
Craft Work

by Amanda Kear

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The sun was just past its zenith at Rubicon, as blue Fimbriath spiralled lazily down towards the main hold, passing over a chequerboard countryside of vineyards and well-maintained roads. Masterpotter Emendin - astride the dragon behind bluerider P'skel - stifled a yawn and hoped that the noonday sun would evaporate the last of the night's weariness from his bones. Travel a-dragonback was marvellously efficient, but it did tend to befuddle the senses, being whisked in a flash from the early morning of the Thornblaze Potterhall to the noon of Rubicon.

He was distracted from these thoughts as Fimbriath bellowed a greeting to the brown who was watchdragon at Rubicon Hold, and Emendin was intrigued as always to feel the vibration of the call through his thighs. Fascinating things, dragons!

Fimbriath made a thoughtfully smooth landing, careful of his passenger and his cargo, and Emendin uttered his thanks to dragon and rider. He was going to be a-dragonback a lot today on craft business – first Rubicon, then Kadanzer; then, if time permitted, on to some clay workings in Izmir.

"Do you need us to wait for you, Master Emendin?" P'skel asked, as he assisted the Masterpotter to undo his riding straps.

"No, no – this will take some time. No need for you to hang about. If the watchrider here can't oblige me on the next leg of my journey, I can ask him to contact you – or I'll send Chatter." Emendin gestured above, to where his bronze firelizard was indulging in some aerial acrobatics with a local firelizard. Before the plague, there would doubtless have been a whole fair of the creatures swirling about as they inspected the new arrival. The sky seemed poignantly bare without them.

Steward Gerstle was awaiting him in the courtyard, watching patiently as the Masterpotter dismounted from Fimbriath. Gerstle came forward uttering polite greetings as P'skel was carefully lowering Emendin's heavy pack from where it had been secured on Fimbriath's flank.

"Splendid, splendid!" Emendin received the weighty bundle into his care and followed Gerstle into the main building.

"Shall I have someone carry that for you?" Gerstle enquired.

Emendin shook his head. "No need, thank you. Some of the contents are rather fragile, and I had rather be at fault

myself if it gets dropped or damaged!" He smiled to indicate that he intended neither of those things to happen.

The Steward guided him to Lord Lomcoli's private offices, where Lomcoli and his mother, the Lady Molloi, awaited him. Lady Molloi's eyes fastened interestedly on Emendin's pack as the group exchanged formal greetings, and she raised an eyebrow in query. Emendin gave a discreet nod.

"Sweet Faranth, man," said Lomcoli, who had also noticed the bulk and weight of the pack. "Just how many sample tiles did you bring to show us?"

Emendin chuckled, to show that he was not offended by language that was not entirely suitable for a business discussion. Lord Lomcoli was maturing fast, but was still rather young and brash, even with his mother's guidance. "Ah, but Lord Lomcoli, you are not my only client of the day." He laid a hand on his pack and looked to Lady Molloi. "May I?"

She smiled. "Now is a very good time, Master Emendin."

While Lomcoli glanced suspiciously at his mother, and growled about people trying to spring surprises on him in his own office, Emendin unfastened his pack and extracted several very carefully wrapped objects. He slit the string with his belt knife and deftly unwrapped several pieces of exquisitely crafted porcelain – the finest his Hall could produce, an almost translucent white. Each item had a twin – a pair of bowls, a pair of dinner plates, and so on – and each item was decorated with the Rubicon Hold badge amidst a vine leaf and grape motif. Animals and other produce symbolic of Rubicon's wealth and economy peeked out here and there from behind the vine leaves. Emendin beamed at the delighted expression on Lady Molloi's face as she picked up a soup bowl to examine it.

"Master Chazard and his artists have outdone themselves this time," she exclaimed in delight. "The sketches he showed me don't even begin to do this justice!"

Emendin's smile got even broader. "I shall pass on your kind words, My Lady." Chazard had few opportunities to produce the fine porcelain for which he had such a talent. A commission such as this was as rare as gold dragon eggs – and Chazard had fretted and fussed over every stage of the process like a broody queen dragon.

Lord Lomcoli was also admiring a piece, turning a plate around in his hands to examine the decoration in detail. "Beautiful work, Master Emendin – beautiful work indeed." He cast a suspicious look at his mother. "But may I ask what occasion warrants such fine tableware?"

"You may indeed," said Lady Molloi, relieving her son of the plate he held and placing it back with the rest on the desk. "It is my wedding gift to you, and you shall receive it on the day of your marriage."

