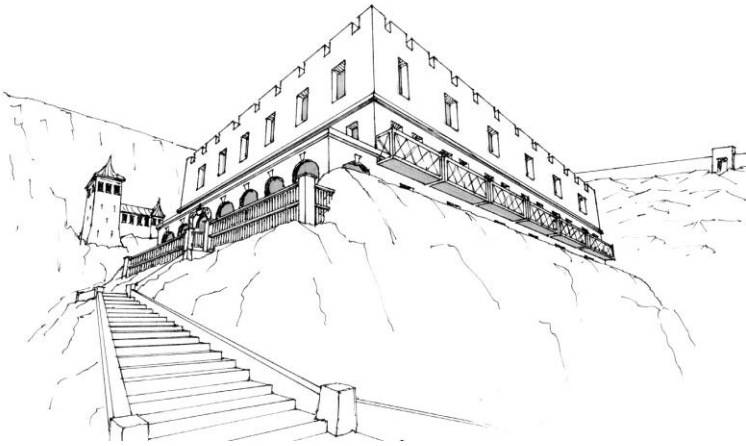


# Ridgeland's

## Franchise Preparation



Vic Lindblom

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## **Prologue to Ridgeland – Franchise Preparation**

In Laboot Ridge, forty miles southwest of Donhome, each of sixteen family barns hides a loaded wagon. We are careful because my dad has spies everywhere, especially since our falling out.

Ostensibly, the families are heading for a well-deserved spring retreat at the beach, while foremen keep the furnaces and hearths roaring, maintaining the required level of production. Our decoy caravan will head east at dawn toward the beaches, long after our wagon train has drawn out of town to the west in the wee hours of the morning.

My family and neighbor clans have quietly planned this escape for four months, beginning at the winter solstice, since our position here has become untenable. Dad knows of my disgust for his vendettas and burgeoning harem. It was reasonable that he slew the secret lover of his second wife, my adulterous mother, when I was only 80, but the murder and enslavement of the rest of her lover's family started me wondering about King Chamel.

In the 250 some years since then, his harem continues to grow. He takes whomever he wants, leaving broken families and abandoned parents, who have no recourse in their grief. True, some parents are honored that Chamel chose their daughter, but there is never compensation. No husband or suiter is ever appeased, thus too often the result is the man's assassination or slaughter when he seeks revenge.

Chamel's example has led Donhome to become the home of base wickedness in the land of Don, despite my half-brother Labuje's music, which lends an air of gaiety. The emperor of Don, upriver in the capital city, Konee, takes no steps to rein Dad in, but rather embraces the thrill, encouraging his men to visit this pit of pleasure when they transship their wares and gold through the port. So,

Donhome continues unabated to spread its poison upriver and along the coast.

I successfully withstood Dad's influence upon Laboot Ridge for a couple of centuries, but only because we are indispensable to the prosperity of the kingdom. Since I discovered and developed brass and iron working, Donhome became the center of industry in Don. Much of the gold from Konee has flowed our way due to the innovation here. Merchants in Donhome keep most of it, but we have experienced no lack of capital for expansion.

Recently, Dad's bands, scavenging to staff the lusty action in Donhome, have become more aggressive, scouring the Ridgeland, enticing or abducting adolescent girls and pretty boys from our barony. The baron tacitly approved when I established roadblocks to vet traveling groups, keeping the bands out, which ticks Dad off. We realize it is a matter of time before his temper explodes, raining vengeance on his successful son, probably in the form of an armed invasion of Laboot Ridge.

To escape before the attack, I have assembled this diverse group of locals, rebellious by nature, possessing sufficient talents to build a new civilization. We head out tonight, armed to the teeth; hopefully, sufficient to repel any troop that Dad can muster to pursue us.

We will initially head west, but rather than continue on toward Konee, we will veer south, heading for the bluffs below the uplands. We will seek to travel in the open plains when possible, to make breaking trail easier. But I intend to crest the continental divide before seeking a new area in which to settle, far from the shore of the ocean and with a good barrier of wilderness between us and the land of Don.



