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The Frontier Lord Begins with **Zero** Subjects

THE BLUE-HORNED MAIDEN

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Alna (15)

Dias (35)

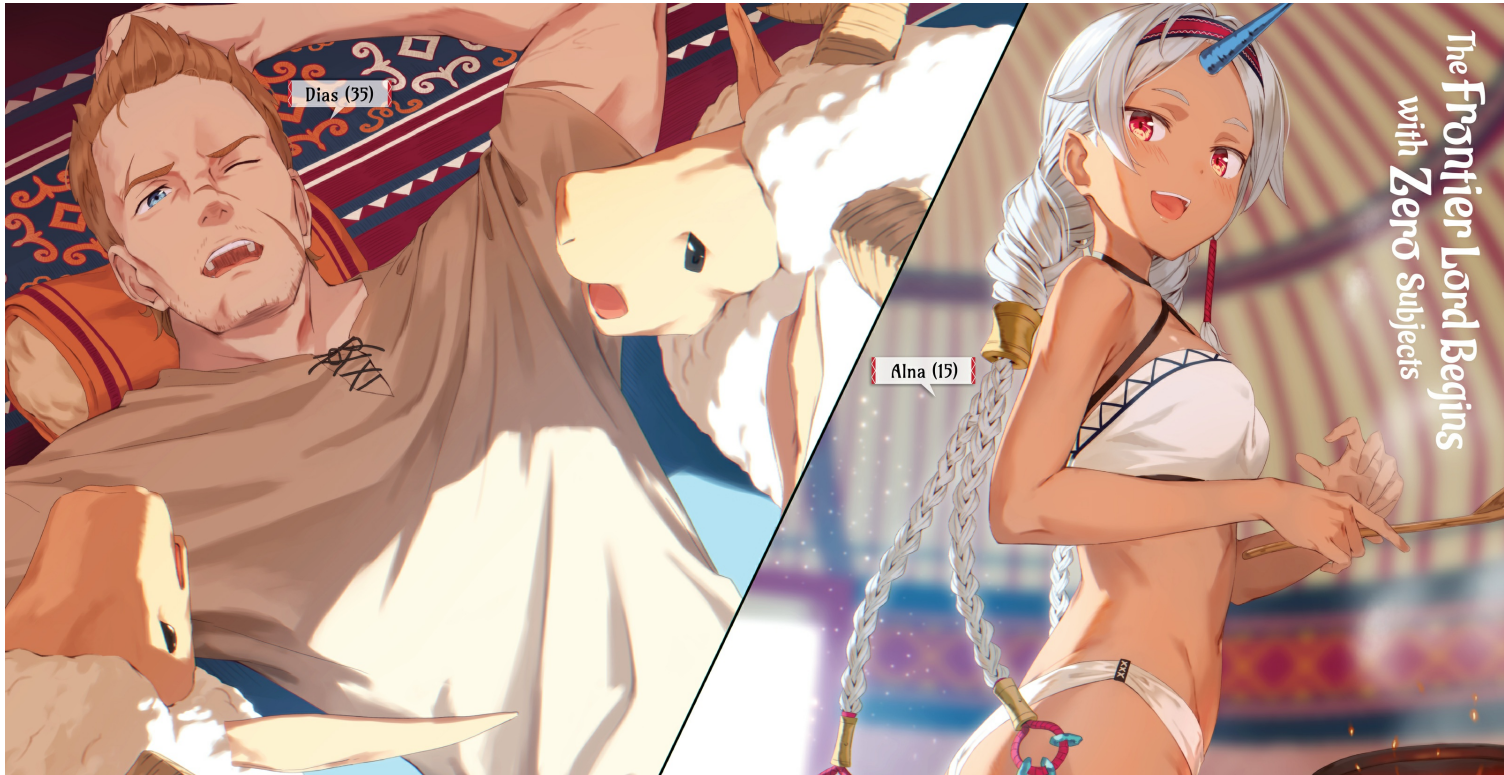






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Prologue

My mother liked to say, “Work in a way that is useful to your people.”

My father liked to say, “Be a man who defends the weak.”

I lost my parents to an epidemic when I was only ten years old, and in the twenty-five years since, I have done my utmost to live by their words.

As a youth, I banded together with other orphans who, like me, had lost their parents, and together we saved up by cleaning around the city, helping at the farms for a little food, and sometimes hunting monsters whenever they appeared. That was how we survived day to day, living on the money we earned from our work.

Five years passed that way. The year I turned fifteen, however, war broke out between a neighboring nation and our own, and our country saw defeat after defeat. Our forces lost battle upon battle, until enemy soldiers pushed as far as the city I called home...and began to plunder it before my very eyes.

I couldn't stand by and watch as these atrocities played out. So to make good on the words that my parents had left me, I decided to fight to protect the city from the invaders. I enlisted in the military, and I fought, on and on, for twenty years.

In the winter of the year that I turned thirty-five, negotiations with our foes fell in our favor, and the war was declared over. Then all of a sudden, for reasons I couldn't fathom, people were hailing me as the heroic savior of our nation.

As it turned out, without my ever realizing it, I had an aptitude for combat. I had done more in battle than any other soldier across the country. In fact, even the nation's advantageous negotiations to end the war had been a result of my efforts.

Thus began the confusing and awkward days in which everyone I met praised

me endlessly. The people who fought alongside me, the knights who led our forces, the people in the city who always hated us orphans, and even the nation's most powerful people, who apparently did very important work—all of them heaped praise upon me.

I was applauded and cheered everywhere I went. It went on so long that in the end even the king himself, the most important person in the entire nation, joined in and commended me. Using some very difficult and complicated words, he said some very nice things about me, and announced that he would reward me with a domain.

I didn't actually know what it meant to *have* a domain, uneducated as I was, but the official at his side politely explained that, in essence, it meant living on the land I was given as its lord, protecting its people, gathering their money, and giving that to the king.

And apparently, once you were bestowed a domain, you were expected to go there immediately. I was somewhat forcefully ushered into a carriage, and without any chance to prepare for the journey, we left the capital.

I traveled for a month under the watchful eye of officials who clearly thought very little of me, if anything at all. I wasn't allowed out of the carriage except to go to the bathroom or to sleep. It was a suffocating several weeks that suddenly ended one afternoon when I was told that we had finally reached our destination.

There was a lot of bickering and complaining from the officials as I was pushed out of the carriage and took the first steps in my new domain. I stood in what I was told was the center of it, and one of the officials explained that everything as far as the eye could see was mine.

The official pointed at neat grassy plains ahead of us, then gestured around at...more of the same thing. No matter where I looked, I saw the wide grassy plains, sweeping grassy plains, and expansive grassy plains that were my domain.

It was a far cry from anything I had imagined when I had been told that I would receive land. It was so different from what I expected that I could do

nothing more than dumbly stare at it all. The official gazed at me with a wicked smile as he spoke.

“I must say, it’s a fitting fiefdom for an orphan joining the ranks of the upper class. Give the job your best. These plains are called Nezrose. Your name is Dias, yes? Well, henceforth, you shall be known as Dias Nezrose.”

With that said, he hopped back into the carriage and left me all alone...standing in the middle of grassy plains that stretched farther the longer I looked.

I saw no sign of any of the subjects that I had been told about. To make matters worse, there was no house for me to live in either. When I realized that I still hadn’t eaten, it dawned on me that I would also have to consider what to do about food, and though I took another look around, I saw nothing edible.

The only things I had been able to bring with me were my beloved double-sided battle-ax, the clothes on my back, my worn-out boots, and my battle-worn armor.

I didn’t have a single thing to eat.

This was how life in my domain of endless grassy plains began—with no subjects, no house, and no food.

A Spring Day on the Grassy Plains

My life on the grassy plains had kicked off, and my first task was to work out my list of priorities. I knew that at the top of that list were securing water and food, and finding a place to live. No matter what I planned to do from here on out, the first order of business was to survive.

There was only one way to do that: find fresh water, find a source of food, and then find a suitable place to live, like...a cave, or the shade of a tree or something.

In any case, with my immediate goals set, I picked a direction and took off walking. It seemed that luck was on my side, because it wasn't long before I found a stream. It was so clear and clean that I could see straight through to the riverbed. I was so happy that I couldn't stifle a cry of joy. After years of drinking muddy water in the midst of battle, clean water was, in and of itself, something to be grateful for.

Clean water also usually meant wildlife, so I was hopeful that I might have found a source of food too. I drank some of the water and stared into the stream. I was looking for a fish or something I might be able to eat, but unfortunately, I came up empty.

I knew I could have just hung around and kept looking for wildlife to hunt, but I decided that securing a place to live was just as important, so once again I was off.

I wanted somewhere I could sleep, perhaps not too far from edible plants. To that end, I walked and walked and...well, I just kept walking. I trudged on for a good long time, all over the place, using my own footsteps in the crushed grass as markers so I didn't get lost.

I walked and I walked, and I came to understand something on a very deep level.

My domain was nothing but grass.

No matter where I walked, grassy plains stretched out as far as the eye could see. In every direction, I saw grass, grass, and more grass. I knew that hoping for a cave of some sort was always going to come down to a matter of luck, but I couldn't believe that there wasn't even a single tree around. With trees, you could make houses, and even when you couldn't build a whole house, you could at least make yourself a cover from the rain.

Before I knew it, it was already late afternoon. Since I didn't have anywhere else to go, I headed back to the river. Once there, I drank my fill of water to replenish myself after all the walking, then sat down to rest and stared out at the grass rustling in the breeze.

The more I stared at the grass, the more I became aware of the sheer amount of it. I couldn't help wondering if it would come in handy for something. As an experiment, I tore some of it from the ground and ate it.

Yep, tastes awful.

The grass went up to about my knees, and it was so soft that it was easy to tear up—certainly too fragile for making handicrafts. I let out a long, deep sigh.

All I've got is an ocean of useless grass that I don't even know what to do with.

I sat there so long that the sun set and darkness began to envelop the plains. It got so dark I could barely see a few steps in front of me, which meant that any further exploration was out of the question. I took off my armor—it was too clunky to sleep in—threw it by my side, and lay down on the grass.

Tomorrow I'd get back to my plan of action, but for now, I decided to sleep. I didn't *know* what I'd be doing when the sun came up, but I'd do the best I could, and if the situation didn't get any brighter, then I'd have to consider fleeing the domain. I'd probably make a lot of people mad, but I wasn't going to just die out here to keep those people happy.

Okay, two more days. I'll stick with it for two more days. If I can't find anything out here by then, I'll follow the carriage tracks back to the nearest village and look for some kind of work that's useful to people.

Thinking about it like that made me feel better about the whole thing. At least I'd still be living up to my parents' words. My heart felt lighter, and my eyelids

grew heavier. I shifted on the grass a few times to get comfortable and then, wrapped in the scent of the plains, I drifted off to the land of dreams.

I felt like I heard a voice. It was saying the same thing over and over again, like a shrill ringing by my side. A part of me wondered if whoever was talking was trying to tell me something.

Wake up!

Who are you?

The voice was loud. At first I couldn't stop thinking about how annoyingly loud it was, but then I thought about the words themselves, and...my still-slumbering brain realized that someone was *actually* telling me to wake up.

I could tell it was morning by the feel of the sunlight against my eyelids. I guessed that the voice was telling me to wake up because it was already morning, but I was still sleepy, and I didn't really want to get up. I turned away and settled myself in for another journey to the land of dreams.

But just as I was wondering what kind of dream I would have as I drifted away, I felt a shock through my back. It was like someone had kicked me. The impact ran through my body with a jolt, and it hit me so hard that I leaped to my feet.

Startled, I spun around, ready to swing at the person who had kicked me. I tried to wake myself up as I searched for the culprit through my hazy vision. As the world came into focus, I found them and started to take in exactly who they were. However, I was so surprised by the sight of them that I couldn't say a word.

The person who had kicked me was a young girl. Her face was decorated in a red paint that brought flames to mind, and she was dressed in strange cloth. The clothing didn't leave very much to the imagination, and my eyes were at first drawn to her tanned skin, but I was quickly taken by something else entirely: her forehead.

The girl had a blue horn protruding from it.

I stared at it as it glowed blue in the light, and it was as though I had

completely forgotten how to speak.

“Who the heck are you and what the heck are you doing here?!”

As I stood without responding, this was the question the girl aimed at me, along with a glare, her eyes as red as fire. Her silver hair shook with her every word, and the jewels braided into it echoed as they collided. It was a most beautiful sound.

“Don’t just stand there; answer me!”

Her voice was high and sharp, and filled with an enmity I could feel prickling my skin, but I was at least relieved by the fact that she still hadn’t reached for the bow on her back. And if she was here on what appeared to be friendly terms, then it was only fair of me to answer her question.

“Oh,” I finally uttered. “I am called Dias. As for what I’m doing here, well, as you saw for yourself, I was sleeping.”

“Why were you sleeping here?!”

“Because I didn’t have anywhere else to sleep. I took a drink from the river, sat down to rest, and then I got sleepy, so I slept.”

“Are you a complete idiot or something? Or wait, is it some kind of illness? Is that why your eyes are blue like that?”

“Uh...it’s not an illness. As for the idiot part...well, I can’t really deny it. I’ve never been educated.”

“Then tell me why you came to these grasslands and what you plan to do now that you’re here.”

“I came here because I was brought here, and because I was told that I’d be living here from now on. My plans are, uh, well, now that I’ve found a river, I have to find a source of food, a place to live, and then avoid dying, I guess?”

“And let’s say you find yourself a place to live. What then?”

“What then? Hm... Now that you mention it, what do I want to do next? For starters, I’m going to live. I really don’t want to die. Hm? Er, hang on a sec, no need to reach for the bow! What do you mean ‘answer me seriously if you don’t want to get shot’? I’m being serious, I really am! All right...so I want to live

by the words my parents left me. I want to be useful to people, and I want to protect the weak.”

“Why aren’t you lying to me?”

“Huh? What do you mean? I’m not lying to you because I don’t have a reason to lie to you.”

“Are you an ally or an enemy? Which is it?”

What is up with this girl? All these questions that don’t make sense to me. What does she even want?

Every time I answered a question, the girl’s horn let out a blue light, but at the same time, her face grew sterner. I couldn’t make heads or tails of it. More importantly, that ally or enemy thing wasn’t something you ask someone you’d just met, was it? How was I even supposed to answer? I mean, I could safely state that I wasn’t her enemy, but that didn’t mean I could easily say I was her ally.

“I’m not sure I understand,” I told her. “Look, I don’t mean you any harm, so I’m not your enemy, I can assure you of that. But I don’t even know your name, and we’re literally meeting for the first time right now. How am I supposed to say I’m your ally? Isn’t that odd? Is it okay to say that I’m neither ally nor enemy?”

“No! Ally or enemy! Answer me clearly, right now!”

The girl’s eyebrows raised as she put a hand to her bow and glared at me. I didn’t know what she didn’t like about my answer, but I could tell she was losing her patience with me. I could have just played along and said that I was her ally, but I knew that this girl wasn’t going to be satisfied by some superficial response. In fact, that would only make it clear to her that I was definitely her enemy.

I knew I wasn’t a smart guy, but I didn’t want to make the girl any angrier, so I thought as hard as I could in search of the right answer.

Am I her ally or her enemy?

I pushed my brain to its limits and thought harder still...and then I arrived at a

realization. This was my domain, and this girl in front of me was standing on my land. That meant that she was one of the “subjects” that I’d been told about. The official had told me that the job of the domain lord was to protect their people. Now I was sure—I *could* tell the girl that I was indeed her ally.

It also made sense to me why she was reaching for her bow—if the domain lord couldn’t tell his own people that he was their ally, of course they’d be furious. As for the strange horn sprouting from her head and the light coming from it, I figured that was a problem I could ignore for the time being. What mattered was that she was my subject.

I looked the girl straight in the eyes, took the feelings of my own personal pledge to do my job to the best of my ability, and put them into words.

“I am your ally!” I answered. “And no matter the enemy, I will protect you!”

The girl’s eyes widened in shock at my reply, and a strong blue light shone from her horn. It was so bright I was forced to squint.

“Why? Why is this light so blue?!” exclaimed the girl, even though it was coming from her own person. “What is this powerful light?!”



For a little while, the girl said things like “It’s impossible” and “I don’t believe it,” but then she set her glare on me again. In response, I tilted my head—I didn’t know what she was even talking about or why she was glaring at me. The girl quickly took my arm and pulled me along behind her as she walked.

“W-Wait a second!” I stammered. “What is this? What’s wrong? Are you taking me somewhere?”

“I’m taking you to my village!” she said. “So shut up and follow me!”

She didn’t even glance back at me, instead dragging me along behind her as she marched through the fields, her legs rustling against the grass as she went.

Village? There’s a village? Here in these empty grasslands? But I spent all of yesterday walking pretty much the whole length of the place. How’d I miss an entire village?

I suddenly felt depressed about being so stupid, but eventually felt grateful that I’d stumbled into this girl. So I walked through the grasslands as the girl pulled me with her, and as the white cloth houses of her village standing side by side came into view, I wondered how in the world I had ever managed to overlook such a place.

At the Strange Village of Cloth Houses

“I’m taking you straight to the chieftain!” announced the girl, glaring at me again.

Apparently, when you entered a new land, it was customary to first greet that land’s chieftain, so I nodded along, glad that she had been so kind as to lead me. She took my hand in a stronger grip and tugged me harder.

The village was filled with round houses made from cloth, and the people of the village—all of them dressed similar to my guide, and with the same horns on their foreheads—looked at me as we marched towards a house in the center of the village. It was noticeably bigger than the others, and the girl pulled me right inside of it.

The space inside the house was a beautiful sight, unlike anything I had ever seen. There was a circular hole at the top of it—perhaps to let in the sunlight? From the hole, a wooden framework spread out radially, and the design made it look like an expression of the sun’s rays. It was truly exquisite.

The floor was covered in a beautiful carpet decorated in a unique design I’d never seen before. On top of that was handcrafted wooden furniture inlaid with patterned jewels. Now, I’d been surprised when I’d seen the lavish extravagance of the royal palace, but this might have outdone even *that*. I was speechless.

“It’s not like you to bring an outsider to the village, Alna... Is the man blue?”

I turned to the sound of a gravelly old woman’s voice, but found only a mess of cloth. It was uniquely embroidered and piled upon itself, and as I looked at it, I wondered, *Where did that voice come from?* I tilted my head, but as I did so, the heap of cloth shuffled, and from within it I saw an old woman with a horn in her forehead, watching me very closely.

I couldn’t believe that the heap of cloth was, in fact, a person, but she sat down on the carpet as the young girl—Alna, I assumed—replied.

“Yes. I caught him sleeping in the grasslands and I grilled him about why he’d come, but...his answers only confused me. I wasn’t sure what to do, so I asked him if he was our ally, and his answer resulted in a brilliant blue.”

“My oh my, a brilliant blue to such a question, you say? And there was no red?”

“Not a trace. His every answer was blue.”

Blue, red... What are these two talking about?

“Every answer? Now that *is* interesting. You, man of blue,” the old woman then addressed me. “Will you tell me your name?”

I wasn’t sure what to make of what she called me, and I was taken aback by the sudden question, but I managed to stammer out an answer all the same.

“Huh? Oh, uh, my name is Dias.”

“Dias. It has such an odd ring to it. It would seem that you are Alna’s ally, Dias. Are you mine too?”

Hm? Well, I mean all these villagers are my subjects, so the answer to that is obvious.

“Of course. I am an ally to all who reside in this village.”

“Oh? Is that so? And why is that?”

“Because it is my job.”

“And who was it who ordered you to carry out this work?”

“Er...the king.”

The moment I uttered the words, the old woman’s horn glimmered brightly and her eyes widened in disbelief. At the exact same time, Alna leaped to her feet and aimed her bow at me.

Did I just put my foot in it?

The air in the cloth house grew abruptly and terribly tense, and I wondered for a moment if I should reach for my own weapon...but was shocked to realize that I’d left my battle-ax on the plains when Alna dragged me to the village. Now, I wasn’t usually one to go leaving my weapon lying around, but I’d just

woken up to a sudden meeting with a horned maiden, and as a result, well, I'd really screwed up.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Alna," said the old woman. "We're not done talking yet. Dias, I'd like to hear more about your job. Yes, there's an idea. Would you tell me why the king ordered you to do this job? And please, start from the beginning."

The old woman spoke in a calm and even tone, but Alna's gaze was razor-sharp. So while I kept one eye on the bow Alna had trained on me, I did as the old woman asked and told her how I'd come to meet with the king. Still, I didn't know exactly what she meant by "start from the beginning," so I really did start at the beginning—from as far back as I could remember, right up until the present.

"Well then... Yes, I get it now," said the old woman when I was done. "But what a surprise that you've been blue through it all. It would seem even the hornless are capable of such a thing."

There it is again—the word "blue." What does it mean to these people?

Alna felt the old woman relax, and she lowered her bow. On top of that, her eyes softened and she took to simply watching me. The old woman looked at her and then, after a moment's thought, she turned back to me.

"Blue Dias, I now understand that you are a worthy lord ready to defend his subjects with everything he has," she said slowly. "So what I would like to ask is this: if we are *not* your subjects, how will you treat us?"

"If you're *not* my subjects? Well, I guess I wouldn't do anything. I mean, if the subjects I finally found turned out *not* to be my subjects, then I'd be a bit out of sorts, but that's it, I'd say."

"So you would be our ally even if we weren't your subjects?"

"Hm? Even if you... I mean, even then we'd still be living on the same plains, wouldn't we? If you were in trouble I'd help you out, so yeah, I'd be your ally."

As I spoke, I saw the old woman nod as if she were confirming something, and her horn glowed blue. But why was she even asking me that question? Why on earth would she ask me about situations in which she and her village weren't

my subjects?

Hm?

Huh?

Wait, are these villagers not my subjects?

But that can't be right, can it? The official told me that this land was my domain, and that means the people living here are my subjects.

"I judge by your expression that it is starting to dawn on you," said the old woman. "It is true—we are not your subjects. If anything, we are in fact enemies of your king. For many long years, we have fought against your nation."

The woman spoke her words in a clear and definitive tone. I felt like I was going to slump over on the floor. The people I'd thought were my subjects weren't my subjects at all. In fact, they were my enemies, which meant that right now, I was in the middle of enemy territory. And worst of all, I was there without my weapon *or* my armor.

My head sank as the reality of my predicament hit me in the face, but for whatever reason, the old woman looked at me with a kindly smile.

"Blue Dias," she started again, "while it is true that we are an enemy of your king, that does not mean that we are *your* enemy. You are blue. A very rare blue. That blue means that we can get along very well. So please, I ask that you raise your head and listen to my story."

I lifted my head slowly and looked at the old woman. In that moment, the wrinkles that covered her face stretched softly and kindly, until she was smiling at me the way I once remembered my mother smiling.

"Firstly, let me introduce myself. My name is Moll, and I am the onikin chieftain. We onikin have fought against the kingdom—your nation—for control of the grasslands over many long years. We engaged in many battles, and nearly as many wars, and these conflicts raged on. However, the onikin lost significantly fifty years ago. We lost a great many of our people and we were forced to flee. That is how the kingdom took control of this land."

Though she had smiled at me earlier, Moll's expression was stern as she spoke of her people's history. Her eyes wavered as fifty-year-old memories resurfaced in her mind—the loss of the war weighed heavily upon her. I sat up straight as I listened to her story, then I asked the first question that came to mind.

"If you were forced to flee the grasslands fifty years ago, then...how are you still able to live here now?"

"That is simple," replied Moll. "Some two or three months after we lost the war, we secretly returned."

"And the kingdom hasn't noticed you since?"

"The answer to that," said Moll, pointing at her horn, "is this."

Just what are those horns all about, anyway?

"These horns are capable of storing magic," explained the chieftain, "and through that we can access power impossible for the hornless. One such magic is concealment, which we have used for the last fifty years to continue running and hiding from the kingdom."

"That is...simply astounding," I said. "But is it okay to tell me all of this? I came from the kingdom, after all."

"But you are blue. If you were not, I would tell you nothing. What's with that look on your face? Oh, am I right to assume that you still do not understand the meaning of 'blue'? You're so slow on the uptake I can scarcely believe it. One more magic we horned have access to is called soul appraisal. When we are faced with a presence that means us harm or enmity, we can read their threat through the color of the light our horns emit and the strength of that color."

"Oh, I see. So blue indicates that I mean you no harm? But even then, telling me such secrets seems very careless."

Moll's lips curled into a grin.

"When someone means us no harm, our horns glow *white*," she clarified. "Blue, you see, is a light that comes only from someone who will bring us good fortune—the extent of which is determined by the strength of that blue. If you

held any enmity towards us whatsoever, or if you lied about anything, then your blue would have muddied and begun to turn red. But that did not happen even once—something I suppose we can attribute to your past. You have no desire to do anything save for blindly and foolishly living by the words of your deceased parents. It is a remarkable feat when one can do so to the age that you are now.”

“Should I...take that as a compliment?”

“What are you talking about? Of course I am complimenting you! I’ve lived a long life, I’ll have you know, and I’ve never met an idiot quite like you, no, I certainly have not.”

Moll cackled with laughter, but I still didn’t feel like she was complimenting me.

“In short, we are very fortunate to have a fool like you as the new lord of the plains. You appear to have no ties to the kingdom’s nobility, and you bear no ill will towards us onikin. Above all, you’re more than happy to treat us as your neighbors. We’re thankful. You see, there is only so far that our concealment magic will get us, and there is no way for us to expand while we are hidden.”

“Huh... But why are you so insistent on these grasslands?” I asked. “Why not just expand somewhere far from here, away from the reach of the kingdom?”

“A home is not an easy thing to abandon. That, and the baars we raise—the livestock upon which our lives are built—eat a lot of grass. There are not many places with such soft grass in such vast quantities, which makes this a difficult place to simply leave.”

“Well, I have no problem with the onikin people, nor do I mind you living on the plains. Expand your village as you wish. The officials told me only that I am to protect my subjects and raise money. Though admittedly, I still have yet to find even a single subject.”

If the onikin had gone to such trouble to live here, and if that was a sign of how much they valued the place, then I was fine with them being here. When I said as much to Moll, her face twisted in surprise.

“Hah...” she sighed. “You really *are* a fool! Did you not think to make any sort

of bargain? To set any conditions? Oh, you are truly helpless! You have no home and no food, yes? In which case, we will prepare these things for you and provide you with some livestock. In return, we ask that you overlook our presence no matter what the nobility tells you. By overlook, I mean that you speak not a word of us to any of the kingdom's people. Not even the king himself. We want you to gather your subjects and become a fine and respectable lord. If we lose you, we'll likely end up with another useless idiot like the one who came before you."

"I'll of course see to my job as lord dutifully, and I was intending to let you stay anyway, so saying nothing is fine by me. But, wait, are you telling me there was a lord here before me?"

"There was. They had a house somewhere else, and that was where they lived. They would occasionally come to visit, but safe to say they were a vulgar, stupid sort."

I noticed a gloom in Moll's face, and it told me the previous lord likely was just as bad as she said. A tension even ran through Alna's face when the previous lord was mentioned, and I had to wonder, what did they *do*?

But however curious I was, it seemed far better not to ask.

"Enough about past lords," Moll continued. "Let us talk about the present and the future. As I said, we will give you a home. It will be smaller than this one, but...ah, yes, we will have it built near the river where Alna found you. We will also prepare for you a change of clothes and some everyday tools and items. As for food, we'll provide you with a week's worth of jerky. Then a pair of baars and...I will lend you Alna as your caretaker. The two of you will live together until you are accustomed to life on the grasslands."

I was stunned into silence by the chieftain's words, but Alna was about ten times more shocked. I could see it on her face and the trembling through her body.

"You do not know how to care for livestock, do you, Dias? Your house will also need to be looked after once it is built. There is much you will have to remember, including how to handle wild animals and how to survive without falling ill. Alna will teach you. Alna, I assume you are fine with the decision, yes?"

You are the one who brought an outsider into the village, so you will take responsibility for him.”

Alna’s eyes twitched and she was about to make a retort, but one look from Moll silenced her completely, and she reluctantly nodded.

“Then we are done,” said Moll. “Well then, my lord, let us work towards a bright future together.”

Our discussion had come to a close, and I acquired that which I had set out to find: a place to live and a source of food. I hadn’t expected to end up living with Alna, but I had heard that people in positions of authority were known to employ secretaries and maids and other sorts of help. I’d seen a lot of maids in the royal palace, so I decided I’d accept Alna in the same way. However, she wasn’t much like the maids I knew of. She was a little rougher and wilder. Nonetheless, I convinced myself that it wasn’t necessarily a bad thing.

By the River

After talking with Moll, Alna and I returned to the spot by the river where Alna had woken me up. Three onikin men were already there when we arrived, preparing to set up a cloth house—a “yurt,” they called it. They worked quickly.

First, they cut down the grass where they were going to place the yurt, then laid down a cloth flooring and put up the framework that would become its walls. At the same time, the section that would become the roof of the yurt—complete with pillars meeting at the skylight—was built on top of that framework.

Once this was complete, the roof was placed firmly atop the wall framing, and all of it was covered in a white outer cloth while the finer details were finished up.

“They’re so quick,” I remarked. “I thought they were just getting started, but it’s practically a home already.”

“Easy to put up, easy to take down, and easy to carry—that’s what makes a yurt special, and that’s why we use them,” said Alna, my new caretaker. “When we run into a threat that we can’t escape with concealment, we take down the yurts and we move the whole village.”

I could tell that Alna wasn’t a big fan of her new duties, but she was at least willing to teach me the law of the land, and even in the short time since I’d talked to Moll, she’d already taught me a lot. She told me it was easy to get sick out on the plains and that I should wash daily to clean away any possible ailments before they settled; that I should shave every day because nasty stuff got into beards; that I should keep my nails clean; that I should wash my clothes every day; and all sorts of other tips.