"Wedding?" Lomcoli looked first startled, and then irritated. "Is this one of your less than subtle hints that I should marry, mother?"

"It is indeed," said Lady Molloi pleasantly, as she collected up the crockery and passed it to Steward Gerstle. "Now we shall just see these safely put away, and then perhaps Master Emendin would like some wine while you and he discuss your plans for the Main Hall?"

"A little too early in Thornblaze time for wine," Emendin said, but accepted an offer of fruit juice instead.

Lord Lomcoli glared at the closed door a moment after his mother and Steward Gerstle had departed. "Wretched woman," he growled.

The Masterpotter diplomatically avoided commenting, and instead started to remove sample tiles and design sketches from his pack. His Hall had been contacted by Lomcoli's Steward, saying that the Lord wished to renovate the hearth area of Rubicon's Main Hall, and was considering faience and tiles rather than masonry and flagstones to achieve the sort of decorative effect he wanted. If Lomcoli decided on a substantial amount of architectural ceramics, or the more elaborate encaustic or enamelled tiles, then this would be a major commission for the Potterhall – and a chance for other of his masters and journeymen to revel in their specialist skills.

With a broad smile, Emendin settled into the day's business of extolling the virtues of his craft's products.



The morning had gone well. Lord Lomcoli had been very receptive to the idea of a faience frieze around the hearth with a montage of hunting scenes, particularly when he realised that he could specify likenesses of his favourite hunting hounds within it. Steward Gerstle had joined them when they got to the discussion of costings and a schedule for the work to be started and completed. Finally a relaxing lunch with Lady Molloi and Lord Lomcoli, and then Emendin left the Hold with a written contract for the work, a belt pouch swollen with the down payment for the hearth and the final payment for the porcelain, and an arrangement to send his best artists to Rubicon in a seven-day to make sketches and maquettes of the hounds in question. A very good morning indeed.

Blue Fimbriath was waiting for him outside, as Lord Lomcoli apparently had need of his own watchrider's services. Chatter reappeared as the Masterpotter was climbing back onto Fimbriath's neck, broadcasting mildly lustful images of a green firelizard. "Poor bronze – no queens to chase since the plague!" Emendin teased as the little creature settled on his shoulder.

P'skel grinned. "You should take him to the Weyr – there's still a few golds there."

Emendin smiled back and shook his head. "Oh no, no. If he spies a gold I'd likely not see him again for a seven-day. And badly behaved as he sometimes is, he's the only message carrier the Pottercraft have got at the moment."

P'skel pretended to be offended. "Passed over in favour of a flutter! And me such a reliable sort!"

The Masterpotter gave a hearty laugh. "Then, oh reliable sort – let us be off to my appointment with Lord Dracir!"



The contrast with Rubicon could not be more apparent. After Fimbriath had emerged from *between*, Emendin looked down over the ash-strewn and desolate lands around Kadanzer Hold. The Masterpotter had, of course, heard that Kadanzer Mountain continued to periodically emit clouds of

ash, but he had not personally visited the Hold for over a Turn and was unprepared for the transformation this had wrought upon the land since his last visit. He surveyed the countryside with dismay that things were so much worse now. At this time of the Turn, the ground that Fimbriath winged over should have been a colourful patchwork of grain fields and grazing land. Instead the terrain looked as if there had been a recent snowfall – large swathes of the country were blanketed with a dirty grey covering. Emendin hazarded from the pattern of grey that he could discern the direction of the wind on the day or days that the ash had erupted.

Even the fields that had been spared the covering looked unhealthy. Grass that by all rights should be lush with summer growth appeared instead to be sparse and yellowing. There were few beasts in the fields. Where were they, Emendin wondered? Were they being kept under cover, or had they been moved away from the main hold, onto lands not affected by the ash falls? He had heard – via both harpers and those of his own journeymen assigned to Kadanzer lands – that the ash had caused dire consequences for the economy of the Hold. Not only was much of the grass smothered, but even where it was relatively clear the grazing lands around the mountain were poisoned. Something washed out of the ash and into soil and vegetation, so what little fodder remained was unsafe for the beasts to eat. Lord Dracir's hold had gone from being the jewel of his territory, to being the poor relative, its inhabitants supported by smaller and more distant holds.

