

Chapter 1 - Judge Wallace

"It's another light load," he mumbles to the beast, "I'm sure you're happy about that." A sweaty farmer with thinning blond hair empties a basket of squash into his cart and wipes his hands on mud-caked, ragged overalls. Peering out across a picked-clean field, he breathes a heavy sigh. Farming is slow, dedicated work, honest, above all else, and the end of the season means an unwelcome vacation.

His glance falls to the vegetable cart, a motley collection of oranges, yellows, and browns, the last of this season's harvest. Taking a moment to count his blessings, he digs into his pocket, retrieving a folded scrap of paper and a hunk of graphite.

He raises a heavy finger towards the cart and gesticulates the shape of an "e", muttering a half-empty arcane word he heard many years ago. In an instant, a figure comes to him as if he had always known it: the number of squash that lay in the cart, and with it, the sum of the harvest.

Bracing the faded parchment ledger against the haunch of his dark gray mare, he finds the sharpest corner of the rock and scribbles down a final entry -- 22,747.

He folds the parchment along its golden-brown creases and returns it to his pocket. With some difficulty, he climbs atop the cart and takes the reins. The mare begins pulling east toward the town of Meridia before Hadakura completely settles in his seat.

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An evening trip into town used to be his favorite part of the day. On most evenings, he'd pull a handful of his finest squash from the cart and set them up on display for the locals who stop by to barter for fresh produce. The cool breeze would wick the sweat from his back as he sat on his cart, smiling and nodding as he listened to the day's juiciest gossip.

For the last month, he'd skipped the market entirely. He couldn't even make quota, much less trade for luxuries. The old mare hadn't quite grasped the change in schedule yet. With a gentle tug, Hadakura rights her onto a path bearing north, his fate resting in the capable hands of Judge Wallace.

The cart shakes and jostles as its large wooden wheels bump in and out of the rutted cart tracks on the ground. With a wince, Hadakura pulls the reins a little closer to his lap, and the mare finds a steadier pace.

Hadakura's field is not so large that he cannot see his house from the other side, and with some effort, he picks out the figures of three of his children racing between the poplar trees. He watches for a few vicarious moments before giving the mare a little more slack on the bit. No use dawdling on the road if he's to be back by supper, he decides.

His destination lies less than a mile down the road. On the horizon, the Judge's other charges trickle in piecemeal from their own fields. They drive carts filled with a larger variety of produce -- fruits, beans, and cabbages -- towards a utilitarian-looking building near the road. Customarily, Hadakura would join them at this counting house to have his ledger verified by one of its accountants. He'd have to stop by later. The Judge would soon retire for the evening.

Hoping to avoid the long, public approach through the front gates, Hadakura takes the cart the long way. He passes over Judge Wallace's bridge and through his back gate, turning up the dirt path that leads to the rear of the Wallace house.

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Judge Wallace's manor sits atop a hill, just as Hadakura's does, but its similarities end there. Constructed by hands far more skilled, its masonry, brick red, stands in sharp relief against the sky. To its north sits a separate house for those in the Judge's immediate service, mainly chefs and maids. A stable to the east and a small workshop to the west flank the servants' house. These three, the counting house, and the big house make up all the structures within eyesight, surrounded by acres of grazing land.

Hadakura rounds the corner and emerges from the side of the house with little notice. Judge Wallace is sitting atop the porch whittling a fresh piece of wood, passing the hours in leisure. Seeing the farmer atop his cart, he palms the project, stands, and waves in greeting. "Hadakura," he starts, "it is nice to see you."

"Well met, Judge," replies Hadakura from the seat.

"What brings you to my house this evening?" Still holding the block and carving knife in his left, the Judge straightens his sleeves and belt to better receive his visitor.

"Begging your pardon. A word, if you will, sir," says Hadakura.

"Of course, of course," the Judge beckons his approach with a wave, "your visit is most welcome."

Hadakura swings his legs off the cart, taking care to find his footing as he steps down. Stomping caked mud from his boots, he grips the banister and climbs the stairs.

