

*Brim scowled and wrinkled his nose as he forked another patty out of the hay. Forty stalls mucked out and only halfway done with his morning chores. He turned as he heard someone approaching. He smiled as he saw his mother, but the smile vanished when he saw what she held in her hand.*

*“Brimthimble Bristlebrow what have you done! You have made yourself a slave! You are not going through with this!” She rattled a piece of parchment with an official looking seal on it. “I will not let you go!”*

*“Mother,” Brim replied, “It isn’t slavery if you agree to it. It’s simply an indenture and only for three years! We’ve spoken about this. There is nothing for me here! Is this” he led a sweeping hand around the immense stable, “any better than working the mines in Port Elry? I will never be one of the Horse Guards, have you seen the size of these Warhorses? They’re 16 hands high and weigh 2,000 pounds! Have you seen the size of me? No matter how many times I muck out these stables or how many boots I polish, I will NEVER grow the foot and a half taller I would need to be considered for the guards! My invitation to the Academy is not coming. All the applicants my age were selected two classes ago. I am little more than a slave here. At least in Port Elry after my indenture is up, I can have a chance at something better. I could strike it rich, and build us a house, and start a family, and give you those grandbabies you are always pining about!*

*I am sure you have seen that document is sealed by the Imperial courts. If I don’t show up and board that airship, I’ll be arrested and thrown in the deepest cell in Theodoric’s Hold, right next to father. They’ll never forgive a coward mother, or a coward’s son. It is done and I have made my choice. He gently took the indenture contract from her hand and took her into his arms. She laid her head against his chest and sobbed uncontrollably.*

*“You had better write every week!” She warned.*

*“Yes, yes, of course mother.” He placated as he held her through her tears.*

The Taladorn Steppe has long been known for two things, Soldiers and Horses. The Imperial Military Academy had been in Coorhagen for as long as anyone could remember. And anyone who rose through the ranks of the Imperial Military very far, had studied at the Academy. The area of the Steppe is a bountiful rolling grassland and well back in history the residents yoked the large native breed of horses to their ploughs. When the young Emperor Theodoric first saw these horses, he fell in love with their sheer size but even more so with their playful demeanor. He immediately bought all he could find to provide for his personal bodyguard and the Taladorn Horse Guards regiment was born. Shortly after that he ordered the building of stables to breed these majestic animals and grounds to train his men to fight upon them. The continued expansion of these training grounds eventually became the complex that today is the Imperial Military Academy at Coorhagen.

While the horses may have started the academy’s growth, it was the Steppe that insured its continuance and importance. The central location and ample supplies of food provided by the

fine arable soils protected by two mountain ranges bordering the Steppe made it a uniquely advantageous area to grow and train military forces that could be easily fed and rapidly deployed to any conflict. While the Periphery may be heralded as the breadbasket of the Empire, that is because the food in the Steppe feeds the Imperial legions.

The people of the Steppe are hardworking folk known for their toughness, honesty and willingness to serve. Whether that service be in the infantry, the cavalry, the new rune fusiliers or by providing the myriad goods and foodstuffs a well-trained and well-equipped standing army requires. From the highest ArchSentinel to the smallest farmstead all the peoples in the Steppe are valued and rewarded for their service to the Empire.

The Empress herself attends the annual autumn festival and as all rulers before her, awards the ribbons for best in breed horses and best in field foods. A ribbon award goes a long way in negotiations when the quartermaster comes around to stock the Imperial stables and granaries. The celebration lasts a full two weeks and they say a good half of all the ale produced in the season may very well be drunk in those two weeks. Dancing singing, gambling, horse races, military parades, exhibitions and The Grand Tournament highlight the entertainment but eating and drinking are truly the focal points. The Academy class which graduates with the harvest and they are well known for their overindulgence before being sent off to serve in some remote post. But as the seasons turn all is renewed in spring as the new wide eyed cadets enter the classrooms and the wide fertile fields are ploughed again.