It was certainly something to reflect on, as Fimbriath glided down towards a flagstone courtyard. The Potterhall had been destroyed in an earthquake, but had been rebuilt and was now as thriving and vibrant as it had ever been. Kadanzer Hold had escaped the destruction meted out to the Weyr... but was still suffering from the aftermath of that event. Something to reflect on indeed.

"Good day to you, Master Emendin!" It was not the Steward, but Lord Dracir himself who greeted Emendin as he dismounted from Fimbriath. He was, Emendin noted, carrying a flying jacket. Obviously the Lord of Kadanzer was eager to get straight onto the business at hand!

"Are you in need of refreshment, Master Emendin?" Eager or not, Dracir was not one to forget his manners.

The Masterpotter shook his head. "No, no, but thank you kindly. Perhaps some klah when we get back, eh? Now where is this new clay of yours?"

"Too far to comfortably travel by runner, I'm afraid," replied Dracir, as he pulled on his flying jacket. "It is on land held by Black Wherry Hold. The watchdragon will take us there." Emendin glanced over to Fimbriath wondering if he was the dragon in question, but the blue was already taking off – making way for Kadanzer's own watchdragon to settle in the courtyard.

"Brown...?" Emendin enquired.

"Baseth," supplied Dracir. "And brownrider S'toris." Emendin uttered a polite good afternoon to dragon and rider as he mounted. It seemed he was going to do more dragonriding today than he had in the last six months. No doubt his daughter would want to hear every detail of it. She had a very romantic notion of dragonriders – though grizzled old P'skel and scar-faced S'toris hardly fit the bill.

Dracir shouted out details of the discovery of the new clay deposit as Baseth ascended, though most of what he recounted had already been in the letter which had arrived at the Potterhall. Some coholders beholden to Black Wherry Hold had gone searching for missing herdbeasts on the northern flanks of the mountains overlooking Drake's Lake, only to discover that the ground in the area had shifted and buckled drastically since the last time anyone had visited the region. A hillside had collapsed in a major landslide – and the missing herdbeasts were happily licking at a huge band of clay that had been exposed.

Whilst the coholders were delighted that there was a potential new salt lick for their beasts, they were also alert to the possibility that the clay might have other economic possibilities. They'd fired a few pots and sent them to the Lord, who had consulted with journeymen potters based locally, and then contacted the Potterhall.

And that was where Emendin came in – where politics, economics and craft affairs collided. The journeymen concerned had also both sent him letters, cautiously optimistic about the quality of the clay, and its potential for producing high quality porcelain of the type he had just delivered to Lady Molloi. But they had also warned that Kadanzer's economy was approaching ruin – and would stay that way as long as the ash still fell. Lord Dracir did not need just a clay mine and some dewatering facilities on his land – he hoped for a fair-sized potterhall to be built, kilns, decorators and all. What the Lord was after was a large and long-term contract between the Hold and the Craft that would provide a stable income.

It remained to be seen if that was also a good prospect for the Craft.



He certainly liked the feel of the clay. Emendin was gloriously messy, having thrown himself whole-heartedly into an assessment of the clay and the site. Journeyman potter Skaye and several of Dracir's holders had been waiting for them at the landslip area, along with a Minecraft master called Broto and his assistants. Emendin himself had a sound grasp of the geology involved in mining a clay deposit, but it was always better to get a second opinion from the miners, and Master Broto had spent the previous day surveying the site in detail. That was vital in a case like this, where the stability of the area might be in question.

The quality of the clay was not under debate. Skaye had done a barrage of tests, and Emendin came armed with fine sieves and other equipment to confirm his results and compare the data with detailed notes on the properties of the other china clays that the Pottercraft currently utilized. The tricky thing to assess was how much effort should go into exploiting this deposit. Emendin and Broto walked the area, talking practicalities and hazards, pausing to look at some digging and coring work that Broto and his journeymen had done the day before, and listen to Broto's opinion on the state of the fault-line that had shifted and caused the buckling and slumping of terrain. The mere mention of the word 'earthquake' was enough to make anyone in the Pottercraft understandably nervous!

Mining for clay was often a hazardous procedure, even without the threat of further tremors in the area. With all clays' propensity for swelling and shrinking depending on their water content, clay tunnels and clay faces might suffer serious wall collapses and slumps – something that had taken the lives of both miners and potters in the past.

"It's your decision, Master Emendin," Broto said finally. "The Minecraft is willing to work the site, with a proviso on the scale of the effort and under the safety strategy that I outlined."

