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DAYS OF WINTER WHITE



The Frontier Lord Begins with **Zero** Subjects

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Wow! This is
going to be
so much fun!
We can do
anything!

So cold! So
much snow!
It's all soft
and fluffy!

Illustrator: Kinta

“Wow! A
dragon!
A real
dragon!”

“Yes! It’s a
dragon!”



Cast of Characters



Dias

Lord of the Baarbadal Domain,
formerly Nezrose.



Alna

Onikin Tribe Member
and Dias's wife.



Klaus

Captain of the domain guard.
Married to the dogkin Canis.



Senai and Ayhan

Twin sisters and forestkin
with mysterious powers.



Eldan

Demi-human hybrid and
neighboring lord of the Mahati
Domain, formerly Kasdeks.



Aymer

Long-eared hopping mousekin
woman. Also resident education
supervisor and village advisor.



Ellie

An orphan raised by Dias,
now living in Iluk Village.



Zorg

A young man being considered for
the position of onikin tribe chieftain.
Alna's older brother.



Juha

Dias's former brother in arms,
now employed by Eldan.

Aymer's Report

**Residents:
From 98 to 125!**

Dias joined forces with Zorg, Alna's brother, and slew a group of Wind Dragons which were heading to attack Iluk Village.

Dias fell ill from the wounds he received in battle, but upon drinking a concoction prepared with the sanjivani herb, a plant of legend, he made a complete recovery.

We were all really worried that he was going to die, so what a relief that he's so well again! That said, just who or what was that mysterious baar that gave him the plant in the first place?

Eldan, a lord ever worried about the fate of the beastkin, also drank the sanjivani concoction, and thus recovered from the illness that had plagued him since birth.

Dias was promoted to the rank of duke, by order of King Sanserife. He then officially took on the new family name of Baarbadal, which has since become the name of the domain which he governs. Through a deal with Eldan, Dias exchanged a portion of his Wind Dragon materials for half of the forest that acts as the border between Baarbadal and Mahati (formerly Kasdeks).

As preparations for winter continued, Francoise and a number of expecting dogkin mothers went into labor. All of the newborns were delivered safely and in good health, resulting in twenty-seven new dogkin and six new baars.

Dias is now a duke with a steadily developing domain, and his story continues...

Baarbadal Domain, Iluk Village: Facilities & Items of Note:

Yurts, storehouses, privies, well, livestock pens, assembly hall, village square, stables, fields (vegetables and trees), reservoir, forest to the east of the grasslands.

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Iluk Village, the Day Following the Banquet for the Newborns—Dias

It was a touch warmer in the plains, though the grasslands now showed signs of the coming winter, and the people of Iluk did as they always did: they each took to their work with great gusto. They let the livestock out from the stables to stretch their legs (as the animals had all waited patiently while we were busy with the banquet and such), they continued with winter preparations and insulating their yurts, and they took care of the newborns.

With everyone working so hard around the village, I had to get to work myself to replenish all the food we'd chowed our way through at our banquet. I mean, I was *supposed* to get to work, but I just found it damned near impossible to leave the yurt, and even as the sun rose to its highest at noon, I still hadn't left.

As for why, well...

It was the six voices all crying out their different variations of "Beaah!"

In other words, Francoise and Francis's kids.

Their faces were all so wrinkly I wasn't even sure if they could see or not, and they twisted and turned their little bodies, which still hadn't grown a single hair. The six little baby baars stayed in their bed, snuggling into their mother's comfy wool in search of warmth while Francoise looked on happily. Why, it was just so adorable and heartwarming a sight that I could have stayed there watching it forever. And when I thought about how I wouldn't be able to see it if I left the yurt, I suddenly didn't feel like getting up anymore.

"Look, you've worked hard every day until now, so you've earned yourself something of a break, but...if this keeps up for too long, we're going to find ourselves in trouble," said Alna.

I could hear her talking to me as I stayed by Francoise's side. She was seeing to her daily chores, and her words were the push I needed to finally get up.

"Satisfied yet?" asked Alna.

“Nope,” I replied, “but the little babies have all disappeared into Francoise’s wool, so I figure there’s no real point to sticking around. I’ll take a quick look around the village, then head off to the forest.”

Alna let out an exasperated sigh, and that same exasperation was written all over her face, but in the end she couldn’t stop a little smile from flashing across her lips.

“I guess I should take excess enthusiasm over someone who hates kids,” she said. “You don’t complain about them crying at night, and you’ll happily clean them and change their diapers whenever they need it.”

Alna started getting my cloak and foraging equipment ready while I swung my arms and my hips to loosen up the stiffer parts of my body.

“I went through all the crying and the diaper changing back when I was young, and it’s a much simpler thing when it’s babies you’re dealing with,” I replied. “Ellie was a real handful, I tell you what. She kept crying and wetting the bed even when she was growing up...”

It was something of a nostalgic memory for me now, and I thought back on those old times as I put on my stuff and got ready to leave. But my comment reminded Alna of something.

“Speaking of Ellie, she came out near the end of the banquet yesterday and announced our winter gear. She’s already gotten started making everything. We onikin tend to put our focus on practical clothing that’s easy to make, so I was a bit stunned by Ellie’s ideas. She’s got a real eye for fashion. I just hope the actual clothes are as good as her designs.”

Alna looked over in the direction of Ellie’s yurt, and her eyes sparkled with an excitement and anticipation that far surpassed the caution in her words.

“Then I’ll make sure to check in on her when I do my rounds,” I assured her. “She said something about lacking some materials, so she’s going to write a letter with an order for what she needs. Eldan’s people are preparing for the highway on the other side of the forest. I’ve just got to hand it off to them over there, and they’ll see that it gets to Aisa.”

Ellie had designed new winter outfits that improved upon what the onikin

already made. You could have called it Sanserife flair, but I thought the designs were more likely unique to Ellie, and all the ladies in the village were excited about them. They rated the designs real highly, and the banquet had exploded into chatter when Ellie had revealed her concepts.

As for me, I just figured that if I could help her finish them, be it by speeding things along or helping her make sure the end product was exactly the way she'd envisioned it, then I'd give it my best. And when I said as much to Alna, she burst into a happy grin, and I knew it was a good idea to help Ellie out.

When I had all my forest gear on and was ready to go, I left the yurt with my axe in hand and headed around the village. The voices of the villagers echoed around me: the crying of the newborns, the happy chatter of people, and the enthusiastic cheers of those inspired by the birth of our new residents. Everybody was working hard.

The first thing I did was head to Ellie's yurt, where she wrote out that letter to Aisa. Then I went to see our geese, and then our animals at the stable, and then I circled the outskirts of Iluk.

Even from the middle of the village I could hear the grunts and shouts Klaus and the masti guards were making throughout their training, and I neared the group before they finished for the day. Klaus still had some hard feelings about his battle with the giant lizards, so he'd decided to build himself up all over again from the ground up. He threw himself into his training with more energy than ever. The masti were inspired by his enthusiasm, and as a result they were following him around and training just as hard.

I watched them for a little while, and then I left without a word so as not to bother them.

In the coming days, the plains would welcome the arrival of winter. According to Alna, it got so cold over the winter that even the monsters didn't like to come out, making winter about as quiet a season as they came.

The onikin spent this time preparing for spring of the new year. They worked on handicrafts; trained their bodies, skills, and hunting abilities; and generally spent their days growing and preparing.

I could already tell that this was exactly how Klaus and the mastis were going to spend the time, and already I couldn't wait to see how they grew between now and next spring. I was thinking about it as I circled back around to the stable, where I found the twins running over to me, both of them decked out in their own foraging gear. They must have seen me on patrol and guessed where I was going, then hurried to get all their stuff together too.

"Dias! We're coming with you!" cried Senai.

"To the forest!" added Ayhan. "For foraging!"

"I'll be joining you today!" said Aymer, who was wrapped in Senai's arms.

"We're heading out a bit later than usual, so what say we ride the horses today?" I asked.

The four of us went to the stables, where the sheps were out with the horses and the white ghee. The dogkin were brushing the animals with their long-handled brushes, combing their manes, polishing their hooves, and even brushing their teeth. The horses and ghee had their eyes closed in bliss and were all enjoying it so much that I thought they'd fall asleep on their feet. In return, as if to say thanks, the horses and the white ghee licked the sheps with their long tongues, and the sheps smiled brightly because they were used to such treatment.

"Shiya!"

"Guri!"

The twins both called out to their horses as we reached the stables, and the white Shiya and the gray Guri's ears shot straight up. Their heads soon followed and they replied to the twins with hearty neighs.

"Balers!" I shouted, not wanting to be outdone.

The great big Balers glanced at me through narrowed eyes, then heaved a sigh the likes of which I imagined the whole village heard. I hadn't been able to take care of Balers every day, and I still wasn't very comfortable riding him, so his behavior wasn't all that surprising. Still, I let out a wry chuckle and wondered if he couldn't be just a *little* more accommodating.

The sheps who were taking care of the horses stepped away and the horses all walked over to their prospective riders. Shiya strode over to Senai, Guri practically skipped on up to Ayhan, and Balers...reluctantly dragged his hooves over to me. I was relieved at least to see that while Balers wasn't exactly fond of me, he didn't hate my guts. He pushed his whole weight into me, and then he gave me a long annoyed stare which made his message clear.

"Pats. Now."

Shiya and Guri, too, had both lowered their heads down to the twins as if to similarly say, *"Pats please!"* So that's what we all did. That was when Aisha, the horse we simply took care of because she wouldn't let anyone ride her, trotted elegantly over to us.

Aisha always looked at everyone with a fierce glare, and that's exactly how her eyes were as they went from me to Senai to Ayhan...but when they landed on Aymer, Aisha's gaze softened.

"Oh? What's that?" asked Aymer. "Me?"

Aymer looked mighty flustered, but Aisha walked on over and lowered her head as if to say, *"You will ride me."* Aymer's eyes darted to me and the twins, unsure of what to do, and then she timidly climbed aboard Aisha's head.

The little mousekin stood astride Aisha's head, albeit unsteadily. Then Aisha twitched her ears as though she wanted Aymer to grab on. Aymer did as directed, and with the mousekin's stance secured Aisha finally raised her head proudly.

"My reinsman is found," her expression said.

I didn't know why Aymer was fine and the rest of us weren't, but I figured that it was good news that Aisha had found a rider. As the horse began to move, Aymer's eyes glimmered with excitement. It was her first time riding a horse, after all.

"Wow!" she cried. "Wow! Riding a horse is *very* different from sitting on a person's shoulder or head!"

When Aymer leaned her body one way or the other, Aisha turned in that direction. Aymer didn't look very stable, what with her missing reins and a

saddle, but she did a masterful job all the same. Aisha was doing a lot to make sure Aymer was steady and comfortable too, and it looked to me like as long as the ride wasn't too rough, Aymer would be just fine.

"If we *did* make a saddle," I muttered, "then we'd want to make it part of the bridle. Maybe a leather belt across the top of Aisha's head. I figure we'll need something like that for riding in the future."

"I'll let Alna know immediately!" declared one of the young nearby sheps.

With that, the dogkin was off to our yurt in a flash. A few moments later the shep was right back and panting from all the running, but they stood up tall and gave their report.

"Alna says a small saddle for Aymer will be easy to make! She says she'll make time to whip one up! It should be ready in about two or three days!"

"Yay!" shouted Aymer, already having a grand old time riding Aisha.

She was so happy, in fact, that Aisha picked up speed and Aymer was left holding her glasses as she wobbled to and fro. When she got back she looked unsteady and a bit shaken.

"I do believe that galloping is a *little* too much for me at this stage," she admitted. "With a saddle I won't have to worry about a fall, but at the moment all the wobbling is rather scary. I'm very sorry, but I hope you don't mind if we ride on the slow and easy side today."

"Not a problem," I replied.

"Okay!" said Senai.

"All good!" said Ayhan.

Aymer looked relieved at our replies and slumped across Aisha's head.

"You okay?" I asked. "You don't have to come to the forest. You can stay here at the village and just practice riding around if you like."

"I'll be just fine," answered Aymer.

Aisha, too, glared at me and even shot a fierce neigh my way.

"Don't you dare doubt my abilities. I will take care of her."

And true to her word, Aisha did a great job of treading cautiously as Aymer lay there on her head. A part of me had to wonder why Aisha hadn't just taken all of this care from the start, but if she and Aymer were happy with the arrangement, then so was I. I put my axe down and walked on over to the stables to get Balers's saddle.

Riding Through the Winter Plains as Winter Nears

We rode towards the forest on the backs of Balers, Shiya, Guri, and Aisha. We couldn't bring ourselves to just leave Alna's beloved Karberan all alone at the stables, so we'd gotten the gear ready and now had a fifth horse along for the ride without a rider. Karberan had been a bit crestfallen to see that Alna was nowhere in sight, but when I'd flashed the reins and the cart and indicated that we'd need someone to help us carry wood home, the horse had looked plenty satisfied.

