The fluttering scrap of parchment in the hands of the village elder was familiar to Alash. He had been responsible for the delivery of similar declarations a hundred times. They always brought the same tidings. War had been declared, and the lower orders were being summoned to die so that their masters could claim ownership over some rocky scrap of borderland.

 He could feel his blood rise at the thought. Hoofbeats and shouting from three years prior echoed in his ears, and he smelled the copper tang of blood. It meant that his days of hiding were done, and that it was time to show the world what he could do once more.

The village elder sighed, drawing Alash’s mind back into the present. Borash was wrinkled and stooped, but his eyes were bright with intelligence. “The army is being levied in Molbul, but there is not yet a war. If anyone wishes to become a soldier, they must arrive before the start of summer. Anyone with experience using boats and ships is offered double wages.”

Alash regarded the summons, surrounded by the villagers. They could not read, most of them, but they recognized the seal at the bottom of the paper. It was the second capital, Mahagad. The “true” capital of the Reimunate Empire, more than a thousand leagues away. The order to levy was at least a half a year old, which Alash knew meant the war could very well be half over.

One of the village women laughed and turned away, rolling her sleeves up. “Back to work everyone! Unless one of you is hiding a boat in your barn!”

The small crowd laughed began to return to their tasks, but Alash stayed, hoping to read the specifics of the declaration. He’d go back to war, but every scrap of information would be valuable.

Looking around, he spotted another two looking at the poster consideringly. Alexander the Seblinkan and Tyio the Genesess weren’t so much focused on the poster as they were on surveying the people walking away. That figured, given their status as outsiders. Turning back to Borash, Alash found himself the focus of the old man’s attention. A finger beckoned him forward.

Borash looked grim at closer range. His face was harder than a king’s. When he finally spoke, it was slow and deliberate.

“All three of you, this is your best chance. Alash, you will take Alexander and Tyio with you and go back to war.”

With a start, Alash noticed that Alexander and Tyio were also listening, beckoned by that same finger.

Alexander grunted shifting his shoulders forward to loom over Borash like a bear. “And what, exactly, gives you the right to decide that?”

Borash met his eyes directly, without the smallest hint of fear, despite the fact that Alexander outweighed the old man by at least 30 kilograms. Alash reflected on how useful it would be to have the hulking bear of a man along now that the world had gone mad again. Borash was shrewder than most kings too, apparently.

Tyio laughed. Her voice was calm, but there was something underneath. She was still watching the crowd, but had been listening in. “You’ve never been out of the village. I’m a woman.” Her voice twisted that short sentence, turning the last word into a curse. “He’s an experienced hunter and traveler.”

Alexander swung round and took two steps, putting his enormous frame solidly within reach of the girl. “You’ve got some nerve, Genesess.”

Alash had to take three steps to Alexander’s two, but her got between them almost as fast. He had understood the man’s problem where Tyio had not. He did not want to leave. “Alexander, face the facts.” Alexander again shifted his ire onto a new target, but this was a much more even matchup. “You are from the village that was here before the war with Seblika. The first thing I heard when I entered the village was ‘watch out for the Sebl in the farm down on the valley floor.’”

His glower increased by an order of magnitude, but Alash rounded on Tyio, remembering lessons learn at the elbow of a duke’s son. *To strike both sides is the best way to bring them together. Make a good point and insult an enemy, and even if they don’t want to admit to your point the situation will be defused.*

“Tyio, I pretty sure he was wondering why we were being told to leave the village, not why I was in charge.”

Tyio smiled, her eyes flashing like diamond rings on the finger of a duchess. “I thought that would be obvious.”

Alash sighed slightly before turning back to Borash to find the leathery face creased by a smile. The stoop and the wrinkles deepened for a second as he sighed. “In another life, you’d have made an excellent village chief. Alas for what could have been.”

Alash blinked, somewhat stunned. The old man had never been even remotely kind to him in the past.

Appearing oblivious to the effect of his words, Borash continued. “You’re outsiders. Outsiders cause problems, and they offend God. I don’t want to kill you, since killing offends God, so you going to the capital would suffice.” Alash smiled ever so slightly at the words. *I don’t want your blood on my hands, so go get killed in the army.*

Alexander again took up the gauntlet, his mouth set in a line. “My family has lived here for seven generations and helped found this village. Just because Seblinka is gone doesn’t mean a -”

Tyio’s eyes flashed as she tossed her long brown curls, turning her head to regard him directly again, cutting him off. “None of the villagers are ever going to trust you for that exact reason, idiot. Do you see where this is going?”

Alexander looked like he’d been punched. The villagers had been resettled from the southern plains of the Reiminate less than twenty years prior.

Alash smiled, admiring the skill displayed by the beautiful Gene. Tyio landed the coup de grace “Nobody will marry you here. Your family will die with you, same as mine. In the city, or as soldiers, we might actually have options.”