Land West of the Sea

We have been on the road four days, approaching the end of existing trails, when one rear guard thunders up to announce the approach of a scouting unit from Donhome. After spreading out the rear three wagons across the clearing to block the trail, I allow the troop to advance for a parley at dusk, boldly targeting them from

the wagons with a fraction of our weapons, as our archers infiltrate the woods beside the trail.

“King Chamel demands that you return to Laboot Ridge. If you return now, there will be no repercussions, except that you must allow our bands free passage through the Ridgeland area, including Laboot Ridge.”

“We are not returning.” I will not negotiate.

The officer threatens, “We will attack your caravan and bring home those who survive.”

He is bluffing; his unit cannot take us. “It will take a week before a sufficient attacking party can reach us. We will be ready to repel them.”

Frustrated, the leader responds, “Laboot Ridge will be sacked, and the people taken into slavery.”

“We left all that behind and do not expect to communicate with them whatever happens. We also think you make a hollow threat. Would you cut off your nose to spite your face? Those remaining in Laboot Ridge will continue to produce for Donhome.”

The troop leader is enraged. “You have no authority to abandon Don,” he shouts as he spurs his mount forward and draws his saber. Suddenly, two feathered shafts blossom from his chest. He falls to the side of his mount, foot caught in a stirrup, as the sword drops from his lifeless hand. The mount begins to wander in circles.

Realizing that he is now in charge and the next target, the sergeant raises an empty hand, “Peace. We are leaving.” The troop wheels and sets off the trail at a canter.

“Let them go. We do not want to give them more reason to attack us.”

Right on schedule, late in the day a week later, as we are crossing a grassy plain, one of our rear guard, winged, rides up to the caravan saying that they made contact with scouts back at the tree line. After sending him up to the medical wagon, Jonas sends runners out to warn and beef up our side guards and dispatches a rider to bring the rear guard back up to strength. He alerts me, and we circle the

wagons, putting oxen inside after they tromp down grass around the circle, and place women and children behind boxes that we unload to close off the spaces under the wagon beds. Men and older boys take positions in the wagon beds where they can see over the tall grass. Weapons are distributed, even to the women. As the troop draws closer, the rear guard brings its mounts inside the circle. The rear and side guards take positions, hidden down in the grass, outside the circle, within support range of those in the wagons.

The troop of forty soldiers draws up out of bowshot range. The officer sends a squad to make a quick circuit around the wagons to see if any advantage lies in a different direction of attack. Finding no advantage, the troop withdraws to set up camp.

A disgruntled teen comes to me, “Mr. Laboot, I don’t want to go on with the caravan. I want to go back to Donhome with the troops. But I don’t want my family hurt, either. I’ll go to the troops with a white flag, carrying any message you want, if something will just get them to go away.”

“You don’t know my dad, do you? If the troops just give up and go home, he would have their heads. If you go over there, you would just be one more scalp they could bring back to say they attacked and destroyed us.”

“Am I stuck here?”

“If I can guess their orders, we either make it through this, or we are all through. Will you defend your family?”

“I knew I shouldn’t have come. I guess; I stay, and fight.”

“Thank you, son.”

I gather the heads of the clans for a war council after sending two men out into the forward quadrant so we are covered all around. Most of the clan heads are quiet. They are farmers and craftsmen, not soldiers. Still, all of us handle weapons adequately, having lived in a community near the wilds.

Jonas, my backup, speaks, “They will attack late at night after we are tired from keeping watch. They expect to catch us unprepared, and in the confusion gain an easy victory. Once they



are inside the circle, we can't use arrows in the dark for fear of hurting one another. They are better at hand to hand fighting than we are."

I agree, but have to convince the clan leaders. "Men, Jonas served several decades in the militia, so he knows what he's talking about. I agree that he is probably right. They want us back; they don't want us dead, but they will kill whomever they need to. We shouldn't wait for them to attack."

A craftsman protests, "What are you saying? Aren't we safer behind these wagons?"

"No, they have us localized. The only people they can't pick out are those outside the circle, our guards. They know we are civilians and don't expect any aggression from us. We can take them by surprise."