Alna was most enthusiastic when it came to the topic of baars, the livestock Moll said she’d provide me with. Baars were fluffy animals covered in white wool, with two curled horns sprouting from their heads. Alna told me that Moll wasn’t exaggerating when she said that they were essential to onikin life.

However, baars weren't raised for their meat. They were raised for their *wool*. Baar wool was durable and water resistant, and these qualities were improved when the wool was woven into cloth. It was a high-quality material that felt wonderful to the touch.

Baar wool was used for the exterior cloth of yurts, bedding, and the onikin's clothing and underwear. The material played a big part in supporting their way of life, but it was also an important source of income, as it was sold to traveling merchants.

When I heard this, I asked Alna if merchants visited from the kingdom, but she replied with only silence. I knew then that she wasn't going to open up about any merchants who visited anytime soon. I wondered if perhaps it was a merchant from a foreign country. Not that I had much to say about it either way.

Once they'd finished the yurt, the onikin men planned to build a livestock pen for me. After that, a pair of baars would be sent from the village, but this was going to take a little while—Moll planned to choose a healthy pair of young baars, and I couldn't have been more grateful. Not only was she giving me some of their precious livestock, she was going to make sure they were healthy too.

The more a baar ate, the more wool it grew. If I sheared this wool and took it to the village, they'd supply me with food and other essentials. I was told I could process the baar wool myself, but I was clueless when it came to that kind of thing. However, I did know that more wool meant more food, so I wanted to take really good care of my baars and ideally grow their number.

Apparently, wild baars appeared on the plains from time to time, and it was okay to catch them when you found them. More baars meant better wool production and better chances for them to mate, so I was ready to sprint after one if I saw one.

My basic plan was a bit on the slow side of things, but at least it was set: get myself some more baars and live a good life out on the plains. Moll and the onikin were treating me really well so far, and I had to make sure I did my part in return. That meant settling in, making my domain bountiful and plentiful, increasing my subjects, and...

Hm?

Wait a sec. Increasing my subjects? How exactly do I grow my domain's population anyway?

"By the way, Alna," I said, "I was wondering, do you know how I could increase the population around here?"

"How the heck would I know?" replied an irked Alna. "All I can tell you is that it's not going to be as simple as it is with the baars."

Yeah, how is she supposed to know?

I'd thought Alna was one of my subjects when I first met her, but nope, none of the onikin were my subjects.

Which means my domain's population is still a big, fat zero.

Alna saying it wasn't going to be like the baars was probably her way of saying that the onikin weren't going to donate any subjects. Naturally, I wasn't going to find any roaming around in the wild either.

So what am I supposed to do? It's not like my subjects are just going to sprout from the ground.

I spent some time thinking about it and racking my brain, but I couldn't make heads or tails of how I was going to increase the population. Perhaps if I'd been better educated I might have had some ideas, but there weren't any ideas—or much of anything, really—floating around inside of my head.

How do the other domain lords do it? All I know is farming and fighting.

In response to my anxious moaning, Alna's eyes formed into slits and she glared at me.

"Look at you, sitting there moaning. Pitiful," she said.

"I'm sorry, but I'm doing the best I can. I can't start anything if I don't have subjects, but I don't even know where to start."

"You keep throwing that word 'subjects' around, but think about it for a second: what would you even do if you had some? You've got one yurt and

enough jerky for one person. Did you even consider that? You get yourself some subjects and all they've got to look forward to is death by starvation or illness."

"Wait! So you mean that if I increase my population, the onikin tribe won't provide for them?"

"Don't be stupid! There are limits to our generosity, you hear?"

"Right, of course. I'm sorry; forget I said anything. Well, I guess that means I need to focus on food and housing before population. Trading baar wool won't secure me enough food for a group."

I was back to square one, with no good ideas whatsoever, and I let out another moan. The house and food I had now were all thanks to the goodness of Moll's heart—how was I supposed to secure that for my potential subjects? People, homes, food. There was so much I had to think about, and it was all getting tangled up in my mind.

There was no way I was going to arrive at an answer while I was so confused, but as the lord of the lands, I had to find an answer. So I thought, and I kept thinking, and then I started to feel a fever coming on.

Is this the dreaded brain fever I've heard about?

I felt like steam was going to start pouring from my ears and my brain would boil. As I sat there waiting for my brain to melt, Alna let out a sigh.

"I wouldn't want to be subject to someone so stupid in a million years. Hey, your loony lordship, catch."

Alna passed me a leather sack about the size of my fist. It was full of powder of some kind.

"That's matani dust. Use it."

"Matani dust? What's that?"

"It's crushed grass with a scent that wild beasts love. Spread it around and the aroma will draw the animals."

"Wow, I didn't know a grass like that existed. But, uh, what happens after the animals are drawn to the dust?"

“How about using that brain of yours to think about it, your loony lordship? Hunt some wild game and you’ve got yourself some food, no? Get yourself some hides and horns, and you can put them to use too. Take what you don’t need to the village, and if you have enough materials, you can trade them for another yurt. If you’re just going to stand there like an idiot then you may as well get out there and do something manly like hunting. At least start laying the groundwork for your future subjects.”

“Wow! That’s a good idea! I’m good at hunting!” I exclaimed. “I don’t even have to think when I do that! Great! I’m going hunting! Right this instant! Um, do you mind looking after the yurt and waiting for the baars?”

“Nope. That’s what I’m here for, more or less. And I wouldn’t leave sensitive baars in a dolt’s care anyway. But let me say this clearly: get far, *far* away from this place before you throw that dust around. We don’t want any wild beasts causing trouble around the yurt. Head downwind until you can’t even see this yurt anymore, *then* use the dust.”

I nodded brightly, then took my axe in hand and ran downwind. Running thoughtlessly through the fields helped to cool my simmering brain and clear my foggy mind.

Maybe I’ll think up a good plan for recruiting subjects while I hunt! Nothing quite like exercise and moving the body!

The Endless Grassy Plains

I continued on my way through the plains until I was sure I'd put a good distance between myself and the yurt, and then I undid the string that was tied around the leather bag of matani dust. It was full of a fine brown powder, and it had a sharp, unique scent that wasn't like any grass I knew.

So if I spread this around, then I draw in wild beasts. But uh, how much of it do I use? Alna never said anything about the amount. Guess I'll just use all of it?

My first thought was to spread the dust around by my feet, but I didn't think that would do the job. I wanted a lot of wild beasts, and I figured that meant launching the bag. If I did that, the powder would be carried far and wide on the breeze.

And that's exactly what I want.

So, with the leather bag still open, I waited until the wind picked up speed and then pitched the bag into the sky. It went exactly the way I hoped: most of the dust was taken on the wind and flew through the air. Any that didn't came straight back to the ground along with the bag and got all in my hair, but I figured it was still a job well done.

All that was left now was to wait for the animals to come running, then hunt them.

Hm... How many wild animals do I have to hunt for a yurt, I wonder? Surely one wouldn't be enough. Maybe five? No, probably ten, I'd say. That means for, uh, ten yurts, I'll have to hunt a hundred wild animals.

There was no way I was going to be hunting a hundred wild beasts in a single day, so I'd have to spread it over a number of hunting trips. Fortunately, I didn't mind hunting for days at a time, so I'd just keep going until I had enough for the yurts I needed.



While I was thinking about this, I realized that the matani dust must have done its job, because I heard a rumbling from the distance. I looked towards the noise and saw a herd of black shapes drawing closer. I wondered what kind of beasts I was looking at. Whatever they were, they certainly made a racket with their running, and it sure looked like there were a lot of them.

That's not just ten or twenty; that's way more! Just how many of them are there?!

The bull-like beasts were covered in black hides, with two horns sprouting from their heads. There were more than I could count at a glance, but more importantly: where in the world did they even come from?

Man, that matani dust sure is something. If I can hunt this whole pack though, then maybe I'll hit my first goal in one fell swoop!

I felt the enthusiasm swell inside me as I lifted my axe up and readied for the hunt. The beasts were coming straight for me, and the distance between us closed in just moments.

The hunt had begun!

I raised my axe and I swung it, over and over, and over and over. With each swing of my axe, I felled yet another of the rampaging wild animals. That was how I fought—I left everything to brute strength and instincts, and swung. Nothing more, nothing less.

As a new recruit for the war, I was pulled aside one day and told to train. An instructor taught me how to use a variety of weapons—swords, spears, and bows among them—but none of them really felt like they fit me, and in the end I settled on the battle-ax.

The axe was far less complicated than all the other weapons—no need to aim for weak points, and no need to look for gaps in the enemy's armor. I wasn't cut out for reading my opponent's movements and working out tactics to defeat them. I was far too simple for such things.

But the wonderful thing about the battle-ax was that I didn't have to think. I just had to set my sights on an enemy and swing. If there was a shield in my

way, then I took out the shield, and if there was armor in the way, then I pulverized that too. I didn't think there was any weapon quite as wonderful as the battle-ax.

That instructor told me that I was racing to my death with the way I fought, but me and my battle-ax survived the battlefield that day. And after I'd made a small name for myself in war, I didn't hear anyone complaining about my fighting style. Either everyone recognized it for what it was, or they just didn't think it was worth it. In hindsight, I think it might have been the latter...

In all honesty, my approach to fighting *did* have a glaring weakness. See, I was so rough with my axe that I ran the risk of breaking it completely during battle. And make no mistake, nobody's taking out an armored enemy with their bare hands. I'd broken my axe and almost died more times than I could remember.

However, I'd overcome that particular weakness when I acquired an axe I could truly call my own. I'd earned it in battle when I defeated a soldier from another country—a "shogun" or some such, I think he was called—and, well, it's durable beyond belief. I can swing it with everything I've got and crush my enemies and it doesn't break or shatter. Better yet, it's got a real strange power: whenever it gets fractured or chipped, the axe repairs itself over time.

The truth is, after I beat up that shogun or whatever he was called, I'd only picked up his battle-ax because I liked the lion design on it. I had never imagined it would have strange powers to boot. The first time I saw the axe repair itself, I really thought I was dreaming. I even slapped myself on the cheek and told myself to wake up.

In any case, that's the story of how I overcame the weakness in my fighting style. As soon as I knew that I wasn't going to break my weapon in the middle of combat, I swung it with even more ferocity than before. In time, everyone came to praise me for my war efforts.

That's what I was reminiscing about as I swung my battle-ax at all the wild beasts, and when I took a look around, I saw that I'd taken down about half of them. The bulls were simple creatures with only very basic attacks, so it was easy for me to get lost in my own thoughts.

Just as I was wondering how best to approach the rest of the herd, they took a look at the impromptu graveyard around me and began to back away. I could see right away that chasing them down one by one and hunting them was going to be a world of trouble, so I relaxed my stance and lowered my axe, at which point the wild beasts turned tail and fled.

As I watched them disappear over the horizon, a thought dawned on me. I'd just hunted a whole heap of wild beasts—which was a good thing—and I'd be able to trade them for yurts and food—which was also a good thing—but given how many of them there were...

How was I going to take them all back to my yurt?

I looked around at the wild beasts strewn across the plains, still more than I could count, and it occurred to me that I didn't have any easy way to transport them. Going back and forth carrying them one at a time, well, that was going to take forever.

I put my thinking cap on and I thought about it but, as expected, I didn't come up with any good ideas. That meant I'd have to go back and ask Alna for her advice. Keeping that in mind, I picked up one of the slaughtered beasts and hefted it on my back as proof of my success, and I started the walk back to my new yurt.

At the Newly Constructed Yurt

I didn't even think about how to carry the beasts back to the yurt. I just went wild on them. I wonder if Alna's going to call me "your loony lordship" again.

Whenever Alna talked to me that way, her eyes and her voice were both ice-cold, and I could barely take the pressure. I was thinking about how to handle it as my yurt and my new livestock pen came into view. Alna was standing outside and she saw me carrying a beast on my back. Oddly enough, she actually looked happy when she ran over to me.

"Look at you!" she cried gleefully. "Out on your first hunt and you killed yourself a black ghee! Very manly."

"Huh? Oh," I replied, "so this is called a black ghee? Uh, actually, about that... I hunted more than just this one. I scattered the matani dust and it brought a whole herd over. I hunted about half of them, but I, uh, I actually hunted so many that I couldn't carry them all on my own. I don't suppose you have any good ideas?"

"Half a herd? How many is that?" Alna asked.

"Oh, uh, thirty or forty, maybe? Definitely not a hundred."

"*That* many?! Thirty is incredible! That's amazing! I can't believe you're capable of such manly feats!"

Alna was in very high spirits for some reason, which left me confused. She was like an entirely different person. I couldn't work out why.

And what does she mean by manly feats?

Alna looked at me, then at the black ghee on my shoulders, and her face filled with a smile. It left me just as perplexed as I was about her attitude. I was about to ask her about it, but then Moll arrived at our yurt with the two baars she'd promised. She looked straight at the black ghee and her wrinkly face formed a smile.

“My oh my, you hunted a black ghee?” she asked. “You’re more capable than you look! And already showcasing your manliness.”

“Chieftain!” said Alna excitedly. “It wasn’t just this ghee he caught! He says he hunted thirty or forty!”

The both of them were now in very high spirits.

“Really! That’s quite the accomplishment! Look at all that manliness he’s displaying on just his first day!”

“You said it! I’ve never seen something so manly! Chieftain, I’m going to call some villagers to help carry all the black ghee that he—I mean, that *Dias* hunted! We’ll want to get them back by sundown!”

And with that, Alna dashed off towards the village.

Moll told me she was going to put the baars in the livestock pen and left me standing where I was with my ghee, trying to work out what was going on.

Why is Alna so happy all of a sudden? She really called me by my name just now. And why do they keep throwing around the word “manly” like that? It feels like they use it differently from the way I’m used to.

Their conversation made no sense to me otherwise. What did “manliness” mean to the onikin? I simply couldn’t make any sense of it.

Anyway, while I was standing there, still confused, Moll emerged from the livestock pen and walked over to me on her cane, which she used to poke my battle-ax, still dirty with ghee blood.

“Amazing work. I know you said you’d participated in the war, but you really *are* strong, aren’t you?” she remarked. “Hunting thirty ghee in a single trip is *very* manly.”

“Er...Moll? Why do you keep saying ‘manly’ so much? You and Alna keep using that word, but it sounds different from the way I’m used to hearing it.”

“Manliness is manliness, however you want to put it,” Moll answered matter-of-factly. “It’s a man’s worth, his ability to work, and his competence—all of it is his manliness.”

“Hardworking and competent, huh? Wait, but even if I *am* manly, why was

Alna in such high spirits about it?”

“You dolt. She’s a good woman who has come of age, you realize? It’s only natural that she’s going to be impressed by your feats of manliness. And it’s not just her. All the women in the village are the same. And if I were younger, I wouldn’t have just sat back either.”

“Are you saying that...manliness makes one popular with women? Is that what you mean?”

“What else would I mean? Manliness is everything to a woman, is it not?”

“Wait, but there’s a man’s looks, his ability to talk—I mean, there’s a lot besides just competence, isn’t there?”

“Huh? What are you even talking about? What good is a handsome face? Does it fill a stomach? Does conversation help you increase your baar livestock? When a woman marries an unmanly man, she risks not just her own starvation, but the starvation of her children too. That is why manliness is everything. Nothing else is of any value. Beautiful faces are only good for women.”

I see... I guess when you’re a different race and you live in a different place, your sense of value and expectations are different too. But even then, placing the entirety of a man’s worth on his competence?

It struck me then that I should ask Moll to teach me more about the onikin ways and how they differed from my own. I was going to be living with them for a while, and I didn’t want to cause any trouble I could otherwise avoid.

I let out a low moan as I mulled over the idea, but Moll seemed to get the wrong idea and shot me a grin.

“By the way, if you want Alna’s hand in marriage, consider this: she’s a pretty one, and she’s a hard worker too. You’ll need thirty black ghee, or around twenty young baars. I know you can hunt that number pretty easily, but just know that if you want to put your hands on her, there’s an order to things.”

“Huh... What?! I can marry Alna for *just* thirty ghee? Are you for real? Are we talking about trafficking here?!”

“Are you daft? There’s no trafficking about it. It’s a betrothal gift. For a

wedding! Do they not have such a custom in the kingdom? Show the appropriate manliness and you'll win a woman's hand in marriage with ease—Alna's included. The right betrothal gift forms the basis of a marriage, and no woman would utter a single complaint about it. In my case, because I was the prettiest and hardest-working woman in the village, my husband brought me forty baars of fine quality. Why, it was such an act of manliness that I shed tears of joy at the sight of them all."

Wow, the onikin view of marriage is really intimidating. And fundamentally different from the way the kingdom does things. All the same, I should be focused more on expanding the population. I can save marriage for later.

But if I was to marry Alna, what kind of a life would be waiting for me then?

"Why the serious look all of a sudden?" asked Moll. "Aha, I see. Worried about your future kin, yes? Worry not! The horned and the hornless are more than capable of reproducing together."

"Whoa! No! That was *not* what I was worried about!"

Unfortunately, my strong rebuttal didn't even seem to reach the chieftain's ears, and she jumped straight into talking about married life between the horned and hornless, and what it meant to raise children. While I listened to Moll go on, I thought of the different values of the onikin people, Alna's quick shift in attitude, and all these new and unexpected worries that were quickly giving me a headache.

The Following Day, Inside the Yurt

I awoke to the rumbling of my stomach as a delicious scent wafted through the yurt.

Ah, that's right, I'm in a yurt. And judging by the light through the hole in the roof, it's morning. But wow, my bed is incredibly soft. Ah, so this is what a baar wool bed feels like.

And my axe? Oh, it's next to my bed.

Speaking of which, how did I get into bed?

My memories were still hazy and unclear. I wiped the sleep from my eyes and tried to put my memories in order.

Alna had come back to our yurt with several villagers in tow, and after I gave them a rough idea of where the rest of the black ghee carcasses were, they headed off. While Alna and the others were gone, Moll had given me a crash course in baar care. I named the male baar Francis and the female Francoise.

Alna returned while I was petting the two baars and refilling their water tray. The villagers couldn't believe how many black ghee there were, and they were skeptical that I'd hunted them all myself. I was again surprised by how kind Alna was to me, but I didn't have much time to think about it. The villagers were carrying the ghee, Moll and Alna were counting them up, and then there was a discussion about the yurts and supplies they'd trade for. When that was finally done, Moll returned to the onikin village, and Alna and I sat down to eat.

Alna made a stew with the jerky I'd received and some potatoes she'd brought from the village. It was so delicious that I ate way too much of it. I felt so fat and satisfied afterwards that I started to doze off. I must have fallen asleep on the spot.

I had wondered for a moment who had carried me to bed after that, but there was only one answer. It had to have been Alna. And I assumed from the delicious scent in the air that she was up and preparing breakfast too.

Well, now I know what happened yesterday. Time to get up.

I sat up and looked around the yurt. I saw Alna cooking at a small stove, its smoke wafting up towards the hole in the yurt's ceiling. She looked like she was enjoying herself.

"Morning, Alna," I said.

"Morning, Dias!" she replied, still watching the pot on the stove carefully. "Breakfast won't be long. I just added some herbs, so I need to let it all simmer a little longer."

Alna told me that the herbs were medicinal and important for life on the plains; they warmed the body and helped to keep illness at bay. Today, she'd added them to the leftover stew from the previous day.

Once she was done explaining all of this to me, Alna returned to stirring the pot, humming to herself. After a few more minutes, it was ready.

"Let's eat it while it's hot," said Alna, ladling the stew into wooden bowls and putting them on a small foldable table.

In yurts, it was customary to sit and eat on cushions on the floor. That explained the small legs of the table we ate at—you didn't use chairs in yurts.

Alna and I sat across from each other and dug into the herb stew right away. I dipped my wooden spoon into my bowl and put some in my mouth, and boy, was it good! I'd assumed that the medicinal herbs would make it all bitter, but that wasn't the case at all—the aroma was invigorating, and there was an added spicy kick to it. The stew was frankly tastier than it had been yesterday.

"Alna," I started, "this is even better than the fresh stew you cooked last night!"

When I gave her my honest impressions, Alna was so happy that she blushed and fidgeted bashfully. "O-Oh, really? I didn't go to *that* much trouble...but thank you either way."

Her attitude and her expression were nothing like when we'd first met. She really seemed like a whole other person. Change was a truly powerful thing. Alna continued to fidget in place for a while until she noticed me watching her,

then she sat up straight and cleared her throat.

“Ahem. Anyway, Dias, when will you start your hunt today?” she asked.

“Hm? I received a lot of supplies thanks to yesterday’s hunt, so isn’t that enough?”

“Not if you intend to populate the lands with more people, no. First, you’ll need a well. If beasts start living upstream, they may dirty the water, which will lead to people getting sick. A well is an important source of clean drinking water. You’ll also need a privy. Excrement is another source of illness, so you’ll need a place where it can be properly disposed of. You’ll have to do more hunting so you can pay the village craftsmen to construct these things for you.”

“I see. I guess I’ll go ghee hunting then.”

“No, you’ve hunted enough of them already. Overhunting a single beast will only make things harder for everyone, so it’s best to hunt something else for a while. You’ve hunted monsters before, right? How about that?”

Monsters were horrible creatures that were never meant to be. Born from miasma whirlpools and filled with their noxious poisons, monsters crawled out from dungeons with a hatred for all living creatures outside of themselves. That hatred drove them to attack anything and everything indiscriminately.

Monster meat was filled with miasma, making it inedible and useless as food, but their hides, claws, horns, and the magical stones in their hearts could be put to use in a number of different ways.

“Monster hunting, huh? Not a bad idea,” I mused. “But are there any monsters in these parts?”

“There aren’t many, but they’re there if you look for them.”

“So we’re looking for monsters in the midst of these wide open grassy plains? That sounds like it’s going to take a really long time. Aren’t we better off just hunting black ghee?”

“You can leave the searching part to me—my search magic has us covered. If we go together we’ll find one in no time.”

“Together? But if we go out together then who’s going to keep an eye on

Francis and Francoise? Can we really just leave them here?"

"A couple of men should be visiting from the village any moment now. They'll be bringing over supplies to trade for the black ghee you hunted. We'll just leave the baars to them. Let's get ready so that when they come, we can head off *together*! Even a boring hunt is a lot of fun when you've got company!"

Alna's cheeks flushed red as she spoke.

"Oh, uh, sure..."

She put a lot of emphasis on the words "we" and "together," which made me wonder if it was okay to be alone with her. Alna, however, didn't notice any of my concern—she finished up her breakfast, then hurriedly began tidying and washing up all the utensils and cutlery so she could start getting ready.

Once everything was washed and the stove was put away, Alna gave me a toothbrush made of beast fur and a knife to use as a razor. Then she pushed me out of the yurt and told me to clean myself up at the river.

"You don't need to get ready by the river?" I asked as she pushed me outside.

But apparently, women needed to use different tools, and it took some time, so it was easier to do inside of the yurt. That was enough of a reason for me, so I headed on down to the river by myself. I brushed my teeth, and then I took to shaving, but it was a struggle. It wasn't easy using my reflection in the water. While I was still in the middle of it, a few onikin men arrived from the village with yurt and food supplies.

I wasn't sure whether I should go see them with my face half-shaven or if I should finish up first, but before I could make a decision, Alna came out of the yurt. She must have heard them coming.

When the onikin men saw Alna, they let out cheers that echoed over the plains, and when I saw her I couldn't help but let out a surprised cry of my own.

As for *why* we were all reacting this way, it was because Alna was a woman transformed with her makeup on. All the onikin people—men, women, young and old—usually wore the same makeup, which was a red face paint that made me think of flames. But that wasn't what Alna had on today. She'd washed away the face paint and colored the top of her eyelids bluish-red and her lips

scarlet.

As for why, well, even a dolt like me knew the answer to *that*.

Alna noticed my reaction, and she seemed very happy by my cry because she burst into a satisfied smile and nodded as if to say, “Impressed?” A moment later she ran over to the onikin men to greet them.

Alna told the men that she was going out for a while and asked them to take care of the baars while she was gone. They were so utterly transfixed that they said yes without thinking. It was only *after* they’d agreed that they snapped back to their senses. They tried to tell her that they had other stuff to do and that they didn’t have time, but Alna rejected their excuses outright, telling them to be men of their word.

The onikin men were left flabbergasted, and Alna gave them no more mercy than a light wave goodbye before heading over to me.

“I’m all good to go, Dias,” she said. “We can leave as soon as you’re ready. The men were all too happy to look after the baars while we’re gone, so I can spend *all day* with you!”

Alna was still beaming as she talked, but the onikin men were looking at me now. Even as they were charmed by Alna’s smile, I could feel the jealousy radiating from their eyes. As the subject of their jealousy, their looks were like pins shooting straight into me, and it was like I could read their minds.

“I ain’t never seen Alna like this.”

“Why would she pick you?”

“Outsider.”

“What have you done to my Alna?”

Now, I could understand how they felt. After all, with her new makeup Alna was breathtakingly beautiful, but that didn’t make it any easier for me to be on the other end of it. Alna, for her part, seemed entirely oblivious to the onikin men’s jealousy and continued to smile at me. I realized right away that we’d best move if I didn’t want the men getting any angrier with me.

So I hastily and messily finished shaving and returned to the yurt, where I put

on my armor and readied my trusty axe. Alna strapped her bow across her shoulder and put her quiver at her waist, and with our preparations done, we headed off and away from the burning gaze of the onikin men.

Heading North of the Grassy Plains

Alna said that if we headed north, we'd reach monster territory. There must have been a dungeon somewhere nearby, because monsters appeared there fairly often. The plan was to head in that direction, hunt a few monsters, and bring their materials back to trade for a well and a privy.

Alna ran ahead of me with a skip in her step, then spun around to look at me.

"I'm not just good at doing things around the home," said Alna. "I'm also good at magic, and that's going to handle the monster search for us!"

Her eyes sparked with a certain expectation, and I wasn't exactly sure how best to respond.

"That's quite something," I said.

Alna burst into another blinding smile and jumped around even more. To be honest though, I didn't really know what to make of Alna's recent change in attitude, and it gnawed at me.

I mean, I'm glad that we'll be able to get along well while we're living together, but...

Before I could finish the thought, Alna stopped. We'd arrived at our destination, and Alna drew an arrow and looked around. There was a great rocky mountain nearby, and a cold wind blew from it—that could have been why there was so little grass around the area. We certainly weren't in the plains anymore. It was much more like a desolate wasteland. A few stray strands of grass poked up from among the stone beneath our feet, but it was otherwise lifeless.

Jagged rocks were scattered all over the place, and it really felt like we were in monster territory now. We walked around for a time, finding nothing, and that's when Alna's eyes lit up. She turned to me and said it was time to put her magic to work.

I nodded and told her I was ready, and she nodded back happily before

walking a little ways from me. Then she closed her eyes and began to utter a chant of some kind. The first thing to respond was the horn from her forehead. Though it glowed blue when she used it on me before, it now began to emit a white light, which spread as if melting into the air.

Next, the jewels braided into Alna's hair began to glow. They emitted the same light as her horn as they floated, drifting around her as though pulling at her hair. The light from her horn and hair jewels continued to glow for a time, then suddenly swelled as a portion of it turned red, and all the light gathered around it.

The clump of red light formed into a sharp spear, which pointed to the north. Alna touched the light, stopped her chanting, and opened her eyes.

"I found one," she said, "and it's big. I think this monster might be the reason we haven't seen any smaller monsters around here. It's farther to the north, near the base of the mountain. Like I said, it's big, and that means it could be dangerous."

Gone was the bright and bubbly Alna from moments ago. Now there was tension running through her face.

"Dangerous, huh?" I clenched my battle-ax at the thought. "All right, I'll go check it out. Alna, you go hide somewhere while—"

"No, I'm going too," said Alna, cutting me off and leveling a strong gaze at me. "Did you forget? I can use concealment magic. If the monster is too much for us, we'll use that to cover our getaway."

Oh, that's right, she can use concealment. I'd completely forgotten because I can't use a shred of the stuff.

As long as Alna wasn't in danger, I didn't mind. "All right then. Let's go."

Alna nodded back, satisfied, and the two of us headed farther north, towards the rocky mountain where the monster was.

At the Base of the Rocky Mountain

Even from a distance, we could see that the monster at the base of the mountain was gigantic. We'd made our way here cautiously and quietly to avoid any surprise attacks, but now that we could see how big the monster was, I realized we never needed to worry about that at all. The monster was *huge*, with a long neck, four legs, and a rugged, craggy shell covering its body.

"It's a turtle...?"

The monster lumbered along slowly due to its sheer size, and no matter how you looked at it, its shell made you think of a turtle.

Then again, that long neck might not be very turtle-like. No, wait. Its head looks a lot like a turtle, yep.

The turtle looked like it was just wandering around, spaced out. It didn't look particularly smart. It was my first time seeing this type of monster, and I watched it closely, wondering if it was actually a threat. I tilted my head, still puzzled, then noticed Alna next to me. Her face had gone pale, and when she spoke I could hear her trembling.

"That's an earth dragon," she stammered. "Wh-What's an earth dragon doing here?"

Dragon? But aren't dragons those red creatures with wings that fly around and breathe fire? There's no two ways about it—what we're looking at is a turtle. It's all yellowy-brown in color too. Doesn't look much like a dragon to me.

Then again, Alna's worry looks very genuine. I don't think she's lying. Maybe dragon is the onikin word for turtle?

"Well, whether it's a turtle or a dragon, I'm still going to head down there and give it a good whack. Alna, you keep hidden with your magic."

"Wh-What the heck are you on about?! That's a dragon, you dolt! You can't beat a..."

She went on talking like that as I walked towards the monster, axe at the ready. I could hear the fear sending shivers through her voice.

Come on, it's just a turtle. What's there to be afraid of? They're slow on their feet, so if worse comes to worst, I'll just run away.

I turned around and saw the anxiety on Alna's face. "Relax," I assured her before I ran towards the giant turtle.

Now, let's see how well my axe does against that shell...

