer had time to say as Gaius rotated once and swung the hammer into the side of his head. The weapon had been meant to strike through Gaius's armor, but it was now turned against its wielder. Gaius's mighty strength and the huge head of the hammer worked together to warp the shape of Homer's steel helm beyond all recognition. Needless to say, its contents were similarly reshaped.

As Homer's body *thud-thudded* to the ground, Gaius dropped the warhammer to switch back to his faussar. He stood after retrieving the weapon and saw Matthew charging at him, peeling Chas off of his face and tossing the man aside. With a low roar, Matthew swung his two-handed sword down from the roof stance. It was the same rage-filled strike he'd employed earlier. His technique was less like someone had taught him how to wield a sword and more like he was just angrily swinging his weapon about in a rage at the world.

...And in actuality, Matthew never *had* been taught swordplay. He only knew

the roof stance and the rage swing; he was completely self-taught. But maybe that was only natural. After all, sword technique and training were meaningless to him. There had never been anyone who had been able to defend against Massacre Matthew's powerful, lengthy blade. He'd never known anyone to surpass the speed of his arm, to escape his reach, or to possess the strength to block one of his blows.

...Not until now, that is. In a simple contest of strength, Gaius wouldn't have been able to stop Matthew's strike. But there was a massive disparity between the two, brought about by diligent training and long years of experience. There was a *clang!* of steel hitting steel as sparks flew.

"You stopped my sword?"

Gaius wasn't content to stop there, however. He caught his opponent's blade, diverted its direction, and deflected the strike. He then swung his blade up at the ogre's throat.

Matthew dodged back, bringing his sword up to deflect Gaius's faussar with reflexes that made it clear why ogres were known as a fighting race.

...This is where he should have realized that his opponent was pointing his sword the wrong way.

Gaius pulled his sword back as if he had been waiting for just this moment, and while Matthew's right arm was still extended from his defensive move, he slashed to the side at it. Gaius's blade tore through skin and flesh, ripping into the ogre's arm. But it was shallow. The swing had only gone a short distance, so there wasn't much power behind the blow. He hadn't managed to cut through the ogre's thick muscle.

Without a moment's delay, Gaius slashed again, this time at the ogre's left side. This was another shallow cut; the ogre's muscles were like steel armor protecting him from the inside. The two fighters paused, Matthew bleeding from the cuts while Gaius still held his sword, the edge still embedded in the ogre's torso.

"Urgh..."

"Groooh!"

The two glared at one another. Massacre Matthew lost none of his will to fight even with a blade in his side. He probably wouldn't stop fighting until he'd been rendered unconscious. Sensing that, the Black Rose of Igris tensed his arms, straining to lift the red-skinned giant off the ground. The spectators, who had all been watching with bated breath, began to murmur at this.

"Beeeldaruuus!" Still, Matthew continued to howl, lifting his left hand to swing his sword down even in this position. At just that moment...

Gaius swung his entire body, bashing his faussar, with his opponent still attached, into a tree. *Wham!* The ground seemed to shake from the impact, and the blade was driven deeper into the ogre's red flesh. A great cry went up from the watching adventurers.

Gaius repeated this attack, this time heaving his sword down instead of sideways. The young ogre's body was like a heavy log, being lifted into the air on an axe blade to be smashed against the ground over and over.

The crowd went completely quiet, save for one one-eyed adventurer who muttered, "Ahh... Not again... I can't watch Beldarus splitting wood again..."

*

Chas waited for Gaius to finish off Matthew by cutting off the ogre's head before addressing him. "You're somethin' else, Black Rose of Igris... I mean, Kobold King." For a second, his eyes lit up with a strong will to fight, but...

"Bro!" A family member or friend called out to him from the crowd, and Chas regained his cool. He clucked his tongue loud enough for Gaius to hear and sent him one last glare before all the fire went out of his eyes. Then he thought for a moment, before exaggeratedly grasping his arm and exclaiming in a flat voice, "Aaargh! My aaarm! When he threw me earlieeer! I think I broke iiit! It hurts soooo baaaaad! I can't fight like thiiis!" He retreated back into the crowd, still shouting emotionlessly. Soon he was out of Gaius's sight. He must have decided it was time to call it quits.

Even coming at him with the other hundred adventurers nearby, it would be hard to put down the Kobold King...that's what the swordsman had decided. A portion of the gathered forces clearly agreed with that observation. It was all the more obvious to those with skill and experience. They all unconsciously

took one step back, then another. Everyone there had been completely shaken by Gaius's melée with the six fighters.

"...I've earned quite a few nicknames for myself, haven't I?" Gaius came out of his fighting stance, setting his faussar against his shoulder. No one dared attack him even then. His earlier display had robbed each and every one of them of the desire to cross swords with the Black Rose of Igris. "When I tried my best to avoid letting my enemies suffer, they called me 'the Headhunter.'" He sighed, but to those around him, it was the warning huff of a beast before it charged. "I don't know how considerate I'll be able to be if I get too busy, though. If I don't have time, well..." He took a step forward and the ring of people split. "It might...hurt." The words he spoke with a twist of his lips crushed whatever will to fight remained in those encircling him.

...Gaius Beldarus had never celebrated his bravery. Instead, he was ashamed that it was the only area he really excelled in. But he was well aware of how to dominate a battlefield. And as he stepped forward, the crowd around him parted like the tide going out.

Gaius calmly walked forward. With each step he took, the adventurers took two steps back. One alone remained standing in place, stupefied: the knight who had ordered this move against Gaius, Seligman. A lack of experience and being on a different wavelength from those around him had separated him from the waves of adventurers around him.

The Kobold King stopped before him. From the look of him and his equipment, he could tell that the young man was a knight who worked for Wyatt, the one commanding the forces around him. So when Gaius's faussar swung down, everyone there, Seligman included, thought that he'd become prey to the blade.

Their eyes met, but it was not an equal exchange. Their gazes were those of a lion meeting the eyes of a trembling rabbit.

Fwoosh. The sword cut through the air. But all it cut was a few strands of Seligman's hair as the young knight's legs gave out from under him. It almost looked like he'd dodged at the last second. Either way, he was completely defenseless now...but Gaius only spared him a glance and went by him. He

didn’t finish the knight off or take him hostage. The beast stalked off, leaving his sitting prey alone.

After him came the soft *jingle, jingle* of the weapons tied to his golem horse as it followed its master.

All the adventurers and Seligman could do was watch them disappear beyond the trees, all of them silent as if they had forgotten even how to breathe.

*

I let him get away. That was Seligman’s first thought once he recovered from his stupefaction. *Why didn’t he kill me? It wouldn’t have been hard for him.* He could have just lifted his giant sword up and splattered his brains on the ground. And if he didn’t want to take the time to swing at him, he could have just reached out and stuck him with his sword as he walked past. *These adventurers would have no one to command them if he took me out. Common sense says I should have been his objective. I mean, back at the river, they went straight for Dawson and Humphreys, didn’t they?* He saw no reason for his enemy to extend mercy to him. There was nothing between Seligman and Gaius, and unlike his colleague Ashcroft, Seligman didn’t have a face that could get him confused for a teenager. He hadn’t even had time to plead for his life earlier. So why...?

“Sir Seligman! Are you all right?!” A young fighter ran over to Seligman, interrupting his thoughts. The other adventurers all looked towards him too, awaiting orders.

“Y-Yeah. Sorry. That was a close one.” Seligman feigned calm. *That’s right. We need to go after him now instead of trying to figure out what he’s thinking.* He made to grasp the hand held out to him, intending to pull himself to his feet so that he could order them to pursue their foe, but—*Huh?*—he couldn’t move his fingers. His hands were shaking. He was rooted to the ground, sweating like a pig. *Why can’t I stand?*

“Sir Seligman, are you hurt?! Let me see!” The young fighter knelt down worriedly.

That’s it! Damn it! He got me somewhere! Seligman brushed aside the young man’s hand and ran his own hands over himself. His arms, his neck, his legs, his

stomach... but there was nothing. He stuck his hands inside his armor as well, just to be safe, but nothing hurt. He was completely unscathed.

Seligman gave a great sigh of relief. “I’m okay...” That’s when he realized Gaius Beldarus’s true aim. *I was frozen from fear, not from a wound.* The Black Rose of Igris had realized that the young knight was beside himself with terror. And that wasn’t all. Gaius had left Seligman alive specifically in order to rob his enemy of whatever confidence they had left. There was a saying in the southern countries: “Wolves lose their fangs when commanded by a rabbit.” There were no heavier shackles for a force than a cowardly commander.

*

“Oh, can’t you run any faster, you big lug?! You really took your sweet time back there! We need to hurry!”

“Sorry! Sorry!” Gaius bowed his head in apology as he dashed through the trees.

“The little lady’s demanding that we hurry as w...nwhoa?!” The elder yelped as a magic bolt grazed Gaius’s side.

“You okay, old-timer?!”

“Just run, would you, you half-wit?!” the elder yelled, grabbing on to Gaius’s hair like it was reins.

“Not the hair, please! I’m starting to go thin there...”

“You idiot! Look out, they’re aiming again!”

“Ow, ow, ow!” Gaius’s pace didn’t slow, worried though he was for his scalp. The elder yelped again when Gaius suddenly changed direction, jostling the old kobold within his knapsack. A moment later, a bolt of magical energy exploded into a nearby tree trunk.

Aiming at them were twenty or so adventurers who were not part of any of the currently organized groups. This bunch had lain in wait, foreseeing the chance that Homer’s group would fail to subdue their foe and aiming to take the glory now that the opportunity had arisen. Many of them were quite experienced; their pursuit was cautious, precise, and thorough. The archers

Gaius had failed to finish off earlier had joined this bunch as well. They relied entirely on their own judgment, ignoring Seligman's orders, but such was the risk when using adventurers. And since visibility was so bad in this forest, Seligman might not have even known they were acting on their own like this.

Gaius had stalled the main force of adventurers for long enough and was heading back to the riverbed in time to carry out Sashalia's plan when he'd been discovered by this group. They must have caught on to his immediate goal, because the archers and swordsmen were working together to prevent him from making it back to the riverbed.

"Look at the river!" The elder pointed through the trees at the riverbed, which was rapidly filling with muddy water to become a river once again. "It's filling up fast! We're not going to make it!"

"I see it! Just try not to fall off, old man! Come on, Claudette, keep up!" Gaius stopped zig-zagging and began to run straight for the river. Two adventurers blocked his way: one bearing a curved sword and the other wielding a shortsword. Without slowing, he brought down the first with a single running punch from a gauntleted fist, then followed through and grabbed the hands of the second. He pulled her close and headbutted her, and the woman dropped to the ground. A moment later, Claudette's stone-and-clay body trampled over her. She didn't get up after that.

Gaius reached the river, hearing arrows and magic flying close to him, and waded through the shin-high water without lowering his speed. Claudette followed, protecting his rear, but just as she tried to enter the river, a crossbow bolt and a bolt of magic struck her simultaneously in the left hind leg, dislodging a chunk of her body and sending her toppling into the water.

"Hey! They got Claudette!"

The golem horse neighed and sank beneath the torrent.

"Claudette?!" Gaius spun back around, but he was forced to beat a hasty retreat across the river as the archers on the other side of the river continued to fire at him. The adventurers were forced to give up their pursuit as well, as the river was only getting deeper and flowing faster.

*

The reason the river had dried up was because a large amount of soil had formed a natural dam at the mouth of the river in the lake at some point. The kobolds had done some work on their own to create a channel the water could escape down, and had dammed it off so they could release the water whenever they chose. Then they'd waited for the perfect opportunity to unleash it.

There were too many examples to count throughout history of rivers and lakes being used in warfare. Most of them consisted of damming rivers and using the water to wash away enemies, or flooding a lake to submerge a castle, or filling a field with water to halt the advance of cavalry. Sashalia, who had always been diligent in her study of military history, had thought to use the riverbed in this way as soon as she gained an understanding of the terrain around the Kingdom. That and the spirit-speak tactics she'd come up with had allowed for the coordination required to put her plan into action. The water level of the lake was high enough due to the sediment that had dammed the river, and the rain a few days ago had allowed the level to rise as well. The water rushing down the riverbed now would easily sweep away anyone who tried to set foot inside it. In addition, there was a construction team upriver throwing logs and other detritus into the flow at regular intervals to discourage anyone from trying to cross the river. That would likely keep anyone from trying for a good while. Thus, this torrent of water and mud succeeded in separating the majority of the adventurers' forces, still over three hundred strong, from the battlefield.