Emendin nodded thoughtfully. "Then it comes down to building costs, availability of fuel and the logistics of transport."

Broto's turn to nod. "Drake's Lake's not too far away," he said. "And Black Wherry Hold has a dock for their fishing craft."

"Indeed," Emendin agreed, as he mulled over the logistics of exploiting the site. While the clay was of a high quality, transporting it huge distances was not economically viable. Clay was heavy, even after it had been dewatered, and there were deposits of equal quality much closer to the main Potterhall. Each mile that any raw clay travelled cost marks – and that ate into the profits of selling the finished goods. He reviewed his mental map of the satellite potterhalls in the region. The kilns where Skaye was posted were the closest, but the route across Drake's Lake to a hall in Waterfall Hold would likely be a cheaper transport route. So both of those were possibilities, though new kilns suitable for firing porcelain would have to be built regardless of which of those halls he chose. But was the dock Broto mentioned of sufficient a size to take the ships that would be needed for moving large quantities of clay?

The third alternative was to build a new hall from scratch right here – or within spitting distance of here – and thus place the specialist kilns close to the source of their raw material. That cut down production costs, as only finished goods would be transported out from the site. But could the area support a hall? Certainly the grazing land in the area was not affected by the ash falls. But Emendin had never visited Black Wherry Hold and Skaye knew little about it. Could those holders provide the food, fuel and manpower that supporting a potterhall required?

That brought him back to musing about building new kilns in Skaye's hall. That hall looked to Kadanzer Hold itself for food and other services to keep it running – and in the Hold's current condition Kadanzer was already struggling to meet its obligations to the potters. New personnel and an increased demand for fuel would put more strain on that situation. Dracir might argue that his Hold could cope, but Emendin was not willing to take that risk. No, if this site was to be a viable resource then the only options were a new hall here, or upgrading the one in Waterfall Hold.

Construction costs were also an issue. When complete, a new hall would benefit the potters, the miners and Dracir. But who bore what share of building that hall would be a complex negotiation. Emendin suspected that Dracir was desperate for any economic boost to his territory – be it clay mining or an actual hall – but that the latter would be what he was hoping for. He doubtless had destitute holders from the flanks of Kadanzer Mountain whom he hoped to move out here, where they could again be active and productive.

The whole situation gave the Potterhall a lot of bargaining power – but was one of those tricky ethical situations that craftmasters would debate over a skinful or two of wine of an evening. The good of the Hall was not always simply a matter of marks gained and tithes paid. Debts – professional, personal and financial – were still owed from the rebuilding of the Thornblaze Potterhall. And begging Dracir now might seem to be a gain to some, but Emendin was conscious that one day there would be heirs to deal with. No, he was sure that there was a path that would be of maximum benefit to all.

“Time to talk to Lord Dracir about timber, road cutting and Black Wherry Hold, I think,” he remarked to his companion. “Thank you, Master Broto – it has been a pleasure working with you today.” He clasped the minermaster’s forearm and headed back to where Dracir waited with S’toris and the holders. “Lord Dracir,” he called, “would it be possible to visit the local hold?”



The discussions and negotiations began in earnest back at Kadanzer Hold, over what was a late lunch for Dracir and Broto and an early supper for Emendin. Black Wherry Hold had proved to be of moderate size, its people making their living from raising livestock and fishing in Drake’s Lake. There had been building work going on – an extension to the hold’s living quarters – confirming Emendin’s surmise that Dracir had holders he needed to relocate from near Kadanzer Mountain. From the quantity of fish on the drying racks and the healthy look of the holders, it had looked to be prospering. S’toris had remarked to Emendin that Black Wherry was one of the places he took Baseth to hunt – seeking out the wild wherries that the hold took its name from.

The hold was a little over two hours’ ride from the clay site, so roads would indeed need to be cut for transport of materials and personnel, regardless of whether the Masterpotter decided to simply mine the clay or to build a hall. Once all concerned were back at Kadanzer, maps of the land were pored over while the road-building potential was analysed. Dracir and the Hold Steward were both apparently content to absorb the full cost of that particular enterprise, Emendin noted with interest.

Midway through their talks the Masterpotter had paused briefly to send Chatter to Izmir with a message to say that he was not going to make that meeting today, and re-scheduling it for later in the sevenday. The little horror had returned with an empty message tube – but also with half a meatroll clutched in his talons. Emendin sighed, and wondered whose snack he had stolen.