So onwards we walked, with Karberan in the lead, followed by the twins. Aymer and I took up the rear, because Aisha was walking slowly for Aymer and also because my axe was pretty heavy. Karberan spent a lot of time glancing back at the rest of us to make sure we were indeed heading in the right direction, while Shiya and Guri were delighted to see Senai and Ayhan having such a good time and took off running all over the place.

Balers watched them with a good deal of envy, but he was kind to me and did his best to accommodate how bad a rider I was. I could feel the kindness of his heart in little things like that.

But I can't just keep relying on this generosity, I thought. I've got to put in the work myself too.

Balers glanced at me then, perhaps sensing my passing thoughts.

"Then practice more. Show me you care. More often. Do it."

I had a pretty good idea of what he wanted to tell me from just that glance...and I'd felt that exact glance before, which made it all the more awkward.

"I'll have a lot more time come winter," I said. "I'll do my best to please you."

I gave his neck a good, strong pat, and the horse replied with a neigh. I wasn't sure exactly what he was saying that time, but he lifted his head up high and with bold steps he trotted onwards through the plains. We caught up to the horses ahead and walked alongside Aisha, where Aymer seemed to be having a wonderful time.

"Horse riding is so much fun!" she declared with a hearty laugh. "It really is so very different from sitting on Senai and Ayhan's shoulders or riding on your head, Dias. This feeling of being at one with the horse, of communication through our very bodies, is amazing! Now I fully understand why Alna loves horses and why she treats them so well! I can't even properly put into words how much fun I'm having. I feel like I can just ride Aisha right off into the sunset and beyond!"

Aymer's tail wagged excitedly as she spoke, and she leaned forwards, pressing Aisha onwards. Aisha responded in kind, carrying herself with such elegance it was like she was dancing. It was a far, far cry from Balers's heavy gait, and Aymer loved it. She pushed Aisha on even more, and the horse picked up speed, and...all of a sudden I got the feeling we'd soon be looking at the exact same thing that had happened earlier at the stables.

"Aymer, I know you're having a great time!" I shouted. "But if you're not careful you're going to make yourself dizzy all over again!"

Aymer snapped back to her senses and brought Aisha back to a more relaxed pace as she calmed herself.

"I got a little carried away there..." she admitted. "If it weren't for the wobbling and the shaking, I'd be off like the wind. I wonder if there's anything we can do about that..."

"Hmm..." I murmured. "Well, during the war, some people got sick in carriages and on boats. They did their darndest to work out some method to deal with the shaking, but in the end nobody had any good ideas. But I honestly think that the best thing for it is just submitting yourself to the experience over and over until you get used to it. I don't think it's as bad for you as it is in carriages or boats, and there's no magic cure-all, anyway."

"Oh. I see. Magic...hmm... I can use *some* magic, but I've never been

particularly good at it.”

“Aymer, you can use magic?”

“Everyone can use some magic, no matter their race. Well, usually. People like you and Ben, who can’t use magic at all, are actually quite uncommon.”

“Back when I was a soldier, most of the guys weren’t particularly skilled with it.”

“Be that as it may, they were likely still capable of it,” said Aymer, her ears darting left and right as she spoke. “Even those who lack any talent whatsoever can usually cast a dim illumination in the dark or at least sense magical energy. However, there’s often no point to casting such spells as they have no real use, and you simply waste a great deal of magical energy for nothing. Disturbing the flow of magical energy can actually make you physically ill, so it’s not advisable to use magic if you don’t have the skill for it.”

“I see.” The little lesson had me dropping into thought.

So when you run out of magical energy it hits you physically too. Does that mean that for me and Uncle Ben, our bodies were just magically weak right from the start? Or maybe we’d just never suffer that kind of physical breakdown because we didn’t even have the magical energy to disturb the flow in the first place.

And what even is magical energy anyway? Could me and Uncle Ben get some if we knew how it was created and what it was made of?

Boy, I bet it sure would be useful to be able to use magic.

Right around then, some kind of bright light crossed my gaze. It was blindingly bright, and I had to shut my eyes. I was shocked for a moment, but I didn’t want to scare Balers so I kept a cool look on my face. I slowly opened my eyes, just a little, and tried to get a sense for where the light had come from. But all I found was my axe, sitting on my shoulder.

I guess the sunlight must have reflected off my axe, huh?

The sun wasn’t all that bright, and my axe wasn’t so polished that it reflected much of anything, but I figured sometimes this kind of thing happened anyway.

I made sure to angle the axe blade so the same thing wouldn't happen again.

Not much later the trees of the forest came into view.

"We're here!" shouted Senai.

"I can smell the forest!" shouted Ayhan.

In the Forest

We got off our horses and walked along, holding them by their reins as we went deeper into the forest. There didn't seem to be any monsters at the entrance to the forest, so we could have left the horses there to rest, but all of them seemed to want to join us, so we let them enjoy the forest with us.

A little deeper in we were met by all-new scenery thanks to the chill that we'd been hit with. All the trees were losing their leaves or otherwise fading in color, and the forest was filled with an air of desolation. I didn't think it was all that much to look at, but the twins only saw yet another side of the forest that they loved. They thrust the reins of their horses at me and started running and jumping around together with Aymer.

But they weren't just having a good time. They'd also brought some coal with them, and they put it to use by writing messages for me on the trees. It was something they'd been doing for a little while now.

Okay to cut down, don't cut down, make into timber, no good for timber, cut this one down and leave it, cut this one down then cut it into smaller pieces so it can return to the earth more easily...

Anyway, there were a lot of notes like that.

Among these tree-scribbled orders, I found a couple I hadn't seen before: *cut down soon and take home and make into timber today*.

"These ones here," I said to the girls, who were traipsing around and stomping on the fallen leaves, "the ones you said I should cut down soon and the ones we should take home today, I guess I should do these now?"

"Do it later!" said Senai.

“When we go home!” added Ayhan.

“We don’t know how much we’ll have yet!”

“We’ll decide when we have a better idea of things!”

The twins threw leaves up in the air and covered each other’s faces with them, and they laughed and laughed. Aymer was watching from a distance, and when she saw them laughing, she started laughing too. Their laughter echoed across the forest as we proceeded farther in, and then all of a sudden Senai and Ayhan realized something and stopped in their tracks. They went to a nearby tree and wrote *Do not enter!*

They wrote the words *real* big so they jumped out at you. They made it seem like a warning about some kind of danger, but the girls looked as bright and bubbly as usual. I was puzzled by the contrast of their message and their behavior, so I decided I’d ask, but as soon as I took a step forwards—

“Stop right there!” they shouted in unison.

So I stopped, and the horses stopped, and the twins suddenly turned serious and ran on over, looking like mothers set to scold a naughty child.

“You can’t go past this point! No tree chopping either!” said Senai.

“And no horses! Everyone stays out!” added Ayhan.

“Well, if you say so, that’s what we’ll do,” I said, “but what’s in there? Is it dangerous grass or something?”

I was worried that maybe it was dangerous for the horses.

“Really delicious mushrooms are growing in there!” said Senai.

“Really delicious! And very fragrant too!” said Ayhan.

“But there’s not many yet, and we won’t get to forage any if we take what’s there or accidentally step on them!”

“We can all eat them next year!”

“So we’re going to leave them until then!”

“We have to make a fence so animals can’t get near!”

“We have to be patient. Super patient...”

“Next year... Next year we can eat them...”

The girls put their hands to their mouths to stop themselves from drooling and swallowed what was threatening to pass their lips. Those mushrooms must have been real appetizing, that was for sure. But they were showing a great deal of patience in waiting so everyone could eat them together. I gave them both a pat on the head for it.

“Well then,” I said, “let’s build ourselves a fence so we can all eat those mushrooms next year.”

The twins’ eyes lit up, and they immediately started running around picking out wood to use for the fence.

So, while the horses relaxed on a bed of fallen leaves that the twins had made, we took to making a fence. I chopped down some trees that were marked for cutting and put them around the area where the mushrooms were, making sure our fence was big enough to keep out person and beast alike. Then I secured it all so it wouldn’t get knocked over by wind or rain.

We didn’t have the proper tools for the job, but with the twins picking out the best wood to use, Aymer directing us with her wisdom, and me with my brute strength, we ended up making ourselves a pretty sturdy barrier indeed.

Around the time the sun was on its decline, we had the basic shape all set, and we figured we were about done for the day, so we took a seat and gave ourselves a break. The fence was still a long ways from completion, being that we’d have to come back later with better tools to finish it, but we were all confident that it would do its job just fine until then. Everyone looked satisfied; Balers was lying down, so the twins were relaxing against his stomach, and Aymer was lying down on top of the fallen leaves. I sat down on a tree stump, and as I did a letter fell out of my pocket.

The letter was the one that Ellie had given me with an order for materials she needed. It was important, and I was supposed to give it to Eldan’s people working on the highway, but I’d completely forgotten about it. I knew that if I took off running, then I could make it to Eldan’s people before the end of the

day, but that was only if I was on my own. The twins were already pretty tired, and dragging them along for the trip would only leave them completely exhausted, not to mention the fact we might not make it in time.

That said, I knew I couldn't just leave the twins in the forest all alone. Aymer must have noticed I was racking my brains over this, because she sat up to talk to me.

"If you have some business to attend to, please see to it," she said. "I'll keep an eye on the girls, so you don't have to worry. We'll shout out in a loud voice if anything happens, or we'll get away from danger with the help of the horses, but don't forget that the twins are quite capable with their bows too. We'll be just fine."

I wanted to trust her, and I did, but I still struggled with the notion of leaving them alone. But for some reason, Senai and Ayhan were watching us with a clear glimmer in their eyes.

"Go! Go!" said Senai.

"We'll be okay! We promise!" said Ayhan.

There was something almost like expectation and excitement in their voices, and I thought about it long and hard, but when I looked back at the twins they looked different. It was clear by their expressions that they were almost disappointed, like they *needed* me to go and see to my business, and they were starting to get all fidgety. I looked at them, and I kept looking at them, and after some more thought I turned to Aymer.

"And you're sure you'll be fine without me? You're sure you're sure?"

"We'll be fine! We've been in the forest all day, and we haven't encountered a single threat. I know I'm on the small side, but I'm a fully grown adult, you know. I'm ready to respond should anything happen."

"And you're really sure? Really? You're sure?"

"Yes, really."

"You're really sure that you're really really—"

Before I could continue, Aymer's eyes narrowed to slits.

"We are wasting time with these questions. Go and do what it is you have to do," said her gaze, nudging me to my feet.

"I'll be right back!"

And so, with axe and letter in hand, I took off running to the other side of the forest.

In the Forest with Senai and Ayhan—Aymer

Aymer watched Dias's silhouette as it faded into the depths of the forest, then turned to the two fidgeting twins.

"Well then, girls," she said, "what in the world is it that you're planning this time? Judging by the fact you don't want Dias to see, am I right to think it's something like the magic you cast on the fields?"

"How did you know?" asked the girls in unison, astounded.

Aymer sighed, then shook her tail vigorously. "If you're going to do it, you'd best hurry!"

And so the twins got to it. They tied the horses' reins to a tree so they wouldn't get in the way and walked over to the area where the delicious mushrooms were to be left to grow. Then, just as they had at the village fields, they knelt down facing one another and began to chant their prayer. And as with the fields, a circle appeared around the two girls, raising the earth slightly before sinking underneath it.

The girls had cast this same magic in different parts of the village, always careful to make sure they weren't seen. As she watched over the twins at work, Aymer wondered how many times she had seen them do this now. It didn't take long before the circle vanished completely, and the twins picked themselves back up.

"I suppose this means that the mushrooms you mentioned earlier will grow well, yes?" asked Aymer.

But the girls shook their heads.

"Mushrooms aren't as easy to work with as trees and other plants," said Senai, "so we just prepared the area for them."

"Mushrooms aren't like other plants," explained Ayhan. "They're different. Sometimes they don't grow. But because these ones are so delicious, we still wanted to try!"

The twins brushed the leaves from their knees as Aymer puzzled over what she'd been told. She was glad, however, that they were all done before Dias had come back, and she breathed a sigh of relief. That was when she heard a sound from beyond the fenced-off area, in the dim gloom of the forest where the sun did not shine.

It wasn't the sound of the wind, nor was it the sound of any small insects. It was something much bigger. Aymer and the twins had exceptional hearing, and they waited nervously for whatever it was. Senai and Ayhan gripped their shortbows while Aymer moved to stand in front of the girls in an attempt to protect them. The horses grew restless where they were waiting, and it was with this tension in the air that they listened as the yet-unseen creature trudged through the grass, revealing a shadowy silhouette.

The first thing that came into focus was a once-pointed hat that, because it had a hole at the top of it, was no longer pointed. Wearing it was a small man with a long, thick white beard that seemed excessive in length. He wore heavy leather clothing, from which hung a countless array of different tools. He also sported a knapsack and held in his hand an axe with a short handle.