Chapter 6: Obsession

Wyatt scowled when he saw Darke point her face down and skew the brim of her hat to the left slightly. *She's doing that so it's harder for an opponent to tell what she's looking at.* He determined that she was most likely not an upstanding swordswoman, but one who preferred using dirty tricks in combat. On top of that, he'd seen her fight in his previous attack, and knew that she had taken out Dawson on the riverbed. He was well aware of her skills with a blade.

However... The red-armored knight rushed toward her, and Darke responded by slashing at him from a high left stance. Wyatt raised his sword, showing her that he'd block it. The black-clad swordswoman then missed her swing...no, she rotated and struck at Wyatt's other side without losing her momentum. It was a typical feint. Wyatt had seen this coming, however, and dodged her slash, turning his defensive stance into a slash of his own.

"Whoa!" Darke shouted and dodged the Sword Eater, almost falling out of the way. Her hat didn't fall off, which meant it was probably affixed to her hair with something. She regained her balance right away, and Wyatt attacked once more. As she deflected his second strike, the black-clad swordswoman leapt back to put some distance in between them.

"...Hmm." Their exchange solidified Wyatt's suspicions: this opponent was several levels below Gaius Beldarus in skill.

"You okay, Darke?!" A flax-colored kobold voiced his concern for the swordswoman, but the latter held her hand out to stop him from interfering. She had likely gauged the difference in their skills from that exchange as well.

"I need you to stay back, Rain Grass. That goes for the rest of you, too. I am the only one who is a match for this man."

"Oh? How admirable," Wyatt said. "Why, if you cry and beg forgiveness, I might just spare your life."

"Huh? Ah, yeah, that's not gonna happen." Darke narrowed her eyes and

shook her head exaggeratedly. Wyatt was faintly irritated, as she was clearly making fun of him.

“Why’s that?”

“Hmm. Are you always so curious, Sir Why’s That?” She laughed, the sound like a frog croaking.

“...It’s ‘Wyatt.’ Do you really have any reason to side with those barbaric kobolds? Or is your duty to Beldarus that great?” Wyatt never stopped analyzing his opponent even as they spoke. She may have been a lesser opponent than the Black Rose of Igris, but that didn’t mean he’d have an easy time of it against her. He was hesitant to use more of the Scarlet Plate’s power before his confrontation with Gaius, what with the burden it placed on his body. His bones and joints were already screaming just from the two tree-eating lizards and one bugbear he’d had to deal with.

“Oh, no, it’s just, the thing is, I’ve actually never cried before, as far as I can remember, so the ‘crying and begging forgiveness’ thing... I wouldn’t know how.” The black-haired swordswoman gave another croaking laugh and then pointed her finger at Wyatt as if struck by a sudden thought. “Oh, I know! Do you think you could give me an example of proper groveling? I might be able to do it then! Would you be so kind, Sir Why’s That?”

“Enough damn foolishness.” Wyatt spat the words out distastefully and went on the offensive.

Their blades hit with a *clang!* as Wyatt swung down his Sword Eater and Darke blocked with her hanger. She had unexpected strength for a human woman, and Wyatt couldn’t help being impressed. Her shapely figure was likely in part because of muscle, not just body fat. More than anything, she was skilled at knowing precisely how to apply her strength. He had no way of knowing if this was a natural skill of hers or one honed through hard work. Her ghostly pallor gave off an impression of weakness, and if Wyatt had been any ordinary fighter, underestimating her because of this could have been his downfall.

She is impressive, but... Using their locked blades as a pivot, he lifted his hilt and shifted Darke’s blade to the side. This not only removed her defense, but

put him in position to attack. *I won't need to use the Crimson Plate for this.*

Darke pulled away and leapt back like she had earlier. Wyatt followed and lobbed an attack at her side. Darke blocked with her sword held vertically and deflected the blow. *One.* She went for his throat on her counterattack, but Wyatt hooked her blade and spun it away. *Two.* Darke tried to flee again, but he pressed his attack with a furious strike. She barely managed to deflect his sword that time. *Three.* After four, five, six...ten such exchanges, Darke finally managed to gain some distance from him again. The two pointed their blades at each other and went back to trying to find an opportune moment to attack.

"Whew! You're a strong one, Sir Why's That! Yes, indeed." Her expression remained unchanged, but Darke couldn't hide how hard she was breathing.

"You're more agile than you look as well." Wyatt, on the other hand, wasn't breathing hard at all.

"Aw, that's not very nice! And here I was giving you a compliment!"

"So was I. Be grateful for it." Wyatt took a step forward. Darke took a step back.

"I see, I see. A good man has to be a good flatterer. But it's more important to know when to quit."

"You've a glib tongue."

"Oh, and you've a keen eye! I am quite known for my tongue skills." Darke slowly licked her lips with a wet and deliberate thoroughness, then muttered, "eww, spit," and wiped at her mouth with her hand. "On closer inspection, you look quite virile and manly yourself, Sir Wyatt! ...Mhm, mhm, not bad, not bad..." She hummed to herself, in thought for a moment. "Oh, but I couldn't. My type is more rosy-cheeked young men and sweet young women... Them, and virgin men with ugly mugs and smelly feet."

Wyatt brought his sword hilt up to his right shoulder and pointed the blade at her, holding his sword sideways in the "key" stance. "You are no fighter. You really are nothing but a fool." He stepped forward, unleashing a powerful thrust. Darke bent backwards and deflected the Sword Eater to her right with her hanger. Wyatt allowed the motion to carry his arm forward and changed

the trajectory of his blade, whipping it around in a brutal backhand slash. Against a normal opponent, this attack from the side would probably finish things, but Darke was just barely able to defend against it. Their blades clashed again. Wyatt tried to push her backward, but Darke held her ground. They drew closer, and right when their eyes met over their locked steel...

Pfft! The black-haired swordswoman pursed her lips and spat some kind of liquid at her opponent. During her earlier jesting, she'd hidden something small inside her mouth and bit it open, spitting its contents at Wyatt to blind him.

The spray of vinegar and spices flew at Wyatt's face, but he pulled back to avoid it. This was a technique he'd had used against him a few times in the war, and one he'd even made use of himself more than once. Since he'd judged her sword skills to be inferior to his own, he'd anticipated that she would stoop to using such tactics.

"Underhanded..." Wyatt re-gripped his sword and stepped forward to counterattack, but right at that moment, the black-clad swordswoman crumpled...no, she hadn't collapsed. She'd deliberately dropped to all fours. The red-armored knight hesitated for a moment, baffled by the utterly defenseless position she'd taken, but he was able to read her gaze and decipher her aim quick enough to respond to her ruse.

Whoosh came the sound of a thick log swinging down on a rope from his left side. The log had been hung so that it would collide with the upper body of an adult human male when released. From the mass of the log and the speed it was coming at him, the impact would be fatal. Wyatt instantly understood why Darke had continued to cross blades with him despite her inferior skill.

I can't dodge it. In his accelerated thoughts, he could sense the black-clad swordswoman going on the offensive. He even felt like he could hear her thinking, "Die a pathetic death." Even if he could crouch and avoid the log, she would strike as soon as he was thrown off his balance. ...In which case...

There was a *thud!* as the massive log impacted...Wyatt's left hand. The patterns on his armor glowed red. Inside the red plate, his flesh and bones groaned, and a searing pain tore through him.

Darke was in position to thrust out her blade, but her eyes opened wide at

this, and what happened next was enough to freeze her in place.

Wyatt knocked aside Darke's hanger with his right hand, leaving his left hand holding the entire log. It was the only way for him to defend in his position. But the swordswoman could never have imagined what happened to her blade in that moment; it didn't simply bend or snap, but shattered. And Wyatt would never let the opportunity her shock afforded him go to waste. Not even bothering to bring his sword back from its swing, he sent a fierce kick her way, his armor still glowing.

Crack. Darke's body folded at the impact, flying thirty feet through the air in an arc and rolling when she hit the ground. She thudded loudly into a tree and went still, her head lolling. At the same time, Wyatt collapsed to the ground, in agony from the strain of using the armor.

"Darke!"

"Captain!"

Rain Grass and some others from the attack team rushed to Darke's side while one of them leapt at Wyatt, slobbering and snarling ferociously. It was the young, blue-furred kobold.

"Deyah! Deyah! Deyah! Hoh! Hoh! Hoh!" He was slashing and thrusting with no proper form or thought behind his blows. Without proper footwork, his blows were light and shallow. Still, Wyatt was more vulnerable than he'd been all day now. He couldn't even lift his sword to defend, so he was left with nothing but his gauntlets to block the strikes of the shortsword. And while he was so occupied...

"Put your back into it! She's heavy!"

"Gwoooh! You can say that again!"

"Sheeee's heavyyyyy!"

"She's *too* heavy, isn't she?!"

The other kobolds had thrown aside their weapons and worked together to lift up the unconscious swordswoman, fleeing as fast as they could.

"Mmnh!" The blue-furred kobold who'd bought them time also fled as soon

as he sensed that he'd done his part, and by the time the red-armored knight was able to regain his feet, they'd all gotten a considerable distance away.

"...How pathetic. I let the dunce take control of the situation, and ended up having to use the armor in the end." Wyatt scowled and sighed. He patted, pressed, and rubbed at his body to assess the damage the Scarlet Plate had done to him. Grimacing in pain every so often, he eventually finished his examination and took another deep breath. "I'm good." He was all right. Nothing had been severed or broken. He could still go on. He wasn't finished yet.

"Unbelievable," he muttered, looking down at a broken dagger, still in its sheath, lying at his feet. It was likely one of several such knives the swordswoman had strung up underneath her cloak. "I thought I broke her sternum or some ribs." She'd jumped back at the last moment, probably taking the brunt of the force from the kick with her right arm and this small piece of steel under her cloak. "...A skilled fool to be sure." Still, she couldn't have escaped completely unscathed.

Wyatt took a moment to think about it, but decided not to pursue them. If he followed them too far there was ample danger of them luring him into another trap. The guildmaster had a more pressing duty to reorganize his forces. He decided to make reuniting with Ashcroft and his men his priority for now.

*

"The attack team was defeated by the enemy guildmaster, currently fleeing! Captain Darke is unconscious!" Unease ran through the command center as one of the housewives received a report from the attack team.

"There's an area of unsprung pit traps a little farther in that direction! Tell them to retreat through there!" Sashalia ran her eyes over the map and pointed out the location in question. "Is the enemy pursuing?"

"No pursuit!"

"Attack team has arrived at traps! Attempting to revive the captain!"

After a short while, the lady kobolds began receiving more updates. The

attack team seemed to have been attempting mouth-to-mouth and chest compressions on the unconscious Darke. This was a method of resuscitation familiar to the hunters of the village, who put their lives in danger every day, or so Rain Grass had told Sashalia.

“Darke...” Though she was concerned for her colleague, Sashalia couldn’t neglect her duties, so they went about their work in the command center for a short time, even though the atmosphere was strained with worry.

“Captain Darke has regained consciousness!” This time, the elated report sent a wave of relief through the room.

“How are her wounds?”

“She’s claiming to be fine, but her spirit messenger reports that her right arm looks to be in bad shape. Also, Rain Grass...”

“Rain Grass...?”

“...Is in some distress. ‘She put her tongue in,’ he says.”

“Uegh,” came a chorus of housewives, disgusted looks on their faces. Fog’s childhood friend was very unpopular among the group, it seemed.

In any case, from the reports it seemed Darke had regained consciousness without the actual need for cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

“Any other losses?”

“They abandoned their weapons to flee, so they’ll need replacements.”

“There’s a stash in a moss cave a little further back. Have them restock there. Anything else? No more casualties?”

“Nothing but the ‘tragic loss of Rain Grass’s first kiss.’”

“No one cares,” shouted one of the housewives.

“Er, that’s probably what Darke told the spirit messenger to say...” Sashalia felt the need to make that comment lest her colleague cause the flax-colored warrior to fall even lower in the eyes of the housewife alliance. “It’s harsh, but we can’t let Darke leave the front lines. Tell her to avoid fighting personally, but remain there to command. We’ll restore some of their fighting power with

squad five, which is nearby."

"Got it. We'll contact them," two housewives set about their task.

"Red Eye's squad one should stay where they are to maintain our last line of defense. Squad two should bring their staves with them and begin confronting small groups to replace squad five. While the enemy's main force is cut off by the river, we'll finish off the fifty remaining on this side."

"Yes, ma'am!" the housewives replied.