Alexander opened his mouth and closed it again, grumbling under into his beard about Genesess.

Borash smiled too, though his mouth didn’t reach his eyes. “So you see. Now go. We will be happier and safer without you.”

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The village barn was a large structure, built long before the war. Somehow it had escaped burning, and so it had become the communal property of the new settlers. The bottom half was stone, and it stayed relatively warm throughout the winter. It was also Alash’s home, since he kept his most prized possession and closest friend there.

“Hello, Trebin.” Alash rubbed his hands up and down the horse that had saved his life. The great brown Suseki Stallion nuzzled him and pawed the ground. Alash smiled and pried open the horse's mouth. “No, we’re not going hunting again. We’re going to go all the way to the capital.” Checking that the teeth were even and healthy, he allowed them to snap shut almost on top of his hand. “Yes, I know you like it here, but I don’t think the villagers like us.” Reaching for his horse’s hooves, he drew the file out of one of the saddlebags resting on the dirt nearby. Still speaking calmly, he began to prepare his pride and joy for another journey.

After maybe five minutes, Trebin snorted. Looking up from the second hoof, Alash found Alexander standing in the doorway with a backpack and staff. He looked both awed and rather worn for an nineteen year old, even one who’d been considered an adult by the village for four years and run his own farm for three. The man had never been out of the mountains, and Trebin was no mountain pony. Jet black and majestic, he towered over even the giant Sebl.

Stepping carefully out from under the 400-kilogram animal, he turned. “Relax, you’ll spook him.” Alexander’s eyes widened a bit and he nodded, letting the tension drain out of his shoulders and setting down his staff.

“It’s a helluva thing. I always knew you weren’t from around here, but seeing it’s different.” His voice was slightly awed, and the set of his jaw wasn’t exactly friendly.

“You’ve seen me go hunting on Trebin every week for a year. What’s different?” Alash’s tone was light, trying to put the big Sebl who was now his travelling partner at ease.

But Alexander shook his head, unwilling to give the notion up. “You up there in ordinary clothes with cruddy saddlebags makes it seem less. But that horse is worth more than the whole village, ain't it?”

Starting to brush Trebin’s coat, Alash considered. Lying would only cause problems later, if they were going to travel together. “Probably not. A mare or gelding would be worth much less, but since Trebin is a stallion, so he’s probably worth closer to half the village.” He paused to cast a considering eye at Alexander. “You have a good eye for animals.”

Alexander sighed, staring around the barn without meeting Alash’s eyes. “The village had two horses before the soldiers came. I liked to talk to Ivan about them.”

Alash focused on brushing. There wasn’t anything to say. War was war, though from what he understood, the village had been burned during a revolt some years after the Seblkian conquest.

Alexander continued, turning halfway to look towards the village entrance, lost in the memory. “He was admiring their horses as they came in, talking pleasantly to them. Goddamn traitors.”

The troops that destroyed the village had been Taldovian mercenaries from the eastern mountains. They were Semins, worshiping the same God as the villagers, and that made them traitors in his eyes. Alash almost laughed at the thought. Up in the Blessed Imperium, they killed each other all the time, religious unity notwithstanding.

Trebin snorted, pawing the ground. Alash danced out of the way, throwing a look at Alexander. “What did I say about calming down?”

Alexander winced, bringing his eyes back to Alash and his mind back to the present with a shake of his head.  “Sorry.” He shrugged his shoulders, shifting the weight of the pack. “I’m all ready to go.”

Alash regarded him for a moment, then stalked over, allowing his training to take over. “What all do you have in there?”

Arriving behind Alexander, he regarded the slightly lopsided pack, noting that the waterskin had correctly been placed on the lighter side and the bedroll was on top.

However, something extra was weighing down the far side disproportionately. “What’ve you got in the left side of the pack? Valuables?”

Alexander burst out laughing, pointing an accusatory finger at Alash. “You really are a soldier, you greedy bastard!”

It was Alash’s turn to wince. It wasn’t a question, but he answered it anyway. “Yeah. Gold weighs more than anything. If you’re pack is noticeably lopsided, we’ll be robbed by the first people who outnumber us.”

Alexander set down his pack and began rummaging. Alash watched for a moment, then heard the clank of pans being adjusted and went back to caring for Trebin. The idea that the Sebl would actually have gold was ludicrous, but it paid to pay attention.

A moment later, the big man spoke without looking up. “So, fearless leader. What’s the plan?”

Alash smiled, reveling in his newfound authority. “We’ll make a run for Molbul. If my hunting skills can’t keep us in food, I’ll trade for it, but we should be able to make it there in a month, and I’ve got almost a saddlebag full of salted meat to start with. Once we make Molbul, we’ll sign us up for service with the army; I’ll be Alash don Stauben and you can be my squire. Tyio will leave once we make it to the city, but having a woman with you on the road means you get through towns and gates much easier.”