Standing before the twins was an elderly stump of a man with a stocky build, just a little taller than Senai and Ayhan. Deep wrinkles were carved into his face, and beneath his pointy nose was a friendly smile.

"Ah," he said, "I *thought* that was forestkin magic. That takes me back, it really does. So the forestkin have returned."

The old man's voice was husky and nonchalant. But when he saw the tense expressions on Aymer and the girls, he realized his error and set his axe on the ground to show that he meant none of them any harm.

"Come now, I'm exactly what I look like: a cavekin. I wouldn't dare harm a sworn friend like the forestkin. The thing of it is, I ain't felt your magic in so long that I just couldn't help myself, so I dug myself up and out of my cellar. But I tell you, it really makes me nostalgic, it does."



So saying, the old man who called himself a cavekin waved his muddy, dirt-stained hands and put the twins somewhat at ease. Even so, they did not put away their bows.

“You forestkin always were cautious,” he chuckled. “Even hundreds of years later, you still ain’t changed a bit.”

The old man looked at the twins very carefully and, as if realizing something, went on.

“Hmm? Those jewels hanging from your necks, is the magic in them stonekin magic? I see... Stones and the forest, together. Just like in the long distant past. I wonder... No, no, it couldn’t be *that*, could it? Is your leader a human? An ordinary human without a hint of magic whatsoever?”

None knew how to answer the old man. They did not want to simply give up information about Dias, but they also did not want to be rude to a person who appeared to be friendly. Aymer considered her options, and it was during this deliberation that the twins nodded. Aymer could tell that the twins were now at ease with the stranger, and she realized there was nothing more she could do. She let out a sigh, and the old man chuckled once more.

“I see, I see,” he said, his face growing a little more serious. “And is that ordinary human a good companion? A kind companion?”

The twins answered in a heartbeat.

“Dias is super kind!” said Senai.

“He’s not perfect, but he’s kind and warm!” added Ayhan.

The old man was momentarily bewildered, but a second later he was grinning and nodding along.

“Is that so, is it?” he said. “In which case I’m going to have to get moving. I’ll come visit in a few days per an old promise, so you tell that ordinary human that I’m coming, okay?”

The old man didn’t even wait for a reply; he simply spun around and walked back into the depths of the forest. Aymer wondered if they should have followed him, or if they should have tried to stop him, but that was when they

all heard very familiar footsteps bounding through the forest.

Running Through the Forest—Dias

I dashed over to the Mahati side of the forest as fast as my feet would take me, where Eldan's men were working on the highway, and I arrived just as they were finishing up for the day. I said my hellos, explained the circumstances, then passed them Ellie's letter and dashed straight back into the forest to return to the twins. When I got back, I found them with their bows out and their faces full of shock, like they'd just seen a fairy or something.

"What's wrong?"

Senai and Ayhan both looked at me and tilted their heads like they didn't even know what to say. In the end it was Aymer, whose head was rocking from side to side, who eventually replied.

"Um... I don't really know how to put it," she said, "but we just met the strangest old man, wearing the strangest of outfits."

"An old man? Wait, are you telling me there's a person living here in the forest?" I asked.

"Uh, no, the man himself said he lives in a cellar, though I'm not sure whether or not he was telling the truth. He said he'll come to visit you in a few days...or something to that effect, I think."

"Come to see me? So you told him where Iluk was?"

"No. He didn't actually ask us anything, really. He simply wanted to know what sort of person you are."

"Well, whatever you want to say about it all, it's troubling. For all we know, it could be some senile old man who got lost wandering the forest. I'll have to go see Eldan's highway crew to tell them about it tomorrow so that they're at least aware of it."

Aymer and the twins nodded their heads, and we all got ready to go back to Iluk. Once we were done, I decided that we could come back to cut down the trees next time we came, so we ended up leaving pretty much empty-handed.

The next day, when I'd had breakfast and seen to all my usual chores, I went back to the forest just like I'd done the day before, with Aymer and the twins and the horses. Half of the reason was that the twins just loved going to the forest, and the other half of course was that I had to tell Eldan's highway crew about that old man the girls had met. So once we got to the forest, we walked along the makeshift path that linked our domains.

We told the crew about the old man, but they didn't know anything about him. They said they'd look into it, so we thanked them and then headed off to the fenced area where the twins had met the old man the previous day. I thought it would have made things quicker and easier if he'd been there again, so I took a look around, but I couldn't find even a single trace that anyone had been living in the forest. I did my darndest too. When I was ready to give up I decided to walk with the twins and let them do what they liked to get the whole thing off my mind.

First we made sure that the fence was fine, and then we reinforced it. From there, we decided which trees we were going to take home with us, and then did some foraging for any food. It was all just the usual stuff to fill the time. Every now and again the horses would peel some bark from the trees to eat, but then they raised their heads and neighed. It was like they'd caught the scent of something, and after they all looked at one another, the horses started nudging us around.

"Balers, what happened?" I asked.

"Shiya?" asked Senai.

"Guri?" asked Ayhan.

"Whoa! Whoa there, whoa there!" cried Aymer. "I only have a very small body, so there's no need to push so vigorously!"

But the horses wouldn't listen to any of us, and their pushing was getting pushier. It seemed pretty clear that they wanted us to go somewhere with them. So we did just that, and we walked where they directed us until we reached an area where all the trees had withered away and naturally created an open clearing.

Such places weren't all that uncommon in the forest at this time of year, so I couldn't help wondering why it was that the horses had brought us here. Then the horses started pushing their noses into the ground, and when the twins saw that they suddenly gasped and took to digging up the earth with nearby tree branches and whatnot.

"Is something down there? You need any help?" I asked.

"Wait a sec!" said Senai.

"We'll show you!" said Ayhan.

They brushed away the dead leaves and the branches, and from the earth they dug out something about the size of the palm of a hand. It looked like a rock at a glance, but it was a mixture of red and white in color.

"So, uh, what am I looking at?"

Upon closer inspection it clearly wasn't a rock, but I also knew that it wasn't a nut or berry either. I was confused, but the twins looked very proud of themselves as they brought the thing closer to my face. I was hit by a strong scent unlike anything I'd ever experienced; it was like high-quality butter with a refreshing sweetness to it.

"Is this one of those mushrooms you were telling me about yesterday?" I asked. "It doesn't *look* like a mushroom, but it sure smells delicious..."

"Oh, you're right, what a most wonderful scent," said Aymer, who was standing on my shoulder.

"Yep!" said a beaming Senai. "It smells great and it tastes just as good! It's a mushroom with a weird shape!"

"They're very rare!" said a grinning Ayhan. "This forest is amazing!"

"Well, judging by the smell," I said, "I am really looking forward to tasting it."

"I agree," said Aymer. "It smells so good that even the horses are completely entranced. But none of you can eat them, you hear?" she told the horses.

"Mushrooms and grass are completely different things, and eating this will probably make you sick."

I didn't know if the horses understood what Aymer had said, but they started

huffing through their noses and baring their teeth. It was quite the sight.

“I don’t care what faces you pull!” said Aymer. “No means no!”

Having said her piece to the horses and put them in their place, Aymer turned to the twins.

“But, girls, was it okay to dig up that mushroom? At the place we fenced off you told us we had to leave them to grow, didn’t you?”

“They won’t grow here anymore,” replied Senai. “The trees are withering, so the mushrooms will wither too.”

“Mushrooms take sustenance from tree roots, and in return they protect them from getting sick,” added Ayhan. “But this tree already did its duty before winter.”

Senai then put the mushroom they’d found into the bag hanging at her side, and the two girls went off running, sniffing the air as they poked at the ground around the clearing. Aymer and I watched at first, but then the twins noticed and ordered us to help. We both realized then that the girls were leaving marks in the ground where the mushrooms were. So Aymer and I went around digging up the mushrooms and brushing away the dirt and leaves on them. Once we had them, we gave them to the girls because they wanted to carry them home themselves.

That was when we heard footsteps running through the forest and the familiar voices of some senjis.

“Lord Dias! Lord Dias!” cried one. “Where are you?! Lady Alna is calling for you!”

“That damp person with no hair and shiny skin and a big mouth!” cried another. “He’s come to the village again! He came with company!”

“So you must hurry back! And...what the heck?! What is that delicious smell?!”

Alna must have sent the dogkin as messengers, and they’d chased our scent down. They were shouting even as they bolted right up and sat down in front of me panting something fierce. I gave them all pats until they were satisfied, then

turned to the twins.

“Sounds like Peijin is here,” I said. “Alna wants us back, so let’s finish up for today.”

I was a bit worried that maybe the girls would feel put out because they hadn’t had much of a chance to play, but to my surprise they simply nodded their assent. I was shocked at first, but I saw that they looked very excited, and they were holding up their bags of mushrooms and loving the smell of them. It was pretty clear to me that they were more excited about the mushrooms than the forest, and that made things easy.

We got our stuff together and followed the senjis back to Iluk Village.

Upon Returning to Iluk Village

The first thing we heard upon our return was Ellie's voice.

"Once you've picked out what you want to buy, add it to the pile! We'll pay for it all at once, together! Then you can take your stuff home with you once everything is paid for! So, everyone, please be patient until we're all done!"

"Ugh! Really! Look at yourself! Yes, you, over there! Don't just take what you're given! Make sure it's good-quality merchandise first!"

From the sounds of it, Ellie was supervising all the dogkin at the market that Peijin had set up. That market was made up of three caravans worth of goods, including soft and chewable bones, thin strips of jerky, and a whole range of clothes and shoes and cloaks that were all sized for dogkin. All of the dogkin were ecstatic, and their eyes were practically sparkling with excitement.

The dogkin were smelling everything that was put out on display, taking it in their paws to look at it more closely, and tasting some of the jerky samples that had been passed around. They looked to be having a blast. Ellie, however, felt differently, and her voice could probably be heard from the forest now the way she was raising it.

"Now wait just a darned minute! Don't you *dare* try and tell me that this is all the preserved food you've got! We're here ready to spend all our coin and sell all our baar wool, so you better believe we're expecting you to lay out everything you've got!"

"And look, I know you want to sell your handicrafts and your antiques, but that is secondary to our need to prepare for winter! Now, if you will just show us the true depths of your goods, then I'm sure we can work out a deal for some of your pricier items too, but first! And! Foremost! Bring out your food! Anything that'll last, we want to see it!"

That was when we spotted Ellie, really putting the pressure on that merchant frogkin, who was decked out in a fancy hat and had a bag hanging from his

neck. He looked all out of sorts under Ellie's pressure, and with his face all shiny and slimy he replied.

"Y-Y-Yes, yes, yes! It is the preserved foods, yes! I understand! I very understand, but please relax! No hurry!"

"It's Peijin-Mi, isn't it?" replied Ellie. "Look, I know it's not easy for you, what with your brothers handling the onikin village, and you trading in a foreign country for the first time while you're still grappling with the language, but you're only making things harder for yourself when you make things harder for us. You're a merchant, aren't you? Then show some guts and show us what you got!"

It seemed that the frogkin was the younger brother of the Peijins we'd met before. But when Ellie put it to him straight like that, he got a stern look on his face and stood up straight, and he started issuing orders to the beastkin around him in a language I'd never heard before. It must have been his mother tongue.

The beastkin started moving around right away, pulling boxes and barrels from their caravans, and Ellie beamed as it all got laid out. She took off right away to go check the prices of everything. I stared at it without thinking too hard, and then Aymer spoke up from Aisha's head.

"I'll go and give Ellie a hand!" she announced. "I'm certain there will be a lot of calculating to be done. Besides, the twins clearly can't wait to see what's on offer. Please see that Aisha makes it back to the stables!"

I nodded and took Aisha's reins while Aymer hopped from her horse and over to the marketplace. A moment later, Senai and Ayhan handed me the reins to their horses and their forest gear and dashed off. The marketplace seemed to get livelier yet again, but I just watched it from a distance. It didn't seem like they needed me for anything this time around, so I pulled on the reins and headed to the stable with the horses.

From the moment Peijin-Mi had arrived, Ellie had been deep in a discussion about what to buy and how to trade. And with Aymer right there with her, I figured the negotiations would go just fine. Ellie was good at the talking side of things, and Aymer was good at the numbers side of things, and I wasn't going to be very useful to either of them. Truthfully, I'd probably only get in their way. I

decided to leave Ellie and Aymer to handle what they were good at, and I'd go off and handle what I was good at.

After I took the horses back to the stable, I plodded my way to the storehouses to put away our baskets and foraging gear. Then I decided to go to the yurt to let Alna know we'd come home. After all, according to the senjis, Peijin-Mi had brought somebody with him on this particular visit. I wanted to say hello, but also I figured I should find out just who it was who had come to Iluk.

But when I entered the yurt, it was empty. There was no Alna, no Francoise and her baby baars, and no guests either. I scratched my head and wondered where everyone had gone off to, then put my axe in its usual spot and figured I'd try the kitchen range.