The attack squad had lured away ninety adventurers, and an additional thirty had followed. They'd managed to reduce that number down to fifty-five. On top of that, most of the adventurers were still scattered. Many had died or been injured by traps, magical beasts, and the kobold squads, but more and more were simply abandoning the fight or fleeing due to the confusion of being cut off from their commanders or their draining enthusiasm for the mission. Wyatt's use of adventuring parties, which he'd hoped would be able to think for themselves in an emergency, had backfired as the parties were all prioritizing self-preservation over the expedition as a whole. They may have been combat specialists, but adventurers were fundamentally people who fought in their own self-interests. They didn't live on their reputations and their faithfulness to their contracts like full mercenary companies did.

The reason soldiers were kept close enough for their commanders to see them and speak to them...no, the reason they *had to be* kept that close was precisely to prevent such losses of morale. That's why wide-open spaces had always been chosen as battlefields in the past. The Kingdom's Army was able to maintain morale even while split up largely due to their ability to uphold the chain of command and share information between separate groups using spirit-speak. As long as the command center remained active, the kobolds would most likely be able to maintain order and assertiveness in their actions. Even with a quarter of their forces split off and all the strategies they'd had thrown at them, the dregs of the remaining adventurers still surpassed the Kingdom Army's fighters when it came to strength, but the scales of battle were starting to tip heavily in the Kobold Kingdom's favor due to this difference between their forces.

“We’ve made it this far...” Sashalia took a moment to allow herself to feel relief until Hopping Rabbit prodded her shoulder to get her attention and made a report:

“There’s another message from the attack team. It’s from Captain Darke, to the General.”

“Hm?”

*

[Attack team to Command Center: No lasting injuries. The Captain’s breast provided ample protection.]

[Command Center to Attack Team: Please be more precise in your reports. Did you mean “breastplate”?]

“What in the world are they doing?” The elder sighed after catching that uncoded message.

“...Did something happen?”

“Mm, the pale one seems to have battled the enemy leader and lost.”

Gaius sat against a tree and listened, his expression stony.

“Seems she was injured, but her life’s in no danger and her team was able to get away. No need to worry.”

“That idiot.”

The elder picked up several scents from Gaius, but didn’t ask about them. “How are *you* doing, though?” the elder asked. Exhaustion and weariness were clear on his partner’s face.

“Pretty embarrassed... Guess this isn’t as easy for me as it was when I was young.” Gaius smiled wryly. It was no wonder he was fatigued. He’d fought battle after battle, and faced quite a few highly skilled opponents all at once. The blow he’d taken from Melinda combined with all his other wounds, large and small, were starting to take a toll on him.

“What’s that? Mocking the elderly, are you?”

“Huh?! Oh! No, that wasn’t my intention.”

“Hmph... Mm?”

“Did you get another message?”

The elder confirmed the contents of the message he’d been sent and sighed irritatedly. “They’re more persistent than we thought. They’re still moving, even in this situation. The twenty-odd uninjured foes they left in the rear have picked up several more and are making their way up the river.”

“I would have expected them to have retreated by now...and if it’s a group of about thirty...”

“It’s a bit too much for them to handle.”

The only troops stationed along the river on the way to the village were three small squads, making a total of nine kobolds. They were precious fighting power, and Gaius would have liked for even one of them to be able to join the attack squad instead, but they couldn’t be removed from their duty of cleaning up the enemies Gaius had already gone through or that had been separated from the main force. They were the bare minimum fighting power needed to perform that role, and absolutely would not be able to deal with a human force of thirty head-on. The path this group was on also had some traps, but there were many more on the western side of the river where the adventurers had been stranded. Once the adventurers made it through the forest and reached the plains, there would be nothing stopping them from reaching the village.

“The little lady’s asking our status, probably trying to decide if we should head back and regroup or go at them as we are.”

“I’m good. We should concentrate our fighting power to the west. That’ll avoid more losses.” Gaius couldn’t hide the fatigue in his voice as he answered.

The elder harrumphed in response, then went quiet in thought for a time. “Say, Slayer of Fifty.”

“...That’s an exaggerated nickname, old-timer.”

“Oh? How many *did* you slay, then?”

“It wasn’t fifty.”

“Don’t be modest, just tell me.”

“...I counted forty bodies afterward. But I didn’t fight them all at once...”

The elder cut him off by asking, “How many would you say you’ve defeated today?”

“Dunno... Thirty-four or -five, maybe? I wasn’t really keeping track.”

“Hmm. So if we add the thirty we’re going to face now, it’ll be sixty-five-ish, eh?”

“Well...I suppose it would.” Gaius cocked his head, unsure of where the elder was going with this.

“Let’s say you’ve the strength of forty men. I may be your partner, but it is only my first battle, so we’ll say I’m worth half that—call it twenty. What do you get when you add those?”

“...The strength of sixty men?”

“Exactly. Together, we’re the Slayers of Sixty! Sixty-five will only take a tiny bit more effort than usual!”

The elder’s logic was spotty at best. Gaius was confused for a moment, but then he understood what the elder was trying to say.

“Hahaha! You’re right about that! True, it’s just a matter of simple math! You really do know your stuff, elder!” He slapped his knee in amusement.

“Sure I do. Though you’ve lived about thirty times as long as I have! Gahaha!”

“Oh, life’s about quality over quantity! Hahaha!”

The two shared a laugh for some time.

“Well, shall we get going, Your Majesty?”

“Let’s.” Gaius stood, once again ready to take on his foes.

*

After another encounter with a tree-eating lizard, scuffles with traps, and general interference from the kobolds... Wyatt finally met back up with Ashcroft and the twenty or so men he’d rounded up. A lone adventurer approached him

soon after.

It was a messenger Heatley had dispatched from his position at the rear. The adventurer ran up, covered in sweat and out of breath, and reported to Wyatt what Heatley's squad had discovered while taking care of the injured: that the knight Humphreys had been defeated by Beldarus on the riverbed; that Seligman and the main force had been cut off from them, left on the other side of the river when it filled; that the supplies they'd brought with them on carts had been washed away; that the injured and medical team had taken refuge next to the river; and that Heatley had taken twenty-five men from the rear who were heading upstream to attack the village in place of their main force.

Ashcroft and the other adventurers nearby listened to all this in astonishment, but the shock Wyatt felt was even more extreme. The rest of them were all focused on Beldarus and the river filling in, but Wyatt was finally coming to realize something else. The kobolds' tactics were entirely based around dividing the adventurers into small groups and crushing them, then relentlessly repeating that process. It's impossible for ten to defeat one hundred, but in theory the ten would be able to defeat that many foes if they only had to face them five at a time. That would only be in an ideal situation, but it was the fundamental basis of their strategy. The kobolds had meticulously separated the adventurers again and again, using the forest environment to their advantage and working together to do it. Then they'd concentrated their own soldiers with absolute efficiency, finishing off each and every enemy they had separated from the main force. This was not something they could have accomplished by simply deciding to do it beforehand and acting with quick wits.

...Their soldiers were acting together as one body, which meant that somewhere there had to be a head, a commander who had firm control of the battlefield and was moving pieces on it even now. And it wasn't Gaius Beldarus, who was fighting on the front lines. With all that he'd done in battle, there was no way he was also the one commanding all these forces.

"We have to strike at the head. Or make it unable to function," Wyatt muttered to himself. But they had no way of knowing when they would be able to mobilize their main force. They couldn't measure the amount of water now flowing down the river, so it was possible they wouldn't be able to cross it until

night, and they would never be able to traverse the unknown territory of the Greatwood at night, let alone fight in it. Which meant they would have to make camp and re-launch their attack tomorrow...and they'd lost the supplies with which to do that. Of course, people could go a night without eating and drinking, but there was no guarantee they'd be able to fight decently in such states of exhaustion. That meant that he didn't even know if they'd be able to finish this by the next day.

They could head back to the encampment they'd left outside the forest and replenish their supplies there, but launching another invasion after going back that far would be difficult. *Now I realize I should have just let the men who were lured into the forest die and continued down the riverbed myself.* Wyatt ran his eyes over the nearby adventurers in irritation. Of course, he couldn't have made that choice, considering his position as guildmaster. He would have lost all the trust of the adventurers, and none of them would have followed his orders after that. It would be the equivalent of abandoning the role his lady had given him, and all the funds and authority that came with it. So he couldn't have done that.

This battle would not be the end for Wyatt. He would break through this barrier and continue on... and he was here to make it so that he could begin moving once again. *Should we head back to Ryburgh and come back on another day, with a proper force and proper tactics?* No, that wouldn't work. In that time, the Black Rose of Igris could expose the plot of his lady, Keighley Zigan, to the other lords, and that would be the end of that. Besides, open hostilities between the Keighley and Dugard factions were likely to break out in that time, and if that happened, Wyatt would never be able to send a force hundreds-strong to subjugate "some monsters."

That's right. Why did I even do all this work to bring soldiers to the Greatwood in the first place? I barely got this force ready in time. He covered his face with his hand, pressing down on the center of his forehead with his pointer finger and his temple with his thumb, as if he meant to crush his own skull. He held this torturous pressure to his head, desperately holding back the impulse to scream.

At the same time, Wyatt was forced to realize that he had been pushed even

closer to the brink of ruin than he'd ever been before. He *had to* finish this before sunset today.

"Heatley's heading along the river, making for the village."

The messenger nodded in confirmation. Heatley was clearly acting under his own discretion. The young, courageous knight had let his ardor stir him to rashness. Of course, what he was doing was necessary to carry out Wyatt's plan to hit the village from two directions at once; this had been the reason he'd brought sub-commanders in the first place.

"Ashcroft. Take the forces here and head for the village."

"We're still fighting?!" His subordinate's response was politically, tactically, and empathetically lacking, so Wyatt replied with his fist.

"I-I'm terribly sorry, Sir." Ashcroft mumbled, one hand clasped to his chin.

Wyatt continued as if the previous exchange hadn't happened. "I'll take Quincy and Margot and go around to attack the village from another side." Two lightly equipped adventurers with swords nodded in acknowledgment. They were more often involved in searching and exploratory work than fighting, but they had both grown up in the mountains and were good hikers.

"Will just the two of them be enough?"

"Good point, Ashcroft. I think I'll take one more." The look on his subordinate's face said that this wasn't what he'd meant, but Wyatt ignored him and turned to a small man who had been standing behind him. "Cyril. You're up. You found a route to go around the village when you were with Theron, didn't you? Tell me." He drew his Sword Eater from its sheath and placed the blade against the former hunter's cheek.

"Eek! I-I don't have a route! I just know some landmarks you could use to find a way around!"

"Wow, a straightforward answer for once. Well done." The guildmaster smiled and drew his blade across Cyril's right cheek, creating a red line there. The former hunter screamed like a child and fell to the ground.

"We won't be able to get in contact with Heatley at this point, so there's no

coordinating with him. We just have to take advantage of his actions." Wyatt turned back to Ashcroft. "With numbers this small, they shouldn't be able to confuse us anymore. I don't know how many times I've said this at this point, but avoid the traps and make your way cautiously, *carefully,* straight to the village."

"Y-Yes, Sir."

"You and Heatley's group will be both the main force and a diversion. Draw the kobolds' attention and fighting strength to you, and pressure them to stay there. The enemies shouldn't be able to ignore you."

The young knight and adventurers all nodded in unison.

"Meanwhile, my unit will set fire to the village. When you see the smoke, that's when you'll begin your attack in earnest. They should be in disarray. Then all we need to do is lure the dogs and Beldarus into an open space and hit them with all of our strength."

"Roger."

"Understood."

"Got it!"

"You can count on us."

As they all assented, Wyatt looked over the group, a dark fever lurking behind his eyes.

"We'll set off at once. We're finishing this before the sun sets, no matter what. Now that there are so many fewer of us, you can expect your rewards to be that much greater."

*

Thirty or so soldiers marched in single file along the torrential, revived river. One among them, a knight, bashed the trees with his fist as he walked by. It was the rear commander, Heatley.

"That brainless idiot, Humphreys! That dimwit, Seligman! What were they doing?!" As he gathered an understanding of the situation from what information he could get out of the injured, Heatley had been enraged at the

incompetence of Seligman and the main force, who they had been completely cut off from and were no longer able to contact. “Those fools! Useless!” The young knight cursed his colleagues out of a twisted sense of responsibility and passion. The adventurers in front of and behind him continued on silently, unwilling to engage him.