"I'm afraid the harvest is well short, over a thousand units, give or take, and more if these I've brought are too small. So, without a doubt, the contract I have with Sir Baldrick..."

Wallace cracks a smile. "Rest your tongue. There are other men in Sir Baldrick's employ who miss quota from time to time. I only wish you had come to me first before you signed this damned agreement." The Judge sits on the edge of his chair and digs through a portfolio of papers, pulling Hadakura's contract from it.

"Yes, here it is. Allow me a moment to refresh my memory," says the Judge, shifting his weight back into his chair, as he continues, "You must be tired. Why don't you have a seat?" He gestures to a wooden rocking chair of his own design, a fact he has no qualms sharing, and Hadakura obliges.

The Judge's review of the contract is perfunctory. They had this same conversation in more hypothetical terms less than a month ago. After a moment of study, the Judge looks up from the paper and says, "I do so hate to be the bearer of bad news, but such that I am responsible, the document leaves little room for argument."

"Then is there nothing to be done?" asks Hadakura.

The Judge replies, "There is never nothing, but you are going to have to find work through Winter if you hope to earn a wage. I am sure that Sir Baldrick will offer you a reasonable contract next season, but he has no obligation to provide your Winter stipend."

Hadakura pushes the blond hair off his forehead and nods, "I had expected as much. We won't make it without. I need to find work. That's why I came here..."

"But the farming season is over. The frosts will be here within the week."

"I'm handy with bricklaying, too."

"Then you will know better than to lay bricks in the snow."

"That's true," Hadakura admits.

The Judge pauses to consider a thought before waving it off. "Well, no matter. There is always work to be done. Go home to your family. Let me call upon a few people in Meridia, and I'll send word to you by week's end. This will all work out, you have my word."

Hadakura was no expert on legal matters. Perhaps, had he shown the Judge the respect of his station a decade ago, there might have been leeway to alter the arrangement. Perhaps he wouldn't be facing a winter without pay. Judge Wallace was a close friend of his father's, that much he had known, but it had only been in the last few years that they had grown from a passing acquaintance to friendship. By then, the contract had already been inked.

The men part with a handshake, and Hadakura leaves the contents of his cart with the Judge's men at the bottom of the hill before heading home.

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Hadakura's small two-story farmhouse sits east of his farm. As his father had told the story, when he built the house, he put it between the sunrise and the crops. He wanted the first light of the morning to fall on the house, because family comes first.

Hadakura had taken the words to heart. He had lived here his whole life, but still, he found himself learning new things about the house every day. Yesterday, he had learned that windows were drafty. Tomorrow, perhaps, the well would sand in and its

bottom would need to be redug. His father absorbed these responsibilities in times past. Upon his inheritance, his father's grand philosophical overtures soon gave way to the grim reality of homeownership. It had engendered in him some measure of pragmatism, and, while he saw the wisdom in his father's idealism, he did not know how much of it was simply for appearances.

Hadakura's two sisters had married young and now had families of their own. When his father passed away fifteen Winters ago, leaving his widowed mother with an empty bed and a hollow heart, he grieved with her for a time. The next spring, he started the planting season just as he had every year before. Time heals all wounds, though, as does love. For Mother, it was the first harvest that year that made her heart smile again. For Hadakura, it was a lass called Elya.

It was for them - for Mother, for Elya, and for the child growing inside her - that Hadakura had entered into Sir Baldrick's service. When the man from the city of Meridia knocked on the doors of all the independent farmers, his offer was simple.

"You won't need to worry about feeding and clothing your family ever again. Sir Baldrick," he said, "will buy the whole crop every harvest."

Many farmers liked the sound of a guaranteed income and what it meant for their families: insurance and security. There was, as there always is, a catch.

"Of course," the man pitched, "you'll need to maintain a standard of quantity and quality that will be decided by the acreage of your land."

For Hadakura, it was 25,000 squash, and since his land could yield up to 70,000 in a good year, he had all but ignored the rule. He had signed eagerly and cracked a small bottle of wine afterward, beaming from ear to ear, as he hugged and kissed his

wife and mother.