When I got nearer to the kitchen range I could hear voices laughing and chatting and babies crying, and then I knew I'd come to the right place. Alna was there, as were some dogkin cradling babies, and Francoise lying on her side. With them was a person I'd never seen before.

They had yellow fur, a sharp gaze, and pointy ears; they were a beastkin, and quite similar to a dogkin in appearance. They were dressed in a big, single piece of cloth that was wrapped around their body and tied with a thick rope around their waist. They also wore a necklace made up of big beads. As for height, they were about the same size as Alna. Based on the clothing, though, I couldn't immediately tell if the beastkin was a man or a woman. But based on the flowers embroidered into the cloth, I guessed it was a woman...maybe?

In any case, that beastkin was watching the dogkin babies with a smile on her face, but when she noticed me arrive, she put her hands together in front of her body and gave a deep bow. I guessed it was a kind of introductory gesture of some kind.

"You must be the domain lord that has agreed to accept the lostblood," she said, speaking with a feminine voice. "It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Kiko, a foxkin and a Beastland Kingdom councillor. I have come here today in the hopes of ascertaining your character."

With her head once again raised, she took a moment to observe me with her

sharp gaze. I didn't know what was going on, so I simply returned Kiko's gaze, and then Kiko let out a sigh and shook her head.

"Really, there was no need to ascertain anything once I had seen this place for myself," she said, "but I wanted to do so just to make certain. You really do intend to accept the lostblood?"

I didn't know what she wanted to say, or what she was trying to say, but I nodded. At the end of the day, it was true that I intended to accept the lostblood as citizens of Iluk.

"I...see. If you mean that, from your heart, then I have nothing more to say. The lostblood are our children, but they have lost the bloodline we beastkin are so proud of, and I pray you take good care of them."

I still didn't have the faintest idea what was going on, so I didn't say a thing as Kiko said her piece, then finished with another deep bow. She'd come all this way to get a sense of who I was, and then she'd been satisfied before I even spoke a word to her. I couldn't help wondering if that was good or not. And what exactly was it she wanted to know about me anyway? Kiko must have noticed my confusion somehow, because when she lifted her head again to speak, she was smiling.

"We had to know if it was really safe to entrust you with the lostblood. In the kingdom, the nobility would treat them as slaves. When I heard of lostblood potentially moving to this place, I feared they would face the very same here, and so I made a point of coming to see your village for myself. But all was made clear when I saw it with my own eyes."

Kiko turned her gaze towards the kitchen range, and the sharp edge of her voice softened as she went on.

"I see dogkin mothers holding babies, their faces filled with love and care. I see elderly human women doing the same thing, and there isn't a hint of ire in any of their eyes. Your own wife, too, helps out by her own hand, and by talking to your people I learned of the depth of your trust here."

"But there was more. There was the rich, beautiful fur of the dogkin, the shine of their noses, and the levity of their wagging tails. There was also the peaceful sleep of the babies. You cannot fake any of this. The faces and the lives

of your people tell me the truth of this place. The answer was so clear to me that claiming a need to see you for myself was, in and of itself, something of a rude gesture.”

While it was true that the scene at the kitchen range was something I could have happily watched go on forever, everybody doing their part to help out for the babies was just a part of daily life here in Iluk. I wasn’t sure if it was all that grand or special a thing, really.

The dogkin had tried to time their births for that very reason. In winter, when there was less work to do outdoors, everyone came together to help raise the new kids and make sure they stayed safe and healthy. It was something they had always done, since long ago, apparently. If a mother was sick and couldn’t give milk to her children, then another mother would step in to help, and by working together like this they could make sure that no single mother was ever too exhausted. All of which was to say that the scene at the kitchen range would have been even more just a part of daily life for the dogkin than for me.

So I had no clue how to respond. Was it really okay to make a big judgment just based on what was an ordinary scene in everyday life? I felt my head tilting farther and farther and my ear nearing my shoulder when Senai and Ayhan came running on over.

“The mushrooms!” shouted Senai. “We forgot the mushrooms!”

“Quick! Quick!” shouted Ayhan. “We have to get them ready right away, or we’ll lose that yummy scent!”

The girls dashed to the well by the kitchen range and washed their hands, then washed the kitchen items I figured they needed for their prep, and then with Alna’s help they jumped straight into things.

“Oh my, what a most delightful scent,” said Kiko. “Is that mushrooms, perhaps? I never would have imagined you’d get something so wonderfully aromatic here. How interesting to think of how different mushrooms are from place to place. There’s more to this place than I thought...”

Senai and Ayhan’s ears prickled at Kiko’s words, and they ran over to her. They whipped mushrooms from their bags and held them up to her.

“Here!” they said.

“Oh my, thank you ever so much,” said Kiko.

She bent down to better take in the aroma.

“What a truly wonderful scent,” she said. “A gentle aroma that nonetheless rouses the heart. How I wish I could take such a scent home with me so that my family, too, could enjoy it. Alas, home is very far away.”

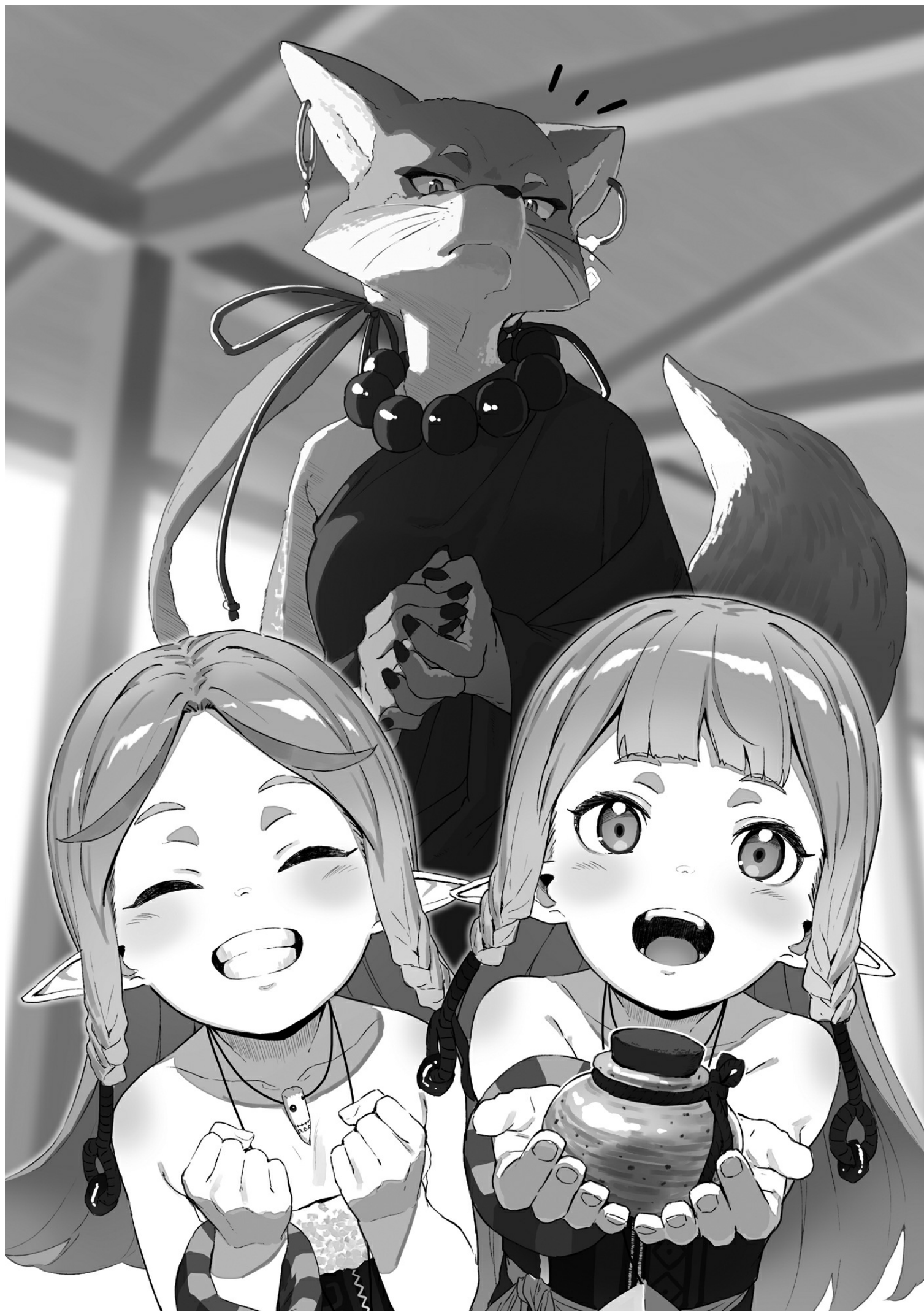
Kiko wasn’t trying to say anything in particular with her words, and it was clear that she was just speaking her thoughts aloud, but Senai and Ayhan suddenly looked at their feet, disheartened. Kiko was flustered and did her best to explain to the twins that she didn’t mean to take their mushrooms or anything like that. Regardless, the twins had dashed off, leaving me and Kiko to exchange an awkward glance.

I spent a little time trying to work out the best thing to say at a time like this, but I couldn’t think of anything. I figured I should at least say *something*, though, so I finally opened my mouth, and that was right when the twins returned with a jar in their hands. They took the jar to the kitchen range and took the stopper from it, then chopped a mushroom into thin slices, which they put in the jar. Kiko and I watched curiously until the twins came running back over to us.

“Here!” said Senai. “We put the mushroom in oil!”

“The scent will stay for a while! So even if your family is far away, it’s fine!”

And with that, the twins held up the jar for Kiko to take.



The twins hadn't been worried at all that Kiko might take their mushrooms away. Rather, they'd been deep in thought trying to work out how to make sure Kiko could share her experience with her family. When Kiko realized it herself, she knelt down in front of the twins.

"Thank you so much," she said, accepting their gift. "I will make sure to enjoy this with my family."

Senai and Ayhan were delighted, and it showed in their smiles. They ran back over to Alna and got straight back into preparing all the other mushrooms they'd foraged. Kiko watched them and everyone else at the kitchen range with a placid expression.

"Those two girls... Are they residents here?" she asked, still watching everyone at work.

"Residents...? Well, I guess you'd call them family. My children."

Kiko turned to me with a look that was part shocked and part a mix of thoughts and emotions. I didn't know what she was surprised by or what had her mind so mixed up. I opened up my mouth to ask, but before I could say a word, a few flustered senjis came running over.

"Lord Dias! A strange person approaches!" cried one.

"They're coming from the east! And they'll arrive here soon! It's an old man! He's dragging logs with him!" added a second.

"He's got lots of logs!" reported a third. "And they're all really big! The old man is really strong!"

I was surprised at the report and wondered who in the world could have been coming. Alna was even more surprised, and she ran over looking mighty panicked.

"From the east?!" she asked. "And you're sure?!"

"Yes! I saw it with my own eyes!" replied one of the senjis.

That did nothing to lessen her worries, and when she spoke to me next it was in a whisper.

“Dias, I was especially careful about setting up my sensor magic to the east, but I didn’t get a single response from any of my sensors. Whoever’s coming, they’re no ordinary visitor.”

I nodded at Alna, and with a glance I told her to look after the kids and Kiko. With that done, I took the senjis with me to get my axe and head out to the east.

The senjis led me eastward until an old man came into sight, dragging more and bigger logs behind him than I possibly could have expected. There were five in all, recently cut down and with the branches all sheared off, all tied together with rope that the old man was using to pull them along.

All I could do for a time was stare in shock. Where did such a little old man find that kind of awesome strength? And what was he intending to do with all those logs anyway? But as these thoughts flitted through my mind, the old man noticed us and grinned.

“Wow! You really *are* just an ordinary man!” His voice boomed over the plains. “Just a plain ol’ human with no magic and no nothing! You have done a remarkable job surviving this long!”

His jovial attitude and the honest-to-God happiness in his voice told me that the old man probably didn’t mean us any harm, and I felt myself relax a little as I walked on over to him. When I got closer, I noticed writing on one of the logs.

Take home and make into timber today.

It was a message that Senai and Ayhan had written on the tree when we’d last been to the forest. When the old man saw me looking, he gave the logs a couple of slaps.

“Ah, these?” he said. “Looks like you forgot them last time you were in the forest, so I figured I’d chop them down for you. Some of them just said to cut them down and leave them, so that’s what I did. If you need those ones you’ll have to go and get them yourself.”

“Oh, uh, thanks. And, uh, by the way, who are you...?”

“Hmm? Oh, me? I’m a cavekin. Go by the name of Narvant. I’m here to help

you, to keep a promise made a long, long time ago in the long, long past. I left a message with the two little ones and then followed their magic here.”

I scratched my head and let out a long “hmm” as I considered the old man’s words. It looked to me like this was the old man that Senai and Ayhan had told me about. He didn’t look senile, and he didn’t look like he was up to no good either. If he were, I felt like he would’ve behaved a little more...normally, so as to not look so suspicious.