They had triggered two primitive traps so far on their march, and one fighter had been forced to drop out due to injuries to his legs, but otherwise their march was going well. Since they were following the river, there was no chance of them losing their way, and they weren’t walking through a sea of traps like their comrades who had been lured into the forest. They just walked along, accompanied by the occasional sounds of breaking twigs or leaves and the odd *thud* of a fist against a tree. It was some time before they encountered the enemy.

“Waaah!” The line all turned at the scream. It had come from a young adventurer near the rear of the procession, who had just happened to turn around. When he did, he’d caught sight of a swordswoman lying against a tree, her throat ripped out. Two other men had been behind her in the line, but they were nowhere to be seen. The adventurer who had screamed soon joined his comrades in death when a length of steel lashed out to cave in the side of his head. Heatley’s whole squad understood instantly that this had been the work of the man who had suddenly appeared, bloodied cleaver in hand.

The next person in the line, a sorcerer, immediately turned around to run, but the cleaver hacked down into his shoulder, smashing his ribcage and hewing through the man all the way into his internal organs. The archer behind him began to string his bow, but while he was taking aim, the cleaver slashed through his torso, snapping his bow like a twig as it went. A warrior with a short spear and a tattooed face flailed with her weapon in a panic, and the butt of her spear got caught against a nearby tree. While she was distracted by this, the tip of the faussar plunged into her face. The man mowed down foe after foe, making his way up from the end of the line like a forest worker casually walking through tall brush.

Gaius Beldarus had hidden in wait for the line of adventurers to pass him by, and began his assault on the rear of the line, where the formation’s attention

was lowest. Heatley's impatience meant all his focus had been on what was before him, and Gaius had taken advantage of that.

Heatley's response was quick, however. "Fall back! You can't handle him! I'll do it!" The young knight pushed past the adventurers and headed straight for Gaius, taking up his sword and declaring, "I thought I'd find you on this side of the river, Black Rose of Igris! You managed to shake off Seligman with an underhanded trick, but your luck's run out now that you've run into me!" If the fact that this brute had taken out Homer, Matthew, Chas, and Melinda all at once had gotten back to this young knight, he might have taken slightly different action, but unfortunately for him, it hadn't.

"I won't be taking you alive. I'll cut you down and end you right here, Beldarus!" Heatley's sword shone. Its blade was curved, waving almost like a flickering flame, so elegant it could have been a work of art. It was a large sword of a style known as a flamberge. He stood facing Gaius with the sword in a high "head" stance used by those who favored large, two-handed blades.

"Ever seen one of these, Black Rose of Igris? It's not just for show. Wounds caused by this blade end up twisted and torn. The scars are terrible. The flesh will never heal back to the way it was." He twirled the tip of the sword slowly as if to provoke Gaius.

Gaius went quiet for a moment and then scratched his chin with his free hand as if this were nothing more than a casual chat. "Mhm. I was cut by one in the past. It hurt."

Heatley was taken aback by that response, but quickly bared his teeth in irritation. "You bastard! Are you making light of me?!"

"...Hey, meathead, you think this fellow's all right in the head?" The old kobold popped out of Gaius's rucksack, cutting off any further shouts from the young knight.

"Put your head back in there, old man. This is hardly a safe time."

"I'm just sayin', if the man intends to kill you here, why all this fuss about your wounds healing and scars and such?"

"Oh, you shouldn't say things like that..."

“Don’t you dare mock me!”

Heatley sent a rage-filled swing at Gaius. Gaius held up his faussar with both hands to catch the blow, then released his right hand from the grip, continuing to push up with his left hand as he took a great step forward. The shape of the flamberge made it more difficult to keep the blades locked than other swords would, but Gaius skillfully maintained contact while shifting his blade to keep Heatley’s sword engaged. There was the screeching sound of sharpened steel scraping against steel as he guided the faussar down the length of the knight’s longsword before twisting his own sword to the side and plunging the tip of the faussar into the Heatley’s throat. As he’d stepped in, Gaius had stretched his body and arm forward. Holding his faussar by the very end of the grip with one hand had extended his reach much farther than the range the young knight had been expecting of him.

Thud. The double-edged blade of the faussar pierced Heatley’s chainmail gorget and split his throat open vertically. The knight staggered back and Gaius pressed forward, both hands back on the grip of his sword. A slow, wet gargle came from the knight’s throat as the steel buried itself deeper. As the blade passed through his neck, Heatley’s body spasmed, until the tip of Gaius’s weapon could be seen jutting out of the back of his neck. Gaius pulled the blade out, and the young knight’s eyes rolled back into his head as he collapsed face-up on the ground.

“Huff...” The Black Rose of Igris let out a breath like a growling beast as he shook the blood from his blade. Although it was summer, the adventurers could have sworn they saw the breath come out white and hot.

“Twenty-something left? That’s still a fair few,” muttered the elder, sticking his head out of the rucksack again to survey the situation.

“Indeed,” Gaius answered him, lifting his head and nodding. “Though I don’t think it’s going to be enough to stop us, the Slayers of Sixty.”

*

The Command Center was still hard at work directing combatants.

“Squad Three has managed to lure two stray adventurers into traps, but one was wounded in the process. That squad’s down to one now.”

“Have the remaining soldier meet up with Squad Four after getting the wounded soldier to safety. Squad Two will take over Squad Three’s territory.”

“Enemy group still heading north,” a housewife repeated a scout’s report, then moved a black stone on the map with her stick.

“Don’t engage them yet,” advised the redheaded general. “Have Squads One and Two hold them there if they can get clear shots.”

Sashalia’s order was quickly sent via spirit-speak. She could see by the movement of the stones on the map that Red Eye’s Squad One and Squad Two, which were both equipped with stolen magic staves, had received and were following her orders.

“The enemy’s movements have changed. They’re not responding to our provocations or lures anymore,” Hopping Rabbit said, watching the positions of the stones representing the enemy.

“Their numbers have dropped enough that it’s actually easier for their commanders to control them. Honestly, any normal group would have retreated by now... It’s like they’re obsessed,” Sashalia said without taking her eyes off the map.

It was as the elder’s granddaughter had said. A group had reformed inside the forest and, after letting a few members leave the battlefield, they’d begun marching steadily forward without being distracted by feints from the kobold squads. This many humans together would be difficult for the kobold soldiers to fight at close range, especially now that Darke had been injured. But the kobolds had to take this group down. They couldn’t afford to risk leaving the group Gaius was fighting by the river or any of the scattered adventurers in the forest alone. Due to fighting, traps, splitting up, and fleeing, there were only about seventy of the Adventurers’ Guild’s original three hundred thirty fighting men remaining on the battlefield. However, the Kobold Kingdom’s original forty-nine-strong army had also been reduced to thirty by death or injury. It was all going to come down to this.

“It’s okay, we can do this with the traps and the terrain on their route...” Sashalia crossed her arms. Hopping Rabbit leaned over to wipe some sweat from the half-elf’s forehead with a cloth.

Just then, one of the housewives went pale and shouted, “Report from Brown Turtle! Humans spotted in the forest to the west of the plains!”

“What?!”

They’d widened their scouting range around the village in response to the previous attack. Brown Turtle was stationed at the very end of that range, as far from the battlefield as possible. He was basically only there as insurance, so when the emergency report came from him, Sashalia and the housewives were more than a little surprised.

“There are four of them. I’ll mark their position!” A small stone indicating a small number of enemies was quickly placed on the great map. Their location showed that they’d taken a wide detour around the battlefield, and it conveyed their intentions clearly to Sashalia.

The enemy had bound the kobolds’ hands and were on their way to destroy their head.

“That smaller group who left the main force wasn’t injured and retreating, but a separate squad going around to attack us directly here...I can’t believe they’d take such a detour right through the Greatwood.” Without the right experience, navigating forests without getting lost was quite difficult, and this was no mere forest—it was the Greatwood. She couldn’t believe they’d purposely head so deep inside without having been lured there. “It’s not a place you can just waltz into.” A small party of hunting-type adventurers quickly came to mind, the memory sparking pain in her shortened ear. “It’s him...”

Sashalia nibbled on the knuckle of her index finger and changed tacks. She didn’t need to get to the bottom of this right now; she needed to come up with a countermeasure. “We could call back the squads fighting in the forest...but if we cut back any more on them, some adventurers will definitely get through...then there will be dozens of them flooding into the plain...but that’s the only way...Sir Gaius is fighting at the river...he won’t make it back in time...”

“M-Miss Sashalia, what do we do?!” Hopping Rabbit asked, panicked.

“Sashalia...”

“What should we...?” The housewives were similarly nervous.

“Wait, just wait. I’m thinking. I’ll think of something.” The small half-elf covered her mouth with her hand, a cold sweat breaking over her as she brought her full thinking power to bear. She continued muttering to herself to organize her thoughts, which only made the housewives more nervous, but Sashalia wasn’t an experienced enough commander to remain perfectly calm and collected in a situation like this.

“Ye bloody idiot!” ...However, there was one among them still in high spirits. He was a bit of a lech, not very smart, and tended to get carried away, but he had more courage and nerve than anyone. His words prevented the room from falling into complete panic.

“What th’ hell d’ye think *I’m* here for?!”

*

“Eep!”

“Walk faster.”

“I will! I will! Stop prodding me with your sword!” Cyril flinched away as Wyatt threatened him with his blade.

The guildmaster and his guide, as well as the two adventurers, Quincy and Margot, emerged from the forest and quickly cut across the plain, arriving at the outskirts of the village. Quincy quickly set fire to a storage shed near a line of stakes that had been pounded into the ground for some reason. From there, they set about tossing burning torches into every pit dwelling in sight. Eventually, the frames of the dwellings and the woven branches that supported their sod roofs caught fire, creating several sources of red light in the dark caused by the thick clouds overhead.

“There’s no one in the houses,” Margot remarked to Wyatt, lighting a new torch.

“They’re hiding somewhere, or they’ve run. It doesn’t matter. Just destroy their dens and all their supplies. We can finish off the bitches and pups later.”

“Right.”

“Our top priority is disrupting the dogs still resisting in the forest.” Wyatt was

also setting fire to a primitive dwelling, torch in hand.

“Hopefully it works.”

“It’ll work. During the Five Year War, we were surrounding an enemy fort when there was a fire in the fort’s kitchen. It only spread a little before it stopped, and didn’t actually affect the fort’s defenses at all.”

“Oh?”

“However, unluckily for them, the smoke billowing out of the fort made it look like it had fallen, so the reinforcements who were coming to their aid retreated instead. In the end, the fort really did fall two days later. It’s not like this is the exact same situation, but they shouldn’t be able to maintain their cool when they see this.”

“Makes sense,” Quincy remarked, tossing a second torch into a dwelling that was refusing to catch fire. Eventually, the sound and smell of something burning inside reached him.

“I wonder if you can see the smoke from the forest, though.” Margot, who had been a part of the guild for a long time and was relatively friendly with Wyatt, was not afraid to raise her doubts.

“I’m not worried about that.”

“You’re not?”

“Well, look at the things. Their noses probably work better than their eyes, right?”

“Ahahaha! That’s for sure!”

...As they went about setting fires, the group finally encountered the first residents of the village in its center. There was a simple structure consisting of nothing more than a roof, some pillars holding it up, and a floor in the square in the middle of the village. The structure was swarming with female kobolds, one young redheaded girl seated among them. There was a great desk in the middle of the hovel, and the map made of animal skins with countless stones atop it proved this was no mere shelter.

“I see.” Wyatt came to a conclusion instantly. He didn’t know how she was

doing it, but it was clear enough to him that this delicate elf with the half-missing ear was the commander who had driven him to his current position.

“I don’t believe you were invited.” The redheaded elf was the first to address the newcomers.

“Who are you, girl? It’s you, isn’t it? You’re the one who’s been manipulating my army somehow.”

“I am Sashalia Denan. General of the Kobold Kingdom.”

“...Denan? A child like you claims to belong to House Denan?” Wyatt was a man trying to make a name for himself through his sword. He was aware of House Denan, famed as it was for its military prowess.

“I didn’t choose to be a Denan. And I’m twenty-three. I’m not a child.”

“Oh? I suppose I don’t need to feel terrible about killing you, then,” Wyatt said, signaling with his eyes for Quincy and Margot to go continue burning houses nearby.

They followed his order quickly and set about carefully lighting some more fires. They threw multiple torches into each building so the internal structures would burn more easily. Wyatt didn’t miss the scowl that appeared on Sashalia’s face for a moment as she watched them.