Just as promised, there had been no bartering with merchants about whether a squash was worth two copper or three. He would receive four, give or take, and Sir Baldrick would profit from the surplus. With the family's income secured, Hadakura felt like he had done right by his father. Family had come first.

Mother met all four of Hadakura's children - Ura and the three girls - before she passed. Sir Baldrick sent his condolences by courier, which was fine. Hadakura could not call him a friend, but he had been fair. When Ura turned five, Sir Baldrick arranged to have an archmage extend an offer of apprenticeship to the boy.

In fact, it had been Ura, less than two years later, who taught Hadakura how to count things with magic. Those days were nearly a lifetime ago. Ura was 15 now, and Hadakura saw less and less of him on the farm as his studies grew more demanding.

It was a month ago, when Hadakura pulled the contract from his papers for the first time since signing, that he had begun to worry about the season's crop. It wasn't his fault - most of his crop died on the vine. Callowmold, they called it. It spreads like wildfire throughout a field. Most inexperienced farmers lose everything. He'd kept almost half his plants alive. It was a commendable effort, all would agree.

But Judge Wallace was right. It was there, in black and white, bearing both their signatures. "Hadakura's farm to provide 25,000 squash to Sir Baldrick each Fall. Stipend of 100 gold pieces per month provided year round. Inspection by Judge Wallace, Wallace Residence." Towards the end of a lengthy paragraph detailing the definition of "squash," a simple penalty:

"Breach of contract severs agreement forthwith until next season."

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These thoughts carry Hadakura home and into the stable to feed and water the animals as twilight falls and a lantern on the porch ignites. He sees the oil burning from the barn and gives a solemn look out into the darkness. Content that the day's tasks are complete, there's nothing for him to do but await word from the Judge.

As Hadakura walks towards his door, his sizable frame blocks the bright lantern light in the window, sending the house into a frenzy.

"Father's home!"

The big wooden door swings open to reveal giddy children and the distinct smell of aromatic spices - onions and garlic - behind it. Some things never change, and Hadakura was thankful for that. Once, long ago, it was he who opened the door for his father, just as worn out and ready for dinner, who would kneel down and sit on his heels to hear stories of children's problems from Hadakura and his sisters. Hadakura did not kneel so well anymore, but he could still listen.

"I made dinner tonight!" his eldest starts.

"I helped!" comes the correction from her sister.

Hadakura smiles at them both. "I am sure your dinner is lovely. How did you help?"

"I stirred the pot!"

"Well, that is a very important job," he says with all the flattery he can muster. He looks to the youngest, just two years old, who still stood silent. "And what did you do?"

"I cooked too!" she beams.

Beaming too, Hadakura looks up and shares his joy with his wife who is trying her best to hide a look of concern. The look startles him and dampens his mood. He bends down and holds his arms out to the littlest of them. She runs into them, and he picks her up and plants a kiss on her cheek.

"Well, I can't wait to try your cooking."

"Okay," Elya coaxes, "find your Father his meal and then it's straight upstairs to wash up."

She corrals the children upstairs and follows, putting herself to the task of cleaning the sticky poplar sap from their hands and clothes.

Hadakura is grateful that his lovely wife had afforded him this bit of space with his meal and his thoughts. His senses had not deceived him, it's a lovely stew, but with every spoonful, he counts the supplies that went into its preparation. A half dozen potatoes, a half dozen yams, a pound of celery, a pound of carrots, a handful of tomatoes, garlic, onions, even the bones of the cow that made the broth.

He carries the bowl and a lantern with him to the pantry and opens its swinging door. It is well stocked, but it would be optimistic to assume that things will return to normal after the ground thaws. Even if it does, there will still be three or four months, coming soon now, where cheap and plentiful vegetables will have to make way for more expensive game. Disappointed in the answer he had received from his search, Hadakura leaves his empty bowl in the basin for the girls to wash in the morning and heads up the stairs to wait his turn for the bath.