We’d know for sure once Alna had a chance to work her soul appraisal on him, but I was pretty certain already.

“And what is this old promise you mentioned?” I asked.

Narvant thought for a time, then threw his rope to the side and stroked his beard.

“Ah... That’s a long story, and it’s going to take some time to tell it. But let’s see... Let me tell you the simple version so you get the gist of things. A long time ago, and I’m talking more than a century here, these lands were ruled by monsters and miasma. It was pretty much a no-man’s-land. All us different races had dug holes in a corner of that dead zone, and we spent our lives living in fear, waking up every morning wondering if today was the day we’d be attacked and killed.”

“Then one day an ordinary human showed up, just like you. They were armed with a weapon and the wisdom of the gods, and they fought back against the monsters. They were fearless. They fought with a kind of weapon we’d never seen before, and their strategies were so cunning none of us would’ve believed it if we hadn’t seen it ourselves.”

“That ordinary human stood tall against countless monsters, and when we saw the battle waging, we fell in line with that ordinary human and eventually became friends.”

It was an old story, and one that felt a bit like I might have heard it around somewhere, but also maybe not. In any case, the dogkin and I stood there silently waiting for the old man to go on, and he smiled kindly as he did.

“We all came together as one under that human’s leadership, and as a result,

we vanquished almost the entirety of the monsters after a long, grueling battle. We purified most of the miasma, and we built this nation...but the place fell to pieces when that ordinary human left on a journey somewhere farther east. Final nail was when we received news that our old friend had perished due to illness.”

“The last words they left for us went along the lines of ‘When another ordinary human arrives in these lands, and they are a person who can bring you all together, lend them your power.’”

Narvant then walked up to me, and then he gave me a light punch in the guts, grinning the whole while. He did it like we were old friends catching up after a long time, and I really was stumped as to how to react.

I thought about how Narvant had come here, all because he believed in an ancient story that might or might not have been true, all for the duty that his ancestors had left him. Which was not to say I thought he was lying...because it seemed to me that Narvant lived by the words of his ancestors and his people.

All the same, I wasn’t sure if it was right of me to simply accept such words, noble and heavy with the weight of the past as they were. I mulled over the issue and I decided I should tell him that I wasn’t related in any way to that person he was talking about, and so I didn’t think it was right of me to accept what he was offering. But just as I opened my mouth, the young senji at my feet tugged on my pants.

“Lord Dias...?” they said. “He wants to be a resident, right? He wants to move in, right? Are you not going to welcome him like you did us dogkin?”

That senji looked so sad it nearly broke my heart to look them in the eye. I choked back the words I had planned and said something different.

“Look, I am *just* a human. Just a guy living out here with no relation to that person you talked about or their last words. So I can’t just accept your offer of living up to the last words that they left you, but...if you want to be a fellow resident at that village over there, then we’d be glad to have you. We’ll provide you with room and board, but I should tell you that it’s not a particularly affluent or wealthy place. So if you’re happy with all of that, then...”

Narvant’s eyes went wide and for a moment he looked dumbfounded, but

then he just burst into laughter.

“‘Not particularly affluent’! Well, if that’s how it is, that’s how it is! I guess I’ll have to rouse these old bones and get to work! As you can see, I’m good when it comes to working with my hands, and I’ll have you know you could even call me the best blacksmith on the whole dang continent! We’ll make this village wealthy in no time!”

With that, Narvant pulled back his sleeve and brought his arm into a pose to show off his muscles. Then he took his rope in hand again and began dragging the logs towards the village. The senjis all looked ecstatic to have a new resident, and a new friend joining the village, so they quickly dashed off to help him with his logs. Narvant burst into another round of laughter at the sight of them, then seemed to remember something and turned back to me.

“Oh, and by the way, young Dias, I forgot to mention! My family is coming along to move in with me! Give the two of them a warm welcome, would you? All we need is a house and some food, but a bit of liquor would be great too!”

So I watched Narvant dragging the logs towards Iluk, and I wondered about what type of people the cavekin were.

At Iluk Village—Narvant

“Let me tell you up front that we don’t live the life of luxury you might be thinking of. ‘We don’t have this,’ you’ll cry! ‘We don’t have that!’ You’ll soon realize that we are all about not having things! This is a literal start from zero! But if you’re okay with that, and you’re okay with us, then we’re happy to have you!”

As Narvant followed Dias into Iluk Village, dragging his logs behind him, he stared up at the man’s hulking frame and reminisced on the words he’d been told long, long ago.

Yep, it sure brings back memories. This guy’s got a different hair color, a different eye color, a completely different personality and spirit, but then he goes and says pretty much exactly what the other guy did. I don’t much like that he shares a name with a certain wannabe smarty-pants. But outside of that, this Dias character strikes me as good people.

Narvant let out a nostalgic sigh, and his beard swayed as he looked once more to Dias’s head and spoke.

“Young one! How about instead of a tour, you just give me the lowdown on the place? What’s the plan for the future? How are you going to put food on the table? The work that me and mine will do depends on what *you’re* going to do!”

Dias stopped walking for a moment and hummed thoughtfully.

“You want to know about Iluk, huh? Well, I’m not sure exactly where to start when you put me on the spot like that, but I guess we’re building the village up for the purpose of trade. We’ve got some great friends here we call baars, and they produce a marvelous wool that we’re going to make into cloth, clothes, and specialty items.”

“Aha, I see... And exactly what tools are you using to make this cloth and these clothes you speak of?”

“What tools? The usual kind, I guess. For the cloth, we spin thread from the

wool, then put that thread both sideways and up and down on a frame,” explained Dias, using his hands and his arms and his body to paint a picture of it. “By weaving that thread together, we make our cloth. In the cities they’ve got better equipment for it, but that’s not easy to come by out here on the plains. We keep all of our looms in the grandmas’ yurt, so you can check them out yourself if you feel like it.”

“As for the clothing, Ellie is using some equipment she got from Aisa, and all of that is in her yurt.”

Narvant watched Dias calmly and quietly, but internally he sighed.

May as well call their tools ancient, they’re so old. I don’t think I can expect too much more from what they use in the cities either... That ordinary human from way back when came up with a loom we all used to use, but I wonder what happened to it? In any case, if the elderly are doing the weaving, then the best thing for them would be something they can sit on while they work. Something that takes the pressure off their backs and legs...

Narvant considered the schematics and how to put such equipment together—the loom he had in mind was a simpler thing than most that could be constructed with limited materials. Unfortunately, he’d been asleep a long time, and his head still felt a bit foggy. So while he roused his mind back into gear, he drew up the plans and measured everything out in his mind.

“I think you’ll get a much better picture of the clothes-making if you talk to Ellie herself,” said Dias. “She’s at the marketplace right now, so let’s head over there.”

Dias never could have even imagined, not in his wildest dreams, what work Narvant was doing in his own head. So, none the wiser, he led his new cavekin companion towards Peijin and his marketplace.

That was right when the two little forestkin that Narvant had met in the forest came running over to him. There was a great deal of panic and worry in their little faces, and when they saw Narvant those feelings only grew.

“Dias!” said one. “We’ll show him around and introduce him to everyone!”

“Dias!” said the other. “You have to be with Kiko! She’s a guest!”

Giving him their orders, the forestkin ran around behind Dias and began poking him in the butt and attempting to push him towards their desired destination...which Narvant had to assume was where the person called Kiko was.

“Oh, uh, okay. Now that you mention it, we *were* in the middle of talking. But how did you two know that Narvant had... Ah, so you heard from the senjis, huh?”

Dias wasn't too sure why the twins were so insistent, and when he asked his question of them they only grew more flustered and yet more insistent and pushed harder against Dias's backside.

“Yep! They just came and told us! So leave! The rest! To us!”

“We met the old man already! We know him! So leave! The rest! To us!”

Dias was even more confused now, but clearly he thought that if the girls were acting this way, then they probably had a good reason for it, so he agreed with their suggestion.

“Well, all righty,” he said with a nod. “You two can show Narvant around. I'll catch up with you again later, okay, Narvant?”

And with that, Dias was off. The two forestkin watched him go, then heaved great sighs of relief. When they were done, they spun right back to Narvant.

“You can't tell *anyone* that we're forestkin!” whispered one twin. “It's a secret!”

“You haven't told anyone yet, have you?” whispered the other. “Because you're not allowed!”

“I ain't told a soul,” replied Narvant, stroking his beard, “and if that's what the two of you want, I won't say a word. But why do you have to keep it secret? I knew the forestkin were a cautious, wary people, but is this part of that too?”

“It's just a secret!” replied the two girls in unison.

And before Narvant could fit in another word, they dashed off for the marketplace. Narvant was close behind them, and he chuckled. If they said it was a secret, then that's what it was, as far as he was concerned. In any case,

the matter soon left his mind as he reached for his satchel and thought about the materials and tools he'd need to buy.

At the Kitchen Range—Dias

I left Narvant in the twins' trustworthy hands and headed back to the kitchen range, where Kiko was seated in a corner on a chair, cradling a baby dogkin with a gentle smile on her face.

"Sleep, sleep, a mother's hands... Sleep, sleep, are a warm cradle..."

She was singing a lullaby I'd never heard before, with a rhythm all of its own, and she handed the baby back to its waiting mother. Her smile only grew from there.

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting," I said.

"Please do not worry," said Kiko, still smiling. "I have had the most wonderful time. Did everything go well with the new visitor?"

"Yeah. Well, actually, they're a resident now, so you don't have to worry about anything happening. What were we talking about earlier...? I think we'd settled on the understanding that I would take in your beastkin children, right...?"

"Yes, that's correct. That's perfectly fine. The plains are about to meet with a harsh winter, and one full of snow, so I will spend the time until spring ensuring the lostblood are well trained before they arrive. We will also ensure that you are sent a gift of thanks for your generosity in accepting our people, and for the delightful mushrooms you gave me...though that may take a little time."

Kiko then dropped into something of a formal bow.

"No, no, there's no need for gifts," I responded. "The gift of new residents is thanks enough for us."

But the moment I spoke the words, the smile on Kiko's face slipped and morphed into something that looked more annoyed than pleased. That strange smile of hers stayed there right up until I told Kiko that I would happily accept her generous gift. I wasn't sure what to say next, and fortunately for me, Alna

soon came running over after having discussed something with the ladies at the kitchen range.

“Dias, how’d it go?” she asked, with a concerned look on her face.

“Uh, what are we talking about?” I asked, before realizing she meant Narvant. “Oh, right. The visitor was an old man, someone that the twins met back at the forest. His name’s Narvant, and he’s a cavekin. He’s here to uphold a promise that his ancestors made to a human, and apparently that means helping us out. He’s incredibly strong, because he dragged quite the number of logs all the way here. After we talked, I brought him in as a new resident, and he’s with Senai and Ayhan now at the marketplace.”

Alna looked for a moment like she’d swallowed a bug, and then she walked up real close to me.

“Are you sure it’s okay?” she asked in a very serious whisper. “Are you sure we can trust him? He walked straight through my sensor magic...and for all we know my soul appraisal won’t work either. And you just let him run off with Senai and Ayhan? It’s all making me very worried.”

“Hmm. I know how you feel, Alna, I do,” I replied, “but when I talked to Narvant, I didn’t get the sense that he was up to no good. And if he tries anything, you can bet that the twins will call on any nearby dogkin, and we’ll have the guy under control in no time. But if you’re still worried, even then, it’d probably be best if you talked to him yourself.”

Alna let out a groan and dropped into thought. But even then, she didn’t seem to come up with any answers that satisfied her. She took another quick look at me, then turned to Kiko.

“I apologize, Kiko, but we’d like to visit the marketplace. Would you mind if we left you to your own devices for a little while?”

Kiko smiled and shook her head, indicating she was fine with it. So Alna placed her worried hand in mine and we walked to the west of the village where Peijin-Mi had set up his marketplace.

The first thing we saw when we arrived was Peijin and his people cleaning up. It looked to me like all the negotiations and sales were done and dusted. Ellie

was looking through a list with Aymer standing on her shoulder, and by their side was a mountain of supplies. I had no idea how they'd managed to wrangle as much as they had: countless boxes, a whole lot of barrels, and leather bags, all piled up higher than me. Still, based on the bright and happy looks on Ellie and Aymer's faces, they'd gotten us a good deal.

The next thing we saw was all the happy and satisfied dogkin, each of them clutching something they'd bought at the marketplace. They had clothes, they had toys and dolls, they had strips of jerky, and they even had accessories made from bones. They looked about as delighted as I'd ever seen them, and I felt like they'd finally been rewarded for all their hard work. Sure, I'd given them all coin for their efforts, but it was only now that they'd been able to spend their hard-earned money.

And I'll have to do my best to ensure I get to see them this happy again.

That was right around the time that Alna's expression grew stern and she pulled my hand to follow her. I remembered that we were here to look for Narvant, but we couldn't see Senai or Ayhan among the crowd, so I wondered where they'd gone off to. Alna and I wandered around until we finally found the cavekin sitting behind our mountain of supplies.