Jonas is nodding, "Niyaq is right. Soldiers have no respect for civilians. They sit out there, fat, dumb, and happy, considering us either old goats, inept, or juveniles too young to fight. If we organize and sneak in, we can catch them in the open around their fire, unable to see who is attacking. Oh, they will have guards watching for beasts, but they won't bother maintaining silence. We can pick out the guards and neutralize them. Do you hear the wind in the grasses? If we go early enough before this wind dies tonight, the noise it makes will cover our approach."

This is the encouragement they need. "Good, we attack while they are still awake, gabbing around the fire. Our main attacking body of twenty men will circle around behind, while three men locate a guard to serve as a distraction on the near side. At my signal of an owl call, take out the guard, making plenty of noise. When they stand to respond, silhouetted against the fire, we hit as many as we can with arrows, and then all of us must withdraw. Their casualties should keep them from attacking the wagon circle tonight. Jonas, you make the assignments and take charge of the distracting force. I will guide the main body."

After Jonas has arrangements made for the evening, he comes to me. "I think your plan is good. What will we do after this? They will be on alert the next time."

"We see how this evening goes, then we will talk about it." I pause, "You know, we would be in a hurt if the grass was dry. I'm sure glad it is spring, and the grass won't burn."

The attack went well. Three of us picked out the captain to hit on the first volley, so he fell down dead. After injuring or killing a dozen men with two volleys, we withdrew without any casualties. We decided to decamp in the morning, having eliminated their leader, not expecting them to abandon their wounded, and expecting the underlings to be nervous about attacking during daylight. The following night we circled the wagons again on an open hilltop and kept good watch. Outlying guards heard a couple of horses pass after the moon set, but we heard no more after that from Donhome.

Summer is past as we approach the continental divide ridge from the uplands. The ridge is lower here compared to its height above the plains below the bluffs. Traversing the mountains will still be our most challenging passage. Because of the slow process of cutting across country with little more than game paths to follow, we are running out of warm weather.

So far, we have repaired most of the wagons at least once. One wagon was lost at a ford when the axle broke over a boulder, dropping it into the water where the current seized it and swept it downstream until it busted up on the rocks, injuring the oxen so that they had to be put down. We spent the remainder of the day crawling through the cold water creating a smoother ford before bringing the remaining wagons across.

Climbing from the plains up the bluff to the uplands, we lost another wagon, its oxen, and its occupants when it deviated from the chosen path, crumbled the edge of a ledge, and tumbled back down to the plain. The two small children died quickly, crushed, having been in the wagon bed among the boxes. The driver, the father, died of his injuries a couple of days later. His wife, though she had been walking alongside, died the next day in a suicide. Three older

children, who had also been walking, were divided up among the remaining families. The married son and his wife joined her family's wagon.

Once into the uplands, several of our people were killed by a big head, and his traveling entourage of hoppers before we could amass sufficient firepower to drive him off. We think that he ended up being eaten by the hoppers in his weakened state. We left the dead under a cairn beside the path we beat down.

Our caravan now consists of fourteen wagons and their associated families, parts of five clans that left Laboot Ridge six months ago. Jonas and two others should be returning any day from scouting out a route for us through the mountains.

We are now descending off the ridge after four weeks of struggle, having blasted two cuts, built two bridges, chopped our way through several forests, and lowered everything by block and tackle down one cliff. One wagon was pushed off the hillside, after it shattered at the bottom of the cliff, when an anchor supporting the block gave away. We lost several people to predators; two small children were carried off by hatchet heads while they were playing in a clearing as we built one of the bridges. Their screams as they were carried aloft were traumatic. But we have not been caught by the snows; we beat them across the mountains.

Our clans have endured, but we are near the end of our endurance. Tomorrow, I send out two teams to find us a place to settle for the winter. Perhaps we will find relatives of the farmers, whom we met on the Baru River, those families who ventured over the divide several centuries ago, all of them descended from Lebai's small tribe, surprisingly. They migrated from near the Gate, across the uplands along the face of the highlands, way back in the era when Donhome was founded. We will need generous neighbors for us all to survive the winter.

# **Ridgeland Franchise Preparation**

In Laboot City

# Chapter 1 Laboot City

The banded apricot and peach sunset above the Falls glows, lighting my path home, reflecting from the rippling river on my left, draping the cliff ahead in darkness, suggesting a promising future. Today's offer would lead me away from my family for years; away from the city established by Father Niyaq Laboot and his followers.