The turtle quickly noticed me running towards it with my battle-axe held high above my head. It shot a glare at me, but it didn't move an inch. Even though it clearly knew I was going to attack it, the monster didn't try to evade or respond with an attack of its own. It seemed supremely confident that anything I tried would be completely useless.

So I closed the distance and decided I would try and pulverize the monster's shell with a hefty swing of my axe! It was a turtle, after all, and I figured that if I aimed for its neck or its legs, it would hide them inside of its armored shell. I didn't think there was a point to wasting time on that; it would be quicker and easier to just start with the shell.

When I was within striking range, I brought my axe down on the monster's shell with everything I had.

KLANG!

The sound echoed through the air as the shock of the blow rumbled through my axe and into my arms. I'd never experienced an impact like it, and I knew immediately that this monster's shell was unbelievably tough.

Up until now, I'd felt the shock of using my axe against the stone walls of fortresses and the iron gates of castles, but this shell was made of something else entirely. My axe didn't even leave so much as a scratch on the thing, but the blade now had a fracture running through it. *Tough one, aren't you?* I thought as I spun the axe to the nondamaged side and set my sights on slicing off the turtle's head.

The turtle saw my slash coming from a mile away, and its features narrowed

into something like a sly grin as it slipped its head and legs into its shell. But what really took me by surprise was when I tried to attack the holes the turtle had retreated into. Parts of its shell actually moved to cover those weak points!

I'd never imagined that a turtle shell would come equipped with that kind of ability, and I was stunned so completely that I stopped in place and just stared for a moment. I stood there with my axe at the ready, trying to work out how best to attack the thing. Meanwhile, the monster seemed committed to staying comfy inside of its shell.

For a while, both of us stayed like that, staring each other down.

"Dias! Now's your chance! Run away!" shouted Alna. "You can't take on an earth dragon alone! It's too reckless!"

She could see that things had come to a standstill, but I didn't really like the idea of turning tail and running when I still hadn't given this thing my best shot. So, I climbed up and onto the monster's shell, found myself a stable place to set my legs, stood tall, and lifted my battle-axe up high.

Maybe people would have called me a fool, and maybe they would have laughed at me for trying the impossible, but what choice did I have? There was nowhere else to hit the damned thing. I decided I would just hit what was right there in front of me: the shell.

If one hit wasn't enough, then I'd just try again. That was how I fought. Now it was a matter of how many times I could hit the monster before I ran out of energy.

I brought my axe down at full force on the turtle's shell, and each time I did, there was the dull echo of the impact followed by another fracture in my axe blade. Three strikes in, and I didn't feel like I was making any progress. The shell still didn't have a scratch on it either.

The fracture through my axe blade widened, and when it looked like it was getting bad, I stopped my attack for a moment and sent a silent message through my axe, ordering it to mend. The axe had the strange ability to repair itself if I just left it, but on top of that, I could also make it do so through the power of focus.

Mend!

The trick was to concentrate on the command while I focused my energy into my axe. When I did that, it repaired itself nice and quick. And just like always, the blade emitted a faint glow and repaired itself. When Alna saw it, she let out a cry of surprise.

Well, yeah, I guess this would surprise pretty much anyone. The first time I realized the axe had this power, I'd been mighty surprised too.

When the light from the axe faded, its blade was completely fixed up. So I took to attacking the monster's shell all over again. That's how things went—I hit the shell until my axe was damaged, and then I repaired it.

Throughout it all, the turtle stayed inside its shell, so I just kept on hitting it. Alna couldn't believe what she was seeing, so she just stared at me in disbelief as I attacked the monster.

Our tactics never changed—I assumed that at some point I was going to break through the monster's shell, and the monster assumed that at some point I was going to completely exhaust myself. The time passed, and the sun started to set, and neither of us had gotten what we wanted.

Hm. It's just not breaking. Once night falls, I'll have to give up so we can head home.

It made me frustrated that I hadn't been able to break the turtle monster, but at the same time, I didn't have much in the way of other options. Alna was looking awfully bored over in the distance, which I felt bad about. I figured I'd give the turtle one last whack, then call it a day.

I lifted my axe and aimed it at the highest point of the monster's shell, and brought it down.

And then I heard a crack echo through the air around us. It wasn't the dull sound of axe on shell, and it wasn't the sound of my blade fracturing either. It was a sound I hadn't heard until now—the sound of the monster's shell breaking. I took a good and proper look at where I'd struck and I saw that my axe had broken through the monster's shell and sunken into the flesh underneath.

I had never imagined that the last strike I decided to throw would actually break the shell open, so I just stood there for a second, but then I came back to my senses and lifted my axe to launch a finishing blow.

At this point, the turtle began to move violently. It didn't want another strike like that one landing on it, so it began to squirm with panic, shaking me on top of its shell and poking its legs and head out.

The monster glared at me with eyes that wavered slightly—it was either fear or intimidation, I couldn't tell which—and then it turned its neck to face me, opened its mouth, and launched its first attack.

FWOOM!

I heard the roar and felt the heat as a fireball flew towards me.

If it can spit fireballs, why didn't it do it right from the get-go?!

I leaped from the shell to evade the superheated fireball and swung my axe straight for the monster's legs as I fell. The monster responded by trying to pull its legs inside of itself again, but my axe was faster, and I landed a direct hit. Blood gushed from the wound, and the turtle stomped its feet in pain.

RAAAAAAR!

I didn't know turtles were capable of such roars, but roar it did as I landed on the ground by its feet. I'd thrown everything I had into my attack on its legs, so I didn't have a chance to roll—my body took the brunt of the impact as I slammed into the ground, and pain throbbed through me.

But I had more to think about than pain right now, and I jumped to my feet, knowing that I had to keep up the attack now that I'd found an opening. While the monster continued to stomp around, I swung my axe for another attack on its legs.

Knowing that it had no other options, the turtle made no attempt to evade or run from my axe and instead pulled its legs and head into its shell to defend itself. My axe clanged against it and bounced off, but I quickly regained my balance, readied my axe once more, and prepared for the monster's next move.

However, the turtle remained hidden inside of its shell.

Stay hidden like that and I'm just going to go put another hole in your shell...

I climbed up onto the monster's shell again and, as expected, it panicked. Its head and legs popped out from its shell, and it was those parts that I aimed for with my axe.



We went back and forth like that a few times. My attacks were increasingly successful, and the wounds were increasing on its body. I don't think the turtle had ever been in a battle where its own shell had become its weak point—it was confused and unsure of how to fight me, and as it grew more panicked and scared, its movements slowed. And when I saw that, I was certain: if the fight continued this way, victory was mine.

But the turtle refused to give up. It hid its head inside of its shell and poked it out, over and over, always looking for an opening and spitting fireballs at me. However, in its panic it lost the ability to aim, and it let fireballs loose in every direction.

That was when the monster happened to notice Alna, watching us from a distance. It shot her a glare as if wondering who she was, and when I saw its gaze settle on her, my blood ran cold. Could Alna dodge a fireball if the monster fired one at her? And what would happen if she took a direct hit? These questions filled me with worry.

The turtle was quick to notice this change in my expression, and the confusion in its eyes suddenly shifted to clarity. Its mouth seemed to curl into a grin, as if telling me that Alna was indeed its next target.

In an instant, I felt a rush of emotion. Perhaps it was that I couldn't stand that the turtle was turning on Alna, or perhaps it was that I felt a strong urge to ensure her protection. Either way, this unfathomable emotion drove me to move and filled me with power. I kicked off the ground and leaped up onto the monster's shell.

I moved quickly and confidently. Before the turtle could make its move, before it could unleash its fireballs upon Alna, I lifted my axe up high and brought it down with everything I had.

There was no death cry. The monster took my hit straight on, its shell no longer defending it, and trembled slightly before stopping completely. It was the sign that our battle had come to an end.

That monster sure was a handful. And those fireballs. If it had used those earlier the battle would have been much harder. I wonder why it didn't? Perhaps

arrogance? Perhaps it thought its shell was unbreakable?

I guess even monsters are capable of being arrogant.

That's what was running through my mind as I stood atop the felled turtle, my face covered in blood. Then, Alna ran over to me and the monster and, for some reason, her eyes filled with tears as she started crying. She was so hysterical that her words blended together in a mush. I couldn't understand what she was saying at all.

"Uh, Alna?" I asked. "What's wrong?"

But she didn't answer. Instead, she just kept on crying. In any case, we'd felled a monster just like we'd planned, and I was ready to start carrying its materials back to the onikin village, but...

Is Alna okay?

Her face was all red, and the setting sun made it look all the redder, and she kept on trying to tell me something but I couldn't make it out very clearly.

Hm? Did she just say that...she's going to marry me...right here and now? No, I've got to be imagining things.

I hope I'm imagining things...

"Alna, calm down," I said. "Let's think about getting home first, yeah? It's almost nightfall, and this turtle isn't going to be easy to carry back, so um, let's save the talk of marriage for later, yeah?"

The moment I uttered the word marriage, Alna found the strength to speak clearly for the first time since the end of the battle.

"Later?! So you'll marry me later?!"

"Wait, that's *not* what I said, I just said we can talk about it—"

"Don't even worry Dias! A portion of this dragon will make a more than suitable betrothal gift! Even just these fragments of its shell rolling along the ground will do!"

"Whoa whoa whoa whoa, that's *not* what I meant! Um, let's calm down Alna, please..."

But Alna did not calm down in the slightest. She went on with her hysterics until some onikin villagers came to check on us, worried because of how long we'd been away.

The Following Day, at the Onikin Village

Transporting the turtle back to the onikin village was really hard work. Above all, the monster was big *and* heavy, and pushing or pulling its corpse took a whole lot of energy.

The men who'd come to check on Alna and I knew immediately that we wouldn't be able to move it on our own, so they gathered all the men in the village and a few horses, but even then it was a real struggle. By the time we all finally made it back to the village, dawn had broken. It took the entire night to bring it back.

Moll and the women at the village were eagerly awaiting our return, and when they saw us hefting that turtle along, the village erupted with cheer. "*It's a dragon! It's a dragon!*" they all shouted as they set about breaking it down and gathering useful materials.

More cheers and hurrahs rang out through the village from those chopping up the turtle and those taking its various materials away. They were all so energetic that I couldn't help but just stand dumbstruck and in awe until Moll poked me with her cane.

"Nobody could have expected that you'd fell something like this on your own," she uttered. "So what now? What do you want for this?"

"I'd like a well and a privy built on my land. Will this monster's materials pay for them?"

"It's more than enough. Do you not know how valuable dragons are? Just one leg of the dragon you brought here and you could fill most of your land with privies and wells if you so desired."

"Wait, are you telling me that's *really* a dragon? Looks a lot like a big turtle to me."

"Enough with your foolish blabbering, Dias. The head has been removed, as you can see. Look at its mouth. It has fangs, yes? Do turtles have fangs? It spat

fire, yes? Have you ever seen a turtle do that?”

I took a closer look at the monster’s mouth and, just like Moll said, it was lined with sharp fangs. Even then, it was still hard for me to fathom the idea that I’d really fought a dragon. I mean, dragons were creatures out of mythology and storybooks, and I’d just felled one? I couldn’t really wrap my head around it.

“Dias, when the dragon has been broken down to its core materials, most of them will be returned to you. It is far too expensive a material for us to handle—we will take only as much as what will pay for the construction of your well and your privy, along with more yurt supplies, food, and medicinal herbs. Oh, and we will also put up a yurt for you that you can use as a storehouse, in which you can store the leftover materials.”

I guess the material from that turtle—or more accurately, dragon—really *was* worth a lot.

“We will take but a small amount of the dragon,” said Moll. “We will also happily store some of it for you, and pass it along to the merchant who visits these parts. He’s sure to be intrigued, and you will soon need to start doing business with a merchant yourself, yes? As for Alna’s bridal gift, one of the dragon’s fangs or claws is certain to delight her parents.”

“Whoa now! Hang on a second!” I shouted. “Now, I don’t mind leaving the valuation of the dragon to you, and I’m happy to let you talk to the merchant, but what’s all this about a bridal gift?!”

“Now that you’ve come this far and you’ve done something as incredible as this, you’re marrying that girl whether you like it or not,” replied Moll. “When you’ve got a dragon slayer living next door, you either make strong ties with them or you live in fear of them. We choose the former.”

“But here’s the truth, Dias: this display of manliness will draw all the single women in the village to you if you do not marry Alna. Is that what you’d prefer? The reason they’ve all kept calm and quiet until now is that they know people from the kingdom have only a single marriage partner, and they think yours to be Alna. If word gets out that you and Alna will *not* marry, well...let’s just say that life will get very difficult for the manly dragon slayer.”

“Look, I get what you’re saying about a dragon slayer as a next door neighbor, but...is marriage the only solution? I mean, what about things like engagement...?”

“‘Engagement,’ you say. Unfortunately, such a concept does not exist within the onikin. You will marry. When you decide to consummate your marriage is up to you. That will be a point of compromise. In any case, Alna has already assumed that the marriage is official and is making preparations for it as we speak. I doubt she’d even listen if you told her that the marriage was off.”

Moll explained that Alna had already run back home and announced to her parents that we were getting married.

I mean, I did wonder where she’d disappeared to, but this? Oh boy...

My wedding to Alna was decided before I could even have a say in the proceedings. At the same time, I didn’t feel like I had any other real choice—not when I could already feel the heated gazes of all the other women in the village staring at me.

Besides, I quite liked Alna, and she was very pretty. She was great when it came to work around the yurt, and she liked me too. All things considered, I figured that maybe marriage wasn’t such a bad thing.

I’m going to turn thirty-five, after all, and that’s about the time people start hurrying to get married. Hm...come to think of it, how old is Alna anyway?

I couldn’t ask Moll because she’d disappeared—she said she had to prepare for the betrothal and marriage ceremony, as well as plan a celebration for the dragon slaying. So I decided to ask one of the men who passed by.

“Sorry to grab you while you’re so busy,” I said, waving one over, “but could you tell me how old Alna is?”

“Hm? Ah, it’s you, dragon slayer. Hm, let me think... Alna is fifteen this year. Pretty impressive. Right as she hits marrying age she nets herself a catch like you. Amazing, really. Was that everything? All right, see you around.”

The man walked off, leaving me frozen in place.

Fifteen? I mean, I knew she was young, but I never thought...

Thirty-five and fifteen...

I'm old enough to be her father. Not to mention that marrying age in the kingdom is eighteen. I guess we'll live like we're engaged for now, until Alna turns eighteen, so...three years.

Yeah, we'll stay engaged for three years, and in that time I'll develop the lands and become a dignified and respectable domain lord. Then I'll be worthy of her hand in marriage, and we'll have a home suitable for raising a family.

I figured that three years would be enough time for me to mentally wrap my head around the whole situation too. Well, I hoped so, at least.

No, by then I've got to be confident. I have to show my resolve, both as a lord and as a man.

I didn't know anything about onikin wedding ceremonies, but I figured that knowing the onikin, it'd be an energetic and joyous affair.

I'd slain a dragon, dragged its corpse back to the village, and now I had a wedding to attend. It was a tough schedule, and I was exhausted, but I'd just have to push through. As I thought about it, I had to wonder—if Alna became a member of my family, would that mean I could count her as one of my subjects? I wasn't sure, because technically we'd just be betrothed.

So was she a subject, or wasn't she? I didn't know where to place her.

Morning, Some Three Weeks Later, at the Well by the Yurt

In the light of the morning sun, I stood at the stone well with its wooden roof. I pulled at its pulley rope, hefted up a bucket full of water, and poured that into another bucket. Then I took that bucket by its handle, and told myself that I wasn't going to spill any water today.

Things weren't easy for me when the well was first built. I didn't know anything about how you were supposed to use wells, so sometimes I pulled on the rope too hard, which messed with the pulley system, and other times I was too forceful with the well bucket and broke that. When I was fortunate enough to pull up some water, I'd spill it all while I was trying to pour it into another bucket, or otherwise spill that other bucket while I was trying to carry it elsewhere. Yep, I sure made a mess of things.

It took about a week before I got used to it and stopped making mistakes, and I learned to be more careful about carrying water around. I didn't want to dirty the clothes that Alna had made for me, so I took things slow. I was wearing a baar wool shirt, a black ghee leather vest, and some black ghee leather pants. They looked a lot like what the important people wore at the kingdom, so I liked them a lot.

Actually, when Alna had said she'd make me some clothes, I requested this style, and she did a bang-up job—her sewing skills were top-notch, and the clothes were more comfortable than I'd ever imagined. If you asked me, Alna's sewing was on par with any of the royal capital's seamstresses.

In any case, that's why I was being careful. She'd made these clothes from nothing, and I wanted to take care of them. I didn't want to see them get dirty. I took my bucket of water slowly over to the side of my yurt where we kept bottles for drinking water, and I poured the well water into a few of them. Then I went back to the well, got some more water, and did it all over again.

While I was doing that, I took a look around at the land around the well, at

the otherwise deserted grassy plains, and I sighed. The onikin started building the well the day after Alna and I were married—uh, engaged—and it was done in a little over two weeks. A bit more than a week had passed since then, so I guess it's been about a month since Alna and I got engaged.

One whole month, but my domain was still just me, Alna, and our two baars. I still didn't have even one single subject to my name. The whole reason we had a privy and a big old well built was for when the population started to grow, and they were built for more than just the two of us. My hunting had gotten us lots of yurt supplies, but it was all just sitting there in the storehouse, and it made me sad thinking about it lying there unused. I'd put one up for practice, but it was mostly empty.

Alna was my family now, and we lived together, so she called herself a member of the domain's citizenry. I suppose you *could* say that I *kind of* had a subject in her, but honestly I thought of her less as a subject and more as a family member.

If I wanted this place to look anything like the onikin village with its numerous lively yurts, then I had to find people to become my subjects. The problem was, I didn't know how, and I didn't have any good ideas either. I'd spent every day until now thinking about it and trying to come up with something, and I used my head as much as I knew how, but I always ended up right where I started: with no good plans to speak of.

So I heaved another sigh and felt my shoulders slump. I couldn't help wishing that my subjects would just float down from the sky, even though I knew it was stupid. Just then, I noticed Alna running over towards me with a great big smile on her face.

I wonder if something good happened.

"Dias! We did it! Little ones! We finally have some kids on the way!"

At first I couldn't believe the words coming out of her mouth, but as they slowly sunk into my brain I was filled with joy. I was so happy I dropped the bucket of water I was carrying. I spilled water all over my favorite pair of pants, but I was far too overjoyed to care about it in the slightest, and I threw my arms high in celebration.

“Yes! Yes! Oh, this is just amazing!” I said. “To think we’d have kids coming so soon! This is wonderful news!”

I rubbed her head and I patted her back, but...I was admittedly a little afraid to touch her stomach, so I held off.

Francoise was pregnant, and her eyes narrowed happily as she nudged me for more pats. We were in the livestock pen, with its straw-covered interior, and I couldn’t stop petting Francoise and praising her. That was when Francis, looking a little fidgety, started pacing around us. I couldn’t help but laugh.

“What’s with the long face? Are you jealous, Francis? Come here, come here! You’ll get your share of pats too!”

Francis looked a bit sulky at my comments, but he gave a little nod and walked up closer so I could give him a pat. Baars were extremely intelligent animals, and they understood human languages perfectly. When you told them not to do something, they followed your instructions, and when you gave them directions, like “come here” or “wait there,” they did as you told them. According to Alna, their smarts were their greatest tool. Baars had learned to survive in the wilderness by using their brains to avoid danger and trick their predators.

When I asked Alna why such intelligent animals were livestock, she told me it was because that’s what they wanted. When they realized that the stronger humans would protect them, look after them, and give them a place to live, they happily offered themselves up as cattle.

When a baar was brought in from the wild, it only took about a week for them to learn a human language. That’s just how smart they were. But while I was thinking about that and happily patting Francoise and Francis, I noticed Alna standing next to us with a troubled expression on her face.

“So, uh, I should tell you something, Dias,” she warned. “Pregnant baars aren’t all good news. A baar’s intelligence is a double-edged sword—it makes them sensitive to bouts of fear and mental anguish. This gets especially bad when they’re pregnant, and it’s possible for a baar to die of terror.”

Alna continued, “So what happens is, uh, pregnant baars gather around the strongest in the group, which in this case means you. It’s your job to ensure that they feel safe and protected. That means keeping them by your side...even when you sleep.”

She didn’t look very happy having to explain this to me. I guessed it was because she felt bad. From what she said, I got the sense that I’d be sleeping in the livestock pen for a while. But I didn’t care in the slightest, so I didn’t want her to either. I would happily stay in the pen with them if it meant the best for our two baars and their future child. I told Alna this, but she shook her head.

“No, no, that’s not what I mean,” she said. “What I mean is that we’ll be bringing Francis and Francoise into the yurt. It’s not good to separate a couple when they’ve just become mates, but some of the onikin men really hate the process, and pregnancies can cause a lot of arguments between couples. When you bring baars into a yurt, it gets dirty. Then there’s the smell, and some men just feel uncomfortable with the way their baars look at them.”

“Oh, I see,” I said with a chuckle. “Well, I don’t mind us all living together. Francis and Francoise are family, after all. As for dirty and smelly, during the war I lived in grimy and stinky barracks squashed in with all my fellow soldiers. Francis and Francoise are like heaven compared to that!”

“Ha! Is that so? Well, that makes everything easier! So you’re not just manly, but you’re kind too! I landed myself a real keeper of a husband!”

Alna smiled brightly as she spoke, and Francis and Francoise, who were watching on, started to bleat. For humans who didn’t know any better, baar bleating all sounded the same, but actually there were small variations in their utterances. Depending on the pitch, baars expressed different things with different bleats. Well, that’s what Alna said, anyway.

I still couldn’t make heads or tails of anything they said, but Alna could understand baars, and I’d even seen her talking with Francoise out in the plains and in the pen. Even now, it seemed that Francis and Francoise were trying to say something, because Alna heard them and her face flushed red.

“What are you two on about?!” she cried, her body writhing as she spoke. “Dias and I still haven’t done any of that! Francis! Don’t be so vulgar!”

The two baars bleated a reply of some kind.

“There’s nothing wrong with taking time to build a strong connection!” said Alna. “And besides, Dias said not to worry about it! Look! That’s *our* business! Leave it be!”

The two baars continued to bleat.



I had a feeling that their conversation was heading into uncomfortable territory, so I slipped away and left the pen. I knew I was supposed to stay by Francoise's side at all times, but she was lost in her conversation, so I figured she'd be fine for the time being. And besides, I still had to go get some water because I'd spilled the last bucket, and the baars needed water for their trough.

I'm not running away from an uncomfortable topic. Nope, not this guy. It's almost breakfast, so I've got to set my mind on making sure we've got water, yep.

Once I was done with the well water, I set up a bed for Francis and Francoise in our yurt. Which is to say, I took a big tub from the storehouse and filled it with straw. Then once Alna and I had moved the two baars to their new bed, Alna and I sat down for a late breakfast. Alna always made something delicious, and today was no different. I ate it up happily, and then after we cleaned up, I readied myself for the day ahead and considered what to do.

I still didn't know how to grow my population, and the onikin village was still working through all the black ghee and dragon material I'd gathered, so Moll had asked me to hold off on hunting for a while. Now that I had Francis and Francoise with me all the time, hunting wasn't really a safe option anyway.

That left helping Alna with the housework, or putting some more time into practicing how to put up a yurt. Or maybe both. As I was sitting in the yurt thinking it through, the horn on Alna's head went from blue to green. Alna stopped in her tracks and closed her eyes while I looked at her and tilted my head.

What does that light mean?

"I'd set up magic around the plains, and something triggered it," Alna said. "Something is coming this way...from the east. I think it's a group of humans with horses. Ten in all, I think."

I reached for the axe on my bed and gripped it firmly in hand.

So that's what green means, huh? The onikin sure do have some helpful magic.

But right now, it was more important that I think about the approaching humans than Alna's abilities. The royal capital was located in the east, but I couldn't think of anyone who would be visiting. If it was a group of bandits, however, they could be up to something.

"Alna, I'm going to go check it out," I said. "I want you to use your magic to hide yourself and the baars while I'm gone. If you can hide the yurt and the well, hide them too. It could be that someone has come here to see me, but I don't think it's likely. In any case, leave the practice yurt unhidden—if the group *is* visiting to see me, that's where we'll talk."

The moment I finished talking, Francis and Francoise waddled over to me with worried looks on their faces.

"I'm going to be gone for just a little while, guys," I assured them. "Oh, come on now, there's no need to look so scared. I'll be right back. I'll be fine; you don't have to worry! It's just ten people. That's nothing compared to a dragon, right?"

Alna looked fine leaving me to handle things on my own, but the two baars looked gloomy and beside themselves with anxiety.

I guess words alone aren't enough sometimes. In which case, I'll just have to head on out there to find out what's going on, then rush back home.

But that still left one question: just who was it out there?

On the Plains, East of the Yurt

I left our yurt and headed east. I kept my eyes peeled for whoever it was that was heading this way.

Ten people are sure to stand out in all this grass... Aha! There they are. They're quite far away. Three knights and four foot soldiers. Alna counted ten, but... Oh, I see. So it's ten including three horses. But if one of them has a bow, it could be trouble. I wonder if I should have worn my armor?

Hm? The three knights are women? And what's with their armor? It's really gaudy, or maybe "luxurious" is the word? Look at all that gold and silver...and wow. So their dresses are sewn into their armor?

That armor isn't going to protect them at all. I could be dealing with some real idiots.

Firstly, I had to work out whether I was dealing with friends or foes. They didn't look like bandits, so I took a closer look and realized that the foot soldiers were wearing the kingdom's armor.

So they're probably friends, then.

That was when one of the foot soldiers noticed me.

"Sir Dias! Long time no see!"

The soldier ran over towards me, waving his hand. He was young with black hair.

Wait a second... Is that my old war buddy Klaus?

"Klaus! You've put on weight!" I said. "You look like a completely different person without your beard!"

"Of course I put on weight! We were practically surviving on scraps during the war. Now that you're a big lord with your own domain I expected you to be feasting every day, but you don't look like you've put on any weight at all!"

"I'm eating well each and every day, but nothing you'd call a feast," I replied.

“More importantly, Klaus, why did you come all this way?”

“Oh, I’m working on guide and protection duties today. It was the women on horseback here who gave the order,” said Klaus, gesturing to the women with his eyes. “They said they have business with you, Sir Dias.”

I took another look at the women on horseback, but I didn’t recognize any of them.

What business do they have with me then?

“With that in mind, would you mind taking us to your manor, Sir Dias?” asked Klaus. “It’s been a long journey, and everyone is quite tired.”

“Well, I can’t take you to my manor, but I *can* take you to my yurt. Oh, you don’t know what that is, do you? Anyway, I can take you to where I’m living at the moment. Would that be all right?”

“Yes, many thanks. I just can’t wait to see where you’re living now that you’re a domain lord, Sir Dias.”

I was about to tell him that it wasn’t really the kind of place to get excited about, but I held back. I figured it was easier for him to see it with his own eyes rather than me having to explain it.

I took Klaus and the group with him to my practice yurt, and thanks to Alna’s spell, there was nothing else around it to be seen. There were no other yurts, no well, no privy, and no livestock pen.

That concealment magic sure is something.

I knew I could trust Klaus, but I still didn’t know who any of the others were, so I figured it was best to keep the magic as it was, and keep Alna and the baars hidden until I’d seen to my visitors’ “business.”

I invited them all inside, and the women in their armored dresses looked shocked as they entered. Two of the foot soldiers remained outside to look after the horses, and Klaus and the remaining soldier entered. All of them looked around apprehensively while I took a seat at the far end and told them to sit where they pleased.

Everyone looked a bit perplexed, and the women looked a bit put off by it all,

but they reluctantly did as I said. When they were all seated, the woman at the head of the group, who was wearing the most luxurious dress of the three women, began to speak.

“It is an honor to meet a hero such as yourself, Sir Dias. My name is Diane. I must ask, what exactly is this...cloth...house? I’ve yet to see any servants, so am I right to assume that your manor is possibly being constructed elsewhere?”

Servants? Manor? What is she talking about?

“Well, uh, Miss Diane, I’ll be straight with you: there are no servants here, and no manors or any buildings like one. There’s just this house. Yeah, it doesn’t look like much, but I had to work pretty hard to put it up.”

My answer stirred up some hushed discussion between Diane and her party. I could tell it wasn’t indecision that gripped them, but rather confusion. The women talked quietly among themselves, and when they were done, Diane turned to me once more.

“Er, I beg your pardon, Sir Dias, but did you just say *you* put this house up? What about your carpenter?”

“A carpenter? You won’t find a craftsman like that this far out. There’s nothing out here but grass.”

“But would it not have been wise to employ some people from the nearest town? It was my understanding that my father—er, His Majesty prepared you a sum of money for preparations, as well as a handsome reward for your long years of service.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I didn’t even get a single bronze coin before coming here.”

“Huh? I’m sorry, what did you say just now?”

“I said that I didn’t get any money. They told me I was a lord, and then they loaded me onto a carriage without much explanation and brought me out here to the plains. I didn’t receive anything at all—not before I left, and not on my way here either. And money was the least of my problems at first. I didn’t have any food or water. I really thought I was going to die out here.”

Diane fell into silence. She looked down at the floor and her body trembled. The two women with her—one a blonde with braided hair, the other with short brown hair—who had been glaring at me this whole time, were clearly shaken by my comments. Even the soldiers, and Klaus in particular, grimaced. For some reason they were all pretty angry.

For a while, nobody said anything.

Hm... So why did Diane and her party come here? I don't know why they're all angry, but what am I supposed to do? I can't leave Alna and the baars just waiting all day. I'd really like Diane to just go home.

“Anyway, may I ask why you’re here, Miss Diane?”

“In short, another war is brewing,” she replied. “Fervor grows in the royal capital, and there are passionate cries for a new conquest. To that end, I am here to ask that you, our nation’s heroic savior, might support us with your forces. I offer myself as a reward, or, if you would prefer, the hand of either Princessia or Miralda.”