Narvant had a whole bunch of tools and steel and bronze and other metal strewn all around him. He was sitting right in the middle of the mess, focusing all his concentration on working on something. Senai and Ayhan were huddled together and crouching next to him, filled with curiosity. Yep, it was a wonderful little scene that just made you want to smile...unless you were Alna, because her face was just as stern as before.

"I knew it," she muttered. "Even my soul appraisal doesn't work. Perhaps he has some kind of enchanted item blocking my magic? Or did he know I was going to appraise him and he's blocking it some other way?"

She kept muttering to herself as she released my hand and stepped towards Narvant. That was right when some of the dogkin came running over to us. It was the same group of senjis that had been with me to meet Narvant when he'd arrived, and they were just as flustered now as they had been then.

"Lord Dias! Lady Alna! More visitors!" said one. "We think they're probably

Narba...Narf... Well, whatever that old man's name is, we think they're with him. They look just like him!"

The dogkin still didn't know poor Narvant's name, and I remembered that Narvant had said something about his family coming. Still, when I looked over at the cavekin, he just kept on working like he hadn't heard the dogkin at all. He was focused wholeheartedly on whatever it was he was doing, so I scratched my head and turned to Alna to get her thoughts on it. But I could see by the glare on her face that she wasn't going to listen to me. Instead, she turned to the dogkin.

"They got through my sensor magic *again!*" she barked, her voice full of frustration. And just like that, she took off in the very direction the dogkin had arrived from.

The dogkin and I followed Alna. We left the village and headed east until we saw two cavekin with impressively long beards, one of whom was...probably...young. He wore a four-pointed cap and an apron full of pockets. His clothing gave him the look of a craftsman. There wasn't a hint of white in his hair or his beard, which were instead a lustrous brown, and his skin wasn't wrinkly like Narvant's. In fact, he looked more muscly than the old man, and he was probably stronger.

The other cavekin was...probably, perhaps—just maybe—a woman? Possibly?

She wore a pointed cap under which was soft, fluffy hair, and the end of her well-combed beard was decorated with an adorable ribbon. From the set of her gaze to her gentle carriage, I sensed a womanliness from her. Or at least, I could see that in her. That feeling was only heightened by her leather dress, but her face and her magnificent beard were so much like Narvant's that I just couldn't be sure. *Perhaps she's got a soul like Ellie's*, I thought.

Alna stopped in her tracks the moment she saw the two cavekin, and it looked to me like she was struggling with the same thing I was, because she looked decidedly unsure of what she was looking at. The two cavekin, meanwhile, had seen us too, and they smiled.

"Aha!" shouted the one with the ribbon. "You really are just an ordinary man!"

My oh my, that really takes me back, it sure does. Sanat, take a look! It's an ordinary human, just like Narvant said!"

The voice was high-pitched and rang beautifully through the air. It was feminine too. To top it off, it sounded much younger than the woman looked.

"Yeah, yeah, I've got eyes, and they work just as good as yours," said the younger cavekin. "I can see him, so quit chewing my ear off! I'm just relieved that dad was right, honestly. I was worried he might have gone senile!"

The younger cavekin sounded just as young as I thought he looked, with a voice bright and full of energy. I felt he was probably a good-natured type. He and the woman were both pulling along well-used carts, both of them loaded with big leather bags.

"Mr. Ordinary Human! It's so nice to meet you!" yelled the woman. "You might have heard from my husband already, but my name is Ohmun! This is our son, Sanat!"

"Mom! Why do you have to scream and shout like that? Think about first impressions! The importance of the moment! Ugh, you're humiliating me!"

I walked over to Alna while the two cavekin said their pieces.

"I guess these are Narvant's wife and his son?" I muttered.

Before Alna could answer, one of the dogkin at my feet crossed their forelegs and tilted their head.

"You think...?" they asked, likely more confused than me and Alna.

"What *is* it with these people?!" cried Alna, looking a little pale. "I can't see their souls, just like that other guy... I don't know what color they are; I don't know whether they're men or women... I can't tell a damned thing!"

"Alna," I said, hoping to calm her, "is it really that big of an issue if your soul appraisal doesn't work? I'm pretty sure you told me in the past that it's not always a surefire thing...and that you can't always trust what it tells you."

Alna didn't reply immediately. In fact she got paler still, so I took her by both of her shoulders and looked her right in the eye.

"Listen to me, Alna," I said. "Magic is just a tool. Everyone agrees that it's

mighty convenient, but just because it doesn't work, and just because you can't use it, doesn't mean that the situation is insurmountable. Ever since the day I was born, I've had to make do without any magic whatsoever, and here I am. I'm doing just fine."

Alna looked a bit shocked at first, but finally the color started to return to her face. She held my gaze for a time, and then she gave a little nod to show that my message had gotten through. She chuckled a little, like she couldn't believe she'd lost herself.

"Y-Yeah, you're right," she agreed. "It's just like you said! I know what you're thinking just by the look on your face, and I can do that even without using any magic. You've made it through your whole life with that honest face of yours. You've never had access to magic!"

She laughed a little more, and her smile grew a little bigger. She wondered aloud why she'd been so worried and laughed again. While that was happening, Ohmun and Sanat walked on over with their carts.

"I was frightened by that expression of yours for a little, but look at that wonderful smile," said Ohmun. "You two are very close, aren't you? But let me apologize. It's our beards, isn't it? I'm sure they gave you such a fright, and again I apologize. Let's see... I don't know your name, Mr. Ordinary Human, and you are a stone... No, you're a jeweled maiden?"

Ohmun looked confused and so I hurriedly introduced myself and Alna and explained that I was the lord of the grasslands.

"Aha, so you're Dias Baarbadal. And you're Alna Baarbadal. Alna, my dear, I apologize. It's our beards, you see. They redirect the flow of magic. That's why if you're going to use your magic on us, you want to focus on the tips of our beards."

I looked carefully at the two cavekin's beards, and it was like I could see some kind of shiny dust at the tips of them, all sparkling. When I looked closer, I saw light racing across the surface of that dust, gathering together.

Is that magical energy?

I moved my face in to get a better look, but as I did Ohmun raised a hand to

stop me in my tracks.

“Now, now,” she said. “Little ones lacking in magic should never get so close to magical energy.”

“Is that so?” I said, turning to Alna for confirmation.

Alna, however, simply shook her head as if to say, “I don’t know what the heck she’s on about.”

Ohmun let out an exasperated sigh at the sight of us.

“Listen carefully,” she began, like a mother chastising children. “When little ones don’t have any magical energy, they’re very resistant to some magics and very weak to others. That’s why it’s best to just steer clear of it. Oh, look at the two of you, all puzzled and clueless. It’s written all over your faces. Now, let me think, how can I explain it more clearly...?”

Ohmun put a finger to her jaw and tapped it a few times as she thought.

“Hmm... Let’s start with poison magic. Poison magic doesn’t work by placing a poison into the target’s body, like you might think. Rather, it disrupts the target’s *flow* of magical energy, creating symptoms that are very similar to being poisoned.”

“Dias here doesn’t have a flow of magical energy in the first place, which means he’s got an extremely high resistance to such spells. On the other hand, Dias, you’re completely defenseless when it comes to the sort of magic that Alna uses, which reacts directly to the physical body or the soul. That’s because you don’t have a means to defend yourself, so to speak. Even a spell for kids could potentially take your life.”

“The gods were deeply sympathetic to this fragility in non-magic users, and so they prepared sacred tools and sacred areas that can only be accessed by ordinary people. Long ago, when we made our promise with that ordinary human, that was specifically for the sake of people like yourself.”

I got the gist of what Ohmun was saying, but at the same time I didn’t understand a word of it, so I was left looking like a goof trying to puzzle it out. Meanwhile, Alna was still hung up on what Ohmun had said about spells for kids and what it might mean for my life, and she shot a glare at the cavekin.

“Oh my, oh dear, Dias is much beloved, that much is crystal clear. But it’s okay! Have no fear! You don’t have to worry about that at all now that we’re here! Our cavekin beards have a special power especially for living in caves. By keenly responding to the environment, they act as our eyes in the darkness, and they detect poisons and miasma buried inside of mountains. Not only that, but our beards absorb such poisons before they reach our noses and mouths.”

“Along with those special powers, our beards redirect the flow of magical energy, as you just saw for yourself. By using these beards in just the right fashion, we can craft charms that will protect ordinary humans from dangerous magic as well. I’m certain that my husband is working on making one of those very charms right now, and we’re here to help him! We’ll whip it up right quick so that all of Alna’s worries can be swept away and replaced by even more of that adorable love!”

And with that, Ohmun took a hold of her cart and trudged off with it. Sanat watched her for a moment before following suit.

“As for me,” he said, glancing back at us, “I don’t know much of anything about any old promises, but that rock-headed dad of mine sees something in you, and mom is totally on board, and that means you’ve got me too. But listen up! I don’t care how ordinary a human you are, you hear? It’s not like I was waiting to leave our cave just because I heard that ordinary humans make better booze than what we drink in the caves, okay? I’m a proud cavekin, and I love our caves, so don’t get the wrong idea!”

Alna and I stood silently, watching Sanat take off after his mother.

“Maybe we really don’t need magic after all,” said Alna. “I didn’t even need to use my soul appraisal just now. With that one little lie of his, it’s totally clear to me that Sanat is blue.”

I couldn’t help myself—I burst out laughing when I heard that.

We followed Ohmun and Sanat back to the village, gave them a tour of the place, and introduced them to whomever we happened to pass by. When we reached the western part of the village, we saw that Narvant was still sitting with the twins and his tools, working on...whatever it was he was working on

while Senai and Ayhan watched.

“Ha ha! So you’re finally back!” he said, not even looking up from his work. “I’ll have your accessory done in just a bit, young one, so hang on a second.”

Narvant raised the little hammer in his hand and brought it down a few times. That was when I remembered all the metal I’d seen earlier.

He isn’t processing those metals here, is he? Without a flame or a furnace?

I walked on over to get a better look at what Narvant was doing and saw a small metal plate. On top of it was a circular bronze plate about the size of my palm or so. The bronze plate had circles in it showing the different cycles of the moon, along with a beautiful and detailed pattern. Every time Narvant raised his hammer, sparks would fly and the image came into clearer focus. It was a mighty confusing sight for me to see, because I just couldn’t work out how he could do all of that without a fire or a furnace. He was just whacking it with a hammer.

“That might look like bronze,” said Ohmun, noticing how puzzled I was, “but it’s not. This is what I was telling you about before. He’s using the power of his beard to craft a charm. What you’re looking at is a mixture of metals blended with our beards, which have been refined with magical energy to make them easier to work with. The stuff that looks like steel is the same. It turns that color because of the mix.”

The explanation was helpful, but it did nothing to wipe the shock off Alna’s and my faces. Ohmun had expected this, though, so she laughed and went on.

“No matter which race we explain our work to, the reaction is always the same. But think of it this way: you lot turn animal hide into clothing, and you make bones and fangs into accessories, right? Think of our beards the same way. Once you realize how easy they are to work with, and how convenient they are, it only makes sense to use them, don’t you think?”

And it was true. The clothes I was wearing were all made from baar wool, and I could see how it was similar. Alna couldn’t, however, so she still looked a bit taken aback by it all. Still, this only made Ohmun chuckle again, and Narvant laughed as he worked his hammer.

“Even if you don’t get it now, you’ll get it in time!” he said. “In that sense, these two little ones understood things right quick, they did! They didn’t care much about the materials, but once they heard about processing with magic, they decided it was something they could do too! Their eyes were all lit up talkin’ about stealin’ my techniques!”

Senai and Ayhan were still, even now, watching Narvant with a rabid excitement filling their eyes the likes of which I’d never seen before. When Alna saw it for herself, her features softened and she knelt down by the two of them. All of a sudden they were talking about magic, about the charm’s design and whether it was to the twins’ liking, and that kind of thing.

Ohmun and Sanat gathered around Narvant to talk among themselves too. They talked about how this seemed like a nice place to live, and how it looked like we had good food here, and how this was probably going to be a great place to do some smithing.

Next to Peijin’s Carriage, While the Sound of a Hammer Echoes Across the Village

I spent a little time watching Narvant, his wife, and his son do their mysterious smithing, and then I scratched my head as I wondered what I should do next. Fortunately, I didn’t have to think too long, because with the marketplace all cleared I heard Peijin-Mi’s sticky footsteps pattering over towards me.

“Hello there! I did not introduce myself. Much sorry. I am Peijin-Mi. It is pleasure to meet,” the frogkin said, rubbing his hands together. “Might I add also congratulations.”

It wasn’t quite as easy to understand Peijin-Mi as it was his brothers, but I got his gist.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you too,” I replied, “but what are the congratulations for?”