“Eh?” Alexander shot a quizzical look over his shoulder.

Alash laughed at his expression and explained. “Knights and noblemen get paid better, and eat better. Townsfolk will charge you the highest price they can get away with, so two soldiers traveling alone get reamed.”

Alexander nodded. It made sense. A second later, he hefted his pack and wriggled, shaking the weight until it settled “So what will we do once we get to Molbul and get enlisted?” A pause. “Will we be fighting the Zelodowvi?”

Alash sighed, remembering days of riding and nights of meetings and planning. Remembering a charge with no hope of victory, to satisfy his Duke’s duty. Remembering the boasting that preceded it. He would not face that battle again. “No. Remember the mention of ships and boats in the recruitment poster?” Alexander nodded again. “The only possible reason for the Reimunate to expand its navy is to try and take control of Nogoro and the Island of Thieves. The Stalatav Primarch will call a crusade in response, and the whole of the Great Range will go up in flames.”

Alexander shook his head. “Sultans and Primarchs. Goddamn. That’s all over my head, but I know that war means soldiers killing peasants.”

Alash laughed bitterly. *War means soldiers killing, period.* The thought was not unkind, but he had seen enough men with a pitchfork in the gut to know peasants were almost as dangerous. Alexander cocked his head, but Alash waved him off. “Go get Tyio and meet me back here in an hour.”

“Why do I have to be the one to get the Gene?” Alexander wasn’t whining, exactly. He just wasn’t happy about the situation.

Alash laughed, shaking his head at Alexander. “We talked about this ten seconds ago. Plus, she’s a Gene. She’ll have connections along the road that might give us a place to sleep.”

Alexander looked dubious. “Sleeping in the same house as Genes?”

Alash smiled again. “We’re going into the capital of the Sammal. They treat Genes better than Semins already.”

Alexander digested that information for a second or two. “Fulture damn them.” He strode out of the barn, muttering again.

Alash went back to brushing Trebin. A few minutes later, his new companions returned to the barn, Tyio also equipped with her own backpack, looked competent enough.

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The track was not one he tread often, but he remembered the spur of rock above the cave.

Alash turned to his companions. “Wait here.” They uttered no complaint. Something in his face told them that this was not the time.

He handed the reins to Alexander and carefully made his way from the entrance towards the back, letting his eyes adjust to the lack of light. Reaching down, he picked up the bundle of blankets and strode towards the entrance. Setting the bundle down outside the cave, he unrolled it. His old world stared back at him.

Alexander whistled, and even Tyio looked impressed. They had never seen arms of noble quality, so even his worn mail and quilted under piece were impressive. The sword was of noble quality, and got a similar reaction when he drew it from the leather scabbard to check for rust.

Ignoring his companions for the time being, Alash lifted the saddlebags and put them on Trebin behind the rough ones he used for carrying meat. Packing the blankets into the bag with his armor and weapons, he hefted the spear and lead the horse down the hill. The memories all rushed back, but there were the familiar mountainsides around him to ground his mind.

Walking back into town with a spear and leading a horse with military saddlebags was a surreal experience. The villagers saw him coming of course, but the way their eyes locked on him was almost laughable. They had assumed he was a soldier of course, and an enemy one at that, but as Alexander had said earlier, knowing was different from seeing. Not one of the nearly fifty people he had lived and worked alongside for the past year and a half would meet his eyes.

When they reached the edge of town, Alash turned to them and gave a wan smile. “Shall we go, then? I want to make forty miles a day, if we’re to reach the capital by the fifth month.”

They both, as if by some unstated signal, turned back towards the village they had lived in most of their lives. There was joy in Tyio’s eyes, and a kind of resigned victory in Alexander’s.

Then without another word, the three turned and walked into the mountains, heading south towards destiny.

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The road did not have milestones, but Alash guessed that they’d made twenty five miles by the time the sun slipped behind the mountains and the temperature began to plummet, which wasn’t a bad start for new travelers on a road that was honestly more of a deer trail.

“Alright, sun’s gone, we’ll camp here.” The words had barely left his mouth when Alexander staggered onto the side of the road and collapsed facedown in the alpine grass with a groan.

Sighing, Alash turned  back to Tyio, finding her resting her back against her backpack, tongue lolling out like a dogs.

Alash smiled to himself and began collecting firewood for dinner, reveling in the luxury of hot food and the meat he had brought from the village.

A half an hour later, a pot of gathered greens and salted meat was bubbling merrily away as his exhausted companions whimpered and winced as they laid out their bedding.

Leaning back against the embankment, Alash surveyed the skyline by habit, looking for smoke or light as the last of the sunlight vanished.

His companions wolfed down their food and fell asleep without speaking more than a few words, and he resolved to take the first two watches and split the last two between them. They would learn the importance of vigilance and the tricks of a watch, but not today. Instruction would be counterproductive today.