War? Are you joking? I can't leave Francoise's side no matter what happens. And marrying someone you've only met for the first time as a reward? What the heck kind of a reward is that? For one thing, I'm already engaged to Alna.

I'm going to decline. No ifs, ands, or buts. I'll turn her down flat.

The issue was *how* to decline Diane's request. I knew I had to keep Alna a secret.

"I'm sorry, Miss Diane, but I will not partake in war," I said. "I don't have a single soldier, let alone a citizen here in my domain. It would be impossible for me to dispatch forces I don't have. You're offering marriage as a reward, but the last war went on for twenty whole years. If this next one goes the same way, I'll be over fifty by the time it ends. I'm more likely to die than I am to get married. I'm well past thirty now, and I'm not as strong as I used to be. On top of that, the idea of living a life dedicated entirely to war is, well..."

Diane and the two women with her looked down at the floor. I figured this was a good time to really seal the deal.

"And there's no need to come all this way looking for someone like me, is there? I'm practically an old man already. Isn't the castle full of enthusiastic youths in shining suits of armor? I didn't know any of them personally on the battlefield, but at a glance they all seemed well trained. Surely you're better off having them fight than me. Not to mention the fact that you're all better off getting married to younger partners."

But in response to my words, Diane gave me only silence. Klaus and his fellow soldier looked scared, and the other women seemed enraged.

What is going on?

In any case, Francoise was my main concern, and Alna had been maintaining her magic this whole time. I was starting to worry about how much longer it would last. I really wanted to wrap this meeting up, and fast.

Oh, Diane is raising her head! Hopefully now she'll say it. "Okay, we'll go home."

"Will you not reconsider?" Diane asked. "We can provide other rewards, such

as more land, for example...”

I can't believe this woman! Give it up already! I have my hands full with the land I've been given, and what am I even supposed to do with more land if I don't have any subjects?!

“More land than I already have would do nothing to please me,” I replied. “And I won't accept any rewards, not even a mountain of gold. I will *not* go to war. Now, if that's all you came for, may I ask that you leave?”

“Dumbstruck” was the only way I could describe the looks on their faces. Their mouths were open wide, but no words left their lips. Klaus was smiling for some reason, and the soldier beside him looked similar.

Oh, I get it! They all want to get home as soon as possible! I told them to go home, and it was just what they wanted to hear! That's why they smiled.

Diane and her two companions remained completely silent, so I figured that, as the lord of the lands, I had to tell them what's what. I took a breath, reached for the axe sitting by my side, and thumped the butt of it on the floor.

“If we're all done, then leave. I can't just keep sitting around all day.”

I knew I had to be strict—I felt sorry for Klaus and the others just standing around too. Klaus and the other guy, both still grinning, stood to their feet and left with a polite bow. Diane and her friends went pale, then they went red, but as soon as they realized that their guards had left, they stumbled to their feet and followed.

I walked out of the yurt to make sure they did as I asked, and stood firm with my axe in hand, glaring at their backs to ensure that they didn't turn around and come back. Diane looked towards me a few times as she got on her horse, like she wanted to say something, but in the end she stayed quiet and led her party back to where they'd come from.

Phew, I don't envy Klaus at all, being put on guard duty for three women like that.

“All of those women were red. One of the soldiers was blue, and the others were white.”

What the?!

I almost leaped out of my skin when I heard Alna's voice come out of nowhere. I spun to find Alna, Francis, and Francoise all standing by my side.

When did that happen?!

"Sorry, didn't mean to startle you. Francoise wanted to be close to you, and she started crying when you were gone, so I kept us all hidden and watched it all from nearby."

"Oh, okay. I'm sorry for worrying you, Francoise."

I gave the baar a pat on the head, and she looked up at me with teary eyes and bleated with joy. Francis looked on enviously, and then Alna did too, so I gave Francis a pat, and...softly patted Alna's head as well. She blushed at that simple gesture, and I knew it was for the best that we stay engaged for a while longer.

"When you say those women were red, are you talking about your soul appraisal?" I asked. "That means they were enemies, right? Does that mean the three of them were a threat to you?"

"Not just to me," replied Alna. "When I use soul appraisal, it tells me whether or not they're a threat to *both* of us. You and I, we're family now."

"I see. So perhaps all that talk of war was a lie, then. Either way, sending them packing was the right call. As for the blue soldier, I reckon that was Klaus."

It made me happy to think that Klaus, someone I'd been friends with, was an untainted blue. I gazed out to where he and Diane had disappeared, then took off walking with Alna and the baars. Now that we were free, it seemed like a good chance to take the baars out to eat their fill. Soft, freshly grown grass was good for them, and I didn't mind spending all day with them, seeing as I'd made Francoise cry.

You two eat to your hearts' content, for both you and your future child.

Morning, A Week Later, at the Yurt

I felt the morning sun on my face, and rolled to the right...straight into a wall of fluff. I rolled left, and found my face plunging straight into another wall of fluff. I slowly opened my eyes to find my vision filled with the white wool of Francis the baar.

I'd prepared the two baars their own bed, but both Francis and Francoise took one look at it and announced in no uncertain terms that they would not sleep in it. Through their bleating they made it loud and clear that they wanted to sleep right next to me. Apparently, that made them all the more reassured, and that in turn made their sleep all the more sound.

I didn't have any reason to tell them no, so I let them have their way, and now I woke up to walls of white fur. Francis on the left and Francoise on the right. Their wool was soft to the touch, and it was really warm between the two of them. Spring had just begun, so there was still a chill in the air, and I was glad for their heat in the mornings. At the same time, I was starting to get a little worried about the summer.

When Francis realized I was awake, he bleated a good morning.

"Morning, Francis," I said.

Then Francoise bleated her good morning.

"Morning, Francoise."

The two baars were early risers like Alna, with all of them waking around dawn. But even then, the baars were considerate in their own ways—they didn't move at all until I woke up, because they didn't want to disturb my slumber.

Now that everyone was awake, Francis and Francoise shook themselves to their feet, and I stretched a little as the world came into focus. I said good morning to Alna, then slipped outside the yurt together with the baars.

The morning air was refreshing as I took Francis and Francoise out for a walk so they could go to the toilet. Once that was done, I took lightly to their woolly fur with a brush and got rid of any dirt and grime caught in it. It was part of the baars' morning routine, and I had to do it every morning. If I didn't, we'd get stray wool all over the yurt.

"I've gotten much better at this brushing thing over the last week, don't you think?" I asked.

Francis and Francoise bleated a response and, well, based on the sound of their bleats and the looks on their faces, there was still room for improvement. We walked back to the yurt, where I wiped the dirt from the baars' feet and my own boots before we went in.

The yurt was filled with a mouthwatering aroma, and breakfast was neatly laid out on the table, where Alna was waiting for us with a smile.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," I said, as I sat down on the cushion opposite her.

I spooned some of the breakfast into my mouth, and as expected, it was delicious. The two of us ate and watched the baars play by poking each other with their noses. Just as we were about to finish breakfast, Alna's horn lit up. It was the same green as when Diane had visited.

"Really? Again?" I asked.

"Sure looks like it," replied Alna. "There's only one person this time so I can make them out clearly. It's a human coming from the east. But they're wandering about aimlessly."

"One person, alone? Why would one person come to the plains? Perhaps it's a lost traveler?"

I shoveled the last of my breakfast into my mouth, washed it down with some water, then grabbed my axe from near my bed. I knew that if I wanted to find out more I'd have to see it with my own eyes, so I headed for the yurt door. As I did so, I noticed that Alna, Francis, and Francoise were all following me.

"No way. You're all coming?" I asked.

"If it's just one person, what's the problem?" asked Alna. "We'll stay quiet

and hidden with my magic, so it's okay. I don't want to see the baars crying again because you're gone, so we're coming with you whether you like it or not."

Oh, yeah, I did make them cry last time, didn't I?

I really didn't want to make them all sad again, so all I could do was let them tag along.

"All right then, let's all head out together."

And I promptly gave them all pats—Francis, Francoise, and yes, Alna too.

I left the yurt with the invisible trio in tow, and headed straight for our wandering visitor to the plains. I kept my eyes peeled, because I knew it would be much harder to find one person compared to a whole party, like the last time. We walked for quite some time, but eventually, we spotted our visitor.

Whoever it was, they were wearing a cloak and carrying baggage of some sort. It was a man with black hair, and...

Wait, that face!

"Is that you, Klaus?" I shouted.

Klaus had been walking with his head down, but he quickly turned to the sound of my voice and burst into a smile.

"Sir Dias!" he said, running over. "I came here to visit you, but I had no idea where your house was and got completely lost. It would have been great if there were some landmarks to guide me, but it's just grass out here."

"Yep, nothing but grassy plains. But hang on a sec, Klaus. Didn't you go back to the capital with those armored maidens? And uh, what happened to your armor?"

I could see that under his cloak, Klaus was wearing a dirtied linen shirt and pants. The armor he was wearing was gone; and the sword by his side wasn't one belonging to the royal military, but a simple short sword in a scabbard.

"Oh, that," said Klaus. "I got fired, so I had to return my sword and armor."

"What?! But why?! Wait, was that because of me?! Is this all because I kicked

that woman out of my yurt?!” I was panicking, but Klaus shook his head.

“It wasn’t your fault at all, Sir Dias. It’s what I wanted.”

“Really?”

“Well, you heard it from Diane yourself. Another war is starting. If I went back to the capital, you can bet I’d be put right on the front lines. That was the last thing I wanted, so I made Diane a little angry with me and got relieved of my post. The timing was great, really. I’ve got other stuff I want to do now.”

“Oh, okay. I’m just as sick of war as you are, so I know how you feel. But Klaus, what could you possibly want to do that would bring you out here to the grasslands?”

“Well, this is where I want to work,” replied Klaus. “Sir Dias, I want to work for you! Please, hire me as one of your domain knights!”

I could tell by his face that he was dead serious, and his stern gaze never left my eyes. Klaus and I had fought side by side, and he never hated or looked down on me for being an orphan or a volunteer. In fact, he’d come to look up to me. I’d saved his life in battle, just as he’d saved mine, and I knew him to be trustworthy. I couldn’t ask for more in an ally.

I burst into a grin, and was about to accept his offer right there on the spot, but then I paused and looked around. Alna must have seen the look on my face and realized what I wanted to ask her, because she stopped casting her magic and appeared instantly.

“He’s been blue the whole time you’ve been talking,” she said with a smile. “So I don’t mind if he joins us. That’s what you wanted, wasn’t it? My opinion?”

I didn’t even need to say a thing. She’d read my mind. But I’d wanted to ask her because she was family now. The thing was, it was just embarrassing to say that out loud. So, I smiled at her and turned back to Klaus, whose jaw looked about ready to fall off.

“S-S-S-Sir Dias?!” he stammered, trembling. “Wh-Wh-Who is that girl and how did she appear from thin air?! And those woolly white creatures?!”

“Uh, well, where to start? Alna is my...fiancée. These two baars are our

livestock, Francis and Francoise. They're all my family. As for the disappearing act, that's on account of Alna's magic. I had her go invisible in case you were someone dangerous."

Alna uttered a short "Hello," while Francis and Francoise bleated their own little greeting. Klaus listened to my introduction, his eyes still wide, then he looked at Alna with her horn, then back at me.

"I'm shocked," he said. "I never imagined you'd be engaged...and to someone so pretty...*and* to someone who can use magic...*and* she has a horn—"

"Look, let's save the details for another time," I interrupted. "For now, let's head back. I still haven't finished our morning prep, and then I have to get Francis and Francoise fed. We've got a lot to do today. Domain knights are in charge of protecting the town and keeping it safe, right? In that case, Klaus, we're going to need to get you a weapon and some armor. I'm also going to have to build you a home."

On the way back to the yurts, I gave Klaus the rundown on Alna and the friendly alliance I'd made with the neighboring onikin tribe. I figured it wasn't right of me to go blurting everything I knew about the onikin magic, so I only told him about their invisibility. Then I told him about the ways in which they'd helped me so far: the yurts, the well, the privy, and the food they'd given me. Finally, I filled him in on Francis and Francoise: the way baars were really smart, how valuable their wool was, and how Francoise was pregnant.

I also told Alna and the baars about Klaus. He was twenty-four years old, and he'd lost his parents not long before the end of the war. We'd met when Klaus was advocating for better treatment of prisoners of war. His attempts ended in failure, and those prisoners had died because of their awful conditions. I'd spent the whole night afterwards by Klaus's side as he bawled his eyes out.

I told them all about what Klaus and I had been through together, and when I did, Francis walked on over and pushed his woolly body and his horns against Klaus's leg. Klaus grimaced as it happened, and it looked like it hurt. What was Francis doing?

"He's just saying hello in his own way," Alna explained. "When he heard your

stories, he decided he wanted to welcome Klaus as a friend. What he's doing now is teaching Klaus the way things work here."

Klaus and I were both surprised by what we heard.

"The way things work?" I asked. "So what's he saying with all that bleating now?"

Alna kindly explained it to us.

"Francis is saying that he contributes to our family by offering his wool to Dias and producing offspring, which helps us grow. He's telling Klaus to prove he can contribute and support you too."

"In other words, Francis is saying he ranks higher than Klaus? Klaus is pretty skilled, so I'm not sure about that..."

"Francis has that opinion because he knows that you're the strongest out of all of us, Dias. He's sure that you'll protect us if something happens. In return, Francis is giving back to the group. He's encouraging Klaus to do the same, but until he does, Klaus is lower on the pole."

Francis lifted his nose proudly when Alna finished talking, and Klaus nodded in understanding—he and the baar seemed to come to an agreement. When I glanced at Francoise though, I couldn't help noticing the exasperation in her eyes. It was clear that she wasn't a fan of Francis getting uppity with the newbie.

Back to the Yurt

Klaus and Francis continued to get to know each other as we headed back to the Yurt, and Klaus was left dumbfounded when he saw the entirety of our camp. It was no longer hidden by Alna's concealment magic, after all. Even though I'd told him all about it before we arrived, I could still see why he was shocked.

Alna and I left Klaus where he stood to take everything in, and we headed into our yurt. We had things to do, and we had to get to it. For starters, cleaning the table after breakfast, washing up and preparing for the day ahead were an important part of staying healthy out on the plains.

Once we were ready to get to work, I called out to Klaus, and the two of us got to building the yurt that would become his home. I figured we'd put it up right next to the yurt that Alna and I lived in. Klaus said he'd be fine with the practice yurt I'd put up, but I put a hole in that when I was still getting the hang of things, so I felt bad about giving it to Klaus. Anyway, with the two of us working on it, we'd put up another yurt in no time.

Alna did the cleaning and the washing, and while Klaus and I were working on the yurt, I had the baars graze not too far from where we were. When the yurt was done, I taught Klaus the ins and outs of yurts, like how to use the stove, how to open and close the skylight, and things to watch out for in daily life.

I get it, Klaus, I thought. I know it's a simple mechanism, but it sure is amazing to have a rope you can pull to open and close the skylight. And look, I know it's not common where we come from, but don't keep pulling on the string like that or you're going to break it!

All right then, I guess that's all our major work done for the day, then? There's still the matter of Klaus's equipment, but I figure we can talk about that over lunch. It's already past noon.

I already knew that Alna would have prepared enough food for all of us, so

Klaus and I headed into my yurt for lunch. When the two of us and Francis entered the yurt, it was filled with the delicious aroma of herb-roasted black ghee. It was a mighty tasty dish.

I let myself indulge in the scent, then sat down on the cushion where I always sat and started to eat.

“Alna,” I said, “I wanted to talk with you about equipment for Klaus. Can we ask the onikin to craft something for him?”

“We can make short swords, hatchets, spears, and bows and arrows. But armor like yours isn’t easy for us, so it’d be quicker to buy some from a merchant.”

“I see. What about the dragon materials in our storehouse? Can we use that for his equipment?”

“Of course. They’ve already started crafting at the village. I hear that the fangs and claws are being used for swords and spears, and the tendons for bowstrings. Oh, and the shell material is being used in shields.”

“Oh, in that case let’s trade some more material for some of those. If they could make a simple breastplate, some gauntlets, and shin protectors, that sure would be nice too. Er, what’s with that face, Klaus? Oh, are you worried about money? Rest easy, my friend, you’ll be getting all of this equipment for free. After all, you’ll be leading our domain knights when we get more of them...eventually. Giving you some quality equipment is the least I can do.”

As Klaus listened to our conversation, he’d been surprised, then confused, then panicked, and he’d stopped eating entirely. And even though I tried to reassure him he wouldn’t have to pay a cent, that only seemed to make him more frantic, and his face grew more and more pale. I was actually worried he might be sick, and I was about to check on him when he forced himself to speak.

“S-Sir Dias? Wh-When you say dragon, do you mean an actual *dragon*? Those materials in your storehouse... Did you defeat an actual dragon?!”

“Well, yeah, it was a dragon, but probably not what you’re imagining, Klaus. It was called an earth dragon. Didn’t fly at all, and I was convinced it was just a

giant turtle until we brought it back. A little while ago Alna and I went hunting and we found one north of the plains. I gave its shell a good crack with the axe and killed it.”

“You...killed it? Just like that? The knights would have to assault a monster like that with every man and siege weapon available to even have a *chance*... You’re seriously going to use such valuable materials for *my* equipment?”

“We’ve got a lot of material just gathering dust, so we’d best make the most of it. We’ll be hunting wild beasts out there, and we’ll want to have the right tools for it: swords, spears, bows and armor. You’ll be charged with keeping our domain safe, so I don’t mind using our dragon materials to make sure you’re well equipped.”

“I can’t believe you’d do that for me. Very well! Then I will do my utmost to be a man worthy of wielding it! I will work as though every day is my last to live up to your expectations, Sir Dias! And I promise to protect our future population from any and every threat that may arise! And until then, I will defend our baars and you, Sir—wait, no—*Lord* Dias and Lady Alna!”

As he shouted those last words, Klaus rose to his feet and shot a fist to the sky. I was glad for his enthusiasm, but I wasn’t sure about him calling me “Lord.”

Do you really need to make our positions so clear? Oh, you do? Well, if you insist, Klaus. At least you’re passionate about your work. We’ll be counting on you as both a citizen and as our knight captain, my friend.

Ten Days Later, On the Plains by the Yurt—Klaus

I looked up at the vast blue sky that spread wide over the plains, and then I thrust my spear forwards, swung it upwards, then brought it down. Then I did it again. With each movement I let out a breath in time with my strike, and I repeated this without rest. I swung my spear as if to torture my own body.

It had been ten days since I began working under Lord Dias, and I took to this training every day without fail. And not just with the spear either—I also trained with swords and bows, and went jogging to ensure my stamina was on point. When Lord Dias was free, I asked him to spar with me, and in this way I did my utmost to rise to his level. I was nothing if not desperate to ensure that I was worthy of fighting by his side.

At the royal capital, the nobles had broken into factions as a battle for succession raged between the first prince, the second prince, and the first, second and third princesses. Plots and conspiracies were put into play and revenges were planned, and all of it played out over and over in the unique and ugly way that only the nobility were truly capable of.

This pointless back-and-forth was the reason that returning soldiers and mercenaries were yet to receive their just rewards, and why the citizens had yet to feel reassured and safe in the aftermath of the war. As a result, the people became angry and wild, and the areas outside of the royal capital fell into an awful state.

And in the areas on the frontiers, distant from the royal capital, things were even worse. Beyond the eyes of the officials in the capital, unscrupulous domain lords were free to do as they pleased, and this was especially bad in the neighboring Kasdeks region. I saw it once on my way to the Nezrose grasslands, and it was so awful that the mere thought of it even now sent a shiver down my spine.

The reason that Lord Dias had not received the money he was owed for his position, and the reason that the third princess Diane had gone to visit him, was

that battle for succession. Of this I was sure. It was likely that Lord Dias's money had been stolen by the second prince, who was infamous for his greed. Princess Diane, on the other hand, was said to be the weakest of the factions in terms of military strength and had thus wanted to recruit Dias by any means possible.

But the rippling effects of the battle for succession were far from over, and I felt certain that Lord Dias's domain would yet see more of its effects as they rolled over the lands. Others would come to the plains, but I knew how Lord Dias would respond—I knew that just as with Princess Diane, he would stand up to them, and he would drive them away.

Lord Dias's stance would stave off these ripples, but eventually it would only result in waves, and someone was sure to attack. *That* was the very reason that I spent my days training.

Lord Dias had never changed. He was the same now as he was when I met him, and when we fought side by side. He was kind, honest, and good-natured. It didn't matter if he gained rank or riches, or even became lord of a whole region. He would always remain true to himself.

I felt that here, under Lord Dias's rule, I could die an honorable death. One far better than that of serving under vain fools like those at the capital or in Kasdeks. With the end of the war I had hoped for days of peace, but internally the country was falling into ruin, and the nobles seemed to clamor for further war in spite of that.

I couldn't handle it, so I had come here. I thought that at least here I could die fighting for something I believed in.

Yet even with these thoughts in my head, Lord Dias had gone to great lengths to prepare for me high quality equipment made from dragon materials. The spear I practiced with was made with a dragon's fang, and the armor I wore—the chest piece, the gauntlets, the belt, and the shin guards—had been crafted from its shell. I wasn't sure if the nobility, and perhaps even the royal family themselves, could ever prepare equipment this valuable.

I had been a fool to come here with the intention of dying at all, but even then, Lord Dias put his faith in this very fool. His investment in me was a sign of his high expectations. And if he was going to put all this faith in me, then I was

going to live up to it. That meant that death was no longer an option. I would live, and I would keep living, and I would ensure I was second in strength only to Lord Dias himself, so that I could best support him.

I could see that Lord Dias was always thinking about how to be a truly excellent lord, and what he could do to develop his region and grow his population. Naturally, that was what all lords should have aimed for, but the only one really doing it within the kingdom's lands was Lord Dias.

And that's why I... Huh? What's going on? Lord Dias, Lady Alna, and the baars are all leaving their yurt. At this time of day? That look on Lord Dias's face tells me that this is serious.

"Lord Dias, is something the matter?" I asked. "It's almost sunset. Why are you heading out at this time?"

"Alna sensed something," replied Lord Dias. "Twelve people from the east. One of them is so weak they might die any second, so we're going to check on them before it's too late."

Lady Alna, Dias's fiancée—even though she spent every night with him—was capable of unbelievable magic I'd never even heard of in the royal capital. One such spell was the ability to sense living creatures. It required a little in the way of preparation, but once readied she could sense who was coming and their number. Although the accuracy dropped depending on the distance, it was nonetheless a most astonishing and convenient magic. I had been surprised to learn that she had detected me both times I had come to the plains.

"Shall I go with you? For all we know, it could be bandits."

"No, I want you to remain here," answered Lord Dias. "We're expecting parcels from the onikin village, and I want you here to receive them. If something strange is afoot, I'll send Alna and the baars back, and it'll be your job to protect them if I do."

"Understood. Leave it to me."

With that, I clenched my spear in one hand and stamped its butt to the ground, while I put my other hand on my chest in a salute. Lord Dias nodded in reply, then walked off towards the east. Lady Alna's horn glowed slightly as they

walked, and then she, Lord Dias, and the baars all vanished into thin air.

Wow, that magic will never cease to amaze me...

I didn't know what enemy we might be up against, but I was going to be ready for anything. I made sure my belt was on properly, readied my sword at my waist, and strapped my bow across my shoulder. Then, spear in hand, I went for a light jog while I waited for Lord Dias's return—I wanted to make sure I was warmed up in case I needed to spring into action.

Hm? What's that at the edge of the plains? Lord Dias? He's back much sooner than I was expecting. The delivery from the onikin still hasn't even gotten here. What happened out there?

I watched as he drew nearer, and it didn't look like the group he'd encountered were bandits after all. It just wasn't possible. I mean, Lord Dias was carrying one of them on his back. That person must have been the one on the verge of death whom Lord Dias had mentioned. He'd hurried back here to ensure they got help.

She really does look like she's going to die at any minute. Wait, all those people, they're...

The group Lord Dias had found—the one on his back and the others following behind him—were all elderly women. They were dressed in ragged cloth with stoles wrapped around their faces, from which their white hair wavered in the wind.

I heard later that the women were all refugees. The second son of Duke Kasdeks had incited an uprising in the region, and they'd been forced to leave. The son had raised forces to bring down his father and older brother, and he was able to recruit many of the domain's soldiers and citizens to his side.

Meanwhile, Duke Kasdeks and his first son had used money and connections to hire mercenaries who had been out of work since the end of the war. They'd brought all these forces in from throughout the country and put up a resistance, and the ensuing battle raged at a considerable scale.

As the uprising continued, villages were left without enough to make ends

meet, and one such village was running out of resources fast. To try and stop the bleeding, this group of elderly women had been evicted from the village, and from the Kasdeks region entirely.

The leader of the group, Grandma Maya, was talented in the ways of divination, and had searched for a path to survival. Once found, she and her group had walked and walked, without food or water, until finally they had made it to the land of Lord Dias.

They had never once given up looking for a way to keep going, and now that they had arrived at our yurts, Alna sat them down on the grass while she served them herbal tea, which they sipped slowly. Even the woman who was now too weak to walk managed to take a sip of Alna's concoction. Between the tea and much-needed rest, some color slowly returned to her deathly pale face, and it seemed that she was through the worst of it.

When all the old women had been seen to, Dias ran over to me, beaming.

"We did it, Klaus!" he cried. "Twelve new subjects in one fell swoop!"

"Lord Dias, you're really going to take them in, aren't you? And as subjects, no less. They *are* refugees, so we're free to do with them as we please, but I'm not sure how productive they'll be..."

"But they're amazing, Klaus! They're all over seventy, and Grandma Maya is ninety! That kind of life span is like a miracle. I hope they'll teach us their secrets!"

"Even sixty is considered a long life, yes, and you're telling me they're all over *seventy*? That just means they could all die at any moment. They could just not wake up tomorrow and it wouldn't be a shock, Lord Dias. That's why they were forced to become refu— Oh, he's not even listening."

Lord Dias looked elated, filled with unbridled joy as he dashed into the storehouse and tried to bring out as much of the yurt supplies as he could in both arms.

"W-Wait, Lord Dias! Let me help! I'll be right back, so just wait and don't force it all out like that or the storehouse will collapse!"

I quickly unequipped all my armor and weapons, and ran over to join Lord

Dias. He was kind and generous, and that was the best thing about him, but I daresay that sometimes he was perhaps *too* generous!

Listen to me, my lord! All things in moderation! Moderation, I say!

Gazing at the Yurts—Dias

Three days had gone by since we'd picked up Grandma Maya and her party, and I looked out at our growing campsite. There was the yurt that Alna and I lived in, then Klaus's yurt, the storehouse, the livestock pen, the privy, the well, and now the three yurts that the elderly lived in. Grandma Maya had also suggested we build an assembly hall, so I put up one of the bigger yurts to serve that purpose.

Our collection of yurts wasn't as big as the onikin village quite yet, but it sure was a grand sight to see all our yurts there next to one another. I couldn't help thinking that maybe we were big enough now to actually call ourselves a village.

But if we are that big now, what would be a good name? Maybe something easy to remember, like Grasslands Village, or Yurt Village... Er, no, neither of those feels any good.

I thought about it for a while, but I didn't come up with any good ideas, so I figured it would be best to ask around for opinions. Francis and Francoise were by my side grooming themselves, so I told them we were off, and we headed to the assembly hall to see Alna and Grandma Maya. Alna and the old women were all together there doing some work with the baar wool.

You see, once you sheared the wool from the baars, that didn't mean you could just use it right away. You had to wash it and loosen it up, then you had to weave it. It was quite a bit of work, and it took a good deal of time, and because we didn't have the manpower to do it ourselves, Alna and I had been trading the raw wool with the onikin village.

But when Grandma Maya and her troupe saw the wool, they thought it was beautiful and very high quality, and they said it'd be a waste just to trade it like that. They told me we should process it so it's worth more. They also said that if we turned it into yarn they could make things right here.

Turned out the old women had been doing that kind of thing back at their last village too. There were things they wanted to weave and make, and above all,

they didn't like the idea of just living off my land without giving something back. Grandma Maya said that she and all her friends wanted to contribute to the domain.

Alna thought the same kind of thing. She was of the opinion that when people got to a certain age, it was best that they keep active, or they'd get sick or grow senile. With that in mind, we decided to leave the processing of the baar wool to Grandma Maya. She and her friends turned the wool into thread, and we could use that for trade or even making stuff for ourselves as we saw fit.

I still wanted to be able to trade with the onikin, so I told Grandma Maya to make sure that a set amount of the wool was saved for that purpose. But she and her friends had permission to work, and they were all smiles. "We'll do a great job; you just wait and see," they said.

Once they all finished breakfast, they gathered together in the assembly hall and they got to work on the baar wool; washing it, loosening it, and spinning it into thread on the spinning wheels that we got from the onikin. The days were busy for them, but they enjoyed it.

As we got closer to the assembly hall, I could hear Grandma Maya and everyone singing, and the gentle sound of it drifting from the yurt warmed my heart.

Oh thread, oh thread, oh thinning thread.

Spin on down and wind on up.

You are a treasure for our beloved Lord.

Oh thread, oh thread, oh ever thinning thread.

Spin and fasten, fill with love.

Bring our beautiful Lady her child.

It was a song they sang over and over as they worked. Now, I wasn't sure I was totally on board with *all* of the lyrics, but I wasn't going to disturb them all by butting in with my opinions, so I kept my mouth shut as I rolled up the door into the assembly hall.

Today, they were weaving, and the clacking of the spinning wheels filled the

yurt. Everyone was humming or singing, and Alna, Grandma Maya, and all the ladies looked happy. It was a peaceful sight. After a little while, they all noticed that I'd arrived, so they slowed down a little and eventually came to a stop.

"Something on your mind, young Dias?" asked Grandma Maya. "You look slightly troubled. It's not like you."

The old woman nodded as she spoke. She had a wrinkly face and a hawklike nose.