The venture is an adventure worthy of any Laboot, something the Father would have enjoyed, but which is unprecedented. Would it benefit me, Belak Laboot, to leave Laboot City? The venture led by a Laboot would project a great image for the city. I would be the technical leader, not a diplomat, thank goodness! Diplomacy stinks, burdened with unscientific people and cultural preference; keep it away from me!

But I am troubled. Even though I am only the eighth generation from Niyaq Laboot, I feel too junior for such an exalted position. I have been groomed for leadership, but the council of the target city would look at me and say, "He stands for Laboot City. If we trust him, we can trust the agreement." I would become political, if only because of my name. No one would just let me do my job. Still, Dad is like me and he fulfills his management duties well, so why couldn't I?

The venture needs me, and Laboot City needs the venture. I am available because I am in training, not responsible for a critical aspect of industry. Laboot City is unable to maintain its dominance without the venture. Without the venture, our city would decline, leaving us vulnerable to a more powerful state.

I would advance quickly, if I led the venture. If the venture succeeds, I would control the new production site. Young and old would laud me and curry my favor, solidifying my ascendancy. Do I really want that attention and responsibility? I am not an extrovert, mixing with the elite; I like my work.

If the venture fails, it would taint my future, unless the failure obviously keeps the city from bigger trouble. That could provide an excuse, if I survive the debacle, but it would still reflect poorly on me. If an enemy sabotaged the effort, I could be a prime target for them.

Even if the venture succeeds, but an enemy steals our technology, detractors would blame me. I know our production secrets and even city security plans, since I am a reserve captain. Metalworking is literally in my blood. How would the city protect me, or would they eliminate me before I revealed too much? Would I have a future? At 50, I'm far too young to die!

I walk among a crowd of citizens moving up the road along the river from the pedestrian bridge to the furnaces. On the opposite bank, we pass framework for new factories downstream of the old city walls, where production is moving to give breathing room inside the walls.

A hand on my shoulder jerks me into the present. As we enter the riverside gate, Charles Black puffs, "Slow down, Bek. Why do you take such long strides? Are you mentally escaping from the interview today?"

"Nah, Chuck, I'm not running; I'm just thinking fast."

"Breathe deep. Thinking fast usually means thinking in circles."

"Yeah, Chuck, you're right as usual. I need to stop the spinning wheels and wait until my thoughts have time to ferment."

"Ahh! What say we stop at Rosie's to add hops to that fermentation process? My dear friend, you should lubricate the mental gears to keep them from grinding."

We slide onto stools at the bar. Given its prime location to entice citizens walking home, finding an open seat this time of day is surprising. I comment brightly, "Walking fast gets us a seat, which you must admit is unusual. I wonder, why? Have the lab rats fallen asleep at their desks? Are foremen slow at shoing out laborers so they can close the factories?"

I am jostled from the left, “Lab rats! Come on, Bek, you’d love to be back with us. I’m only here because my test wrapped up early. Your old team made an exciting breakthrough on mass production of copalloy, so they won’t leave for a couple of hours. You should ask for a transfer back; the work is exciting.”

“No, Mike, that’s not in the cards.”

“But Bek, the furnaces are a waste of your talent, spending time on old stuff, fixing problems with an open hearth, for goodness sakes. Has the heat singed your brain?”

Chuck turns on his stool to defend me. “Hold on Mike, nothing is simple about fixing problems with molten steel. Bek got the slag drain working smoothly, not an easy fix, and majorly significant! If a charging cart bumps to a stop over hot slag, there goes the cart up in flame. Belak is good at everything, start to finish. He’s going to be like his dad someday, running the whole furnace works.”

I worked with these guys over the years and stick in everyone’s mind. The lab was exciting; the furnace work is significant; but all pales to the coming venture. I won’t argue today, “Chuck, things changed today; the lab or the furnace or the mill or whatever doesn’t matter to me right now. Cool it and drink your beer. I’m out of the management training cycle.”

“What, did you do something wrong? Is this from that meeting with old Boris this afternoon? Or is it something else? Will you be the new training lead? You’d be good.”