“Hmm? You employ blacksmiths, no? I thought in these plains, nothing. No smiths, no nothing. But actually have magical smith. Different story. Blacksmith

is starting point for development. So much congratulations! Next time I bring smithing tools!"

Peijin-Mi whipped some papers out of the bag around his neck and showed them to me. Ellie had already made a list for our next order, and when I confirmed what was on it Peijin smiled and thrust out a moist hand, which I shook. That was apparently all the agreement that Peijin-Mi needed, because his mouth expanded into a huge grin, and he tucked Ellie's list away the way one might have handled a precious jewel. He bowed, then told me that he had to set off for the onikin village to meet with the merchants over there.

It was nearing sunset by then, and I'd been thinking to invite Peijin to stay the night, but he didn't want to keep his friends waiting, and it wasn't like I was going to force him to stay. Peijin-Mi leaving also meant that Kiko was heading out with him, and she was at the carriage getting ready for the return trip. When Peijin-Mi returned to the carriage, she walked over.

"Thank you so much for making time in your busy schedule for a personal visit like mine," she said.

Just like when we'd first met, Kiko dropped into a deep bow.

"With everything you had going on here, we didn't get much of a chance to talk, really," I said, "but I understand how you feel about your kids, and I won't forget any of it when they come here to make Iluk their home. We'll treat them the same way we'd treat any of our own youngsters."

Kiko raised her head.

"I am so very glad to hear that," she said with a smile. "But you are allowed to be a little strict with them too, if they require such training. I have had more than enough of a chance today to see into your heart. All that is left now is to trust you, believe in your village, and leave the lostblood in your care. Should the opportunity present itself, I hope we can meet again. Until such a time, stay well."

Kiko bowed one last time, then returned to Peijin-Mi's carriage. The horse neighed, and then the merchants were off. I'd been so busy I'd barely been able to talk with Kiko, not to mention do anything at all when it came to Peijin-Mi's marketplace. Still, I could tell by all the smiling faces that Ellie and Aymer had

done a real bang-up job. Along with all the smiles were all the goods we'd bought, and when it struck me that we'd finally accumulated pretty much all we needed to make it through the winter, it put a smile on my face too.

I watched the merchant caravan trundle off into the distance and just soaked for a time in my satisfaction. It really warmed my heart, and it was enough to make me sigh contentedly.

"Excuse me! Papa! Could you not stand there looking like you're all done for the day?! Help us put away all these supplies please!"

That was Ellie, who was doing her utmost to organize all our purchases.

"Young one! Come back here once you're through with that! This won't be complete until I match it with you, so don't think we're done yet!"

That was Narvant.

"Ah! The mushrooms! We forgot to cook the mushrooms!"

"The mushrooms!"

That was the twins.

"Lord Dias! While on patrol I noticed that we have three new residents! That means we're throwing a banquet tonight, right?"

That was Klaus, and his voice bellowed across the whole village.

All those voices told me that my day was still far from over, so I let out a less satisfied sigh and got to it.

At the Onikin Village—Zorg

It was the day after the merchants had come and gone. The onikin had purchased supplies to see them through the winter and received a number of gold and silver coins for their sales. It was with these coins that Zorg now sat, in the comfort of his yurt, partitioning the money into a number of bags.

The money had come from selling materials, most of which had come from the giant lizards that the people of Iluk had slain. Some of the money would thus go to Iluk, while the rest would be split up between those who had helped to take apart the lizards for their materials before disposing of their corpses.

Zorg had made a deal with Dias to take a portion of the materials in exchange for their work, and the original plan had been to give the remainder back to Iluk Village. But given the sheer amount and size of the materials in question—the pile probably would have needed a whole storehouse of its own—and given that the village guard preferred money, everyone had agreed to simply sell off the giant lizard parts and split the proceeds. It had taken days to finish the job, and then the parts had needed to be taken back to the village so bartering could be done with the merchants. With the money in hand, Zorg was now tasked with dividing it up fairly.

When Zorg thought of all the work they'd done, he didn't feel like the job had paid particularly well. However, when he thought of the fact that through this job he'd been able to pay his newly appointed village guard, he knew he'd made a huge step in terms of securing his position as the next potential chieftain.

Zorg had noticed a considerable change in both the bearing and attitude of the village guard once negotiations with the merchants had come to a close. It was plain for all to see, and for Zorg, the leader of those men, it was yet another reminder that he was strengthening his place among the village leadership.

I paid this guy in advance, so he only gets a silver coin. This one gets full payment. I'll give this guy a bonus for pulling some extra weight, and...you get

less because you skimmed some of the materials for yourself...

Zorg distributed the money as he considered the work of his guard, and when he was done he tied the bags of money shut tight. Then he took his own share and the share for Iluk and hid them in a corner of his yurt among his piles of supplies.

Back when I was on the receiving end of this money, I was all complaints: why don't I get more, why does that guy get so much... But now that I'm on the giving side of things, it's all so much clearer. And the more I learn about all of this, the more I realize that Moll really is incredible...

Zorg took up the remaining bags and left his yurt to pass them out.

She lost her family—the most important thing in her life—to the kingdom, but even then she chose to bear that weight on her own. She chose the path of survival. She calmed those who screamed for vengeance, and she endured. She held on, with all she had, and all the while she waited for her golden opportunity. Her “Dias.”

Through concealment magic and with the expeditionary teams, she took out anybody who looked to be a bother, and while that would have offered some small solace she still kept a lid on her true feelings, her true anger, for decades. And if I'm going to inherit her position, I have to live up to that same reputation... I have to show the same resolve.

Zorg's mind wandered and pondered as he walked from yurt to yurt, visiting his guardsmen to hand them their payment.

A Room in the Domain Lord's Residence, Mahati—Eldan

Today, Eldan was taking a “lecture” from Juha.

Why do we need domain lords? Because a king cannot manage a vast continent alone. *If a king were to take direct control of all his domains, what would he need?* Exemplary officials and efficient systems of governance. *What must one do to acquire exemplary officials?* Provide a high level of education to all citizens.

They had started with theories of governance, then moved on to the

promotion of culture, diplomacy, and eventually to discussions of military matters. It was when discussing this last topic that Juha would prepare a battlefield on a map, spread across a table, complete with playable pieces for the armies at war. Juha would ask Eldan for his tactics in a given scenario and how he would move his forces. Through the discussion of opinions, they found answers to these questions.

And so it was at one of these lectures that Eldan found an opportunity to ask a question that had long puzzled him.

“Juha, all of the scenarios you create for me in these lectures are from your imagination. Why have we not looked at and talked through the battles that you actually fought?”

Juha’s brow furrowed at the question, and with a bitter sigh, he replied.

“Indeed, it would be more meaningful to discuss real battles. There would be great value in such a thing. However, in all my battles I had the addition of ‘our nation’s heroic savior’ on my side, and so none of my battles are worthy of discussion. To give you an idea of what I mean, on a battlefield such as this one, Dias would be *this*.”

Juha then placed on the map an incense burner several times larger than any of the pieces.

“When the morale of our troops fell...we sent Dias to lead them. When we needed a rear guard for a strategic retreat...we entrusted the job to Dias. If securing a particular fort would give us an advantage...we threw Dias at it. Destroying supply lines, securing supplies, defeating enemy generals...all of these things could be accomplished by simply playing the Dias card.”

“In almost every battle we fought, we were at an overwhelming disadvantage. That was how it always started, and it was Dias who turned the tables. He always did it almost entirely on his own. So put simply: one cannot study that man to learn the art of war.”

Juha then reached out to remove the incense burner from the table, but Eldan stopped him and moved it to where his army’s pieces were.

“Then tell me this: If you were the opposing general, leading the imperial

forces, how would you approach this incense burner? Or are you telling me that the empire did nothing to fight back?”

“If I were the enemy leader, then I would have surrendered the moment I made Dias my enemy. That, or I would have done everything in my power to make sure he never *became* my enemy. As for why, it is simply because I know what happened to those who made him their enemy and those who did everything they could to stop him.”

Juha continued, “Every assassination attempt failed—Dias sensed them all coming. Dias barged straight through any traps that were set for him. Flaming arrows and catapults were useless; the man had the devil’s luck and the instincts to match.”

“Dias detected poisons that should have been untraceable all because of what he called ‘*a bad feeling*.’ Well-known mages fared no better; Dias escaped their poisons and restraints, and those damned senses of his sniffed out exactly where they were hiding so they could be captured with ease.”

“Even with overwhelming numbers, the enemy soldiers withered when Dias stood on the front lines. The very best of the best felt that same fear when faced with Dias. And starting with me, Dias surrounded himself with exceptional allies. In the end, the best strategy of all was to never make him your enemy in the first place.”

Eldan pondered on Juha’s words, and his eyes narrowed as he rubbed his fingers on his temples. Then, finally, he silently removed the incense burner from the table.

Wandering, Somewhere—Somebody Walking

The middle-aged man was thin, his expression dull. Shrouded in a cloak, he plodded through the city streets. For many long years he had served the royal palace and had been nothing but loyal, and that integrity had never faltered even when the man had been suddenly ordered to the frontier. It was then, however, that he had been tricked by the second prince’s faction and whisked away, where he and those that accompanied him were put to work.

Then all of a sudden, the circumstances had changed. The second prince's faction had collapsed, and the man found himself free. But even with his newfound freedom, his feet had yet to rest.

Almost everyone who had suffered his fate was now homeward bound and on their way to the royal capital. But this man was determined to hold true to his principles, and with each step he took he drew closer to a different destination.

If the king issues the order, then I must make it my duty.

And so the man continued to trudge onwards in the hopes that he would reach the frontier before the winter set in...

Chopping Firewood by the Storehouse—Dias

Five days had passed since Narvant and his family moved in, and the three new residents added their own unique timbre to the ceaseless sounds of our bustling village. One reason for all the commotion in Iluk of late was the new looms that the cavekin had made.

The looms were a complex combination of complicated wooden pieces in a big frame complete with a cozy chair. The vertical threads of material were secured at the weaver's waist by a strap around their back. The weaver threaded the horizontal threads and secured the vertical threads, then used their legs to pull the thread and move the loom and... Well, the details were all a bit much for me honestly, but that was how you made fabric.

The looms that Narvant had made were easier to use than what we'd been working with previously. Not only that, they were quicker and resulted in better fabric. Then there was the fact that the person doing the work could be seated, which all the grannies loved and appreciated, what with their backs and knees not being what they used to be. Grandma Maya and her crew took to the new looms like fish to water, and the *clack-clack* of their weaving was another pleasant addition to the sounds of Iluk Village.

One other reason for all the sound in Iluk was the six baby baars. Francis and Francoise's kids were an energetic bunch who liked to bleat their hearts out and stomp their hooves as they raced through the village. It was common for baby baars to walk upright not long after they were born, and to be able to run the day after, but because Francoise had given birth to so many kids, they were a little smaller than usual and hadn't been able to move on their own power until recently.

But stand up they did, and soon after they were all covered in wool of their own. It wasn't long until they were dashing every which way they pleased. They were extremely curious animals, and that was one of the reasons that baars were so intelligent. They were always bleating at you as if to say, "What's this?"

or “What’s that?”

With that insatiable curiosity driving them, those six baby baars were almost overwhelming in their excitement. They ran around until they were completely exhausted, then they drank Francoise’s milk until they were fit to burst, then they collapsed into slumber. But as soon as they woke up they were right back at it all over again. It certainly kept us on our feet.

All the dogkin born on the same day were still tottering along slowly as they learned to walk, and they weren’t nearly as energetic, but they too were growing up each and every day. I didn’t think it would be very long before they were joining the baby baars on their races around the yurts.

The last reason for all the noise in Iluk was that everyone was putting in their best to finish our winter preparations, and perhaps nobody more so than the dogkin. Now that they’d grown in number, they felt it their duty to go the extra mile. Although, having said that, I think the biggest reason for their gusto might have been the unforgettable taste of the mushroom cuisine we’d eaten some days ago.

The mushrooms that Senai and Ayhan had brought back with them from the forest were wonderfully aromatic, flavorful ingredients, and putting them in soup brought out a true depth of flavor. Even adding a single slice was enough to take a soup to a completely different level. The dogkin already had an enhanced sense of smell, so the mushrooms had an even more powerful effect on them.

Ever since the night the dogkin first tasted those mushrooms, they were in the forest whenever they had some free time. They did work on the protective fence we’d put up, reinforcing it and whatnot, and they kept guard over the land, making sure that nobody entered to get at the growing mushrooms. When they came back to the village after one of these stints, it was always with food or timber.

“The mushrooms in there will be ready next year, and if we don’t look after them we might never eat them again.”

These words were enough to keep the dogkin vigilant, so they rubbed themselves against all the nearby trees to mark the area as their turf and to

warn any passing animals that things wouldn't go well for them if they entered. Animals that ignored the dogkin warnings would, inevitably, end up as meat for the village.