I don't know if I'm "young" anymore, but...

"Well, we've got more people here and more yurts now, so I was thinking we can call ourselves a village. I was trying to think of names, but I couldn't come up with anything good. Do you guys have any ideas?"

All the old women looked at one another and then started throwing out their different ideas.

Dias Village? Nope, I ruled that out straightaway. Same with Dias Alna Village. I wasn't big on Love Village either...

That was when Klaus arrived. He suggested Dragon Slayer Village, but that one was a real mouthful. I turned that one down on the spot.

I guess this naming thing is harder than I thought. Maybe we just call it Francis Village?

But then I noticed that Alna had an idea.

"How about Iluk Village? 'Iluk' means 'first' in the ancient tongue. Easy to understand, and it has a nice ring to it too."

Iluk Village... Iluk Village. I like the sound of that.

I looked around the assembly hall. Klaus looked a bit unsatisfied and grumpy, but everyone else looked like they were in agreement. So it was decided: the first settlement in the Nezrose Domain was named Iluk.

I'd had nothing when I first got here, but now I had some subjects, we had a village, and we'd even started making products like thread. I figured that was pretty good progress. I really wanted to keep up this momentum, spread more

villages across the land, and see them filled with the same peaceful and lively sights as this one.

Hm? What's this? Why's everyone standing up all of a sudden? Is work over for the day? Oh, it's customary to throw a party and celebrate when you establish a village for the first time? A banquet?

I didn't know that was a thing people did. Not that I was against the idea. I was all for it, in fact. I wanted everyone to have a good time.

The banquet we held was, all things considered, a pretty humble affair.

"We'll sing and dance all night!" cried Grandma Maya.

The old women had all been working since morning, but none of them looked tired in the slightest as they clapped and sang together.

"What? Me? Dance? With Francis and Francoise?!"

Klaus was pulled in by everyone and danced around the campfire with the two baars.

"We'll have to look at getting some alcohol," said Alna. "Food isn't as big of a problem anymore, but it's not a banquet without something to drink. Me? Yeah, of course I drink. I'll drink a big bottle all on my own in a single night."

I was kind of shocked that a girl so young was so good at holding her liquor. But even without the booze, we all enjoyed the herb-roasted meats that Alna cooked up for us, and as the sun set and the skies grew dark, everyone stayed up and kept celebrating until the sun showed up on the other side of the horizon.

Maybe our banquet was missing some things, but our quiet and simple party was still a lot of fun. Everybody was so happy that letting it end didn't even cross our minds. The next day, everyone woke around noon looking sleepy, but they wanted to keep the party going, and they wondered aloud when we'd get to do it again.

Another banquet, huh?

I figured that if something good happened, like establishing another village, or

if we all discovered a way to develop our lands and grow our population, that we'd get another chance to throw a banquet. I told everyone as much and, in that instant, the light in their eyes changed.

Everyone looked completely different from when I'd asked for their opinions about the village's name earlier. There was a fervent enthusiasm in their eyes now. I was very happy about it, of course, but I couldn't quite grasp it either.

"All right, all right," I told them all. "Let's work out what we have to do to raise our population and develop Iluk Village. Let's put our heads together and come up with some ideas."

The Next Day, by the River

A day had passed since we'd all gotten together to discuss how to increase the domain population. I sat by the river, watched the flowing water, and patted Francis and Francoise. I started with their heads, pushing their wool down as I ran my hand from their necks to their backs. I was strong and rough with Francis, but gave Francoise a softer touch, especially around her stomach. Not that I was bullying Francis or anything; it was just how he liked to be patted.

I'd first found out that Francoise was pregnant about a month ago, and though you still couldn't see it, you could feel a little bulge around her belly, so I wanted to be careful. Baar pregnancies were about five months long, so it looked like Francis and Francoise's baby baar would arrive sometime in the fall.

But what will Iluk Village and this domain look like when fall comes around? Will I have more subjects? Will we have a new village? Will we lose subjects?

Ugh, I don't really want to think about that last one.

Everyone had put their heads together and come up with ideas for gathering more people. Klaus suggested putting up a "looking for residents" sign near the domain border, and Alna suggested that we pay a visiting merchant to spread the word for us. I was open to anything, really, so I said yes to both, and Klaus got to work immediately.

That said, neither suggestion would net us new residents anytime soon, and they weren't a guaranteed success either. I couldn't help wondering if there was some way to gather a group of new subjects more quickly and definitively. Grandma Maya had suggested one particular way we could do exactly that, but I'd shot her idea down straightaway. It was the most effective way to up our population quickly, but I just wasn't big on the idea...

"What is it, young Dias? Did you call for me?" asked Grandma Maya. She appeared out of nowhere, without so much as a whisper.

"What the?! Grandma Maya?! No, I, uh, I didn't say a word," I stammered.

I froze out of shock, and even stopped patting the baars. Neither were ready for me to stop yet, so they both started butting me in the ribs with their horns as Grandma Maya spoke.

“Oh, is that so? I got the sense you were calling for me, but I suppose it was just an old woman’s imagination playing tricks. In any case, I wanted to ask about yesterday, young one. Why won’t you accept slaves in your domain? Sell some of your dragon materials and you can buy a great many slaves in one fell swoop. You’ll have subjects in an instant, no? So why do you resist?”

That was Grandma Maya’s idea: that we buy slaves. We lived in an age of slavery, and all sorts of people fell into it: those sold as youths, those who had committed serious crimes, those burdened with great debt, and trafficked immigrants. They were all nothing more than tools, enduring a living hell until the day they died. Slaves could be bought quite cheap, and I could easily buy enough to fill an entire village.

“I don’t like the idea of slaves,” I said. “I can’t even stand the idea of slavery. I met enslaved soldiers on the battlefield, and it broke my heart. They were deathly thin and malnourished to the point that they hadn’t even been able to grow into their bodies. They had no hope for the future, and not even the will to go on living. Some threw themselves onto our blades willingly, wishing only to ease their suffering by way of death.”

“But you could be kind to your own slaves, young Dias. It is as simple as that, is it not?”

“It’s the buying of them that’s the problem,” I replied. “When you pay a slave trader for their wares, they need to get new slaves to replace the old. And it will only get worse if they know that they can sell their slaves in our domain. The kind of people who get into human trafficking aren’t your usual law-abiding citizens. I intend to completely ban the owning and selling of slaves within the Nezrose Domain.”

“I see, I see. Well then, what a relief,” said Grandma Maya with a raspy chuckle. “I’m so glad you’re against slavery. So are all of us, really. Ah, that’s so good to hear.”

I couldn’t believe what she was saying.

“Wait, what? Why would you even suggest that we buy slaves if you’re against slavery?”

“I knew that at some point or another, as your domain grew, that someone was going to bring up the topic of slaves. This worried me, so I wanted to steer you towards an antislavery position before such a thing happened. That was the plan, but it would seem it’s entirely unnecessary.”

“You, uh, you didn’t have to do it in such a roundabout way. You could have just told me.”

I mean, Alna had seen that all the ladies were blue when she’d done her soul appraisal, so I was open to accepting all of their suggestions anyway.

“Well, yes, you’re probably right, young Dias. I apologize. I suppose all that business with Kasdeks left me feeling rather bleak, so I panicked.”

“Kasdeks... You mean the domain lord in the next region over? Klaus said that he was awfully cruel too.”

“And he was telling you the truth. The lord and his eldest son have both professed to slave hunting as a hobby. They are horrible, contemptible people. And Kasdeks’s second son is no better; he is known for the harem of female slaves at his beck and call. When we lived in the domain, every day we heard horrible tales of how slaves were treated.”

Grandma Maya kept her gaze on me, but there was a quiet wavering in her eyes as she spoke. I didn’t look away when I shared my thoughts with her. I declared, plain and simple, “Such a thing will never happen here.”

The words brought a satisfied smile to Grandma Maya’s face, and after thanking me, she slowly hobbled back to her yurt. I watched her go, and I thought about what she said, then got back to patting Francis and Francoise.

But look, guys, butting me in the ribs while I’m talking to Grandma Maya, that’s not okay, you hear? I’m going to be covered in bruises come tomorrow! I’m sorry I got caught up in the conversation, but you can’t treat a guy like this.

All right, all right, I get it. I’m patting, I’m patting. Happy now?

I didn’t have any plans for the day, so I figured I’d spend the rest of it keeping

the baars happy. That was when I noticed Alna walking over. She'd told me she was going to have her hands full with chores all day, so I wondered...did we have uninvited guests again?

"Dias, the merchant has finally come," she announced. "One of the onikin just came to tell me that they'll come by once they've finished over there."

I didn't know much of anything about the merchant who visited the onikin village. After all, when I'd tried asking Alna about them in the past she'd responded with only a stony silence. But I guessed that they came from outside of the kingdom. In any case, whoever they were, I'd been aching to make a connection with a merchant. Not only so we could trade for food and necessities, but so we could ask them to do some advertising for us too.

Naturally, that meant I'd have to talk to them myself. Francis and Francoise didn't like that their patting was being interrupted again, and they showed me by butting me even harder. It hurt!

"We have some time before the merchant arrives," said Alna, chuckling at the clear irritation on the baars' faces, "so hang out with Francis and Francoise until then. I'll go and tell Klaus and the others."

"Thanks, Alna. Sorry I can't help now, but I'll help you out with your chores once we're done with the merchant."

Alna smiled and took off back towards the yurts, and I went back to the task of patting Francis and Francoise until they were finally satisfied. I patted and patted, and just as my arms were starting to go dead, I noticed a caravan coming from the direction of the onikin village. I could hear the clunk of its wheels and the neighing of the horses pulling it along, and the cargo bumping around inside as it neared. I stood up and stretched, and looked more closely.

Two big black horses were pulling along a large caravan covered with a tarp and surrounded by guards. There was a bell hanging from the caravan that rang as it swayed. I guessed that was a way to let people know that the merchant was nearby.

The carriage got closer and closer, and as it did I couldn't take my eyes from it. In fact, I was shocked stiff. I couldn't stop staring at the person sitting at the front of the carriage holding the reins.

What in the world am I looking at...?

They wore brown clothes that looked to be made from wild beast leather, big boots, and a hat that seemed far too small for their head...which was that of a frog. They had big, bulging eyes, a giant mouth that stretched across their face, and green skin.

This wasn't just a person who happened to resemble a frog. It was an *actual frog*, dressed in clothes and driving a caravan. I couldn't take my eyes off them.

That was when Klaus ran up by my side to see what was going on. "Wha-huh?!" he cried.

He froze just like I had at the sight of the approaching merchant. Grandma Maya and her friends were no different. They all came out to see what wares the merchant had brought, and they let out cries of surprise, chatting among themselves as the merchant carriage neared.

"Ah, he's finally here," remarked Alna, oblivious to our reactions. "The frogman merchant."

A frogman? Frogmen exist? Couldn't you have given me a little warning, Alna? I almost had a heart attack.

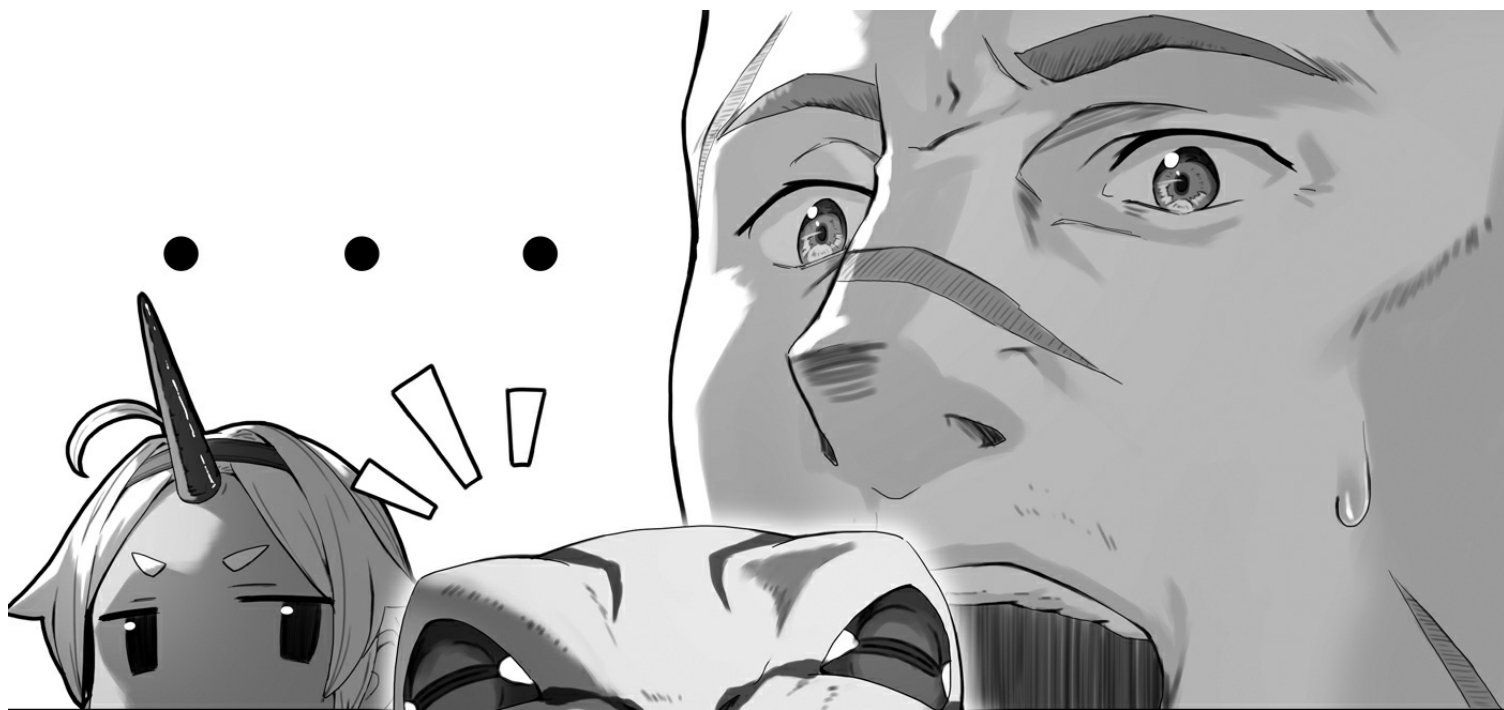
The frogman brought his carriage towards all our shocked faces and brought it to a halt in front of us. He reached out with a webbed hand and gave his horses a pat, then stepped down from his caravan and stood with his guards. Then he took off his hat and bowed politely.

"I reckon y'must be the dragon slayer I've been hearin' about. It's an 'onor t'meet you. Brought all sorts'a rare wares with me today, so 'ere's t'profitable business f'both of us, eh?"

The frogman talked with a unique ribbit that sounded distinctly masculine. He introduced himself as Peijin, and I shook hands with both him and his guards, who were dressed head to toe in iron armor. I was surprised by the damp feel of Peijin's hand, just as I was the thick fur covering that of his guards. With introductions out of the way, I led them over to our storehouse.

"So, Sir Dias, let's get to it," Peijin ribbited as we stood in front of the storehouse. "Would y'mind showin' me the earth dragon materials y'gathered?"

The price o' monster materials depends on the size n'the quality, y'see, so I'd like t'inspect it before we get t'trading."



That sounded like the quickest way to get things going, but I glanced at Alna to be sure. Once I saw the white glow from her horn I nodded at Peijin, and Klaus and I ducked into the storehouse.

White means he doesn't mean us any harm.

The fact that he wasn't blue just pointed to the fact that he was a merchant trading wares throughout the lands, and his ultimate goal was sales. He wouldn't be any friendlier than he had to be. I was a little unsure of how much dragon material to trade with a merchant who wasn't blue, but at the same time, I didn't want Peijin thinking he'd come to my domain for nothing. I didn't want to give him too much or too little, so I settled on bringing out one fang, one claw, and a piece of shell.

I actually didn't even know how much dragon materials were worth, so I figured this was a good way to work things out as we went. Klaus and I then left the storehouse, me carrying the fang and the claw, and Klaus carrying the shell. When the guards saw us their jaws dropped, and Peijin stood in place with something of a twitchy smile on his face. He seemed to grow a darker shade of green.

Uh-oh. Did I do something wrong? Or have they figured out that I only brought out smaller pieces of the dragon? Maybe that put them off? But that's not the feeling I'm getting from them...

"Uh, Peijin?" I said. "This here's our earth dragon material, but...is something wrong? I feel like you *might* have gone slightly...pale?"

"Nothin' o'the sort!" said Peijin with a croak. "Heard y'felled it all on yer own, so I figured it'd be smaller, but judgin' by what y've got, this is a bigg'n, innit?"

"Is it? I don't really know. I haven't found any other monsters in these parts to compare. I've been out hunting to find others, but no luck as of yet."

"Y've been lookin' for another one already? Well I'll be... Now I don't mean t'sound rude, but did y'really slay an earth dragon all on y'lonesome?"

Peijin's moist-looking eyes narrowed as he observed me, and I could feel a certain doubt wafting from his guards too. They didn't look convinced.

But what are they so suspicious of? Ah, perhaps they think that I didn't slay the monster, but simply stumbled across its corpse and took it home with me? They're thinking that maybe I'm lying about the slaying part of it. I can see it on their faces.

I was actually hoping to find and hunt another dragon because I thought the materials might end up being unique to the Nezrose Domain. And if they did end up as a specialty local product, they'd be important for growing the domain further. With that in mind, I didn't want our merchant thinking I was lying about how I got our dragon materials.

Guess I'm just going to have to prove that I did what I said I did.

"Well, Alna was there when it happened, but I did the hunting on my own. As for how I killed it, I jumped up on its shell and broke through it with my axe. But I guess that's not easy to believe with words alone, so how about I show you? Klaus, would you grab a big piece of shell for me to break in half? I'm going to get my axe."

Klaus nodded and went back into the storehouse.

"Ribbit. Wha? Hm?" uttered Peijin. "Break in half? What, *what?!*"

My words seemed to surprise the frogman, and he let out a strange and surprised sound as I walked off to my yurt. When I came back with my axe, Klaus had already put the dragon shell on the ground for the display, so I promptly set my feet underneath me and gripped my axe in both hands.

After I'd hunted the earth dragon, we had realized that the hardest part to break down for processing was the shell. The onikin craftsmen had heated the shell then cooled it, and they repeated the process until they had created a fracture. Then they had taken to those fractures with a hammer and chisel to slowly break the shell into smaller pieces. It had been a lot of hard work.

Anyway, that process had taken a lot of effort, and a lot of fuel on top of that effort, and then power and stamina to top it all off. So I'd taken my axe and tried seeing if there was an easier way. Basically, I'd just hit the shell over and over again. What I'd been looking for were weak points, or sections that were more easily breakable.

It had taken me a few days of hitting the shell, but I found gaps in it, or maybe they were tendons, but in any case they were easier to hit, so I had focused on those parts. A few days after that, I'd worked out how to break the shell clean with a single strike. Once I'd broken it the first time, I kind of got the hang of it, so I'd helped the onikin break up the shell.

"What amazing axe work!" Klaus had cried upon seeing it at the time. "We've got to name it! Let's call it the Shell Crusher!"

Alna and some other onikin had been there to see it. They'd started calling it that, and before I knew it the whole onikin village was calling it the Shell Crusher. Every time I'd visited the village since, the kids would make a racket and ask me to do the Shell Crusher for them.

Long story short, that's how I had an impressive new trick to show Peijin and his guards. My axe flew down from high above, and a sharp crack rang through the air as it collided with the shell and broke it cleanly in half. The two halves then neatly tumbled to either side.

Peijin's mouth dropped open, and his long tongue rolled out from it. The two guards turned pale, and one of them even fell to his butt as his legs buckled underneath him.

"I learned this, uh, Shell Crusher technique after I fought the earth dragon, but I hope it shows you that I've got what it takes to bring one of them down. I hope to find another one and continue trading the materials, and I hope you'll be happy to help with that."

My statement was enough to jolt Peijin from his stunned silence.

"Y-Yessiree!" said Peijin, nodding repeatedly. "And I'll happily buy up all the shell y've got! And don't y'worry. Everything's at market price! You lot! Get the supplies out! On the double! I'mma need more than m'wallet t'pay f'r all this!"

Peijin's shout seemed to bring the guards out of their own shocked stupor, and they started bringing all sorts of stuff out of the back of the caravan. They stacked boxes and barrels and sacks in front of the storehouse.

Peijin had a piece of parchment in one hand that listed all his stock, and in his other he calculated prices with a tool he called an abacus. It was full of beads

that he busily flicked left and right as he counted up all the carriage stock. I could hear him muttering to himself, like, “This many copper coins, this many silver, this many gold,” as he added everything up, and then finally his face broke into a big smile.

“Phew! That oughta do it,” he said. “If this weren’t enough we’d be selling our rations too. Oi, bring ’em over, would’ya? Can’t sell ’em t’the Beastkin Nation, so we’ll have Dias buy ’em. They’re humans, after all.”

One of the guards unloading supplies nodded, and then he brought two children from the back of the carriage. They were very, very young. He stood them in front of the storehouse, and that’s when we saw the state they were in.

The two children were dressed in little more than tattered rags. They were gaunt and thin, and their skin and golden hair were filthy. Children usually had a certain sparkle to their eyes, but there wasn’t a trace of that in these two, and that alone told the story of their hardships. That look in their eyes showed me that we had something in common: they were orphans, just like me.

Peijin just said he couldn’t sell them. Does this mean that they’re products to him? Does he sell children? Are they slaves?

I felt a rage bubbling in me that I couldn’t even express, and disgust began to smolder in the pit of my heart. I ground my teeth together, trying to control myself, and then I felt Alna quietly place a hand on my arm.

“Calm down,” she said.

“My oh my,” muttered Grandma Maya, who saw the growing ire in me. “Young Dias, do try not to look so scary in front of children so young. Mr. Merchant, sir, our apologies but we do not purchase slaves. We beg your understanding.”

Peijin and his guards looked at me trembling with fury, and as Grandma Maya’s words sunk in, they went pale and were thrown into a confused panic. Peijin’s mouth opened and closed like a fish pulled from the water.

“W-W-Wait! I can explain! The two of ’em ain’t slaves!” he cried, trying to explain. “I was tryin’ t’help some folks and they ended up as merchandise, but if I didn’t take ’em with me in the first place, they’d be dead! I’m not a bad guy,

I'm nothin' like that, but it's a complicated situation..."

Peijin's skin broke out into a damp, oily sweat as he began to explain exactly what that complicated situation was.

The two children, both girls, were born on the same day, at the same time. They were twins. In the village where they were born, however, twins were seen as "harbingers of calamity and children of beasts." The day after they were born, the villagers gathered together and decided that the girls had to be executed.

The twins' parents were against this decision, so they took their children and fled, far from the village and into the depths of the neighboring forest where nobody could bother them. There, they started a life of their own, and a few days later they happened to meet Peijin and became his customers.

Unfortunately, living and surviving in the forest on their own was far more than the family could take, and it wasn't long before the two parents fell ill. They bought various medicines from Peijin, but none of them worked for long, and their sicknesses grew worse. As they hovered on the brink of death, they begged Peijin to look after their girls.

Peijin, however, refused. He was a merchant, not a charity worker, and his business was profit. It was for this reason that the parents asked that he take the girls as merchandise.

"I didn't much want t'take on any 'harbingers of calamity,' but I couldn't say as much t'their parents. The two of 'em were practically dead on their feet and shoving the last o'their money at me, so I promised I'd look after the girls 'til I could find someone t'buy 'em. But nobody wants t'buy 'children o'beasts,' do they?"

"So on we went," he continued, "all the money I got from their parents dried up, and now just feedin' the girls has me in the red. And then you came along, Sir Dias. I'd heard that y'humans make a habit o'buyin' n'keepin' slaves, so I just—I figured... Look, I didn't mean any harm, y'gotta believe me."

Peijin bowed apologetically, over and over.

I guess given the circumstances, he didn't have much choice...

Given that he really wasn't a bad guy and my anger wasn't warranted, I bowed my head and said sorry myself. Then Peijin bowed even lower and said that no, no, actually *he* was more sorry, so we stood there bowing and apologizing until Alna poked me in the back.

"Peijin isn't lying," she whispered, just loud enough that only I could hear her. "And those two girls are a clean blue."

I looked at the two girls in front of the storehouse, who hadn't so much as moved or made a sound even with all the commotion going on in front of them. Their eyes shivered with uncertainty.

Before the war started, looking after kids like this was just a part of daily life at the orphanage. Looking after these two wouldn't be all that different, really.

So I made up my mind, and I looked back at Peijin.

"I can't bring myself to agree with the idea of slavery," I said, "so I am against buying slaves. But I will make an exception when it comes to adopting children with no place left to go. Consider this a special case. As for you being in the red, I'll pay for whatever they cost until now with some extra dragon materials. How does that suit you?"

Peijin's eyes went wide with surprise and then he smiled.

"Yep! Righto!" he said with a nod.

At the end of our exchange, I found myself welcoming two new subjects—no, two new family members into the fold.

Heading Out of Iluk Village—Peijin-Do

“Ribbit! Ribbit! Been a while since a catch like that Sir Dias! Nothin’ better’n honest, upright clientele! Nothin’, I tells ya!”

Trade at Iluk Village had gone marvelously, and while I hadn’t made much in the way o’profit, per se, I’d gotten rid o’some unnecessary cargo and gotten a hold o’some fine loot. Y’weren’t gonna see me complainin’. I was sitting at the head of the caravan with m’reins in m’hands, and I felt fantastic.

We headed straight west and outta the plains towards the Beastland Kingdom. I just couldn’t wait t’hear what praise the Beast King would shower me with when I presented him with a dragon fang.

All the lords o’the plains until now had been idiots. Troublesome and dangerous, the lot of them. That Dias though, I didn’t have t’worry about him one bit, nope. I’d have good news f’r the Beast King, yes I would.

“Are you sure that was okay, Peijin-Do? Dias killed a dragon on his own. Won’t that cause trouble for the Beast King...or more importantly, us?”

It was one of the bearkin guards that spoke. At some point he’d taken off his helmet, probably to air out his furry head n’ears.

“He’s a brute all right, but it ain’t no thang no matter how strong he is,” I croaked. “That Dias is as good-natured as he is dense, yep. Great f’r friends and family, but he ain’t standing up t’the king. No drive, I tells ya. No ambition. He seems plenty satisfied with his little piddly village in the grasslands, and that’s all he wants.”

“You think so? I think you’re right that he’s a kindhearted one, but it’s rare for a human to be so against slavery. On top of that, you saw how enraged he was for those twins, and they’re not even human.”

“Can’t imagine that the type of guy who’d adopt those twins will go about starting a kerfuffle, though. Dias is gonna be a safe and secure neighbor, yes he is. And people like him do their best work f’r others. He’d make a fine blade f’r

the beastkin or the Beast King, I tell you what.”

“Wait, you aren’t even a beastkin. You’re more like a fishkin if anything...”

“What?! If lizardmen are beastkin then so’re frogmen! So one of us is aquatic! So what? That’s discrimination!”

Dumb bearkin, spoutin’ stupidity. I should hit him with the horse lash! None o’this laughin’ at the other animalkin, just do y’damned job!

“Can you call a lizardman a beastkin, though?” mused the guard. “I feel like the hair part makes humans closer to beastkin than lizardmen...”

I let out a long sigh.

“Y’segregatin’ and discriminatin’! Judgin’ others based on whether they’ve got hair or not?! Y’r actin’ like a human noble, y’hear!”

“Hey now! That’s going a bit far, isn’t it?”

“Ribbit! That reminds me, actually! One reason we don’t have t’fear that Dias is because he don’t act like the nobility, no sir! He’s rougher ’round the edges; he doesn’t know the customs o’the upper classes. He won’t make any demands, and he won’t go makin’ any bribes neither. He’s an honest type; nothing like them nobles at the kingdom. Did y’notice that when he introduced himself he didn’t mention his family name or reputation? All of it’s the reason that someone as strong as him got put out t’pasture in the plains.”

Lots of humans wanted power and authority. They wanted the reputation that came with a strong family name. But Dias didn’t mention his title, even though he was lord of his own domain.

“I see. But he’s a giant of a man, and I could smell human blood on that axe of his. When you factor in his dislike of slavery, is it possible he killed some slave-loving noble and was driven out of the capital?” asked the guard.

“Nah, if he did that he’d be on death row, though he might’ve done somethin’ similar. But if he’s an enemy o’the nobility, that makes him a friend of ours. And with him in the plains we might see less o’them idiots comin’ t’kidnap our women and children. If he gets into it with the nobles, we might even want t’help him.”

The answer seemed t'satisfy the guard, and he nodded and got back t'work. There was one thing I didn't tell him though, and that was about the mountain north of the plains. If Dias grew his village and his domain, then in time he'd be lookin' at spreadin' north. The mountain up there was full o'monsters and their nests, but f'r someone as strong as Dias they'd be easy huntin'. And that'd make him king o'the mountain.

The important thing of it was this: that mountain was thought t'be full of ore and treasures, and if Dias took it f'r himself, then as his trade partner I'd get a taste'f it. That, or the mountain would be swallowed up by the Beastland Kingdom if the king so decreed it. Either way, it was best f'r me t'play nice with both sides.

I wasn't about t'tell anyone this, but in my heart I was doin' it all because if I played my cards right and did the right negotiatin' between Dias and the Beast King, then I'd be able t'take a tiny sliver o'profits f'r myself while they were goin' back n'forth.

In any case, we were almost outta the plains, and I could see the border to the Beastland Kingdom. We were almost there.

Iluk Village After the Trade—Dias

We gave Peijin the dragon material, ordered what we needed for his next visit, and we arranged for him to spread the word that we were looking for residents. That brought our first dealings with Peijin to a close. There were a lot of surprises in the experience, but I thought it all worked out pretty good for a first trade. We got ourselves a whole lot of supplies, that was for sure.

Peijin still had places to be once things were done, so we helped him with his preparations, then saw him off. Once Peijin's caravan had disappeared over the horizon, I walked over to the storehouse along with Francis and Francoise.