Mike, too, is curious. “Chuck, what are you talking about?”

“Easy you two, I came here, so I don’t have to think about it. The Council of Elders is working on something that I can’t share.” The Council is sufficiently awe-inspiring to silence my friends.

Soon enough we leave for home, moving easily around the old blast furnace foundations because the crowd from the furnace works and labs has dwindled. We join to walk with a few supervisors, who crossed over the chain bridge. I notice that the Falls’ roar is louder now that the bypass power flows are cut, so all the river flow thunders down. Our way is lit, since the lamplighter has passed, heading down the road toward the furnaces.

Chuck and I climb aboard the funicular as the car discharges water from its trip down the Hill. Citizens trickle in, eventually filling the car, which leaves when either the top car or this car is full. In the evening, most people are headed home, so it will move only when we are full. The top car needs a full load of water to over-balance our car. "Chuck, take a seat; I'll stand since I don't have far to go." Once a dozen people are standing, the conductor rings the relay bell and releases the brake. We pick up speed, soon braking for the first stop at level four.

Level seven stop comes quickly, as I work my way to the door. Short, curvy, Aunt Emma ambushes me on the platform with a long hug. "Come over this evening. I'll bake warm cookies and advise you on what look for in a sweetheart."

"Sure, Auntie Em, but I'm too busy to look. What are you doing, now that you literally drove Uncle Ben into the ground, six feet deep?"

She shakes her head. "You know he wouldn't have missed me as a wife in his old age for the world. But me? I look after my nephews." As she stretches up to give me a kiss, I turn my head aside. She accepts the cheek and skips off down the path to the left.

I catch up with Uncle Bruce as we cross under the tracks. "I saw that; she's a sprite. I knew she'd be trouble when I first saw meh brother with 'er. Oops, now, young Belak, keep yer head down. If ye don't the car rumblin' down the Hill'll clip yer tall head."

"Yes, Uncle, I love you, too. Don't let your cane get caught in the cracks."

"When ye gonna find yerself a wife, Belak? Ye could have had a daughter near as old as yer little sister, if ye hadn't dilly dallied."

"Yes, Uncle Bruce, I have plenty of time. I expect to live as long as you have. How many wives have you used up by now?"

"Oh, ye know, Nancy is number four. June was really sweet; I wish she had stuck around. But as ye know; having kids wears any gal out."