“Just how much charcoal could you supply to any potterhall we situated there?” he asked. Dracir and his Steward conferred on charcoal production and named a quantity that Emendin considered adequate for the size of hall he envisioned for the site.

He asked to see the maps again, and pondered over them – more to give himself some thinking time than through any need to assess the lay of the land again. The mining and dewatering option had more than proved itself viable: with Dracir willing to cover the costs of road building and

improvement, the Pottercraft could even decide to take all the costs of construction of the small facility onto itself and still get a decent return for its investment. And in reality the Hold and the Minecraft would share some of those costs.

The tricky thing was a new hall – the costs of building that would be far more substantial and his Craft could not bear that outlay totally alone. However, Dracir direly needed the prestige of a new venture such as that new hall to boost the reputation, as well as the eventual income, of his Hold. Emendin knew that he shouldn’t favour one Lord over another, but his natural inclination was to site a new hall here instead of expanding the one in Waterfall, even if it might be to the financial detriment of the Craft in the short run. Kadanzer Hold had had a run of bad luck through no fault of its own – as had the Thornblaze Potterhall a handful of Turns ago.

Ah, but if they built entirely in brick... and the Waterfall potterhall provided those bricks... The costs would still be high, but it would keep his craftmasters much happier than if local stone was used, and would provide some new journeymen postings in the Waterfall satellite hall in the long months before the Black Wherry hall was ready to be staffed.

He turned back to the others. “Construction costs,” he said. “If the Potterhall provides the bulk of the building materials, can Kadanzer provide the labour?”



A little over an hour later – all the logistics and finances agreed to Emendin and Broto’s satisfaction – the serious business of drawing up the contracts between Pottercraft, Minecraft and the Hold began.

Once the contracts were signed and sealed, Emendin saw Dracir visibly relax. He sent for another skin of wine, and insisted that the various potter and miner journeymen be sent for to share in a drink. An outside observer would think the lot of them a queer sight, Emendin mused – all wearing work clothes smeared with clay from tramping about outdoors, whilst sipping a fine red wine in Dracir’s private sitting room. Chatter certainly disapproved of the whole affair, shifting restlessly on Emendin’s shoulder for a while and then vanishing *between* broadcasting another image of that Rubicon green he’d been flirting with earlier.

The talk shifted to chat on hold and craft trivia, until Emendin decided that he had better head back to Thornblaze before he got too tipsy to climb onto a dragon. S’toris and Baseth proved amenable to being his transport, so Dracir and Journeyman Skaye walked him out to where the pair waited.

“Tell me, Skaye,” the Masterpotter asked as clasped forearms in farewell. “Have you tried using the ash from Kadanzer Mountain as temper in any of your firings?” There were a number of minerals that were of use in tempering clay before firing, assisting water to evaporate evenly and reducing the chance that the vessel would crack or shrink in the kiln. Other desirable properties were also possible, and Emendin was curious as to any the ash might have.

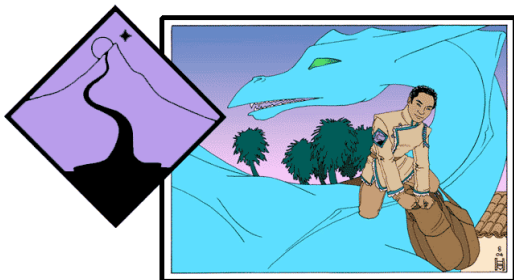
Dracir blinked in surprise, and darted a quick look at the journeyman, who was shaking his head. “Master Emendin,” Dracir said carefully. “Are you telling me that the ASH might be useful?”

“To be honest, Lord Dracir, I don’t know. But there is something in it that is poisoning your beasts—” He saw the Lord wince at that. “—And there are many substances hazardous to health that are beneficial to producing ceramics. It would certainly be worth some experimentation, hmm?”

Dracir nodded enthusiastically. “By all means, Emendin. I can certainly arrange for a few sacks to be filled with the wretched stuff for you – if S’toris and Baseth are amenable to a little delay and carrying some extra weight?” He cast an enquiring look up at the watchrider.

“It would be a pleasure, Lord Dracir,” S’toris said, then paused as his face took on that distant look which dragonriders often had when communicating with their bondmates. He smiled. “And Baseth informs me that taking even a tiny amount of ash away sounds like a very good thing – he is most adamant on how much he dislikes it!”

“Baseth and I very much concur on that!” said Dracir adamantly. With which Emendin could not do anything but agree.



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