“I am Wyatt, a knight of the soon-to-be head of House Zigan, Lady Keighley. I oversee the Ryburgh Adventurers’ Guild. We are here on a mission to exterminate the wild dogs that threaten the Marquisate of Northplain. Now get on your knees and submit to our capture.”

“The insolence! You stand in the Royal Capital of the Kobold Kingdom! It’s you who should kneel, Wyatt.”

“Yeah, yeah!”

“Stupid, stupid!”

“And another ‘stupid’ for good measure!”

The kobold women around Sashalia all raised their fists in the air and jeered at him.

“That fool in the black was one thing. Are there nothing but jesters here?” Wyatt and Cyril remained still, carefully observing their surroundings.

Meanwhile, Quincy and Margot had finished setting two more dwellings ablaze. Two kobold soldiers rolled out of them, screaming and covered in soot and flame. One managed to put the flames out by rolling on the ground but passed out immediately after, while the other tried to run and was cut down by a slash from Margot’s sword. Wails of grief came from the female kobolds watching from the hovel.

“So you did have soldiers hiding.”

The houses that no one had come out of were burning steadily, red light emanating from their entrances. Wyatt was confident that those two soldiers had been their last line of defense. He gave an amused snort as Sashalia chewed her lip in frustration, and ignored her lackeys to point his blade directly at her.

“But you don’t anymore. I’ll take your head and give it to Beldarus to show him what I’m going to do to hi...”

Just then—a figure leapt out from one of the burning dwellings, cutting off the red armored knight’s words. The figure took Margot by surprise and grabbed her arm, hurling her back into the house it had just been hiding in. “Rrraaaaah!” It then launched itself at Quincy in a powerful tackle. A sword went through Quincy’s throat as Margot’s screams began coming from the flaming building.

“Take THAT!” The figure shouted as it stood. Wyatt turned to see a short man in heavy armor, probably taken from one of the adventurers who’d died in their previous attack. He stood ready with his sword and made his way between Wyatt and the Command Center, making sure to keep some distance between them. He had burns all over his body, some of which still smoldered.

“You were...hiding inside the fire...?!”

“Sure was! Don’t take dwarves lightly, ye rotten bastard! Pt! Pt!” The burned man cursed and spat at Wyatt. Of course, all spitting did was get saliva all over the inside of his helm.

“Dwarves?! I see, you’re the kid who was with Beldarus back then... You were a dwarf?

“Ye got that right! A great dwarf, protector o’ the world, servant to the goddess, warrior of love, full to th’ brim with bravery and courage! I am Dwaemon, son of Dwaske, warrior of the Great Anvil, and Gaius Beldarus’s top disciple! Remember that name, ye lousy old man! And what’s with the poncey red armor anyway? Act yer age!”

A dark flame lit in Wyatt’s eyes, but Emon was unaware that this wasn’t due to his provocation.

“...Emon!”

“Right here!” Emon replied to the voice from behind him without turning away from facing down Wyatt.

“Stop them, even if you have to die to do it!”

“That’s the plan! Don’t worry, I won’t let ’em lay a hand on ye!” The boy swung his sword into position and said with all the fierceness he could muster, “So just sit tight and pick yer nose or somethin’ back there!”

*

“I’m not gonna do that, you idiot!”

With Sashalia’s shout at his back, Emon held his sword before his face in the “crown” stance often used by those who wielded longswords. As its name implied, it was a stance that prioritized protecting the swordsman’s head, but considering the size difference between the dwarf and his opponent, it basically protected his entire body.

After all that bravado, he was taking a defensive stance. Wyatt huffed in annoyance, running his eyes over Emon’s armor at the same time. It was a strange shape, far from a normal suit of armor.

“I recognize that armor.”

Though he was short in stature, his robust frame fit into a breastplate worn by a much larger man, protecting everything except his short legs. His arms were protected by smaller pauldrons and gauntlets taken from another soldier.

He even had besagues to protect his armpits. Underneath, he was wearing chainmail adjusted to his size so that the joints of his armor weren't vulnerable. On his head he wore a bascinet that protected his neck as well...his unique build made for an awkward sight, like he was just the upper half of a suit of armor with arms and legs growing out of it. The pointed face of his helm didn't help. Maybe he looked more like some kind of turtle standing on two legs. It must have all weighed a lot, but dwarves were known for their hardiness all across the continent; though he was young, he made it look easy. In exchange, he'd sacrificed most of his mobility, and on the battlefield would be easy prey for magic staves, sorcerers, and crossbows as long as there was no arrow-deflecting magic in effect. None of that mattered in this situation, of course.

"Hmm? Forgot his name, but he was a big rapist arsehole."

"I'm sure of it, then. That was Hubert."

"Yer sure, eh?"

Wyatt didn't stop observing his foe even as they exchanged words. His opponent was small, with thick armor. With this much of a difference in size between them, it would be difficult to pierce the weak spots in his defenses. He didn't appear to be very skilled, but he had a weapon, so he couldn't be ignored. "...What a pain." Still, Wyatt didn't want to use the power of the Scarlet Plate. He knew he would need its strength and the willpower to use it when facing off against Beldarus.

Clang! Wyatt's Sword Eater thrust down towards a gap in Emon's armor, but Emon deflected it with all he had.

"Oh?" Wyatt was impressed by the boy's strength. A regular fighter wouldn't have been able to overpower him.

"Dammit! I'll kill yeh, ye bastard!" The sound of blades clashing rang out as the young dwarf continued defending, allowing his armor to take any blows that got past his sword. His reflexes weren't bad, but his movements were very inefficient and he wasn't skilled with the blade. Compared to the knight who had been wielding a live blade for decades, the dwarf was like a child play-fighting.

"Don't mess with me!" The dwarf had to understand the fundamental

difference in their skill levels, but it was like he was trying to make up for it through sheer force of will. Wyatt felt slight admiration for the boy, along with annoyance. He knew why he felt that way, and he hated it.

“What an irritating boy.”

“Yer the irritating one, ye dumbass! Go home!” He kept blocking Wyatt’s attacks, metal clanging against metal each time. He shifted to counterattack, and Wyatt easily dodged.

“You’re going to die if we keep this up. There’s no need to tie your fate to these dogs. I hear the dwarf population is already low...”

“Ye idiot! My brother is here! I’m not just gonna abandon ’im! Now die! Shit yerself and die! Actually, I think I’m about to shit meself!”

“Brother? ...You don’t mean a dog?”

“What else would I mean, ye numbskull?!”

“...Now I understand what kind of race could create that book. Dwarves are all beyond help.” Wyatt swung his sword calmly. Unlike his previous attacks, it was a cut with little power and low speed.

Emon fell for it, and blocked the blade with all his strength. In that instant, there was a *crack!* as the boy’s sword broke into pieces, shattering from the base of the blade. It was like the sword had suddenly been transformed into porcelain. Strangely, the guard broke, too.

“Whaaaaaat th’?!” Emon let out a shrill cry and Wyatt’s sword struck his helm. The metal didn’t allow the blade to pierce it, but the shock was almost like being struck with a blunt weapon. Emon gave a short piglike squeal and collapsed to the ground, rolling face-up.

“Ugh, it’s like sparring with armor on. It’s been a while since I’ve fought like that.” Wyatt held Emon down with a practiced hand and climbed on top of him, drawing a dagger from its sheath on his belt. It was a weapon called a kidney dagger, with a thin, straight blade that easily pierced the gaps and joints of armor. Since it was used to finish off armored foes, it had a reputation as a fatal, merciful blade.

*

“Damn yeh! Lemme go! Get offa me! Only sexy ladies can sit on mg*waaah*!”

Wyatt skillfully restrained the struggling dwarf under him and stabbed into the chainmail at the joint of the boy’s right elbow. The chain links, weak to this piercing attack, couldn’t defend against the specialized weapon and let the blade through.

“Yowch! That hurts! I’m gonna kill yeh, ye bastaaard!” Emon tried with all his might to shake Wyatt off, but all his efforts elicited was a slight knitting of the red-armored knight’s brow. He could use his legs and hips to neutralize all of Emon’s resistance. There was just too much of a difference between their experience and abilities.

“Of course it hurts. I’m doing this to hurt you.” He stabbed the boy’s left arm next.

“Gwaaaaah!”

“Aaaaaah!” All the kobold women screamed when Emon did.

“It’s because you would intrude on a battle like this...” The blade gouged his armpit.

“...when your mind is as immature as your swordplay...” He stabbed Emon’s leg.

“...that you’re punished like this!” Then the other leg. Each time, the boy and the kobolds screamed in unison.

“Now think about just how weak and foolhardy you are...” Wyatt got a better grip on his kidney dagger as he held the boy down.

“...and sleep!” He thrust the dagger into the boy’s armpit, aiming for his heart. This time, he wasn’t just torturing the dwarf; he was using the dagger for its intended purpose.

“So much for the great warriors, dwarves... You’re pathetic, whelp...” Wyatt muttered to himself as he stood up from the twitching dwarf and sheathed his dagger, taking up his Sword Eater once again. He turned to face the Command Center and said, “You’re next, girl.” However, Sashalia didn’t even look his way.

Wyatt stepped forward...or, he had planned to. There was a hand on his knee and arms wrapped around his legs, holding him back.

“Bfhh... I...know that...already, okay?” The boy squeezed out the words. Bloody foam leaked out from under his helm.

“You...?!” Wyatt hurriedly turned and tried to shake the boy off, but his arms were like shackles, clinging tight and unyielding. The dwarf was clinging so tightly that Wyatt was unable to bring his Sword Eater to bear on the boy’s helmet again, and his armor was too thick to damage with the sword.

Wyatt drew the kidney dagger again with his free hand and thrust it into a gap in the boy’s armor. *Plunge.* “Aaaaah!” The arms still clung tight. In fact, they only clung harder, the boy’s grip strengthening to the point that Wyatt feared that his legs might be broken if this continued.

“But, ye know...the old man said...he trusted me t’ defend ’em..”

“Boy...” The dagger swung down.

“An’ I told ’im...I wouldn’t let ye...lay a finger on ’em.”

“...let go...” Steel tore at flesh.

“I told Fluff, too...promised...that ’is big bro would protect ’im.”

“...of me...” The blade gouged in.

“...’n dwarves...”

“Let go!” Blood splattered.

“...they never...”

“I told you to let go of me!” The blade reached bone.

“...never...”

“Damn you!” He twisted it inside the boy.

“...LIE!”

“*Don’t you say those words to me!*” Wyatt’s emotions boiled over. In a rage, he plunged his dagger into Emon’s arms over and over again, but the boy still wouldn’t let go.

“Monster! You damn monster! Fine! You leave me no choice!” Wyatt tossed his dagger aside and lifted the visor to Emon’s helm. He hooked his fingers inside and ripped the bascinet off of him, exposing the boy’s bloodied face. “Let’s see if you can keep that up after I cut your head off! Show me how stubborn a dwarf can be after that!” He put the blade of Sword Eater to Emon’s neck like a saw against wood, and as a red line appeared on the dwarf’s skin—

“That’s enough! It’s enough, Emon!” The voice belonged to the redheaded half-elf who, until now, hadn’t spared a single glance at their battle, merely glaring fiercely at the map in front of her. Wyatt, who was more than a little surprised, and Emon, whose eyes had been gradually growing duller, both turned their heads to her.

“You fought well, Emon, but you’ve done enough.” Sashalia’s words were gentle as she shook her head at the young dwarf. Emon listened silently, no longer even having the strength to open his mouth.

Meanwhile, Wyatt, still shackled in the boy’s grasp, burst out laughing as if finally comprehending what was happening. “Ha...hahahaha! I see! So that’s it!”

“Yes. That’s right, Emon.”

“Is this what it took to finally convince you to give in, girl?! I don’t blame you!”

“You’ve fulfilled your mission. It’s all right now. It’s okay.”

“You did put up a good fight, boy! Right up until your ally lost heart! Hahahaha!”

Sashalia ignored the triumphant laughter from the knight in the red armor. She took a deep breath and took her glasses off, then wiped the sweat from her brow and gathered up her disheveled hair, even while she smiled at the boy who’d fulfilled his duty. There was relief in her face as she said, simply, “...We’ve won.”