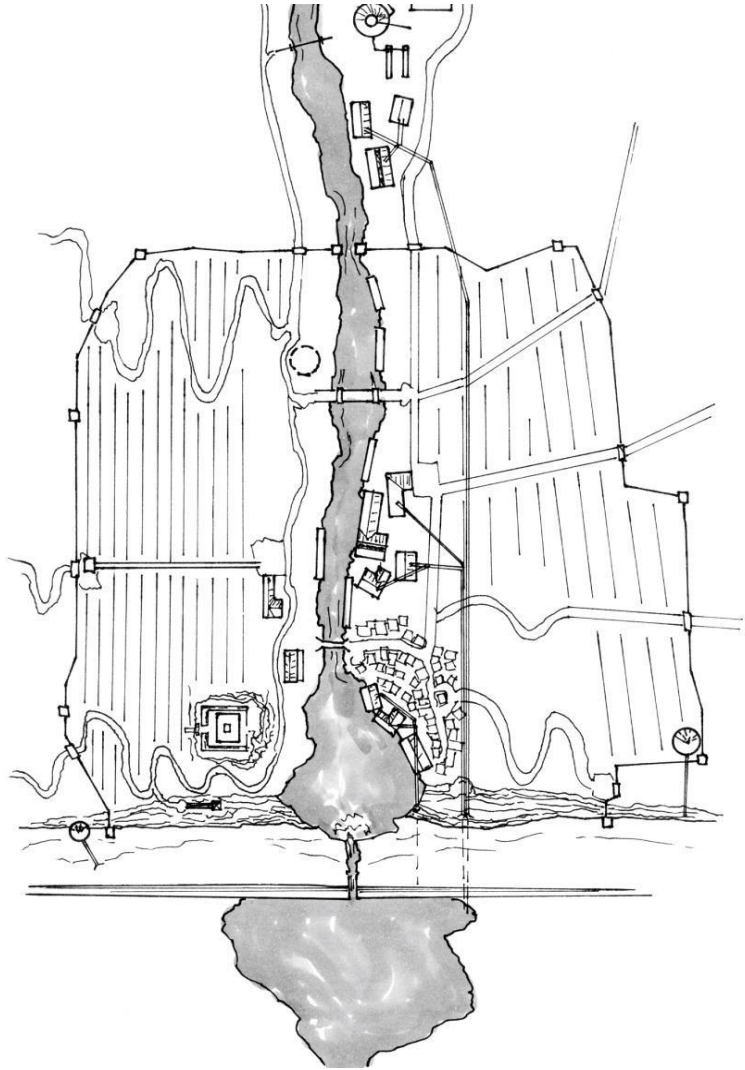


“I know you really loved your wives, given all the kids you have. Nancy will probably live on after you die, now that you’re so worn out.”

“That’s not a nice thing to say to yer elder! I’ll show ye.”

As we reach my door, I drop the line, “I’m sure you’ll try, Uncle Bruce.”

Citizens, in the seventh generation from the original clan members, own homes on this level. The city started at the bottom, working its way uphill as each new generation built. When I eventually marry, we may be able to buy at a lower level rather than build a small home at the far end of the eighth level, assuming I am prominent enough to receive a waiver. Land near the funicular is expensive, so close-in lots tend to be available higher up, but level eight is full. If I succeed in this venture, I will petition the Council for a vacant home lower on the Hill.



Laboot City – Plan View

Darkness settled in and the mists collect as Louise and I look out over the valley, while sitting on Dad's patio. Downstream to the left, the blast furnace and one of the open hearths glow dimly in the night; charcoal ovens squat beside them preparing fuel for the morning and shooting volatiles into the hearth; light from the

ovens reveal stacks of logs in orderly piles; flickering street lamps flank the two roads up to the old gates. Lou gazes at the sky. “The Milky Way is clear tonight across the valley. Overhead, it fades out.”

Glancing across I remark, “Yeah, mists rising from our gardens reflect our lamps. The other side is drier and apartments hide street lamps from our view. Laborers generally go to bed early and are fortunate to get a city light at each corner where a latrine and spigot are. They can’t afford to waste lamp oil. I worked hard after the Fire to design the water supply and sewer system over there. We get a lot less smell drifting across since the Fire. Rainwater frequently flushes the system.”

“Ugh, smells. When wind shifts from behind the Hill, it still stinks. Lucy and Sharon’s houses can smell awful, up so close to the barns. Why doesn’t the Council ban livestock near the city? If I were to marry Rich or Tammar, we would probably end up living near the top, too. I don’t think I’ll marry.”

“Girl, you have it good. Think what the early generations endured and what it was like on the far side before the Fire!”

“The Fire is one of the first things I remember. That stank! We closed all the windows, and I still coughed all night. As I recall, it didn’t bother you; I didn’t hear you cough once until morning.”

“Lou, think about it. Where do you think I was all night?”

“What, did you go hide in the woods?”

“That’s not nice. Would a fine upstanding citizen, like myself, hide in the woods? Certainly not! I was defending you.”

“From what? The laborers wouldn’t riot while the Fire burned.”

“No, laborers fled uphill and out the upper gates to escape the Fire, which started near the river. It roared up the far side through their wooden shacks, which were piled on top of each other. A quarter of the laborers didn’t survive because they were caught against the walls, far from any gate.”

“Why didn’t they just run up the street straight to the gate?”

“They have streets because the Fire allowed us to rebuild to a plan. There were no straight streets before the fire. It was a warren of twisting passages over there.”

“Really? But you are avoiding my question. You haven’t said what you defended me from.”

“I never told you because I know you love animals, when you can ignore the smell, but some animals are not nice. The shacks were infested with rats, each about the size of Puss. They went underground early in the Fire, but as it grew and roared up the far side, the fire got too hot for them, even underground. Those that could ran through their burrows to the river.”

“Oh, are rats so bad?”