Alna, Klaus, and Grandma Maya were all still standing where I'd left them along with all our new supplies and the two twins. The girls were still expressionless, and both had yet to utter even a single word. I was a bit surprised, honestly—Alna, Klaus, and Grandma Maya all had hesitant looks on their faces. I guessed they weren't good with kids.

"Klaus, could you put this away for me?" I started, passing him my axe as I walked over towards the twins.

As soon as I got to them, I hefted them up into my arms. I made sure to keep them at head height so I could look them in the eyes as I spoke.

"How old are you two? Three? Four? Well, let me tell you straight: you're too thin, so as of today you're going to eat your fill. Alna's a great cook, so it's going to be delicious, I promise. Oh, yeah, my name is Dias. What are your names? Will you tell me?"

The two girls said nothing. They were still expressionless, and their green eyes didn't waver in the slightest. But that didn't mean I was about to give up. They were going to realize soon enough that I'd looked after a lot of orphans and I wasn't one to let up easily. So I kept on talking: "How do you guys like to play? What's your favorite food? And what are your names?" I asked them about their favorite songs, their favorite fairy tales, and then I asked them what their names were again. I never let up my smile, and I always looked them in the eyes

as I kept on speaking.

“Why the silent treatment? Are you telling me that you don’t have names? Well, if that’s the case, how about I give you some? I’m pretty good at naming people, you know. I’ve done it before, so I’ll think up some good ones for the two of you. Let’s see now... What’s a good name? You’re both girls, so something cute, maybe?”

That was when I noticed a reaction in their eyes. I knew one thing for sure: these twins’ parents had loved their daughters so much they’d been willing to throw everything away to save them, and the girls surely loved their parents in kind. That meant that they treasured the names their parents had given them.

“No!” cried one of the girls.

“We don’t need new names!” cried the other.

Hearing them speak was a huge relief, and I could finally throw away the fake smile I’d plastered on and give them a real one. Neither of them had moved or talked until now, and I’d wondered: was it the despair of having lost their parents, or was it that they didn’t want us strangers getting too close to them? Seemed to me that it could have been both.

When kids got that way, they holed up inside of themselves, and their fear of the outside world meant that they’d never leave the mental shell where they hid. I’d seen a few kids like that in my time and, well, the results were usually tragic. That’s why I was glad: these girls had loved their parents enough that it helped them break out of that shell. I had to hold back my urge to praise them and keep myself on topic.

“Well then, I guess you don’t like that idea, huh? Could you tell me what your names are, then? We won’t know what to call you otherwise, and it’ll make things pretty hard for everyone.”

“Senai.”

“Ayhan.”

“Senai and Ayhan! Wow, you’ve already got wonderful names! Thanks for telling me! All right then! So me and that guy over there, Klaus, we’re going to tidy up all these supplies here. While we’re doing that, you’re going to head off

with Auntie Alna and Grandma Maya to wash yourselves in the river and change into some clean clothes. I'd also really like you to eat something. Can you do that for me?"

The two girls looked over at Alna and the others, and though they didn't look too happy about it, they nodded all the same.



I could tell they'd be okay now, so I put them gently back down on the ground and looked over at Alna and Grandma Maya, who both appeared shocked. I asked them if they could take care of the girls like I'd mentioned, and though they both looked like they had thoughts they wanted to air, they clearly figured they should do as I'd asked first. They took Senai and Ayhan by the hands and led them away from the storehouse while they spoke to them in kind and gentle voices.

As I watched them walk away, Klaus came over to me, grinning as he carefully held my axe.

"I'm very surprised, Lord Dias," he said. "I never knew you were so good with kids."

"I probably never told you before, but before the war I took care of kids at the orphanage. What I did with the girls was just one technique I developed during that time. I was pretty much like a parent, and I did all sorts of things, including taking care of a newborn baby."

"Wow, that's really something. And that newborn was one of the kids you named?"

"Yep, them and some others. Some of them wanted to get rid of their old names, and some couldn't remember them. They all had their reasons or circumstances, and I probably named about ten in all. I hope they're all in good health."

"What happened to them when you went off to fight in the war?"

"There was one other guy who looked after the kids with me, and he stayed, so I left things in his hands. But I don't know where he is or what he's doing anymore..."

"If he's healthy, then perhaps some day he'll hear word of your work and come here to see you."

"Yeah, that'd be nice. Anyway, let's get to putting away these supplies, yeah? Based on the list Peijin gave us, it's quite the haul, and if we don't hurry, we'll be working into the night."

Klaus and I promptly went about putting all the supplies away, which was mostly food. We didn't have the luxury of time, so we couldn't inspect all of it closely, but we still opened the boxes and barrels to make sure they matched the list Peijin gave us.

Dried meat, dried fish, and even dried grapes. We had ten bags of flour and a barrel of walnuts still in their shells. That was a lot of walnuts! We also had a barrel of wine, and I put that at the back of the storehouse so Alna wouldn't find it. Then there were tanned animal skins, ore, and three barrels of salt. We also had some sausage and cheese, so we'd be able to feed Senai and Ayhan something nutritious.

We put everything that wasn't food in the back of the storehouse, and we put everything that needed to be eaten before it spoiled near the front. We still had a lot of dragon materials, and the storehouse was starting to look pretty packed. It looked like we might need to expand it in the near future.

All right, looks like that's everything on the list. Hm? What's with that small box?

It didn't have any number written on it like the other items on the list, and everything else on the list was packed away. I looked back from the list to the box, and I tilted my head in confusion. Then Klaus came up and looked at the list, and then at the box, and then he tilted his head just like I did.

"What's that box, Lord Dias?" he asked.

"Beats me. It must have been part of what Peijin unloaded, but it's not on this list. Let's just check out what's inside of it, yeah?"

Klaus nodded in agreement, and then took it in hand. "Just to be on the safe side, I'll open it."

He slowly and carefully took the lid off the box, and revealed its contents. Turned out it was an accessory box of some sort, because that's what it was filled with.

"Oh, I see," I said. "All the accessories were put in this box and, uh...I guess the reason they're not on the list is because they don't have any value?"

Klaus nodded and began to take each item from the box. Some were round, some were square, others were cylindrical. I'd never seen anything like it, and I didn't have the faintest idea how to use anything.

"Oh, I know what this is," announced Klaus. "It's a telescope. It uses special glass so when you look through it, you can clearly see things that are far away. In the capital, the knights used these. They're very expensive, and...oh. There's two of them."

Klaus took the two cylindrical objects from the box and showed them to me.

Wow, that sure sounds like a convenient tool.

"And this spinning needle inside of this glass case," continued Klaus, "is a compass, I think? At the moment it must be reacting to the other metal objects in the box. And hey, look, there's a map of the area. Looks way more detailed than the one I saw in the capital. Then we've got paper, pens, and ink. This bundle of thin steel rods bent at the ends must be for opening locks, I guess? Oh, and there are manacles in here too."

There didn't seem to be anything linking all of the tools together. I couldn't work it out. Wasn't it a bad idea to sell someone a bundle of lockpicks? Was it even okay for Peijin and his men to be carrying all of this stuff with them?

"There's a thin steel file in here, and a knife hidden in a belt buckle. This is, uh, this is all a bit dangerous, isn't it? As for the rest of this stuff, I've no idea. I couldn't tell you what it's made from or what it's for."

"All right, well, we'll keep all the dangerous stuff in this box and ask Peijin how we're supposed to use it the next time he comes around. But that telescope thingy sounds really handy, so let's make use of that straightaway. The map we can put in my yurt so everyone can take a look whenever they feel like it."

Klaus nodded and agreed, so we shut the lid on the box, and Klaus said he'd keep it in his yurt so the kids couldn't get to it.

We were finally done with all our tidying after that was settled, and that was right when Alna and Grandma Maya returned with the twins, who were both cleaned up. Naturally we didn't have clothes for them yet, so they were

wrapped in baar wool sheets which were tied around their waists with string. All the same, it looked a lot better than the rags they'd been wearing. They also had cloth wrapped around their feet like boots, and even though there wasn't much they could step on to hurt themselves here on the plains, I thought it was still a good idea.

All righty then, let's heft them back up into my arms and have another chat with...hm? Alna, why are you blocking me from getting to Senai and Ayhan?

"You might not have noticed it yet, but after moving all those boxes, you're filthy," Alna told me. "If you want to go near the girls again, you're going to have to wash up first."

I took a look at my clothes and my arms and, well, it was exactly like she said. So I told them I was going to go clean up, and I took Klaus and the baars with me to the river. As we walked off, I turned back and saw that Senai and Ayhan were opening up a little bit and smiling as they talked to Alna.

"That must be nice," I muttered to myself.

It really was nice, and I really was glad, and I wasn't at all jealous about being left out. I guess that was why Francis and Francoise chose that moment to rub up against me and comfort me.

"But I don't need it, guys," I said.

Baa!

Baa!

In the end, all I could do was accept what they were giving me.

The sun was setting by the time I got back to the yurt and changed into a clean set of clothes. I went over towards the storehouse with the baars and everyone was gathered there in front of it. Alna was at the center with Senai and Ayhan, and all of Grandma Maya's friends were surrounding them, going on and on about how adorable the two girls were. Only Grandma Maya stood at a slight distance, watching it all.

As I got closer, I saw that Alna was braiding Senai's hair. She told them that

she'd do Senai first, then Ayhan, and explained that braiding was important for girls on the plains. Alna had a box with her that she treasured. It was a wooden box with intricate decorations carved into it, and it was filled with various jewels.

Among those jewels were round, hooplike hair ornaments, and Alna threaded red string through the holes in some of them and made them a part of Senai's braids. The hair ornaments hung down from the end of Senai's hair, and Alna explained that this was the hairstyle for onikin women.

Braiding and undoing braids took a long time, but Alna did it every day after she washed her hair. Once, I'd asked her if she thought doing it was troublesome or annoying, but she told me that she'd done it since she was a kid and it was just part of everyday life for her. She'd never even thought about whether it was annoying or not.

"This is called a salyakut. It's a jewel that wards off illness. This one is called a safish, and the light it emits will protect you from enemies."

Alna carefully explained each hair ornament and what power it had as she went about braiding Senai's hair. Senai looked like she liked having her hair braided and she smiled. Ayhan, meanwhile, watched Alna's hands with fascination and listened carefully to each part of her explanation.

Alna told them kindly that she would braid their hair for them until they grew up, but then they'd have to do it themselves. The twins nodded. Now that they'd been cleaned up and they'd eaten, they were calmer and more receptive.

I felt really glad as I watched Alna and the girls sharing a moment, and that was when Francis and Francoise started rubbing up against me again.

Come on guys, I'm not jealous, I'm just happy they're all getting along. No, I'm serious. Really, I am!

I went back and forth with the baars like that for a while and then noticed Grandma Maya walk up to me. She looked a little troubled.

"You have noticed that they are not human, yes?"

Her question was so unexpected that it took me by surprise, and I frowned.

What is she talking about?

“Wait a second. However you look at them, they’re human kids,” I said.
“You’re not trying to tell me they’re monsters, are you?”

“That’s not what I mean. I’m just saying that they’re not human. Take a look at those ears. They are long and pointed, are they not?”

I looked more closely at the girls’ ears and it turned out Grandma Maya was right. They *were* pointed, and they *were* long.

But they’re just ears...

“Look, people are all a bit different in some way or another, and don’t you think that’s true of ears too?”

“I’m not talking about just their appearance. I feel a special energy from them; you could call it a presence. It’s been on my mind since that frogman called them ‘harbingers of calamity.’ Perhaps I am being overly sensitive, but you will keep an eye on them, won’t you, young Dias?”

“Hm. All right, I hear you. I wasn’t intending to let them out of my sight for the time being anyway, but I’ll be careful.”

“I’m counting on you, young dragon slayer. We’ll all be counting on you should anything happen. But then again, perhaps any would-be calamity would turn and flee the moment they faced a dragon slayer anyway.”

Grandma Maya cackled to herself and then joined the rest of her friends watching Senai and Ayhan, and she joined in on the conversation.

So, the girls might not be human, huh?

If it was just a matter of not being human, you could just as easily say the same thing about Alna and the onikin, but there was a little more to what Grandma Maya was trying to say. It was like maybe she was saying there was something special about the girls? But to me, they just looked like ordinary girls with long and pointy ears.

While I was thinking about it, Senai and Ayhan’s hair braiding finished and they seemed very pleased about it, or maybe they just liked the way the jewels shone in the light, but either way they jumped around and their hair ornaments

swung back and forth. They really were just ordinary little girls.

“Those braids look great on you, Senai and Ayhan,” I said.

I walked up to them and the girls took the braids in their hands.

“Look! Look! So pretty,” said one.

“And shiny!” said the other.

Their smiles were still a little awkward, but I was surprised by how much they’d opened up in such a short time. It was hard to believe they were the same girls who, just a few hours ago, were completely hidden in their own shells. I couldn’t help but think that maybe the most effective thing for all little girls was jewels and other beautiful ornaments.

“What’s this jewel, then?” I asked, kneeling down so I could make better eye contact.

The girls fumbled and mixed up the names but they did their best to explain their hair ornaments and it really brought a smile to my face. I just wanted to see them stay happy, so I asked them about this ornament and that one, and they went on trying to explain them all to me.

Alna then took two yellow jewels from her box that were a bit too big to be hair ornaments, and then she started working on them. She opened a hole in each one with a steel pin, smoothed them with some rough beast leather, and threaded some string through the holes. She was making pendants.

Once she was done, she put the pendants in the palm of her hand and she held them out towards Senai and Ayhan.

“Senai,” she said, speaking slowly and quietly, “in the ancient tongue, your name means ‘one as beautiful as the moon.’ Ayhan, your name means ‘the holy moon.’ Now, I don’t know why your parents gave you those names, but I’m sure that they had a deep attachment to the moon. That’s why I’m going to give you these ahi jewels. They’re said to carry the power of the moon. The round one is for you, Senai, and the crescent is for you, Ayhan. Take good care of them.”

Alna then put the pendants on both of the girls’ necks. The twins were overjoyed to receive the jewels and just as surprised to learn the meaning of

their names, but sadness began to creep in as they remembered their parents, and then they burst into tears.

Alna and I looked at one another and nodded. I took Senai in my arms and rubbed her head to soothe her while Alna hugged Ayhan and patted her back. I could feel the warmth in Senai as she wept, so I went on rubbing her head.

I never imagined the girls' names would be so meaningful. Alna said that in the ancient tongue... Wait. Ancient tongue?

"Hey, Alna," I said. "You mentioned the ancient tongue when we decided on a name for the village, so I thought it was just an onikin thing. Do you think Senai and Ayhan's parents had some connection to the onikin people?"

"I don't know," replied Alna, still patting Ayhan on the back. "The ancient tongue is no longer used, and we don't know when it was active. It only exists in old legends now. There might be people outside of the onikin who know it, but there might not. I couldn't tell you either way. Neither Senai or Ayhan are human, so perhaps in the past their race mingled or traded with the onikin."

Hm. First the girls' ears, and now the ancient tongue. I feel like I should keep both of those things in mind for the future.

Right then, Francis and Francoise started rubbing against me, bleating loudly.

"The baars want to comfort the children," said Alna, translating. "They said they're especially good with kids."

I let Senai down to her feet, and Alna put Ayhan next to her, and then we left them in Francis and Francoise's hands...or I suppose, more accurately, their wool. The baars rubbed up against the girls, who responded immediately to their soft wool and gripped the animals in hugs and buried their faces in them while they continued to cry. After a little time like that, both girls fell asleep right where they were.

I didn't know quite what to make of it, but I was mighty impressed by what those baars could do with their wool. It was a truly amazing thing. Ever since I'd started sleeping with baar mattresses and blankets, I'd been sleeping much better too.

The two baars, for their part, held their noses high as the girls slept on them

and shot me a glance that said, *"You see that? Told you so!"*

Me and Alna, and everyone else who was standing around at the time, we all chuckled to ourselves quietly so as not to wake the sleeping twins.

Dawn at the Yurt, Ten Days Later

I woke up to the light of the sun like always, but something didn't feel right. I moved my arms and quickly realized that the usual fluffy comfort I was used to was gone. I sat up, wondering where Francis and Francoise had gotten to, and took a look around. It was only after I looked at the bed by my side that everything clicked into place.

Francis and Francoise were sleeping in the bed next to mine, and Senai and Ayhan were clutching them tight, both still fast asleep. It brought a smile to my face. We all lived together now, and for ten days now, the twins had been sleeping with the baars. I couldn't help but chuckle to myself; I felt like that was more than enough time for them to get accustomed to sleeping in their own beds.

As I watched the girls, lost in their peaceful slumber, I thought about all the commotion that had filled the last ten days. There was the girls crying in the middle of the night, the bed wetting, the arguments as the girls got used to their new life, and then all their mischief and tantrums as they tested our limits. The girls had broken out into sudden fevers once too. All in all, we adults had really been put through the wringer with each new commotion.

We had our hands full looking after the girls, and our once peaceful and quiet village was suddenly bustling and loud. Still, nobody ever complained about it. And as the girls started to settle and get used to their new lives, their expressions softened and they started smiling more. Senai and Ayhan still missed their parents, but they'd taken the first steps to overcome that sadness. They talked a lot more, and everyone treated them like their own daughters.

The ones who got on best with Senai and Ayhan were Francis and Francoise. The two baars loved the girls like they would their own lambs, and the girls cozied right up to the baars in turn. It wasn't just a matter of them having comfy wool either; the baars comforted the girls when they cried, stayed with them

when they were lonely, and were kind of like a mix between parents and friends. It was a very special relationship.

When they found out that Francoise had a little baar growing inside of her, the twins were puzzled, and for a little while they weren't sure how they should approach Francoise. But thanks to Alna and Grandma Maya talking them through everything, they took care of Francoise and her little one as best they could by actively brushing her and looking out for her.

Next up, the girls got along best with Alna, but their friendliness towards the onikin girl was mixed with a healthy amount of fear. One reason for this was that Alna was strict when it came to discipline. It was a loving strictness, but she really let the girls have it with her scolding whenever they got up to mischief. Alna never shouted particularly loud or laid a hand on the twins, but she didn't have to—her low, deadpan voice when she gave an angry lecture scared even me, so I could only imagine how effective it was for Senai and Ayhan.

The other reason for the twins' fear was Alna's homemade herbal concoction. It had a powerful scent and it was mighty bitter, but Alna made them drink it every day, and the portions were nothing to sneeze at either. Onikin kids were brought up on the stuff, little by little, around the time they started to teethe, and it served as a way to increase their resistance to illness. Alna said it was an essential part of raising kids.

Well, Senai and Ayhan weren't onikin, and they'd never tasted anything like Alna's mixture in their lives. They'd never even had to drink any similar medicines. Alna knew this, and she knew the girls might get sick living in a new environment, so she figured she had to make up for lost time. She made Senai and Ayhan drink especially thick mixes of her herbal concoction every single day.

It wasn't just drinking either. Sometimes she *washed* them in the stuff to help them avoid skin infections, and the girls hated how it left them reeking of herbs. It always left them in low spirits.

But through it all, the girls still loved Alna thanks to her inherent kindness. Alna sang for them when she braided their hair or when they were taking afternoon naps. The girls loved her lullabies and gentle singing, and they were

always hounding her to sing for them.

Alna also made the girls their clothes and prepared their meals, so she was like a mother to them even at her own young age. Sometimes she even let them get away with a little selfishness.

After Alna, I guess it was a toss up between Grandma Maya's group and Klaus. All the old women just couldn't keep themselves from telling the girls how adorable and cute they were and spoiling them. Klaus, for his part, said that they were princesses on account of them being my and Alna's daughters, so he doted on them and was more respectful than was ever necessary. Senai and Ayhan were comfortable around the old ladies and Klaus, and they talked easily among themselves.

That left me, and, well, to be honest, I wasn't sure what to make of my relationship with the twins. We talked a lot, and we did chores together, and we went for walks, so it wasn't like we didn't get along. We *did* get along, but I didn't know if I could say that it made us *close* either. Yeah, sometimes they were selfish and self-centered around me, but they didn't break out into tantrums in front of me, and they seemed to hate it whenever I tried to look after them in some way or another. And I guess it *was* me who had forced them to tell us their names, so I could understand it, but I was admittedly a bit sad that they weren't warming up to me a little more.

Oop, can't just lie in bed thinking all day. I've got to make sure the girls are ready for the day ahead and start preparing for the morning.

I slapped myself on the cheeks to wake myself up and hopped to my feet. I said good morning to Alna, who was making breakfast, then I gently shook the baars and Senai and Ayhan to wake them. After that, I left the yurt, said good morning to Grandma Maya's group and Klaus, and headed for the well with the twins in tow.

At the well, Senai and Ayhan helped me take care of the baars, then I washed the still sleepy girls' faces with a hand cloth dipped in chilly well water, and we got ourselves ready for the day.

When we were finally done, breakfast was ready, and everyone in the village

got together to eat. Nobody had suggested we do things this way; we all just naturally gathered to spend the morning together. On sunny days we ate in the center of the village, which everyone just called the village square, and when the weather was bad we took our breakfast to the assembly hall.

It was cloudy outside, so we all gathered in the assembly hall this time. When I entered along with the girls, the big table in the center of the yurt was filled with a variety of food, and almost everything had walnuts in it. That was because of the fact that in our trading with Peijin, we'd received an awful lot of walnuts, but also it was simply because Senai and Ayhan had recently told everyone that they loved them.

And let me tell you: it really was *all* walnuts. There was herbal soup with walnuts, barbecued meat seasoned with crushed walnuts, accompanied by a paste made from boiled potatoes and walnuts. Yep, a whole lot of walnuts.

At this rate we're going to run out of walnuts in no time, so I'm going to have to think of a way to get us more of them...

That's what I ended up thinking about as I ate, and when I was done I watched Senai and Ayhan awkwardly take to their own food. They did their best to drink their soup even though they struggled to hold their spoons, and they packed their mouths full with everything else. It was an adorable sight, and for us adults, watching them like this was a quiet bit of fun to start the morning.

I say quiet, because if you stared at the girls for too long you ended up drawing their ire, so you had to be careful.

Hm? Why are the girls staring outside all of a sudden?

"Dias, someone is coming," said Alna, her horn lighting up. "It's one person and an animal, coming from the east. Given the pace, I think it's someone on horseback."

I sighed. Yet another person from the east. I didn't much want to think about what they wanted.

"How fast are they moving?" I asked.

"They're not in a rush, but they're coming directly at us. It won't take them long to get here."

If that were the case, then I figured it was better us going to see them than letting them get too close to us.

All right, well I have to go, but Grandma Maya and her crew will have to stay, as well as Senai and Ayhan. I'll also have Klaus stay here, so me, Alna, and the baars will head out.

Just as I was about to speak, Francis and Francoise started to bleat.

"Dias, the baars said they'll stay here," said Alna, translating for them. "They don't like you being far away, but they want to stay with Senai and Ayhan."

Well, I guess it's decided, then.

"Take care of the girls, okay?" I asked as I gave the baars a pat. Francis bleated confidently, but Francoise's eyes filled with tears as she nodded.

Just as I was about to head out to get ready, Klaus came running in with my equipment. He had my axe, my chest piece, my gauntlets, and my boots; all ready for me to throw them on. He must have left the assembly hall without me noticing.

"Thanks, Klaus," I said. "You're a great help."

He grinned at my words and helped me put on my armor. When I was all done, it was time to head out, but before I could go, Senai and Ayhan ran up to me with their eyes downcast. It looked like they wanted to say something.

Ah, of course. I can't go without saying something to the little ones.

"I'll be back soon," I said, kneeling down so I could look both of them in the eyes.

"Hurry home," said Senai.

"We'll be waiting for you," added Ayhan.

Both of the girls smiled, and it filled me with energy. It must have done the same for Alna too—who already had her bow in hand and her quiver strapped to her waist—because she knelt down as well, and told the girls we'd be back in no time.

Alna and I left the yurt and headed straight for our new visitor. I didn't know

who they were or what they wanted, and until I did, I didn't want them getting to Iluk Village. So Alna and I ran, and I relied on her magic to make sure we met with the visitor a good distance from our yurts.

When we started to get closer to the visitor, Alna hid herself with concealment and stood at the ready with her bow. Or at least, I *think* that's what she did, because I couldn't actually see her. Meanwhile, I stood in place and waited, ready and on guard in case of any surprise attacks. After a short time, a person appeared on the horizon, but I still couldn't tell if they were friend or foe.

Then as they got closer, I started to make them out more clearly. It was an elderly man with white hair, neatly kept with oil or something like it. He wore a black shirt with white pants, and long black boots. They were riding clothes of the sort I'd seen at the capital. By his side, a short sword glimmered in the light of the sun, and I saw that the handle and scabbard were both adorned with decorations of some sort. The brown horse he rode looked to be quite strong and of excellent breed. The man's clothing, too, was finely tailored.

What does someone like that want in a place like this? I wondered.

"He's white," I heard from Alna nearby.

Not long ago, I'd asked her to tell me the results of her soul appraisals as soon as she cast them, so Alna was quick to point it out.

White, huh?

White was a color we couldn't easily make an immediate judgment on. I felt reassured with blue, and at least with red I knew exactly what I was dealing with.

As I thought about this, the elderly man noticed me. He nodded politely and slowed down, then stopped in front of me. He hopped off the horse with a swift, elegant movement, then stood before me.

"I apologize for visiting without prior word," he began, placing a hand on his chest and bowing deeply. "Am I right to assume that you are Sir Dias?"

"Yes, that's me. May I ask who you are and what your business is here?"

“Oh, I must apologize for being so rude as to not introduce myself. I had my mind far too focused on my orders. My name is Kamalotz, and I come here as an envoy for my lord and master, Eldan Kasdeks. Lord Kasdeks has professed a desire to meet you and is already on his way. If you would be so obliged, he would like to meet with you at your place of residence—”

“We meet here,” I said sharply, cutting Kamalotz off.

Eldan. That was the name of the second son of Kasdeks in the neighboring region. Grandma Maya had told me about him. The domain was currently governed by Enkars Kasdeks. His first son was named Janni, and his second son was Eldan.

I’d heard that Eldan was a slave-loving, womanizing sort who’d incited a rebellion against his father and brother. I wasn’t going to let a man like that take a single step into Iluk Village, and I was going to make that crystal clear. We still didn’t even know if Eldan had won or lost in his attempt at an uprising.

If Eldan had won, that meant he’d be visiting as the new lord of Kasdeks. If he’d lost, he would be on the run, and he might be seeking refuge. Whatever the case, Kamalotz remained frozen in mid-bow for a short time, then slowly lifted his head to find my glare waiting for him.

“Understood,” he said, immediately dropping his head again. “I will convey this to my master immediately.”

He had to strain to get the words out, but he did. Then he bowed again, a little more awkwardly this time, before jumping back on his horse and taking off the way he’d come. I let out a little sigh as I watched him fade away into the distance, and I gripped my axe a little more tightly just in case I needed to be ready for a fight.

A little while after Kamalotz left, something appeared on the horizon, and as it came into focus, I couldn’t quite believe what I was looking at. Then again, there wasn’t a person alive who wouldn’t have been shocked by the sight—it was a giant bed moving through the plains, accompanied by the sounds of women singing and wood creaking.

Oh, but maybe it’s not a bed. Maybe it’s a carriage. I mean, there are four

wheels attached to it, and four horses pulling it along...

I didn't know *what* it was, exactly. I suppose you would have called it a bed-shaped carriage. Anyway, the bed-shaped carriage had this transparent white cloth draped over its roof, and an exquisite sunroof, also covered in white cloth. On the bed itself there were all manner of cushions, pillows, and colored flower petals.

In the middle of the bed was a rotund man that I figured was probably Eldan Kasdeks. Around him was a harem of some ten women. All of the women were dressed in flowing white dresses, with white cloth covering their faces, hiding everything save for their eyes. They were feeding Kasdeks food, waving fans to cool him down, and singing to him. Now, I had heard that he had a lot of women servants, but it was really something else to see it in person.

And yet, Eldan Kasdeks himself looked much younger than I expected. He seemed around fifteen, maybe sixteen years old. He had a handsome face and his brown hair was cut short and in a unique style. His stocky body was draped in a loose-fitting, long-sleeved white shirt.

Around Eldan's bed-shaped carriage was Kamalotz on horseback, and five guards, all of them armored and carrying swords or spears. Based on their builds, I could tell they were women. I was half-shocked and half-disgusted; was the man such a womanizer that he even made them his bodyguards?

Alna, who was still hidden with her magic, whispered to me, "The barrel-bellied guy is a strong blue, and all the women around him are blue or white. There's no red anywhere; even his guards are all white."

Well, given the rumors and the fact that he's red, I'm going to send him packing right away... Wait a sec. What? Blue? Did she just say that he's blue?

"He's not as blue as you were when we first met," continued Alna, "but it's a strong blue nonetheless."

I just couldn't wrap my head around what Alna had just told me. It wasn't that I didn't believe her. It was just that, after all the rumors I'd heard about Eldan Kasdeks, it seemed crazy that he didn't show a trace of red.

So I stood there dumbstruck while the bed-shaped carriage arrived in front of

me. When it came to a stop, a strangely panicky Eldan alighted from the carriage and ran over, his belly bobbing up and down with each step.

“Oh, I am so very sorry! So very, very sorry!” he cried. “I apologize for so rudely entering your domain like this! I never meant to make you angry; it’s just that you’re my hero, and I wanted to meet you as soon as possible!”

Kasdeks spoke with a unique, high-pitched voice that, well, honestly kind of reminded me of Peijin.

“My name is Eldan Kasdeks,” he continued, “but I want you to simply call me Eldan. I’ve heard stories about you ever since I was a boy. You’re the heroic savior of the nation! I’ve heard so much about your valor in battle! I earnestly mean it when I say that I look up to and revere you! I’ve put so much blood, sweat, and tears into becoming a domain lord, and it feels like some kind of miracle that my neighbor is the great Dias himself! When I found out, I wanted nothing more than to meet you and become friends right away! I swear to you, that’s all it was. I never meant you or your land any harm, so I hope you won’t stay angry at us...and I really hope you would stop glaring at me like that...”