Right as she finished speaking, one of the flaming houses collapsed. It hadn’t finally burned down; rather, it had been smashed by a figure that barreled through it towards them as if it couldn’t even consider taking a detour around the burning building to reach them. It groaned and huffed like a beast, covered

in blood, and fearsome power swelled all through its body. There was only one person this figure could be—none other than their king, Gaius Beldarus.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The giant leapt at Wyatt, sending a heavy yet quick slash his way. This was the “carriage-driver” slash, an attack so wide it went around and hit the target in the back. With all the power and momentum behind Gaius’s blow, by all rights it should have smashed through his opponent’s defenses and split the man in twain, but Wyatt immediately activated the Scarlet Plate to attain the power to block the slash. He twisted around and used his Sword Eater to defend. Wyatt’s perception and skill had to be extraordinary for him to react to and stop this incredible attack. The power of the Scarlet Plate, too, was frightening, to give him the strength to stop the full might of Gaius Beldarus’s attack with only one arm.

There was a crash as sparks and pieces of metal flew. Meanwhile, Gaius was already making his next move. He swung sideways at Wyatt’s head and Wyatt shifted immediately to a two-handed stance, blocking Gaius’s swing. Gaius broke from the bind and swung at his other side, but Wyatt blocked this as well. He flipped his faussar and tried to cut into Wyatt’s neck, but Wyatt flicked his Sword Eater and deflected the attack up.

All of this happened several times faster than it would take two regular swordsmen to perform the same moves. Another blow, and another. After all this, the two finally pulled apart and faced each other from a short distance away. The guildmaster had kicked Emon aside the moment he had activated the Scarlet Plate, and the dwarf was now lying near the Command Center, unmoving.

“Gnnh...” A beastly growl came from the Kobold King’s throat, a grunt of pain from the knight in the red armor.

“Black Rose of Igris...!” Wyatt howled in a low, dark voice full of hatred. His anger had boiled over into pure loathing.

“My current title is the Kobold King. Please stop calling me by that old nickname, Sir Wyatt.”

“‘King?!’ You claim to be a king...?! Just how...how far must your ridicule go?!”

“I ridicule no one,” Gaius said, blade still facing Wyatt, then he called out to his pupil. “Emon!”

“...Yer late...old man...”

“...You did well.” They were probably the words the boy most wanted to hear. Emon smiled, satisfied, and laid his head on the ground as he finally ran out of strength.

“...Thank you, Emon,” said Gaius. The words were quiet but heartfelt.

“Your Majesty!” Sashalia called out.

“I really put a burden on you, didn’t I, General?”

“No!” the loyal retainer exclaimed hurriedly, then continued in a more professional tone: “Your Majesty, I’m busy commanding our troops to clean up the rest of our foes, so may I ask you to deal with this?”

“Of course. Carry on, General.”

“Yes, sir! Okay everyone, one more push! Please make sure the wounded get treated, too!”

“Yes, ma’am!” The housewife alliance all answered in unison, their energy restored.

“‘Clean up’...?! Girl! Did you just say ‘the rest of your foes’?” Wyatt’s eyes practically popped out of his head with rage.

Sashalia smiled in response. “Yes. Your soldiers who were heading north through the forest have been reduced to less than a third of their original number. It’s really too bad, after you managed to get that many together again.”

The old kobold in Gaius’s rucksack popped his head out and joined in, waving his arms about. “And the group we faced by the river turned tail and ran after we cut down half of them! Hohoho!”

Things were exactly as they’d said. Heatley’s squad had run after losing their commander and half of their men. Ashcroft’s forces had come under attack by

Rain Grass and the attack squad, Red Eye's magic staff squad, and other kobold fighters all brought together and working skillfully to bring their numbers down steadily. The adventurers were almost routed. This was all, of course, due to Sashalia's continued leadership of the kobolds.

Wyatt could only listen to their words in mute amazement, but he quickly collected himself. "...No, it's not over yet. If I cut you down here, if I kill all of you...! I can keep moving forward!"

"All I'll say is it's futile."

"It's fine. This is no longer a matter of gains and losses."

"Is that right? I suppose there's nothing for it, then."

They both took up their swords once again, measuring the distance between each other, slowly, slowly stepping closer. Then the clash resumed.

"Groooh!"

"Nwaaah!"

Their swords struck and they both moved between offensive and defensive positions several times. If Gaius pushed forward, Wyatt activated the Scarlet Plate and pushed back. Each of Gaius's blows would have had enough strength to rip Wyatt's arm off, but Wyatt defended with all his might. Meanwhile, Wyatt's swift slashes could probably cut through rock, but Gaius stopped them with his board-like cleaver. Sparks flew with each clash, the slowly chipping sword glowing as if it were bathed in flames. All this happened at speeds the human eye could barely follow.

"You monster! You damn monster! You have all this power and you waste it!"

"I could say the same to you. That's something very interesting you've got there."

"I wouldn't have had to use this toy if not for you!"

Their battle raged like a storm, moving from the square containing the Command Center to the entire village. Their blades clashed over the still-burning wreckage of houses even as the flames burned their bodies. They could smell each other's hair and skin burning, but still never took their eyes off one

another. The clash of their swords only increased in intensity as they grabbed flaming pillars and tossed them aside and stepped over furniture wrapped in flames. At one moment, they pushed against each other's blades, their faces almost close enough to touch, and at the next, they hid themselves behind houses, watching out for an opportunity to strike. Wyatt used the power of the Scarlet Plate to leap over a dwelling and launch a surprise attack at Gaius, only for Gaius to then thrust his faussar straight through a wall at his next opportunity to surprise Wyatt. All their accumulated experience was put into this exchange of blows, and as it went on, it led to new wound after new wound appearing on both their bodies.

The fighters did not restrict their combat to using their swords. They punched and kicked, and used every technique at their disposal to throw everything they had at each other. All the fatigue and wounds Gaius had accumulated began to weigh him down, while the searing pain and burden of using the Scarlet Plate were straining every part of Wyatt's body and driving him to the brink of madness.

The king fought with wild abandon to protect his kingdom. The knight was seeing the world with a warrior's clarity, all thoughts of political ambition evaporating from his mind as he fought to protect his dignity. As the battle raged on, each of them chipped away at the bodies and minds of his opponent.

...Even Wyatt's sword, strengthened as it was by magic, was beginning to chip away after so many impacts with the other blade. They'd struck each other dozens, possibly even over a hundred times.

Their battle lasted quite a while, but in a way it also felt that it was over instantly. No matter the case, a conclusion was bound to be reached, and it came announced by the sound of a blade shattering.

The moment their swords met for the last time...the huge sheet of steel that made up the length of the faussar gripped in Gaius Beldarus's hands shattered into pieces.

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The steel didn't bend or break; it merely changed its form from a sword into fragments of metal, crumbling like a dry cookie.

“What..?!” Gaius was shocked for a moment, but quickly recovered and leapt backwards to put some distance between himself and his foe.

Wyatt watched him, narrowing his eyes with glee and smiling coldly. His face still dripped with sweat, however, a sign of the torment he was enduring. “It would have been a much shorter meal if your sword hadn’t been a great sheet of metal.” Wyatt boasted, showing off the pattern on his own sword’s blade.

“I see. It’s your weapon. The reason my faussar deteriorated so unnaturally in our last battle was because of that magic...no, that *cursed* sword.” Gaius replied. He took a classic “frontal stance” used in unarmed combat.

Even as they exchanged words, there was a palpable tension between the two warriors. Every one of their actions was part of an invisible power struggle between them.

“‘Sword Eater,’ it’s called. You must have heard the name before. Mine’s the original.”

The cursed Sword Eater was a weapon of no little fame, forged by a pair of brothers: one a legendary blacksmith who specialized in magic swords and the other a genius spellcaster. It was a masterpiece among all modern magic weaponry, so famous that all throughout the war, as well as before and after it, countless fakes and copies of the sword had been forged.

“I’ve heard of it. The fourth prince of a neighboring country, known as the Red Tiger, once had possession of it, but lost it when he perished in the Five Year War.”

“It’s true. He did lose it, and now I have it.” Wyatt showed the blade off with a sneer.

“I also heard that the previous Marquis of Northplain defeated the Red Tiger.”

“I was the one who really killed the prince.”

“I see.”

This was a common occurrence. It was more convenient for everyone for such deaths, and such kills, to not be attributed to rank-and-file soldiers.

“It might have been different if I were a noble... No, even if I’d been a knight

like you already were at the time.” Was the curl of his lips there from self-deprecation? “It’s more than a simple spell forged into this sword to strengthen it. If that’s all there was, it’d be no different from any other magic sword. The name ‘Sword Eater’ comes from the powerful curse that was also incorporated into the blade. This sword slowly imparts that curse into other weapons every time they touch, and when another weapon has its fill of the curse, it shatters... ‘eaten.’” He gestured with his chin to the discarded hilt of the faussar, tossed uselessly to the ground. “Just like that cleaver.”

After his speech, he laughed again. “But I’ve never truly had to rely on Sword Eater’s power...truly waited, with bated breath, feeling like my entrails were being squeezed with every breath I took, for my opponent’s sword to break, until you! You, Gaius Beldarus!” Wyatt spat something that had been filling his mouth. Red fluid, speckled with bits of broken tooth, spattered on the ground.

“I’ve made use of so many things...endured and sacrificed so much in order to find my way here...to be standing here... You wouldn’t call me a cheat, would you, Beldarus?”

“I wouldn’t.”

It’s part of a warrior’s duty to seek, obtain, and utilize the weapons and methods required for victory. Concepts such as “fairness” or “cowardice” mean nothing in the pursuit of this.

“Your sins lie elsewhere. What I cannot forgive is that you sacrificed innocent lives for the sake of your conspiracy.”

“You dare speak of righteousness when you turned your back on the path of a warrior?!”

Wyatt stepped forward, armor glowing, and launched a vicious slash at his opponent’s windpipe. Gaius retreated, but too late. The blade cut through the leather protecting his hastily raised arm and bit into his flesh.

“Ugh?!”

“You’re not getting away!”

Next he aimed for the torso, the thighs, the arms again. Gaius did his best to dodge, but the cursed blade chased after him. Cuts opened up in his coat of

plate, exposing the armor underneath. The leather armor covering his limbs was in an even sorrier state, covered with blood. However, the flames still burned bright in the Kobold King's eyes.

After several more attacks, Wyatt went for a one-armed thrust and Gaius twisted to avoid it. The king thrust an arm through a nearby wall and pulled something out from the other side, sweeping it to the side with a *whoosh*. The attack surely would have broken bones if it had connected, but it just grazed Wyatt's nose.

"Tssh?!"

The red-armored knight had jumped back to avoid a wooden post used in the construction of one of the pit dwellings. Gaius had helped to erect most of the dwellings in the village, but the earlier buildings had been hastily constructed by the kobolds alone, so some of the materials hadn't been properly fastened together. The dwellings all shared the same layout, so it was easy enough for Gaius to imagine where the supports would be from the outside. He had simply ripped one out of the structure with his monstrous strength.

Realizing what the weapon his opponent now wielded was, Wyatt quickly changed his fighting stance. He was surprised, of course, but this didn't change his superior position; that piece of lumber was no match for his Sword Eater.

That was not the extent of the Kobold King's counterattack, however. Gaius hadn't merely swung the lumber. After forcing Wyatt to retreat with the horizontal swing, he used the same motion of the swing as the windup to heave the beam directly at Wyatt, holding the wooden post directly from the bottom and using his arm as a spear-thrower to launch the post forward.

Whoosh! The lumber flew in a straight line instead of an arc, which was harder to defend against, and it had been launched with Gaius's absurd strength. It was practically a point-blank shot from an ancient ballista. The post flew almost straight for Wyatt's face, and the red-armored knight barely managed to avoid a fatal strike by snapping his head to one side. Instead, the missile tore into his cheek, ripping his left ear completely off as it sailed past him, scraping against his skull.

"Monster...!"

Without giving him a moment to catch his breath, Gaius was suddenly grappling Wyatt. He took hold of Wyatt's right wrist and elbow with both hands, circling his arms around the smaller man to pin his arm. His aim, however, was obviously not to immobilize the arm, but to destroy it.

Wyatt wasted no time in activating the Scarlet Plate and ramming a strengthened headbutt into Gaius's face. The Kobold King twisted his neck down just as quickly to take the blow on his forehead instead of to his nose.

Clunk! There was a sound like two boulders colliding as the men impacted, then pulled apart from each other. If there had been more distance between the two of them, their heads could have picked up more momentum and their skulls might have shattered; Wyatt's would have definitely been the first to break. Still, that suicidal attack had just barely allowed him to escape.

"Gruooh..." The shout was the howling of a great beast.

The Kobold King still tried to grab at his foe, but the guildmaster managed to regain some distance from him and get back into a proper fighting stance, his sword flashing defensively.