With an evil eye and wicked grin, I stand, crouching forward, and whisper, “They nibble at children’s toes; they form packs that corner dogs which threaten them; they break into stored grain; and if they don’t eat it, they defecate in it, so you wouldn’t touch it – unless someone strained it and hid the fact that it was contaminated.” Stretching, I continue, “Considering how healthy laborers are since the Fire, I suspect that rats spread disease, too.”

Wide-eyed, Louise admits, “Okay, they are bad, but the river is in the way.” She stands, too, uncomfortable at the thought. I join her as we lean on the patio railing.

“Rats came over the chain bridge, which is unusual since rats avoid being seen by humans. Sentries opened the draw bridge and called for help. So, the rats climbed, starting to come across on the overhead chains. Citizens mobilized to kill them as they descended. Other rats swam the river. Though they were swept downstream, many landed below the chain bridge and were fought off until they drifted out of the city. For weeks afterwards, teams scoured the countryside to keep the rats out of our crops and from climbing the wall into the citizens’ side of the river.”

“Where did you fight? It was smoky up here; it must have been worse near the river.”

“The Fire’s draft pulled wind over the Falls cliff and up the river, so along the river the smoke wasn’t too bad. I beat off rats

along the bank with a shovel. They weren't hard to see, silhouetted against the Fire. I remember one that climbed atop a rock. One hit sent him flying, spinning back into the river." I pause to imitate a batter's swing, "Whap! The edge hopefully broke his back.

"Then I was called to another front in the battle, the stone bridge. The Fire slowly crept upriver toward the market and the old homes near the Falls. Rats started running across the stone bridge. It is narrower, but easier for the rats to cross since there is no lift span. A laborer died on the bridge when he was overwhelmed by a rat pack."

"Eeeyoo!"

"We formed a double semicircle at our end of the bridge to catch rats as they fanned out. We killed most of them. Rat bait and guillotine traps eliminated the rest over the next year."

"Did any laborers help?"

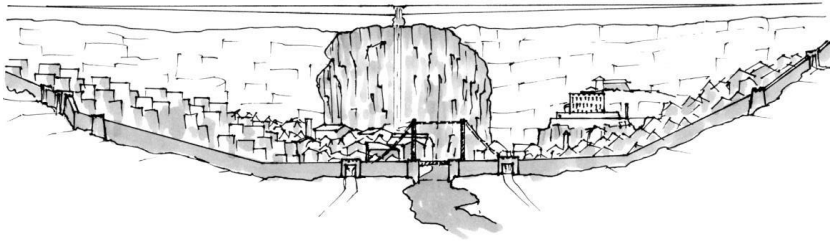
"A number came across the stone bridge before the rats, or swam the river. Most collapsed in fear, exhaustion, and grief, but the stout-hearted ones helped, since we didn't enforce the ban. Most of those who helped formed the first semicircle because they understood rats better. Some laborers are decent; I got to know some that night," I shrug.

"You coughed and slept through the next day. I thought you were lazy. Sorry that I never asked before," Lou responds in a quiet, sheepish voice as she leans against me.

"You're not my keeper. It was a busy time, and I neglected my baby sister." I put my arm around her shoulders and give her a hug.

Lou shakes her head, "Don't worry; I have always been closer to you than to Dad, though neither of you holds a candle to Mom. I am glad she is from old stock; she will live forever."

I send her off dismissively, "Well, sweet Louise, good night. I'll likely see you at breakfast. Will you stay up late or get up early to study for your accounting test? Don't worry, you will do well; then you can avoid marrying Rich or Tammar."



### Laboot City – From Down River

In the quiet of the night, my thoughts race. Quiet, Belak, settle down; review Laboot history to find guidance. The near bank showcases how ingenuity fueled our progress from the first days. Soon, slaves will break up the old blast furnace foundations to make way for another lab. Labs now occupy the location of the first homes downstream. An office building occupies Father Niyag Laboot's first homesite. We tore down older, dilapidated buildings to build new and bigger, since there is no open land. Now, all the buildings that remain are solid.

When the foundry, mill, and forge move outside the walls, the armory will move into one former production building, a new weaving mill and warehouse will take over another, and one will be torn down to provide room for a new grain elevator, and more slave barracks. Merchants will take over the old armory. Housing presses up against the city walls, even with the larger capacity apartment complexes built after the Fire.