By the end of his spiel, Eldan’s voice was no louder than a whisper, and he looked ready to burst into tears, he was so nervous.

I mean, I’m not actually angry, I’m just... I guess I was just watching him with such intensity that it must have looked that way.

I scratched the back of my head and suddenly felt a bit ashamed of myself. After the way I’d just treated Kamalotz, I didn’t feel like I deserved the kind of praise Eldan was showering on me.

“No, look, I’m sorry, uh, Sir...Sir Eldan. I’m not angry, I was just taken off guard by the sudden visit. I couldn’t help feeling cautious. As a result of that I was pretty rude to your aide, Sir Kamalotz.”

Eldan’s expression relaxed into a great big smile when he heard my apology, and his stomach wobbled as he replied.

“Oh, come on now, none of that ‘sir’ stuff, okay? Just call me Eldan. And same with Kamalotz. Don’t even worry about what happened. If you and I are on friendly terms, that’s all that matters!”

Eldan's bearing and his expression were enough to prove to me that he was truly blue after all. It sounded like he really meant it when he said he'd rushed over here to meet and befriend me. And when it came to being friends with your neighbors, I had to say I felt the same way, even though I *did* want to comment on all those female servants and his bed carriage. Still, I didn't know his culture or circumstances, so I swallowed my words and took a step forwards to shake Eldan's hand.

"By the way, Sir Dias," said Eldan, looking at the empty space next to me, "who's the young maiden by your side? She carries the same scent as you. Is she perhaps your wife? If so, I would love to meet her! I have sixteen wives of my own, so we can introduce all of our wives to one another!"

Young maiden? Oh, does he mean Alna? Well, she's not my wife; she's my fiancée, but... Wait a sec! Did Eldan just say what I think he said?! Can he see Alna even though she's invisible?!

"I must say," said Eldan, "she's extremely good at hiding, isn't she? I know she's there, though, because my hearing and sense of smell are both top-notch! She has the same scent of kindness as you, Sir Dias!"

I didn't feel anything menacing from Eldan as he spoke, and in fact, his ear-to-ear grin looked completely innocent. Still, the words that came out of his mouth shook me to my core. I'd never imagined there'd be a human alive who could so easily see through Alna's magic like that. Even though I knew Alna was right there by my side, I couldn't sense her in the slightest, so I didn't think that Eldan would either.

I put my thinking cap on and racked my brain to find a way to hide Alna, or at least make some sort of excuse, but no good ideas came to mind. My head was a mess of thoughts that weren't going to help either of us. All the same, I was standing there trying to work things out when Alna must have realized there was no getting out of our predicament, and she stopped casting her spell.

When she appeared before us all, Eldan saw the horn growing from her head and his eyes went wide with surprise. Kamalotz and all of the women on the bed carriage were the same, and they let out shocked gasps. Still, Eldan was clearly the most surprised out of all of them: his face scrunched up and his

whole body shook, and when he spoke, he had to squeeze the words out.

“Th-That young maiden, wh-who is she? Wh-What is she called, and what is her race? Wh-What is her relation to you, Sir Dias?!”

I could hear his voice trembling, and each question ended with something like a high-pitched squeal. His reaction was anything but ordinary, and it left me very worried, so I thought it best to first clarify our relationship.

“Alna is my fi—”

“I am Alna, Dias’s wife,” declared Alna loudly, cutting me off.

The moment he heard her reply, Eldan’s body shook even more, and he looked at her even more closely as he spoke again.

“M-Miss Alna, is that horn something you were born with? Are you a demi-human?”

“I am one of the onikin, and we are all born with these horns. I have never heard the word ‘demi-human’ before, so I cannot answer your question.”

“‘Demi-human’ is a word used to define humanlike races that are not completely human. Beastkin, fishkin, and races like them are also called demi-humans.”

“In that case, then yes, I am a demi-human,” replied Alna.

Eldan’s reaction to Alna’s words was one of such shock that he froze completely, his eyes wide and unblinking. Just when I thought that he might remain that way forever, tears welled in Eldan’s eyes and he began to cry in a loud voice. Still bawling, he ran towards us. I thought he might be trying to get to Alna, so I stood in front of her, but contrary to what I was expecting, Eldan leaped forwards and wrapped me in a great big hug.

“Sir Dias!” he shouted. “Sir Dias! Tell me! What about children?! Do you and Alna have children?!”

“Hngh,” I uttered, struggling in Eldan’s grasp. “Wait wait wait, why are you hugging me? And what’s with the tears?! We don’t have any children! None! So please calm down!”

“We don’t have any children of our own,” added Alna, “but Dias has adopted

two children we think are demi-human, and we're raising them."

Oh, come on, Alna! Now's not the time for that! However blue this guy is, we're supposed to protect Senai and Ayhan!

"You're raising demi-human children?! Sir Dias, you have a demi-human wife, and you're raising demi-human children?!" Eldan cried, letting out a few more wails before going on. "Mother! Oh, dearest mother! We have an ally here! We have a true comrade! And it's the very same Dias that you always told me about!"



Having said as much, Eldan bawled even harder, and suddenly Kamalotz and all of Eldan's traveling companions were crying too. Their weeping began to form a chorus, harmonizing with Eldan's own cries.

I was completely and utterly confused. I stood there among all the tears, unable to understand what all the crying was about and what Eldan even meant with the last words he'd spoken. But the crying didn't stop. If anything, it got more intense.

Right then, Eldan's ears suddenly ballooned in size. Or to be more accurate, they became more rounded, thin, and larger. But Eldan wasn't done yet; after his ears changed shape, his nose began to elongate into something that looked like an arm, and it wrapped tightly around my waist. Then, in a tremendous display of strength, Eldan lifted me into the air.

There I was, dangling from Eldan's strange extra arm, staring at my battle-ax. I had a feeling I could knock myself free with a swing of it, but I just couldn't bring myself to attack Eldan while he was crying like a baby, and I felt my grip relax. After all, Eldan was just hefting me in the air. He wasn't trying to cause me harm or attack me, so I didn't want to attack him either.

Alna didn't make any move to attack Eldan either. She simply watched as I dangled above her, slightly worried about whether or not I would ever be released.

That was when Kamalotz ran over to Eldan in a panic.

"Lord Eldan!" he said, no longer crying. "Lord Eldan! Your nose! Please, you must relax and calm down! You're lifting Sir Dias into the air with your nose!"

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

Did he just say 'nose'? And okay, so it is coming from where his nose is, but it feels a lot more like an arm!

Alna and I were dumbstruck as we tried to comprehend what Kamalotz had just said. And was still saying, actually; he kept imploring Eldan to calm down, but the bawling Eldan couldn't seem to hear it even with his big ears. In the end, it was quite a while before Eldan finally cooled down and put me back on the ground.

“What is going on with Eldan’s body?” I asked Kamalotz.

I glanced at Eldan, who was lying limp and exhausted while his wives took care of him on his bed-shaped carriage. As soon as Eldan’s tears had dried and he’d let me go, he had suddenly gone very pale and crumpled to the ground. He couldn’t stand no matter how much he tried, so Kamalotz and some of the guards had tried to carry him back to the carriage. They couldn’t do it on their own, however, so I’d ended up giving them a hand. He was much heavier than he looked, but we’d somehow succeeded in getting him up and onto his carriage.

As soon as Eldan was on his bed, his wives rushed to nurse him back to health. When Eldan finally looked like he was beginning to recover, I asked Kamalotz to explain things to me.

It wasn’t completely surprising that him lifting me up had put a strain on Eldan. After all, I was a good head taller than him, and a big man to boot. But even then, Eldan’s reaction had been much worse than I’d expected, and on top of that, I was curious about his ears and his nose—and on top of that, his monstrous strength.

Kamalotz knew what I was getting at, and he nodded silently, then looked at Eldan as if for permission to speak.

“I don’t mind at all,” Eldan said, still lying down. “You can tell those two all about me. Everything.”

Kamalotz replied with a reverent bow, then turned back to me and Alna.

“Eldan is special. He is the product of a human and demi-human pairing. His mother, Lady Neha, is a demi-human, one of the elephantkin, known for their great strength among the beastkin races. Eldan inherited that same power.”

Kamalotz went on to explain that the elephantkin had big ears and long noses, and, compared to other races, were more powerful and had huge bodies. The elephantkin were a kind race that protected others, and had once been worshiped as gods.

As the product of an elephantkin and the human Enkars, this made Eldan a

rather unique half-blooded demi-human. He was born with a special magic that allowed him to transform from human to elephantkin and vice versa, though changing forms could be quite exhausting. When he'd morphed in front of me and Alna, it was because he'd been too happy and excited to control himself.

"I see. Well, that explains the ears, the nose, the strength, and how tired he got," I said. "But I wouldn't say Eldan has a huge body."

"That's because Lord Eldan is half-human," replied Kamalotz. "Being half demi-human is one of his strengths, but at the same time it has its weak points. There are many differences between humans and elephantkin: how much they need to eat, what illnesses they're prone to, required sleep and other lifestyle habits. This has had an effect on Lord Eldan's body, and as such he is small for an elephantkin but large for a human. The care he receives from his wives, as you saw earlier, is an absolute necessity in his life."

Kamalotz then went along explaining what each of Eldan's wives was responsible for when it came to his care. Even the big bed-shaped carriage was built to accommodate Eldan suddenly falling asleep when he was exhausted and, more importantly, the monstrous strength with which he sometimes rolled over when he slumbered. Eldan had already destroyed a number of ordinary horse carriages by accident.

The food that Eldan's wives fed him was mixed with medicine that Eldan needed. The wives who fanned him were there because Eldan had trouble controlling his own body temperature...or at least, that's what Kamalotz said. The elephantkin kept their large ears waving at all times to cool themselves, but that was impossible for Eldan when he was in his human form, and he was prone to high fevers when there was nobody there to fan him. As for the wives who sang, they were simply there to make Eldan happy and had nothing to do with his physical health.

"So, that's why they all take care of him," I said. "But they're all his wives, right? You don't have to marry someone in order to look after them, do you? According to the law of the kingdom, polygamy is banned."

Kamalotz looked troubled by my question and seemed very unsure where to begin with his explanation. Eventually, and after what looked like some worry,

he began to speak.

“In order to best explain Lord Eldan’s wives, it is necessary that I explain to you his dream,” Kamalotz said, choosing his words carefully. “Lord Eldan dreams of building a world in which humans and demi-humans live together, happily, and free of the barriers of race. Achieving this is his ardent desire. Lord Eldan is himself a half demi-human, and his mother is a full demi-human. However, in the kingdom...or for the demi-humans in the Kasdeks region, demi-human slavery is a horror beyond words. Lord Eldan has been tortured by it since as far back as he can remember, and that is where his dreams stem from. He wanted to punish the slavers and protect the demi-humans.”

He went on to explain that Eldan’s father, Enkars, promoted slavery within the domain, and Eldan could not openly admit that he was working to protect the demi-humans. Instead, he made it look like what he wanted was a harem of demi-human women.

Eldan had ordered the slavers to present him with the harem he desired, but they’d refused. This angered Eldan, who had punished the slavers and confiscated their slaves. This was a move right out of the Enkars playbook, and as it continued, news of it reached Enkars, who had praised Eldan’s actions as those befitting a domain lord’s son. Eldan’s scheme was, in this way, a success.

Eldan rescued demi-humans regardless of age or gender, and they too shared in his dream. They adored him, and when these demi-humans discovered that in Eldan was the blood of the once-worshiped elephantkin, their adoration only grew. Some of the women were so in love with him that they had actually decided, on their own, to become the harem that he had once used as cover.

Eldan’s efforts were not always successful, and he met with his fair share of failure. Sometimes he had to bear witness to the tragedy of those failures firsthand, and on many occasions, his heart broke with the pain that came from the path he had decided to walk. But even then, he trudged on. The women who were now his wives took it upon themselves to soothe his soul, and their number grew. In the end, Eldan declared that the women were his wives, but he was a far cry from a simple womanizer.

“For demi-humans, a harem is not especially rare,” said Kamalotz. “There are,

of course, concerns when it comes to having children, but it adds a layer of reality to the lies we use as cover. Lady Neha also agreed to the idea, and in the end, none objected.”

All I could do was nod. I was an outsider, really, so it wasn’t my place to say something on the matter. At the same time, when I thought about how the onikin allowed polygamy, just like the beastkin, I couldn’t help wondering if the kingdom’s system of monogamy was actually the minority. All the same, my parents had been especially strict about taking only a single partner, and I didn’t think I could handle lots of wives anyway.

I organized everything Kamalotz had told me in my head and figured I’d asked everything I wanted to know.

“Excuse me,” said Alna. “I don’t mean to interrupt you two, but there’s one thing that’s bothering me. Why did Enkars allow Eldan any freedom? However much he looks like a human, Eldan is still the son of a slave. He’s the child of a demi-human, no? Wasn’t Enkars insistent on making demi-humans into slaves?”

Now that you mention it, that’s a good point. Great question, Alna.

“How to explain...” pondered Kamalotz with a slight grimace. “Lady Neha was one of Enkars’s slaves, but she was not his wife. His wife is a human woman by the name of Jannya. Enkars and Jannya’s son Janni, their firstborn, is every bit his father’s son. He is evil and cruel to the extent that it is known among all the domain’s people.”

“However, Enkars did not think highly of Janni, who took after him in every way, and instead he declared that the beautiful and bubbly Eldan was his true son. Eldan was born in his human form, you see, and so Enkars said that Eldan would inherit everything. It caused quite the stir.”

“The truth of Eldan’s mother was kept secret from both the domain’s citizens and even Eldan himself, and Eldan was raised by Enkars. Neha watched over him as a servant, but Eldan lived much of his youth completely unaware that the enslaved demi-human was his mother.”

“However, when Eldan turned five, his demi-human ears and nose revealed themselves when he was playing by himself. He realized that they looked exactly like Neha’s, and that was the day he discovered that she was, in fact, his

real mother. From that day, their relationship grew deeper but was kept secret from Enkars. And this love between mother and son was the birthplace of Eldan's dream for the future."

As Alna listened, her face twisted with disgust at Enkars's conduct, and I was left with my mouth agape. Enkars hated the son that took after him and showered attention on the one who was completely different. It was astounding to think that he held no real love for either of his sons. It was all about looks.

"Lord Eldan worked diligently to make his dream a reality and to free his mother from her position as a slave. As a result he became a very resourceful young man, skilled in many areas," said Kamalotz. "This pleased Enkars, who became more certain of Lord Eldan as his heir. Jannya and Janni, however, saw Lord Eldan as a threat. They hated him, and they did everything they could to impede his progress and push him around. But Lord Eldan continued to fight, for both his mother and his dreams."

As Kamalotz talked about Eldan, his tone grew warmer, and it was clear that he held a deep respect for the young man. But when he spoke of Enkars and Janni, his tone became lower and much colder. Here, now, his voice had a chill to it, and I could only imagine what awful things Janni did when he tried to "push Eldan around."

"I see," I said. "But I heard that there was an uprising. Was that a battle between Eldan and Janni for the position of heir?"

"No," said Kamalotz, hesitating for a moment. "That happened because Lord Eldan was simply trying to protect what is important to him. Janni and his mother learned of Lord Eldan's true goals through their information network, and naturally this news went straight to Enkars himself, who exploded into a rage. He declared that Lord Eldan, Neha, and all the demi-humans were to be slaughtered. In order to protect his people, Eldan made a decision: he was going to fight back. It may have appeared to be a battle between potential heirs, but Eldan was not fighting for the position of domain lord. He was fighting so that the people of Kasdeks could live in peace and happiness!"

Kamalotz's hands balled up into fists and anger welled in his words. It was

clear to me that Eldan had never wanted to go into battle. But the battle had turned into an uprising, and the people of Kasdeks had been forced to pick a side: Enkars or Eldan.

However, the population had sided with Eldan, and even those in positions close to Enkars chose his illegitimate son. The only bad thing that ordinary people could point to when it came to Eldan was his apparent desire for a harem, but outside of that, he lived an earnest life, worked hard, and always showed his love for his people.

“It was only natural that they sided with him,” said Kamalotz proudly.

As for Grandma Maya’s village, it seemed like her people had never heard the good things about Eldan. Perhaps it was just that bad rumors spread faster than good ones?

“Lord Eldan and his allies worked together to fight valiantly, and because many on Enkars’s side turned traitor, Lord Eldan prevailed. Though the kingdom has yet to officially announce the change in leadership, Lord Eldan has declared himself the new lord of the Kasdeks domain.”

Eldan then threw himself into the work of parliamentary affairs. He calmed the situation within the domain, and while the people threw themselves into rebuilding, he gathered information about neighboring domains so as to ensure he could protect Kasdeks from foreign threats. That was when he’d learned that I was living in the plains and decided to visit.

Kamalotz had served the Kasdeks family for many long years, and the Kasdeks’s history was one that he had heard and seen for himself, right by Eldan’s side. Now, with his story told, Kamalotz let out a satisfied sigh.

I couldn’t help but let out a sigh of my own at the amazing experiences accumulated throughout Eldan’s life.

Admittedly, though, I felt a little awkward. Eldan had lived an incredible life, and yet he said he looked up to me. So much so, in fact, that he had trekked out all this way just to meet me. I couldn’t help feeling like I wasn’t worthy of his expectations.

I scratched my head nervously, and I couldn’t bring myself to look the guy in

the eyes. I glanced over at Alna and saw her looking at Eldan and his wives, and how close they were to him, and there was a clear look of envy on her face.

Oh, so that's what she cares about...

Eldan saw me following Alna's gaze, and he sat up and crawled to the edge of the carriage.

"Sir Dias, I truly am sorry for earlier. I know I was very rude. I've just... I've never known a human to willingly make a demi-human their life partner," said Eldan, his ears flapping and his trunk moving up and down as he spoke. "You have a demi-human wife, and demi-human children, and...Lady Alna looks so happy. And if she's happy, I'm sure that your children are too. When I saw her joy, I lost control. I felt certain that I'd found a comrade in arms, and someone who shares my own dreams. I was so certain that I blurted it out before even checking if that was in fact the case."

I knew what Eldan was trying to say, and I felt that it was only right to respond to him in kind, so I looked him straight in the eyes.

"Eldan, I fully support your dream. In my village, humans and demi-humans live together in peace. I would like to see such a world continue to grow. Though I may not be worthy of a title as commendable as 'comrade,' I will do whatever I can to help you. Your dream is truly admirable. So hold your head high, and walk your path with pride and confidence."

My words must have struck a chord with Eldan, because he looked ready to burst into tears again, but he held them back and shrugged off his nervous hesitation. He then got to his feet and held his chest and trunk high. The moment he did, Kamalotz and Eldan's wives cheered and started crying and, well, that got Eldan's tears running even as he stood there proudly.

On the Specially Made Bed-shaped Carriage

Eldan felt bad for making us listen to such a long story, and he wanted us to take a rest, so he invited me and Alna up onto the bed-shaped carriage, where we sat on some cushions. The moment we were comfortable, Eldan broke into a grin.

“Sir Dias! Sir Dias! You must tell me all about yourself!” I’d had a feeling this was coming, but Eldan had opened up to me about himself, so I figured it was only right that I do the same. I had to admit I felt a little hesitant about it. I didn’t think I had half as amazing a story as Eldan did, and that made me a little shy.

“I want to hear all about what you’ve been up to of late, and what it was like on the battlefield, and what happened at the kingdom!” cried Eldan.

I wasn’t sure if Eldan could sense my hesitation, but he was bouncing on his cushion as he spoke. His ears flapped and his trunk spun, unable to hide how thrilled he was. His eyes sparkled with expectation, and I knew right then that I wasn’t going to be able to run away from the situation I was in, so I just let out a little sigh.

Eldan looked ready to burst, and behind him Kamalotz and Eldan’s wives looked eager to listen too. I told them all that it wasn’t going to be a very exciting story, but I went back through my memories and recounted everything that had happened until now.

I told them about being an orphan, enlisting in the army, and fighting on the battlefield—though I had to keep that part a bit short because otherwise I’d be going on forever. Then I told them about becoming a lord after the war and meeting Alna, but I didn’t think it was my place to talk about the onikin people, so I kept that stuff secret.

With that out of the way, I told Eldan about my life on the plains. I told him how I hunted an earth dragon, about Klaus and Grandma Maya, and I touched on Senai and Ayhan too.

Eldan and his party all reacted in different ways to different parts of my story. They seemed disappointed that I kept my war stories so short, but they were on the edge of their seats to hear about the earth dragon, and Eldan's wives were especially thrilled about my engagement to Alna. Eldan asked me lots of questions about my reunion with Klaus, and he couldn't stop apologizing about Grandma Maya and her friends. Everyone loved hearing about Senai and Ayhan, though.

"Sir Dias, you're exactly the sort of person that my mother told me you were!" exclaimed Eldan. "I'm so very glad that we can be friends!"

As much as I felt the same, there was something about Eldan's words that gnawed at me, and I just had to ask about it.

"I've been wondering," I said, "how does Neha even know about me? I didn't know anything about demi-humans at all until I met Alna, and I'm almost certain that I never met Neha on my travels."

"It's all in the legendary tales of your deeds, Sir Dias! My mother first heard of you through many such stories. Your efforts on the battlefield started spreading through the kingdom and stretched as far as even Kasdeks."

Eldan moved his trunk deftly to the left and the right to gesture as he jumped into an explanation of the tales of the heroic Dias. Apparently, people on the battlefield started talking about me, and those stories made it to the royal capital and were made into a stage play at the theater. The theater played every night in order to lift morale and recruit more soldiers. The story was basically this: the humble orphan Dias enlists, and with his peerless strength and beloved axe, he cuts through countless enemies to protect his many allies.

But it wasn't just a story of me winning in battle. It was a story about how I lived by my parents' words, protected the weak, and brought the strong to their knees. I righted the wrongs of tyrannical nobles with an iron fist; but because I was so kindhearted, I also saved them when they were in life-threatening danger.

The play proved quite popular with the people, but the nobility weren't exactly happy with the contents, and they ordered the theater to stop showing the play a week after its release. This decision, however, only resulted in

spurring the general populace to action, and stories of my adventures spread via word of mouth throughout the entire nation, making their way to Kasdeks via merchants and travelers.

Neha was a slave and a servant, and when she heard these stories—particularly that of my commitment to my parents’ teachings—it reminded her of the former king of the elephantkin. She thus shared these stories excitedly with Eldan, and told him to grow up to be a person just like me.

Oh...so that’s why she knows about me.

I’d actually never met a single noble on the battlefield, and I’d never once convinced one to turn over a new leaf either. It *was* true that I endeavored to live by what my parents had taught me, but outside of that, the stories were pretty much all lies. It was all just made up for the stage.

“Ah, I have to tell you Eldan,” I said, “I don’t recall actually doing any of that stuff with the nobility. I feel like there’s a really big gap between the ‘heroic Dias’ you have in your mind and the real me...”

Eldan didn’t even give me a chance to go on.

“Sir Dias, I never really believed *all* of the stories that I was told,” he said, “but returning soldiers, merchants coming back from the war, my home tutor—everyone who met you only ever had good things to say about you. *That’s* why you became my hero. And now that I’ve met you and talked to you myself, and heard all about how you got here, I can tell you’re exactly the person I looked up to all this time. You really are *the* heroic Dias!”

He looked at me, his smile unwavering, and I was at a loss for how to reply. His words, his expression, in everything he was so certain, and I felt embarrassed for thinking that he’d been believing in a mere myth.

“That’s why I want us, all of us, to strengthen our relationship and become firmer friends,” continued Eldan. “We’ll work together to grow our domains, and we’ll create a world in which both humans and demi-humans can live in harmony!”

Eldan then thrust his hand out towards me. He was wiser and more experienced than his actual age, and it struck me that I was no match for him in

terms of smarts. I took his hand in my own, and we shared a firm handshake. Eldan covered my hand with both of his, and the smile on his face in that moment was the brightest it had been all day.

Once we'd shared life stories, Kamalotz poured us all some tea, and we sipped at it while we talked about our current circumstances. I told Eldan about Princess Diane and the battle for succession that Klaus had told me about. I also explained my relationship with Alna, because Eldan was especially interested in it. We also talked about Eldan's physical health, and how one day I hoped to meet his mother, Neha, and all sorts of other topics.

Eventually we arrived at the topic of our domains' food stockpiles.

"Sir Dias, it's imperative that you prepare a stockpile of preservable food. Should you find yourself in trouble, you'll find that food runs out very quickly. You can't focus purely on increasing your population; you have to consider food production within your borders too. Winter is far closer than it may appear, and you should be prepared for it as soon as possible."

Oh? Really? That's news to me. I've got lots of different stuff and quite the amount, so I figure we'll be okay. So even that's not enough?

I told Eldan that I'd make our food stockpile a top priority, and that I'd start by tilling the soil to make some fields. Before the war I'd helped out at farms before, so I knew a thing or two about making fields to grow vegetables!

The Yurt at Night—Dias

Eldan and I never ran out of things to talk about, and by the time we were done and Alna and I headed back, it was already well into the night. Alna and I were sitting in the yurt, where Francis and Francoise were asleep with Senai and Ayhan. It took a while to get them to sleep, but now we could breathe a sigh of relief.

When I looked at their peaceful, slumbering faces, it was hard to believe that just moments ago they'd been little eruptions of emotion. All I could do was chuckle to myself.

"Finally sound asleep," said Alna quietly. "Look at how happy they look. It's like they're entirely different people."

She took care of the fire under the stove, then walked over to my side.

"I still can't believe they're the same people," I said with a chuckle. "They've got a lot of energy to burn, but I guess they tired themselves out. The moment one of them said they were sleepy, the two of them were out like a flash."

I was whispering just like Alna was, and the two of us shared an exasperated look. As soon as we'd gotten home, it was like the girls were the incarnation of raging fires.

"You said you'd be back soon!" Senai shouted.

"We waited for you!" Ayhan added.

Despite all the fury they were hitting us with, the tears running down their faces told me that it wasn't just anger in there. They'd probably been filled with worry, and scared because we weren't there with them like we always were.

In any case, the girls built up a lot of feelings waiting for us, and they let us know it. I'd thought about how I really wanted the girls to open up to us, whether that was a tantrum or otherwise, but I'd never imagined it would happen that very day.

“Dias, you didn’t say a single word to scold either of them. Is that a good idea?”

“It might not be, but...I made a promise to them, and I wasn’t true to my word. More than scolding them, I wanted to apologize. When they join a new family, kids test their parents. They’re selfish and rowdy. For now, I want to accept all of that. But yeah, I know that if that’s all I do, it might not have a positive impact. If it keeps up tomorrow, I’ll scold them if I have to.”

Alna thought about my words for a moment, then smiled and was about to say something when her horn suddenly lit up. The air grew tense as Alna turned to stare in a particular direction. I knew what it meant now when her horn went green, but was someone really entering our domain again?

“Dias, we’ve got intruders, and lots of them. They’re coming from the southeast.”

“That’s the first time we’ve had people come from somewhere that wasn’t directly east. Is it possible that they’re some of Eldan’s companions?”

“This group is coming from a different direction than where Eldan was heading, so I doubt it. I don’t know who it is, but ordinary people don’t go wandering around at this time of night.”

Which means either thieves or bandits. What a pain to have to deal with this late in the evening.

“All right, I’ll go check it out. It’s late, so you—”

“No, I’m going too,” said Alna, cutting me off with a quiet but strong reply. “It’s the night of the new moon. You’ll never find them in the plains when it’s this dark. You might even get yourself lost too. You need my magic. Let Klaus take care of things here at the village.”

The lamp in the yurt gave her eyes a powerful light, and I saw in them her strength of will. And when I opened my mouth to say something—like “you’re safer here,” or “you don’t have to worry about me,” or “I’m more worried about you”—that light in her eyes grew stronger.

I also knew how dark it was under a new moon. I’d barely be able to see my own feet out there. I knew that Alna’s magic would come in *very* handy.

Well, nothing else for it...

“All right, Alna,” I said. “You’re right. I’ll need your help. Let’s go.”

She smiled at me, still with that light glimmering in her eyes. Then she got her equipment ready without so much as a sound, and readied the battle makeup that I remembered seeing on her face when we first met.

Once we were both equipped and ready to go, I woke Klaus up and told him what was going on. Then Alna and I headed out to meet with our midnight visitors.

The Grasslands at Midnight—Leader of the Intruders

“People live out here? Seriously?”

We were with the client, but I couldn’t help asking. It didn’t matter where we pointed our torches—all we saw was grass. There wasn’t nothing that looked like food, which told me this place was only home to beastkin or herbivores. Usually no matter how grassy it was, a plain had at least a tree or two, but there wasn’t *nothing* but grass here, and there wasn’t no signs of humans having set up camp neither.

“Would you shut up with all your muttering and focus on your job! If you’re not going to take this seriously then *I’m* going to take my money back.”

That was the client.

What the hell’s his deal, anyway? Coming with us like this...

“Hey now,” I replied, “you paid us well, and we’ll do a fine enough job. You’re sure the target is out here, yeah?”

“I have it on good authority that he’s out here, and that’s why I spent all that damned coin on you!”

“Is that so? Then let me ask you something. Why go out of your way to pick a night as dark as this one then, eh?”

“Because our target is *Dias*. Yes, *that* Dias! Think you can beat him in broad daylight? I’m not sure we can kill him even while he sleeps, and with the cover of darkness on our side. But know that if he’s cottoned on to our attempt, we’re through.”

There were a lot of rumors about Dias back in the days of the war, and they all said he was a special kind of monster. But rumors are largely exaggerations, and with our numbers, I didn’t think we’d lose to nobody. Including me, we were fifteen strong, and I didn’t even think we’d lose to a dragon. After all, we were all well-known in our line of work, and we were confident in our skills. I’d have put more trust in us.