"You're so powerful, even unarmed...! It's incredible! Incredible, Beldarus!" Wyatt's voice shook as he let slip his true admiration for his enemy. "...But that's why I won't give you another chance!"

Gaius tried to make his next move, but Wyatt quickly defended with a slash. He would never let the man get away to pick up a weapon he might have hidden nearby. Wyatt concentrated power from the Scarlet Plate into all the necessary ways to hinder Gaius, to force him back, to crush him down. Each slash, each step reduced Gaius, whittled him down. Wyatt cut at him, not even giving him the chance to turn tail and run. Even as Wyatt could feel his own bones splitting, his joints wrenching, his flesh tearing, he kept his target pinned, driving him slowly out of the village to prevent any chance of the man launching a counterattack.

Once they were beyond the fence enclosing the village, there were no more residences. There was nothing to grab, nothing to block him with. Nothing to use as a shield. Gaius was being steadily beaten down more and more, as the fight grew decidedly one-sided.

“Glrbh!” The burden on his internal organs must have just become too much to bear. The knight in the red armor suddenly spat a bloody froth and staggered. Gaius didn’t miss the opportunity he was given and grabbed Wyatt.

...But his one chance to recover was denied just before he could accomplish it. Wyatt recovered from his momentary daze and activated the patterns on his armor once more. There was a horrible wet *snap!* as Wyatt’s knee connected with Gaius’s gut, and his massive body left the ground, flying back towards the village.

“Gfoh!”

“Gw...Aaaah!”

A groan and a scream both went up. Wyatt collapsed to his knees. Gaius was only in the air for a second before—*crack!*—he crashed into a still-burning structure.

*

...This was the first structure the adventurers had set fire to. It was a small shed where burial tools were kept. Gaius had been pushed back so far from the village outskirts that he’d been driven all the way to the kobolds’ burial ground.

The impact completely destroyed the shed and Gaius rolled along the ground past it, scattering pieces of wood as he went, until he finally crashed into some stakes sticking out of the ground, snapping them as he came to a stop.

“Oof, ouch... Hey, meathead! You all right?! Pull yourself together!” The elder’s voice came from Gaius’s rucksack, but when the latter tried to spit the dirt out of his mouth to respond, bloody mud came out instead. “Answer me, you dolt!”

“...I’m...fine...”

“You’re obviously not, you numbskull! You’re really going to die if you keep this up, you know! Just run for now! Get out of there!”

Gaius didn’t answer him. He merely lay on the ground, unable to even summon the strength to sit up. He felt heavy. His bones, his organs, every part of him was screaming in protest. ...Still, running was not an option. If he ran,

there would be no one left to stop Wyatt. That would mean everyone's death. So...

So...

"Hey... You're not thinking of letting yourself die to stop him, are you?!"

Once again, Gaius didn't respond. He merely stared at the ground in silence.

"Stop! Don't!"

"I can still...pull it off now."

"No, you can't! You can't, Gaius!"

If he took a hit from Wyatt's blade, he could get close enough to snap his neck. Or crush his exposed face. Really, all he had to do was immobilize the other man. He knew he could do that if he allowed himself to get hit. If he gave up his life.

"I'll finish this...I'll make sure of it."

"Don't, you idiot! Does your idiocy know no bounds?!"

"I get that...a lot."

Gaius gathered all his strength and made to sit up, when...

...You really are a stupid male, aren't you?

...he heard a familiar voice. Or maybe it was just a hallucination brought on by his pain and distress. But when he saw it, Gaius definitely heard her voice.

A thin blade, glittering in all the colors of the rainbow as the light of the flames hit it. The line of steel stood straight up in the dirt as if pointing to heaven, a single magic orb shining on its hilt.

...It was the magic sword, Stingfeather, and Gaius Beldarus was resting on the grave of White Fog, his dear friend.

*

I wonder if this is how it feels to be an insect. Wyatt almost felt as though his bones and muscle were no longer holding up his body, and it was only the thin red plate covering him that supported him. That was how badly his insides were

twisted, torn, shattered, and crumbling.

After this battle was over, if his wounds healed, he'd probably never be able to move like he used to...he may never even walk again. *But what does that matter? I don't care. I don't care! How can I?!*

Muttering to himself almost like he was trying to cast a curse, Wyatt took one step forward, then another. Agony gnawed at him with each movement, his heart pounded like a maelstrom, and the elation he felt at defeating his sworn enemy was bringing him back to his original state of mind. He no longer cared whether he won or lost this war. His own destruction was far from his mind. Rather than Wyatt the knight, who always used logic to seek out every advantage, he was turning back into Wyatt the warrior, a man fighting for his own pride. Because of this, he was feeling a great amount of emotion now.

Wyatt had given up everything that he'd built for himself until now, everything that he'd obtained, and all of his future for the sake of this confrontation, and because of all that, he'd managed to surpass Gaius Beldarus. That fact filled his heart with a blissful warmth.

Though his senses were fading with every step he took, Wyatt continued putting one foot in front of the other until he finally had Gaius at his mercy before him. The Kobold King knelt on the ground, hunched over with his back exposed, like a criminal awaiting execution via decapitation.

Wyatt said nothing to him. He had neither the strength nor the patience anymore to move his tongue. Still, he was careful to stay out of range of his opponent's arms as he silently raised Sword Eater. It was less a calculated act at this point than it was the response of the reflexes ingrained in his body. Right as he was about to step forward...

"Please, lend me this, Fog!" Gaius stood, twisting his body and thrusting his arm out in a stabbing motion.

Wyatt was ready for a counterattack like this. Even if his foe now held a weapon in his hand, his thoughts immediately accelerated, ordering his deteriorating arm to defend.

"Sting!" howled Gaius.

The highly sophisticated magic blade extended, aimed straight at Wyatt's face. Wyatt had never seen this kind of magic sword before, and could not have expected Gaius could possess one, so he had no way of anticipating this. However, the red-armored knight's reflexes were enough to best even this. He responded to the threat instantaneously, blocking the tip of the blade with his Sword Eater. The point of the sword was quicker than an arrow, sharper than a spear, fine like the point of an awl.

Gaius Beldarus thrust out the beautiful, brittle blade with all of his monstrous strength, but Sword Eater intercepted it before it could reach Wyatt, and Gaius's weapon fell to pieces just as the previous one had.

It was a speed bordering on godlike. The quality of Wyatt's swordplay was the highest it had ever been in his entire life.

...However, that was enough. That one moment was enough time.

When the red-armored knight moved his sword out from in front of his eyes, his enemy was already right in front of them. When his warped sense of time returned to reality, a massive hand was grasping the gauntlet around his sword hilt. Gaius grabbed the blade of Sword Eater in his gauntleted left hand and pushed the blade into the base of Wyatt's neck.

Thuck. Their eyes met. *Snap.* Something tore.

Wyatt's hands dropped from Sword Eater's hilt as his fingers weakened in time with his heartbeat. It took less than a few seconds for Gaius to plunge the blade into Wyatt's flesh. Wyatt could feel the sensation of the sword tugging at him as it moved, but there was no pain.

It shattered his collarbone, pushing through the red armor to dig deep into his chest. Gaius then twisted the blade, snapping half of it off within Wyatt. The cursed blade had either reached its limit in this battle, or perhaps it had been activated so much today that its curse had finally been turned around on itself. Maybe it was simply following its master into death.

"Don't be ashamed. It was three against one." The king remarked as the warrior fell to his knees.

"...Yeah, right... You cut down...dozens of men today..." The words came out

haltingly, and with blood. Wyatt gave a short huff of laughter, then continued, “But...at the end...my sword...” He sunk to the ground, squeezing out the words. He couldn’t move anymore. His consciousness was fading with every beat of his heart. Wyatt could feel the life pouring out of him. *...surpassed yours.* The words didn’t make it out of his mouth. He no longer had the strength to move it. *Yes... As a swordsman, I...* His thoughts and memory started to cloud as his vision slowly darkened.

...Come to think of it, why did I take up the sword?

“Were you a good boy, Wyatt? Here, I picked this up for you in the capital. It’s another of those picture books you like.”

“‘Iron Knight Iwanoshin and the Crystal Princess’?! Wow, Dad! Thanks! None of my friends have this one yet!”

“Hahaha. Well, good. You really love these books, huh?”

“Of course I do! I mean, Iwanoshin’s super cool, Dad!”

Ah...that’s right. Something hot filled his throat, but he couldn’t even choke on it anymore. Wyatt muttered to himself in his darkening mind, as if just remembering something he’d forgotten. *I wanted to be Iwanoshin.*

*

After having escaped from Wyatt’s control while the knight was battling to the death, Cyril ran through the forest as fast as he could. He was smiling, though the corners of his mouth twitched sporadically.

“Finally! Finally! I’m finally free!” He would escape this battlefield as fast as he could and leave the Marquisate of Northplain behind altogether. He would finally be able to take back the freedom that had been stolen from him for all this time! The cuffs on his wrist were heavy, but this didn’t bother him. Cyril ran through the trees, basking in the sensation of the freedom it had taken him so long to recover.

However...

Shunk. Cyril’s foot sank into the ground. He immediately threw himself backwards, twisting his ankle in the process. He let out a sigh of relief when he

looked down at his legs.

“Th-That was close...” A pit trap hidden by the kobolds yawned open at his feet. He cautiously peered over the edge to see a fanged maw of countless sharpened stakes. If Cyril had fallen in, he would have been completely immobilized.

“Oww!” When he backed away from the pit, trembling, he finally noticed the pain in his twisted ankle. “Ouch... Coulda been much worse, though. I should consider myself lucky...” A twisted ankle was nothing compared to getting stuck in one of those vicious traps. Cyril took a couple of deep breaths, thanking his good fortune.

“How stupid would I be if I got this far and then fell into one of these traps? I’ve got to keep my cool and be careful. I’ll be all right. I’m lucky. I’m really lucky.”

Theron was dead. Hubert was dead, too. Wyatt would likely soon follow them. All of Cyril’s problems had disappeared one after another without him even having to dirty his own hands. “What could this be if not my good luck?”

Cyril had spoken that question out loud to no one in particular, but his eyes met someone else’s. That someone had been dozing in this part of the forest, likely tuckered out from getting so much intense exercise earlier in the day. The two stared at each other for so long that it began to feel awkward, as neither one had expected this meeting.

...After a little while, Cyril let out a strangled scream, and the six-legged sleeping beauty gave a grunt of surprise of her own.

“No, no, this can’t be!” Tears and snot ran down Cyril’s face as he set off at an awkward hopping run, trying to lessen the strain on his pained foot.

The furred lady just watched him go, blinking...until she realized she’d gone through all that work earlier without preparing dinner for herself. The lady stretched to wake herself up and ambled lazily after the former hunter.

*

Gaius returned to the square to be met with cheers from the kobolds. All the injured kobolds who had retreated back to the village, the housewife alliance at

the Command Center, and the elderly, women, and children who had been hiding in the forest greeted him with much jubilation.

“It’s the king!”

“Mr. Gaius!”

“Your Majesty!”

“Gaiuuus!”

Gaius was swept up in a torrent of fur.

“I’m back, everyone.” The king sat down so that he could extend his hands to his people and a second rush of fur leapt at his chest. It was Fluff and Amber Blossom.

“Uncle!”

“Uncle Gaiuuus!”

“Hahaha. Were you good, you two?”

“You came back like you said you would!”

“Of course I did. I promised, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, but you promise me souvenirs when you go shopping, and you forget sometimes, right?”

“Hmm. I guess you’re right about that.”

“Fluff!” Blossom poked disapprovingly at her cousin.

“Hahaha.” Gaius pet the two children, showing them that he wasn’t bothered.

Fluff panted and shook his head to escape, then jumped down from Gaius’s knees and climbed back up again, pressing his head against the back of Gaius’s hand to demand more. Did he want to be petted or didn’t he? Maybe he was just too excited to know what he wanted.

“Hey, you big lug, when are you gonna let me down?” A hand reached out from behind him and smacked him on the top of the head. It was the elder.

“Oh, old-timer. Sorry about that.” Gaius reached around and took off the rucksack, brushing some of the kobolds out of the way to place it on the

ground.

“Not a considerate bone in your body, is there?”

“Hey, Grandpa, don’t be so rude to the king!” Hopping Rabbit scolded the elder after he climbed out of the bag.

The old kobold scoffed. “Ahh! It was cramped and dark and smelly and I kept bouncing and falling and biting my tongue and hitting my head and being swung all about! That was the worst ride of my life!”