We are walled in! Laboot City cannot expand over the hills, overrunning farmland. We need the farms as security or we would be vulnerable to extortion by other cities, and many of our prominent citizens are farmers with valuable holdings. We can't expand much downstream; the land is dead from furnace fumes. Only recently has the land just outside the old walls greened up after the furnaces were moved. Security and military training fields gobbled up that green area as we construct the new foundry, forge, and steel/iron mill along the river and extend walls beyond the furnaces. Eventually, some land will open up for housing.

No one wants to live up over the cliff. Anyone up past the Falls is isolated from Laboot City. The reservoir is too wide to span with a bridge, and since the lake is shallow, as it fills and drains, the shoreline moves a lot! How would you defend a settlement up there, build walls way into the reservoir for when the level is down? The dam is protected, but that's easy compared to defending a settlement.

To cross on the dam would require reinforcement and widening. Until then, laborers and citizens would live together to make a self-sustaining settlement. On which side would they live, our side or the far side? Mixing classes is simply not acceptable.

Okay, we need to expand elsewhere. What does history tell us? Father Laboot seemed to eat soot and thrive in fire. As our output increased, the valley filled with smoke. Younger generations build farther up the hill, but the Father continued to live at the foot of the hill. Some of his grandchildren suffered lung damage and died.

The Father eventually abandoned his home after building the Mansion into the cliff beside the waterfall. His first blackened home was turned into a laboratory. It and the homes of other early settlers are gone, replaced by our older enterprise buildings.

When Father Laboot died, the elders decided to move the furnaces down the valley. The walk to work is longer, but the city is cleaner. For the same reason, the foundry, forge, and mill are being moved down the valley, too.

Now, after reviewing all this history, I don't see how it answers the question of where to move our production. So, I won't second guess the Council's decision.

The Elders, themselves, are fighting over this. The largest group on the Council are war hawks, who want to conquer Baru, the next city at the edge of the uplands to the north, on the other side of the continental divide ridgelines. They would raze it and build "Laboot City #2." Taking Baru wouldn't be hard since we make the best weapons in the world, and all of our citizens train to fight and lead our laborers in battle. Baru is a good choice because hydropower from its falls would be comparable to the power source in Laboot

City. It grows great crops, but has little industry. Covert exploration teams found local ore bodies as well.

But I'm not being asked to plan production facilities in Baru. The second largest group, the conservative or weak Elders, think that our trade would suffer from a war, that it's better if our neighbors don't fear us. My charter would be to work with BuelaVisu in the plains, to initiate a franchise which uses our ironmaking processes. BuelaVisu is also on the Baru River and has potential hydropower from a reservoir, created by placing a dam between the hills upstream. Iron ore rests in the divide mountains to the city's south, along with abundant forests which can feed charcoal ovens. To maintain our technological advantage, BuelaVisu would only produce iron, our lower tech product.

Right now, the moderate Elders on the Council swing toward those promoting the franchise, which makes a majority in its favor. They will likely remain aligned with the conservatives, if the venture succeeds.

If it does succeed, the hawks might become my enemies. But with political influence and recognized ability, I would become the most powerful manager in BuelaVisu, which is much more than I would ever be in Laboot City.

If the venture doesn't succeed, I may throw away years of advancement; however, if I do a credible job, I will know our processes better than any other person. Maybe, if I sabotage the project to please the hawks, I would lead the effort in Baru once we conquer it. Yet, I would still end up moving away from Laboot City.

If I reject the assignment, people would call me a quitter, no matter how the venture turns out. I'd end up as a foreman in the foundry or as a lab rat for the rest of my life. I'd live at the top of the Hill, not at the bottom. I'd be a nobody.

So, I will take the assignment and leave Laboot City, at least for now. I'll try to make the best of it. Maybe, I will be the next Father Laboot, a god in my own right in BuelaVisu or in Baru! He wasn't a politician either.



Getting out of my bed, standing in the dark, I turn toward the cliff, arms reaching out toward the Mansion, “Father Laboot, I need a double portion of your spirit as I answer the call to be in the vanguard for expanding iron production beyond this valley.”