“And I want you to kill Eldan too, if you see him,” whispered the client. “You may as well if he’s here. I heard he came here to meet with that damned bastard Dias anyway. The more thrones we have without lords to sit on them, the better.”

I wonder if he realizes that taking out Eldan would give us away to Dias? Not that I care. If he’s paying, we’re killing.

“And if we kill this Eldan guy, what’s in it for us?” I asked.

“I’ve promised you ten gold coins for Dias’s head. For Eldan’s, I’ll give you a hundred silver.”

Eldan wasn’t worth as much as I thought. The price didn’t make him much worth to us, that was for sure. But the price of a target didn’t really matter either way if you couldn’t find them in the first place. I knew that the work was going to be pretty troublesome in the darkness, so I wanted to make sure the gang was all in the right headspace.

“All right boys,” I announced. “Time to find us our prey! You all know the drill: no survivors, and loot whatever you can carry! Let’s make ourselves some money!”

Not long after I spoke, I noticed something. I don’t know if I heard it first or if I saw it first, but there was a light—red like blood—floating in the darkness and the sound of something cutting through the air. I wasn’t sure what either of them were, but in the next instant one of my men was screaming.

“Boss! Lyle’s been hit! It’s an arrow!” cried one of the men.

“It came from that light over there!” yelled another.

I knew then that it was an arrow I heard, and that we were all under attack. I quickly forced the confusion from my mind and calmed myself down.

We’ve got an enemy on the offensive, and one man wounded. What now?

The answer was simple: shoot back and fight! We’d show that bowman that they’d made a terrible mistake.

“We’re under attack!” I shouted, getting my men’s attention. “They’ve got a bow! Snuff your torches and get down! Anyone with a bow or crossbow, fire at

that red light!”

I knew that the enemy would hear me too, but there wasn't nothing I could do about that. I threw away my torch, unsheathed my sword, and ducked down as I slowly walked towards the red light, but then it faded into the darkness and vanished. A few moments later, arrows flew towards the spot where the light was, but we didn't hear no screams or cries. We missed our target.

I had no choice but to keep walking towards where our enemy once was. When I arrived, I focused my senses, trying to look for that light again or get a feel for where our enemy had gone. But there was nothing. I couldn't hear a sound, and I couldn't feel a thing.

What was that red light? Why did it vanish? What are they doing now?

My mind raced as I searched for a sign of the enemy, and then I heard another sound pass me by, and another scream break the silence.

“Jean?! Dammit! Where are they— Yeaaargh!”

“Quick, we need medical—hrngh?!”

Each time we heard an arrow, it was followed by a scream. Even in this intense darkness, our attacker was eerily accurate with each of their shots.

Shit! Where the hell are they?! How do they know where we are?! Is it sound? No, some of our wounded didn't do or say a thing. And relying on sound now would be pointless among all these screams. Is it possible they can see in the dark? Is it a demi-human with a kind of night vision? But I've never heard of such a monstrous demi-human before.

Perhaps it was magic. But while it was possible to light the darkness with magic, seeing through the dark *without* light was impossible as far as I knew.

With every thought, arrows whipped through the air, and more of us were wounded. My men were firing back as people went down, but the only screams that rang through the air belonged to us.

Where the hell is our client, anyway? Haven't seen him around anywhere. Not even a single word. Did he die before he could say anything?

But with things as they were, the job was already out the window, and none

of us cared about the client no more. Not when we had more important things to focus on, like our own lives.

“All of you, keep firing!” I shouted. “We’re aiming for the right place, but we need more arrows! There’s only one of them, and as soon as we know where they are we’ll beat them with sheer numbers! So keep firing and pin them down!”

I didn’t know how many of my men were out of commission, but I could tell by the frequency of shots that we weren’t dealing with many people. It might have been more than one, but I didn’t have time to worry about the exact details; I had to put the morale of my men first. What’s more, I *knew* that if we could lock down our attacker’s position then we could still make our way out of this.

Perhaps my rallying cries had an effect, because our arrows increased in number, and finally we heard a voice from a distance that didn’t belong to any of my men. It was a young woman’s scream, followed by a low roar from a man.

We didn’t have any women in our gang, so I knew it was the enemy. And the scream let me know that we’d finally landed a blow of our own!

“You heard that! Get them! Strike while the iron’s hot!”

Sword in hand, I ran towards the sound of the woman’s cry. I moved quickly; I wasn’t going to give them the opportunity to slip away and hide again. I ordered my men to surround the area as I closed in. It was our best chance at victory.

And then, suddenly, a huge black shadow appeared. It had run directly down the path I was heading and met me smack in the middle. I felt an overwhelming rage bubbling from it, and I could tell from the size that it belonged to a giant of a man. I instinctively swung my sword, but so did the shadow.

KEEEEEEEEEEN!

Sparks flew and a high-pitched sound rang in my ears as our weapons collided. The sparks illuminated my attacker, and his visage was, in that instant, burned into my mind.



Blond hair, green eyes, well-used armor, and a two-handed battle-ax with a lion motif. I didn't need any more to know that this was *the* Dias of legend, and the rage in his expression alone told me how bad I'd just screwed up.

I never should have doubted the rumors! He really is a monster!

I had given my strike everything I had, but Dias destroyed my sword and sent the blade flying in pieces. It was too dark for me to see it clearly, but I knew it by the weight. The handle of my broken sword fell out of my grip, and then I fell flat on my butt. I simply couldn't take the sheer force of the blow that decimated my sword. Perhaps if I'd fought to maintain my posture it might have been possible, but some part of me knew it wouldn't help.

I was faced with a monstrous strength and a creature that could see in the dark, and I had no weapon to confront them with. My heart shattered just as easily as my sword did. I pictured Dias's axe splitting me two and prepared for the end, but contrary to my expectations, Dias kicked me in the guts instead.

Ugh! Who could've seen that coming?!

Fleeing Through the Forest—A Mysterious Man

The man fled with his torch in hand. He ran through the grasslands, into the forest to the east, and aimlessly onwards through the night.

“Shit! Shit! Shit! They claimed to be the finest mercenaries! Liars! Useless! Taken down like mere flies! I *told* them that it was all over if Dias caught wind of us!”

The man was so irate that he could not keep his feelings contained, and as he fought to catch his breath, he spoke, even though there was nobody around to hear him.

He heaved ragged breaths and turned around worriedly to ensure that nobody was following him, and he continued to run, deeper and deeper into the forest. When he finally stopped, he listened. Around him was quiet, with nothing in the way of living creatures nearby. But even then he looked around often, wary of any potential enemies, and it was a long while before he finally let himself breathe a sigh of relief, knowing that he was safe.

His features relaxed for a moment, and then, suddenly, his body began to shake violently, and his face twisted with deranged fury.

“Dias! My old wounds ache, and it’s all because of you! Always getting in my way, you wretched upstart orphan! You crazy mongrel! You monster! Why won’t you just die?!”

The man shouted as a burning pain pulsed through his body from wounds long since healed, but these shouts alone did not satisfy his rage, and he continued to yell. His whole body went tense, and veins bulged on his forehead, arms, and legs as he trembled. The madness that welled up within him was his strength, and from it came a voice bellowing any and every conceivable insult.

When the man was finally done shouting, and the pulsing of his wounds calmed, clarity seemed to return to the man’s face.

“Damn it,” he sighed. “I have failed. That was not cheap, but...there is nothing

I can do but cut my losses. No more lingering on past failures. Next time will be different. Next time, next time, *next tiiiime*. Know this, Dias: I will not give up until this grudge has been repaid.”

His face was as pale as a ghost, and with faltering steps, the man disappeared deeper into the forest.

After the Battle—Dias

I barely broke a sweat taking out those cowardly bandits. Once they were apprehended, they admitted they'd gotten together with their torches and their weapons and dressed themselves in black so as to get up to thieving. Based on what the bandits told me, and the deep red light Alna picked up from them, they'd planned to launch a merciless surprise attack. Fortunately, we nipped that in the bud thanks to Alna's sensor magic.

During the scuffle, an arrow had grazed Alna's cheek, and that sent me into a *slight* rage. I wasn't really thinking after that point, so I just leaped right into the pack of bandits and took them down. Neither Alna nor I were injured any further, so for all intents and purposes, it was a near flawless victory.

As for the bandits, they had twelve men downed due to arrows, and four suffering broken bones due to my kicks. One of them had gotten away during the commotion, but miraculously, nobody was critically injured or dead. It bothered me that one of the bandits had managed to escape, but given the sheer difference in numbers, I figured we did the best we could.

With the bandits taken prisoner, I confiscated their weapons and gave them a good long lecture on the folly of getting into stealing from others. Once I was done, I released them at the border of the grassy plains. Alna didn't look very happy about it; she thought I was going too easy on the lot of them. I reasoned that because they hadn't actually gotten anywhere near succeeding in their attempts, this was enough.

But if they ever decided it was a good idea to return to my domain and get up to no good, I'd make them know it wasn't, and I'd show them no mercy.

Anyway, that's how the Nezrose domain's first ever robbery attempt came to a close.

"Bandit hunting is a good way to make a lot of money quick," Alna explained as we walked back to Iluk Village. "You get paid a bounty for them, but as an

added bonus whatever you confiscate from them can be traded.”

Alna led me through the darkness, her horn and the jewels in her hair lighting the way.

“So all these weapons will make us some money?” I asked.

My arms were full of everything we’d confiscated from the bandits. They were all of poor quality or otherwise broken, and it was hard to believe they’d be worth anything at all.

“In the plains, iron is very valuable,” Alna explained. “The weapons might not be any good in their current state, but melt them down and you can make any number of tools. That’s what gives them worth. My family wasn’t particularly wealthy, and hunting a bandit group of this size was something I dreamed about.”

Before she met me, Alna made her living patrolling the grasslands and hunting. For the onikin, being wealthy meant having a large number of baars and other livestock, because you could live off them. Hunting was largely taken up by families that didn’t have as much livestock, as well as men looking to accumulate goods for wedding gifts.

The fastest way out of poverty for the onikin was bandit hunting. However, it was almost unheard of for bandits to appear in the grasslands, and Alna told me that hunting a group of them at once was little more than a fantasy.

“When I sensed you coming here in your carriage, my heart leaped,” said Alna. “I thought that bandits had finally come. But I knew almost straightaway, just by your movements, that you weren’t. I got my hopes up, and just like that, they were crushed to dust.”

A carriage had appeared on the plains, a single person was left behind to wander around, and then that person suddenly stopped moving. Alna had sensed my roaming and thought that I was either an abandoned refugee who’d killed themselves, or someone who’d just died out in the wild.

In both situations, I was dead, so Alna didn’t feel like she needed to check on me immediately. She came around to check on my body the following day, only to find me fast asleep.

“You wouldn’t believe how ridiculous it looked to find a man slumbering in the grass like he didn’t have a care in the world,” said Alna. “For all I could tell, it was just some weirdo sleeping out in the plains, completely defenseless. I wasn’t sure if I should say something or tie you up to make sure you couldn’t do anything crazy.”

“I decided to do a soul appraisal just in case, and you were a strong blue. That made me even more confused. Although I have to admit, for a second there I *did* consider killing you while you slept, taking your stuff and telling everyone that you were a bandit.”

But in the end, she hadn’t done that. Instead, she’d chosen to talk to me, and that was how we’d met for the first time.

“Even now, I think about why I talked to you instead of killing you, and I don’t completely understand why I made my decision. It was like I woke you up before I knew what I was doing, and suddenly we were talking. That choice brought me this life, so I made the right one, but sometimes I still wonder... Why *did* I choose to talk to you?”

Alna turned to face me, and I saw her smile lit up by her horn and the jewels in her hair. I was staring for a little while without responding, wondering what it was all about, and then just like that all the light from her magic went out. Before I could work out what had happened or even think to move, Alna sidled up close to me and placed a kiss on my cheek.



I couldn't see anything in the pitch-black of the darkness, and I had my hands still full with all the bandits' weapons, so all I could do was stand there like an idiot. Then, after just a little time had passed, the lights returned. Alna was silent and completely unmoving, and I wondered if I should say something. But before I could, Alna started running.

At first I just watched her go, but then it dawned on me that without Alna's light to guide me, I'd never find my way back to the village, so I ran after her as fast as I could, all the while trying not to drop all the weapons in my arms.

Continued in Volume 2...

Extra Story: The Blue-Horned Maiden

In the Yurt, the Day After the Wedding Banquet—Alna

It was noon the day after the grand wedding banquet held at the onikin village, and the start of her new life. Alna was getting ready to go for a walk. She burned incense on an earthenware plate and rubbed the ashes lightly on her body. It acted as both insect repellent and a talisman. When she was done, she began putting on her bilesha, the dyed baar wool cloth that the onikin wore as clothing.

Those who were married were allowed to wrap themselves in their bilesha from the chest down, but as Alna began to put hers on she remembered that Dias had insisted that they were just “engaged.” This was something she was unfamiliar with, but she knew it meant that they were not truly married, and she wrapped herself from the bottom up. Once it was in place, she tied the string at her waist firmly.

With her preparations done, Alna strapped her bow to her back and her quiver to her waist, and tucked a leather bag heavy with jewels into a spot in the chest area of her bilesha. She had collected the jewels little by little, and she kept them where nobody could see them. She put a hand to them gently, as if in prayer, then stepped confidently out of the yurt.

Outside, Alna heard the men calling out and, together with them, the sounds of a well being dug. There was the digging of the soil, the soil being shoveled away, then the earth being stamped down and hammered. She turned her eyes to the sounds, where she saw a hard working group of onikin men—and alongside them Dias, his forehead beading with sweat as he helped them with their task.

There was no need for Dias to raise even a finger to help. He had already paid the onikin more than enough in earth dragon materials. But even then, it simply

wasn't in his nature to just stand by and watch, and he'd clearly taken to helping the onikin, a great big smile on his face.

Alna had seen Dias hard at work—taking care of the baars, cleaning the livestock pen, tidying the storehouse, and putting up the practice yurt—and it lit a fire of resolve in her heart.

“Dias,” she said, “I’m going on patrol. I’ll hunt down two or three birds for dinner while I’m gone, so I expect I’ll be home late.”

“I can do that if you need me to,” replied Dias, stopping his work for a moment to run over to her. “Well, I can’t deftly hunt a bird with a bow, but I can take down two or three black ghee just fine.”

Alna couldn’t help but chuckle.

“You’ve already done more than enough work for the day,” she said. “You’re helping out with the well, and if you push yourself by going on patrol, you might end up sick. Leave that and the hunting to me, and be sure to take a short break.”

Dias’s eyebrows drooped with worry all the same, but he knew better than to argue, so he simply accepted her words. She looked at him for a moment, glad for the fact that she had someone worrying about her, and though he was so precious to her, she couldn’t help but feel a sting in her heart for lying to him.

At the same time, however, if she told him what she was *really* going out for, it would only make him more concerned. So, she kept her mouth shut and spoke not a word of her true intentions.

“Don’t worry about me,” she said. “I’ve got my concealment magic if I run into any issues. So quit with the worrying and pray that I hunt us some good catches.”

With that, Alna waved off the still-worried Dias and headed out into the plains. And when she was out of sight, she poured magical energy into her legs and bounded through the grasslands at incredible speed.

Alna was headed to the east side of the plains, which connected to the kingdom, making it a place where one had to be especially careful. Alna ran and

ran, and with her legs boosted by her magic, she was practically riding on the wind itself through the wide, spacious grasslands.

Her speed wasn't something to brag about, especially not when you considered the physical strain such boosting put on the body, but Alna told herself she had no other choice for getting as far as she needed to go. At an ordinary pace, it would take her a whole day to get where she now was: east of the plains, where the grasslands ended and the forest began.

Alna took a moment to catch her breath, then took out her hidden leather bag and retrieved a single jewel. Then she sent magic coursing into it as she put the stone in the ground at her feet. Once it was completely buried, she could feel the magic pulsing from it, and for an instant her horn glowed green—the light of her sensor magic.

Alna's sensor magic worked by detecting any living creatures that passed through the area around this buried jewel and sending this information to her. She thus went about burying these jewels across the eastern part of the grasslands, but was careful to set the magic so it wouldn't pick up any small wildlife or bugs. If she didn't do this, her sensor would alert her to every single insect that happened across its radius, and this would only waste Alna's magical energy.

In truth, the onikin people had already set up their own sensor magic within the grasslands, and Alna was able to tap into this. In that sense, there was no need for Alna to do what she was doing, yet at the same time, she knew that the onikin sensor magic was for her people. She was hesitant to use her people's magic for Dias, so she had decided to use her own jewels and her own magic for Dias and herself. It was possible that a time might come when Dias and the onikin people differed in opinion and split, and Alna thought it best to prepare for such an outcome—however unlikely—sooner rather than later.

I am his wife now. I am his family.

These words Alna whispered in her own heart as she buried yet another jewel. Now that she was wed to Dias, a man not of onikin descent, she was his life partner, and her life would run a different course from her people. This wasn't to say that she would no longer value her relationships with her family

and village, just that her relationship with Dias was her priority now, and this meant a lot to her.

As she went about doing her work, a thought flitted through Alna's mind: when exactly had she started to fall for Dias?

There was the first time she saw him, and his body which had been forged into something incredibly strong. He had the hands of a working man, and his scarred face proved that he had been forced to prove his mettle in battle. But at this time, Alna still didn't have any feelings for the man; rather she was filled with a hint of curiosity and a healthy helping of wary caution.

When she heard him speak of his own past to Moll, Alna had been surprised to learn that such a person lived within the kingdom, and she decided she owed him a second chance. But at this point, she still didn't feel drawn to him.

As for when Dias first displayed his manliness and hunted a herd of black ghee, well, even then Alna didn't think that it was the moment her feelings changed. She had seen his manliness in the results of his hunt, finding a glimmer of hope in the man who had only ever worried her, and it had brought her happiness. Alna had to admit that perhaps she had felt the flicker of something then.

But that flicker had become something more definitive when Dias had gone to battle with the earth dragon. Yes, it was true that Dias hadn't even known that it *was* a dragon at the time, but nonetheless, when faced with a monstrous beast, he hadn't backed down in the slightest. And even when his attacks had proved useless, he continued to fight. Then, when the earth dragon had glared at *her*, and when Alna had felt herself a target in its sight, Dias had sprung passionately into action, and slew the dragon with his very next blow.

On that day, Dias had shown Alna something more than mere manliness, and that was the moment that she had fallen in love with him.

Any reservations, fears, or anxieties she'd had about marrying a person of a different race were blown away in an instant by that moment. Even now, those same feelings continued to drive her onwards.

The jewels that Alna imbued with her magic and buried were gathered

painstakingly in a life of poverty. By burying them here to respond to her sensor magic, where they couldn't be found or used by the onikin, was to her a much deeper and more meaningful act than the wedding banquet of the previous evening.

With each buried stone she was telling the mother earth, the grasslands itself, that she would walk alongside Dias for the rest of her life as his wife, just as she was telling the onikin people and herself. This act of setting her own sensor magic was, for Alna, her true wedding vows.

While she was lost in thought, still safe with her concealment magic, Alna felt a chill breeze brush her cheek. She had gotten so absorbed in her work that it was only now, as she looked up towards the sky, that she realized the sun was about to set.

She wouldn't finish her work today, and knew she would have to do it all again tomorrow. She put her bag of jewels back near her chest, readied her bow, and pulled an arrow from her quiver. She had told Dias that she was going out to hunt, so she kept her eyes open for prey as she slowly walked back towards the yurt, where Dias would be waiting.

Waiting for Alna—Dias

The sun was beginning to set, and the onikin called it a day and said they'd pick things up tomorrow. Then they set out for the onikin village. The well was never going to be a one-day project, of course, so the work would continue for a few days yet. I stood in front of the yurt, watched the onikin men head for home, and wondered what to do.

Honestly, for a while now, even while I was working, I couldn't help feeling like Alna was later than usual. I mean, she'd said herself that she was going to be late, but did it really take someone as skilled as her this long to hunt some birds for dinner?

When it crossed my mind that something might have happened to her, I got nervous. Something had been a bit different about her ever since the morning and, well, I didn't know what.

Should I go looking for her? But then there'd be nobody here to look after Francis and Francoise. Maybe I could bring them with me? No, because if Alna came back while we were all gone, then we'd be the ones worrying her.

I let out a low, worried moan. I really didn't know what to do, and it was then that I felt the wind singing through the air, and with it I caught the scent of herbs and ash that Alna loved...along with the scent of blood.

I looked curiously over in the direction that it came from, and saw Alna walking towards me with three birds all hanging by their feet and tied together with string.

"Dias!" shouted Alna. "I caught us three kijis! You don't see them very often in these parts, but they're delicious! All thanks to you praying for a good hunt. We have rice from the banquet yesterday, so we're having rice cooked with kiji meat and dried grapes."

She sounded very pleased with herself as she held up her three birds and flashed a great big smile. Seeing her like that was a relief, and I let out a sigh, making sure she didn't see it.

"Sounds amazing!" I said as I ran over to her and took the birds off her hands. "They look like they're going to be great. Fantastic. Now you take a break and let me handle dressing them, okay? You must be tired after your hunt, yeah? Hey, don't look at me like that, I'm better at gutting and dressing birds than I look. You just leave it to me."

I mean, I figured she had to be tired after such a long hunt, and Alna's smile softened at my words.

"No, we'll do it together," she said. "We can get it done faster, and I'm pretty good at dressing birds myself, you know."

I really would have preferred her to rest, especially because she'd be preparing for dinner later, but then I realized that I could just help her out then too.

Once we settled that, Alna and I dressed the birds and got dinner ready together. The meat was so much better than I ever imagined, and I loved the

sweet and sour flavoring Alna cooked it with.

Special Extra Story: Alna, Grazing?

One Afternoon at the Yurt—Dias

One day, I returned home to the yurt in the early afternoon with Francis and Francoise, and found Alna sitting by the stove with a big pile of grass and chewing on something. The grass was what we fed the baars, and there was no sign of food otherwise. Surely Alna wasn't...was she?

As soon as Alna saw my confusion, she spat what was in her mouth into an earthenware bowl in her hands.

What in the...? What?

I had no clue what to make of what I was watching, but Alna simply wiped at the corner of her mouth with a piece of cloth and looked at me.

"What's with the face?" she asked casually.

"I, well, it's just...are you eating grass?"

"Hm? Oh, no. I'm not eating it. I'm grinding it down with my teeth and mixing it with my saliva."

That was how she explained herself, but it only left me with more questions.

"And...why would you be doing that?" I asked.

"Huh? Oh, okay. You don't know what I'm doing. Just watch, you'll see."

Alna wrapped the grass she'd spat out in the cloth she wiped her mouth with, then squeezed it until liquid started to drip from it, which she collected in the bowl. Once she had enough liquid in the bowl, she took some black tree nuts from a bag and ground them in a different bowl. Then she took them in the same cloth from earlier, picked them up, and squeezed the juice from those into the first bowl.

By doing so, the dense green liquid in the bowl changed dark blue in color, or maybe black. In any case, it was very dark. But what was it for? What did Alna

do with that liquid?

I was still very confused as Alna took a white cloth made from Francis and Francoise's wool, then soaked it in the bowl.

I let out a gasp without even realizing it when she removed it. The baar wool cloth, which had been a clean, pure white, was now dyed in the black color of the liquid in the bowl. I was suddenly worried that Francis and Francoise would be enraged to see their wool being dirtied like that, but when I glanced at the two of them, I could actually see excitement on their faces. They weren't angry at all; quite the opposite in fact.

What the heck is going on?

I still had my head tilted in confusion as I watched Alna work. She took the cloth that was stained in dirty black, squeezed it, then proceeded to wash it in an urn. After she did that a few times, that dirty black cloth became a beautiful vivid blue like the sky, and Alna stretched it out and flashed it in my direction. I could read exactly what she was thinking by the expression on her face: *what do you think about this then, eh?*

Alna explained to me that the work I'd watched her doing was an old, traditional dyeing technique handed down through the onikin people. It was a mixture of liquids from grass, saliva, and black tree nuts. Blending them all together produced a vibrant blue dye. I didn't know the reasons it all worked how it did, but the onikin did, and this dyeing was just another part of their everyday life.

According to Alna, by changing the amount of each liquid in the blend, you could change the shade of blue you got, from vivid and bright colors to much denser and darker tones. The onikin used this along with many other dyeing recipes to color the bilescha they wore in a variety of beautiful colors.

"This isn't done yet," said Alna. "We'll have to dry it for a few days to make sure the color sets. Once it sets, we'll layer it over other pieces of cloth or attach it to wool or fur to produce a bilescha. Given the size, it'll probably be for a baby, I think."

At that point Alna paused and blushed, and turned away from me. At the same time, Francis and Francoise shot me reproving looks. I couldn't take the

weight of any of it, so I turned around and left the yurt without another word.

Afterword

Hello everyone, I'm the author, Fuurou.

I've got lots I want to write about here, but firstly I want to thank everyone. To all of you who supported me on Shosetsuka ni Naro, to the editing team who supported me for this volume, to the illustrator Kinta who made the book even better, to the designer for their wonderful layout—it's because of all of you that this book is here, so thank you. And of course, I'm grateful to every one of you who purchased a copy of this first volume.

I'm so filled with gratitude, and yet I still couldn't be more grateful to all of you. Thank you, truly, so very, very much!

Now, while I *could* end the afterword here with my thanks and gratitude, that would make it too short, so I'd like to tell you a bit about the book.

This book is filled with all the things I'm interested in: nomadic tribes, sheep, grassy plains, and beastkin and demi-humans among them. But out of all of these, it's the nomadic tribes that I like the most.

The more I researched nomadic races, the more I was intrigued. Women have a high status among many of them and often become leaders. They're also generous and happy to accept outsiders if it's in the best interests of the tribe. The nomadic tribes differ from farming and hunting tribes.

The nomadic races prefer talking through their problems over pointless conflict, and they'll flee from battles they have no chance of winning. They value the lives of their communities, a practical train of thought that comes from the fact that their tribes are not large in number.

The way that these nomadic tribes put a premium on the lives of their community stretches to how careful they are about living in a healthy manner. Even now they have many unique approaches to health, and apparently because of these habits they were able to avoid tuberculosis when it was

running rampant.

The more I researched them, the more I felt an overflowing charm in these amazing people. I wanted to share this charm in my own way, with the perfect mixture of fantasy elements, grassy plains, and sheep. The product of that, this story, is something I intend to continue for a little...no, a long while.

There's so much that I want to put in this story, and also things which I've set up but still haven't revealed. I don't know if I'll be able to share everything or publish it like this in a book, but I'll give it everything I have. Nothing would make me happier than having your support.

In the next volume, Dias, true to his word, will try his hand at farming. He's going to run into lots of issues, and we'll see a lot of different characters and even new subjects as problems erupt unlike anything so far. How Dias and his people overcome these challenges is something to look forward to in the next volume.

I hope to write to you all again in the next volume's afterword!

Fuurou, September 2018



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Kinta

Bonus Short Story

Dias and Eldan, Chatting

Eldan shared his past, I shared mine, and all the while, Eldan's wives were by his side, looking after him. Their bodies and faces were hidden behind their white dresses and white veils, only their eyes clearly visible, but there was the light of kindness in their gazes, and I could tell that they all loved Eldan very much.

From what I'd seen so far, there wasn't any discord or tension between the wives themselves. In fact, it looked like they all got along with one another, all of them working together to make sure that Eldan was well cared for.

"I'm mighty impressed," I said to Eldan. "Sixteen wives. I don't know how you do it. I always thought having multiple wives was the stuff of storybooks, so I was very surprised to see it with my own eyes."

I looked at each of the women, and they all giggled.

"Sir Dias," replied Eldan, "it is not as hard as you think to make things work with multiple wives. I love each of them equally and spend the same amount of money and time on all of them. They get along well and are like sisters, working together to support one another."

Eldan said it all very casually, but if you asked me, sharing love, time, and money equally across sixteen partners? That didn't sound like a simple thing. I also got the sense from talking to Eldan that his wives were a mixed group of different demi-human races, and, well, it was all much more than I'd be able to handle if I were in the same position.

"Sir Dias," said the wife sitting closest to Eldan, "it is *because* we sisters support each other that we are all able to stay happily by our husband's side. When you hear of multiple wives, you may imagine a great many inconveniences, but because we wives treat each other so dearly, our physical and mental strains are eased. When we someday have children, our sisters will

be there to look after them when their mothers need rest. They say that a child raised by many mothers grows into a generous and open-minded adult.”

The woman’s words were spoken gently, and there was no malice in them. She didn’t sound as though she was lying.

“I believe that treasuring a single wife is a truly wonderful thing,” said another, “but loving and treasuring many wives is just as wonderful! When I think of my husband and how he is able to make so many women happy, I feel nothing but pride for the smiles I see on my sisters’ faces. They are all so very precious!”

Well, I guess that was one way of looking at it. It was my first time seeing and interacting with the culture of Eldan’s people, and I had to admit that I still couldn’t quite wrap my head around it. But at the same time, I could respect that it was just another way of living, and just another way of showing love and affection. So I nodded along, and when they saw me do it, Eldan’s wives all laughed happily.

The laughter filled the air with an easy warmth, and then one of Eldan’s wives went and said something that killed that comfortable atmosphere entirely.

“Sir Dias, by all means, do consider more wives,” she said.

The second the words left her mouth, I felt a silent, murderous gaze on us all, brimming with rage. An aura drifting over from Alna froze us to the bone.

“Dias has *me*,” she asserted, her chilling aura suddenly giving way to a sweet smile. “And that’s enough. Even without sisters, I will birth forty children, and I will raise each and every one of them into strong, upstanding individuals.”

We all nodded frantically in response—me, Eldan’s wives, and even Eldan himself.

I couldn’t imagine taking more than one wife in the first place, but I vowed at that moment to make Alna my one and only, and to treasure her always.



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by Fuurou

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