“Grandpa!” Hopping Rabbit’s fur was practically standing on end.

“I really caused you a lot of trouble, Elder. I appreciate everything you did for me today.” Gaius bowed his head.

The elder scoffed again. “...So, work on making it more bearable for the next time I have to ride inside.” He turned around and waved his hand dismissively, rubbing his hip as he hobbled away.

The Kobold King gave another deep bow to the old man’s back.

“Sir Gaius.” Sashalia appeared next, leaning on her cane, as the king continued to be mobbed by his people. “Welcome back. I knew you would make it.”

Gaius nodded.

“I took the liberty of preemptively informing our captives of the guildmaster’s death and releasing them one by one near the river. As expected, they got into contact with the forces on the other side, and now all of our enemies are retreating.”

Night was approaching, but it still seemed a little hasty of them to retreat without confirming the death of their commander. It was evidence of just how low the enemy’s morale had fallen.

“Red Eye and Rain Grass are currently commanding our forces to retrieve the wounded and capture those enemies who have surrendered. Darke should be returning soon.”

Gaius smiled at the girl, whose eyes still sparkled even with how exhausted she must be feeling. “Thank you, Miss Sashalia. We only won because of you.”

“Th-Th-Th-That’s not true! I don’t deserve such praise! I just did everything I could!” Sashalia waved her arms in front of her and her face turned bright red. She’d dropped her cane without thinking, so the housewives rushed over to hold her up.

“The king is right, Sashalia!”

“Yeah, yeah!”

“The kids were all safe because of you!”

“Take pride in yourself!”

One of the housewives gave Sashalia a pat on the butt and the fledgling general reddened even more. She looked like she’d start steaming if you poured water on her.

Gaius gave her one of his peculiar smiles and put his hands around her waist. “Hup.” He sat her on his shoulder and stood up.

“Gyaaaaa! Too hiiigh!” The half-elf screamed, clinging to Gaius’s grey head.

Gaius held her in place with one hand and laughed, looking out over the crowd around them. “C’mon, everyone!”

A chorus of kobold voices came in response.

“Long live the general!”

“You did it, little lady!”

“Three cheers for Miss General!”

“Ooh, let’s give her a cooler name!”

“Yeah! We’ll all think of one!”

“Stooop iiit! You’re embarrassing meee!”

That got everyone going. Then came a new voice:

“Mmm, a splendid idea. Something really evocative, like ‘The Red Reaper’ or the ‘Flame Demon General.’” The speaker was the pale-faced, smirking Darke, who had been sent back from the front lines early due to her injury. A splint was tied to her right arm, which she’d hurt in her battle with Wyatt. A sling tied

around her neck held the arm up against her chest.

“So you’re back...you idiot.”

“Heheheh.”

Gaius mussed up Darke’s black hair with a massive hand. She stood there for a moment with an expression she’d never normally wear on her face before looking up. “I’ve returned, Lady Denan.”

“Welcome back, Darke.” The general on Gaius’s shoulder replied, and the two shared a smile.

“Well, the truth of the matter is, you defeated a huge army with a small force, Lady Denan. That’s an important achievement when you consider the future of the Kingdom, so we might need to spread the word some.”

“Ugh.” The military commander could only make an uncomfortable face when presented with such a sound argument.

“Well, I’ll tell our captives all about you, and I’ll make up a few things to go with it. Worry not, Lady Denan!”

“Nooooo!” Sashalia clutched her head atop Gaius’s shoulder.

“Actually, I think the people outside the forest will probably give you a nickname on their own. It might even be something as embarrassing as ‘the Black Rose of Igris’! Keheheh.” That hurt the Kobold King more than anything he’d been through in the entire battle.

“...Say, Darke. I’ve been thinking.”

“Hwha? What about?”

“Will you stop calling me ‘Lady Denan’ already?”

“Hunh. You prefer ‘Flame Demon General’?”

“That’s not what I meant!” Sashalia shouted and lost her balance. She hurriedly clutched at Gaius’s head, prompting the king to yell “Not the hair!” Righting herself with the noble sacrifice of a few strands, she sighed and said, subdued, “...Just use my name, why don’t you?”

“Whaaat? But ‘Sashalia’ is long and hard to say.”

“Whoa, you really don’t pull your punches, do you?” She sighed again, then after hesitating for a moment: “...Fine, then... ‘Sasha.’”

“What?”

“...It’s what my close friends used to call me when I was a kid.”

“Hunh... So you had friends besides me, Lady Denan.”

“O-Of course I did! Like any normal person! As a kid!” Sashalia was still clinging to Gaius’s head with one arm and waving the other one around in protest, but she quickly caught on to the implication in Darke’s words. “...You’re such an idiot.” She looked away from Darke to hide the embarrassed look on her face.

“If you want me to call you by a kid’s name, then you can be ‘Sally’ from now on.”

“That’s not what I said!”

“...Yeah, over there, keep going.” Dwaemon arrived just then, interrupting the dispute between the two. Bandages covered him from head to toe as he was carried over on a stretcher. Fluff had gone to his big brother’s side at some point and was wagging his tail furiously next to him.

“’Ey, yer back, old man. Good to see ye too, Sis!” Emon greeted them, moving only his hand to give them a wave.

“Back at you,” replied Darke. “And hey, you’re looking a lot manlier than I remember, kiddo.”

“Aww c’mon, don’t tease me, Sis.”

“...I wasn’t teasing.”

“Wha?! Really?! Ye think the ladies’ll be all over me?”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“Well then, what’s the point...?” Emon grumbled.

Darke laughed and gave him a flick on the forehead. “Don’t push yourself, Emon. Just rest.”

“Yeah, yeah, old man. I’m fine. I’ll be right as rain with a good night’s sleep.”

Barely any time had passed since he'd sustained his injuries, but he was completely lucid now.

"Frankly, I'm surprised you're alive with injuries like those, but they won't heal if you don't take it easy."

"Huh? Yer takin' the vitality of a dwarf lightly. Don't ye remember what I told ye before? Ye can cut a dwarf's 'ead off and it'll stick back on if ye put it back fast enough."

"Err... And how fast is 'fast enough,' exactly?" Sashalia asked, sounding mildly disgusted.

"'Round three days, I hear."

"What the heck...? Even cockroaches give up faster than that."

"Hey, that was uncalled fer!"

The square erupted with laughter, kobolds slapping their knees, putting their arms around each other's shoulders, and wiping the tears in their eyes. It was like they could all finally breathe again after holding their breath through the fear and worry all this time.

...Thus, the defense of the Kobold Kingdom came to an end.

On the adventurers' side, out of the three hundred thirty-one fighters they started with, one hundred fifty-eight died, went missing, surrendered, or fled, and many were injured. Including the guildmaster Wyatt, three of the five knights on the expedition died in battle. Many of the adventurers who survived retired or quit because of their injuries, and the Ryburgh Adventurers' Guild rapidly lost its ability to function as such.

Meanwhile, on the Kingdom's side, they suffered thirteen losses, which was about a third of their original fighting strength of forty-six, and some fifteen fighters were injured. From the shameless standpoint of pure tactics, these were incredible military gains for minimal losses, but that fact comforted neither the commanders nor the commanded.

Their losses had been great. What they sacrificed would never return to them. Nothing could make up for the tragedy of their deaths. Some found themselves

unable to celebrate their victory.

Still... They'd joined forces, and forged a future for themselves. Their friends standing next to them now and their children had all survived. The kobolds embraced and gave thanks for that fact through their tears.

All those who had returned to the stars...this is what they had fought for.

Epilogue

“Okay, I’ll go ahead and take Claudette home. Make sure my kid’s not out too late, yeah?”

“I understand.”

Red Eye put away his farming tools and removed the plow from Claudette, hopping up onto her and slapping her back with a “Giddy-up!” The golem horse whinnied and plodded off under the setting sun.

The day after the battle, the golem horse had returned to the village rather nonchalantly and had continued to serve Gaius loyally. The only thing different about her was that her body had gotten slightly lighter in color. She must have reconstructed her body with the sediment from the riverbed.

The river had kept flowing until all through the night following the battle, but strangely, in the morning, more sediment had piled up to block off the mouth of the river once again. Because of that, there was a rumor spreading among the kobolds about a powerful spirit living in the lake.

“Mmmph...” Gaius stretched in his farming clothes and sat down on the ground, turning to gaze at the children nearby. Fluff and Fishbone were practicing running on two legs. Dwaemon stood nearby, coaching them. The two furballs were repeating a cycle of running a short distance, falling to all fours, then getting up again and falling again. The adorable sight brought a smile to Gaius’s face, though only those close to him would have recognized it for what it was.

“Sir Gaius!”

“Thought we’d find you here, Sir.”

The voices belonged to Sashalia, walking with her cane, and Darke, who’d just recently taken the sling off of her arm.

“Oh. Something the matter?”

“It’s almost time for dinner, but Claudette was the only one who came home, so we came looking for you. Blossom’s watching the house.”

“Mm. As for me, I just wanted to go for a romantic evening stroll with Sally.”

Sashalia viciously pinched Darke in the side.

“That actually hurts a lot!”

“Where’s Emon and...ah, there they are.”

“Yeah.”

The three youths seemed to be having a meeting of some sort. From their gestures, the observers surmised that they were incorporating a game of tag with Emon being “it” into their practice. ...Of course, they couldn’t catch him. Their big brother was showing off, spinning and dancing as he ran.

“They sure are full of energy.”

“The children’s growth really does surprise me here.” Darke nodded to herself. “Blue Gale’s the same way. Fluff and Fishbone might be taller than Rain Grass and the other adults soon.”

“I bet the babies born recently will get even bigger.”

“With their kids getting bigger and the litters they give birth to, the good mothers of the kingdom are going to have their work cut out for them.”

“It is. But that’s why we established the nursery and are planning on expanding the hospital, and why we started the school, too.”

“Ah, right you are. Instructor Sashalia.”

“Hahaha... I’m just getting more and more titles, aren’t I?”

The furballs had picked up sticks at some point and were brandishing them as they gave chase to Emon. Something quite vile was on the ends of the sticks; Emon’s expression twisted into fear when he caught sight of them.

“Well, that’s just fine! There are tons of things I still have to do, am doing, and want to do!” Sashalia’s cheeks were flushed, but she had an irrepressible smile on her face, too. Up until now, she’d always just been chasing after Gaius Beldarus, but now she stood with her own power, facing forward and walking

her own path. Of course, Sashalia had yet to realize that herself.

“We also need to increase food production and improve sanitation. We’ve organized our military, so we’ll need better armaments to match. I’m even planning to begin trade with the outside world! So you’d better be ready for all the work I’m going to need you to do, Sir Gaius!”

“Hahaha. I’ll do my best.”

“Yep, yep. We’ll have you working at least as hard as Claudette, old man.”

“I’m putting you to work, too!” There was a real fire in Sashalia’s voice.

Meanwhile, Fluff and Fishbone were going after Emon with everything they had. Their earlier clumsiness was all but gone, as if they’d suddenly improved a great deal. The young dwarf they had their sights on was fleeing with just as much vigor, screaming in horror.

“Wow, they got really good all of a sudden.” Darke observed. “You think ’cause they’re descended from a wolf god they get into it when they have something to chase?”

“...I think their enthusiasm is more than likely unrelated...” Sashalia sighed as she adjusted her glasses.

Darke narrowed her eyes beside her, croaking with her usual laughter. “But, y’know, what if the kobolds start looking more like wolves, like their ancestor?”

“You think that’ll happen?”

“They’re so little and fluffy now. Would you be disappointed if they got a little less cute?”

“Why would he be disappointed? I think it’d be great if they became better fighters.”

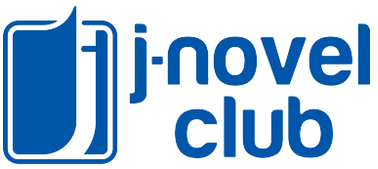
“Geez, you’re always like this, Sally. Why don’t you act more like the adorable maiden you appear to be?”

Gaius watched Emon cry out in terrible agony as the young kobolds finally caught up to him and turned back to the ladies after a short chuckle. “I wouldn’t be disappointed. No matter what they look like, they’re all my...” Gaius stopped there when he caught sight of Sashalia’s face. The small, redheaded general was

smiling, her head tilted as she looked at her king.

Gaius grinned and nodded, looking back over at the kids and correcting himself, his tone warm: “...No matter what they look like, they’re all our precious children.”

(End of the “Nation Founding” Arc)



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