I never tired of watching the vibrant hustle and bustle of Iluk Village, and it was something that I kept stealing glances at as I went about my own chores and chopped some firewood. I knew that I should be concentrating when I was swinging a big old axe around, but we'd been together for so long that using that axe was second nature to me. Chopping wood was an easy task.

Even if I was a bit haphazard in my use of the axe, repairing it was easy, and its edge never dulled. I actually came to think that maybe it was even well suited to jobs like chopping firewood and felling trees. But Narvant didn't seem to think so. I could see it on his face as he stomped over to me.

"Look, I know it's a tool you can use for that job, and I know how you choose to use a tool is up to you, but...I just gotta tell you: you might be heading for some divine retribution."

I stopped for a moment and tilted my head quizzically.

"Hmm?" I murmured. "Yeah, I know I shouldn't be glancing and peeking at what's around me, but I'm being careful. Is that enough to warrant a comment about divine retribution, though?"

Narvant shook his head, exasperated. He sighed and stared off into the distance.

"Well, it's not just you. Your uncle is over on the other side of the village lighting up the ovens with that other tool of yours. I don't even know what to say about *that*."

I followed Narvant's gaze and realized he was looking off at the kitchen range.

"Ah, okay."

When we'd found that fire-starter scepter after the battle with Diane, we'd thought that only I could use it. But as it turned out, Uncle Ben was no less handy with it, and he'd since appointed himself the village's fire starter. Narvant and his family had set up a workshop to the south of the village, and

whenever they needed a fire for their work, Uncle Ben would take care of that too.

Uncle Ben had often handled fire and disaster prevention at countryside temples back when he was a priest, so he was an experienced hand. I mulled over those thoughts and then thought I'd bring something up with Narvant, who still looked a little nonplussed.

"On another note, I heard you made an amulet for Uncle Ben just like the one you made for me," I said. "It sure was a shock to learn that Uncle Ben didn't have any magical power either, but it's a relief to know that if he keeps that amulet on he'll be fine. I appreciate it, Narvant."

I put a hand to my chest and felt my own amulet between my shirt and skin.

"Well, you're related by blood," said Narvant, looking yet more exasperated, "so of course your uncle was going to be another ordinary human. Your parents, and their parents, they wouldn't have had any magic either."

"Really? So then...if Alna and I were to someday have kids, would they be the same as me? No magic?"

"What are you talking about, young one? If one of the parents has magic, the kids'll have magic too. It's the purity of the blood that keeps the magic out, but that only lasts until you mix that blood. If you want kids without magic, you need to marry a woman without magic. I'm thinking that the temple where you lived? That was probably sacred ground provided by the gods. That's what brought all the ordinary folk together and how the bloodlines stayed so pure."

I listened carefully to Narvant's words, but it was kind of in one ear and out the other. What I *did* understand was that when Alna and I had kids, they'd have magic, and that was a relief.

I piled up all the chopped firewood and talked with Narvant, and after a time Ethelbald came running over, his woolly fur swaying as he ran. I could tell that he wanted something, but it wasn't me, it was Narvant he ran up to. He looked up at the cavekin with a bold gaze to match his bleats.

"Baa, baa baa baa, baa!" he said.

“What’s that...?” replied Narvant. “You want more looms? Well, yeah, we’re planning to increase them one by one, but see, we need the right wood first of all. You can’t just throw the pieces together with scraps.”

Ethelbald bleated a response.

“Well, that’s true. The new looms do result in nicer, more sturdy fabric. Ah, so that’s what matters to you, huh? You’re doing your best to grow all that wool, and you want it to be put to good use and made into nice products that last, huh? All right, all right, I get it. You guys are craftsmen at heart too, huh?”

Ethelbald bleated loudly.

“All right, if that’s the case, then I’ll do my best to make more as quick as I can. But you have to understand that, as a craftsman, I want to do a good job too, and good jobs take time. You get that, right?”

Ethelbald bleated again, gave what looked to be a bow, and then trotted off to where his wives were all waiting for him. I realized then that it was because of the new looms that Ethelbald and his wives had been more enthusiastic about growing their wool and eating up the grass around the village. They knew that Narvant’s new looms meant better quality baar-wool fabric, so they wanted to make sure the process started with high-quality wool. And if they were working that hard, they wanted more looms to make sure all the wool got the same level of care.

I was mighty impressed by it all. Narvant’s beard swayed to and fro, and when he spoke it was like he didn’t want to lose out to Ethelbald’s passion.

“This village certainly gives you good reasons to work!” he boomed. “Time to brush the cobwebs off and really get to it! I can feel the old energy welling in my bones!”

It looked to me like a fire had started in Narvant’s heart, igniting his craftsman spirit. He started swinging his thick arms around.

“Look, I know that Ethelbald is asking a lot of you,” I said slowly, “but it’s okay to go at your own pace. You don’t have to push yourself too hard. Also...”

“Even at this age I ain’t ever pushed myself too hard. And also what?”

“You only just got here, but you don’t seem to struggle at all when it comes to understanding the baars. I still don’t understand them clearly, and I only ever really catch the vague gist of what they’re saying...”

“Oh, that. Well, I guess...if you keep at it and you don’t give up, you’ll understand them in due time.”

The words sounded something like a verbal shrug, and Narvant took to searching through the pile of wood, which I guessed was why he’d come in the first place. He took the pieces he liked and hurried back off towards his workshop. I almost got the sense he was running away.

I scratched my head and watched Narvant go, and I was just about to get back to making firewood when the six baby baars raced over to me along with Ellie, who was carrying a bag with her. They were bleating and bleating as they ran around her.

“Oh, is that so?” said Ellie, replying to them. “That must have been a blast. But the kitchen range has its dangers, so make sure to be careful and don’t get in anybody’s way, okay?”

The six baars all looked suddenly sullen and their faces said exactly what they were feeling.

“But that’s no fun!”

But all the same they all nodded, and the leader of the group and eldest son, Fran, ran off with the others close behind.

Baars were very intelligent, and when they left the wild to live with people it only took them about a week to learn the language of those people and converse with them. When it came to baars who were born with people around them, however, they could start understanding things in about two or three days because of their proximity to conversation at home. Another couple of days after that, and they could engage in conversation. Francoise’s kids were a little different from the norm on account of their size, but they’d already learned a whole lot.

Their bleats weren’t fully developed, and they didn’t always remember things correctly, so they could only talk in basic terms, but even then it was an

amazing thing to witness. And Ellie was amazing too, given that she was already chatting with them.

All of that got me thinking that perhaps I ought to spend more time with the baars. Or, more to the point, I should really knuckle down and learn to understand them. If Narvant was already talking with them then I had to think that Ohmun and Sanat were doing the same. I'd been living with baars for half a year or even longer now, and I still couldn't understand them. That struck me as a problem...possibly.

I was hemming and hawing to myself over that topic as Ellie held up the bag she'd brought with her.

"Papa!" she cried joyously. "The winter collection is complete! For now I've completed outfits for you, Alna, and the twins! I want you to try them on immediately!"

I smiled at the news, but then I thought back to the past and grew a little apprehensive.

"I'm happy to try the new clothes on, but...you *do* know that I can't always be gallivanting around the place dressed like a mountain bandit, right? I just want some nice, regular clothes..."

The smile on Ellie's face vanished in an instant.

"You think I didn't already know that?!" she growled, her voice low. "I already told you that I want this collection to be potential future merchandise! How are we going to sell bandit garb to passing travelers?! I did that because we didn't have time to fret about the details! Now go to your yurt and try this on and know that I put my heart and my soul into every little article!"

Ellie dropped her bag on the floor, opened it up with a flourish, and held it open wide for me to see everything inside of it.

Everyone Standing in a Line, Decked Out in Their Winter Garb

Once I tried on the winter outfit Ellie had made, I found it even easier to move in than I'd expected. And given the weather when I put it on, it actually got pretty toasty. All in all, it was astoundingly well crafted.

Ellie's skillful use of baar wool firstly ensured that the clothes held warmth. At the same time, however, she combined the skills she'd learned in the kingdom and some unique onikin designs to craft a special, one-of-a-kind type of clothing. You wouldn't find something like this anywhere else on the continent.

Ellie had also put a lot of thought into *who* was going to be wearing each set of clothes. In my case, because my clothing could get easily dirtied when I went hunting, Ellie had utilized animal hides to guard against dirt and grime and whatnot. She'd considered ease of washing too—my clothes could be disassembled piece by piece to wash with minimal difficulty. All in all, she'd given me something comfortable to move in, hard to dirty, and easy to clean whenever I managed the second thing.

In Alna's case, Ellie had wanted to dress her in something pretty, so with that as a starting point she'd gone with a dress in the fashion of the kingdom. While mobility was assured thanks to the arms and legs being made from thinner fabric, warmth was also assured because of the baar wool, and the sleeves of the outfit could be easily removed for when Alna was working with water. Ellie said that this outfit was the one she was most proud of.

For Senai and Ayhan, Ellie had put her focus on warmth to ensure that the twins' smaller bodies wouldn't succumb to the winter cold. That said, Ellie being Ellie, she couldn't resist adding a bunch of cute bonus details. The most noticeable of these were the pom-poms that she'd put on their beanie hats. Those same pom-poms decorated the backs of the twins' gloves and the insteps of their boots. The outfits were essentially the same for both girls, but Ellie had made sure the colors and patterns allowed for the two to have something

slightly different from each other.

“Oh! I just *knew* I did a wonderful job!” cried Ellie. “You all look wonderful! Now, don’t hold back, you hear? Does anything feel weird or uncomfortable?”

Ellie had all four of us standing in the village square, giving our outfits a go. We swung our arms, rolled our shoulders, twisted our hips, and jumped around to test the limits of the clothing.

“No problems here,” I said when I was done.

“All good here too,” said Alna when she’d done the same.

The twins soon followed, hopping up and down.

“No problems!”

“None!”

Ellie nodded approvingly, then spun on her heels to address the watching villagers.



“Okay then!” she said in a booming voice. “I’ll be making everybody’s clothing in this fashion, so take a good look and let me know if you have any requests! I know you senjis have shorter fur, so I’ll use thicker materials for you guys; and I know you mastis are already warm as it is, so I’ll use thinner fabrics for you; but I don’t know what’s best for each and every one of you, so tell me as soon as you can!”

“And another thing! I want to get all the clothes and winter pajamas done before winter arrives, so I’m looking for help! If any of you are free and available, I want you!”

“Lastly, Narvant, Ohmun, and Sanat, I know you only just got here and you’ve still got a lot to get used to, but if you could *please* get those extra looms ready and—if at all possible—make some tools that are helpful for sewing, that would be wonderful!”

The moment she finished, the village square came alive, and everybody got moving. Some of the residents came up to me and Alna and the twins to get a closer look at our clothes and check the materials, some ran straight to Ellie to ask her questions, and others ran to Aymer, who was recording everybody’s individual requests.

Narvant and his family dropped into a discussion about improving sewing needles and knitting needles or something to that extent, and the baars were so happy to see the completed winter outfits—made with their wool, of course—that they broke into joyous song. The square was nothing if not lively.

It seemed to me that the winter outfits had really lit a fire under people, because once they’d put in their requests they were filled with enthusiasm for their work. Perhaps it was on account of them all really getting the sense now that winter was almost here. This was no more obvious than in the new parents, who were motivated to ensure that their new families were guaranteed a warm winter.

With all their newfound motivation, winter preparations continued smoothly, with no major problems to speak of.

Bit by bit, we increased our stockpiles of meat and jerky, built up mountains of firewood, gathered dried livestock dung because it made for good fuel, and

dried the berries, mushrooms, and herbs we'd foraged in the forest so they'd last us over the winter.

Narvant made some hooklike improvements to knitting needles and whipped up some sewing needles in different sizes, all of which made it easier for Ellie and her helpers to build up our stock of clothing.

The goslings grew up, the six baby baars grew up, and the baby dogkin started walking around. As fall neared its end, the village was lively, bustling, and above all, busy. And it wasn't just Iluk, of course; Eldan and his people were working real hard. They'd cleared the forest, evened out the path, and stamped it down so we had a temporary road between our domains.

They'd had to use a big steel roller pulled along by horses to flatten out that road, but now it was something we could use until spring came. Then they would pave it with stone to make it more resistant to wear. All of that said, winters in the plains came with a lot of snow, so even though the road was usable, it wasn't likely we'd be putting it to much use. Still, it would make traversing within the forest itself a bit easier, so I didn't think it was work gone to waste.

Narvant and his family were trying to build a workshop to the south, but because of all the bricks and whatnot they needed, it seemed like they wouldn't be able to complete things by the spring. They'd instead decided to use a temporary setup until then, which consisted of a big yurt in which they'd stuffed a number of tools and some stoves.

So now, along with everything else, we had some temporary facilities like the new road and Narvant's workshop. It all made me think that Iluk had become a real, proper village. We'd prepared hard and done everything we had to, so all that was left was just to wait for the long, cold winter to arrive.

A Few Days Later, with a Chill on the Air

"Mornin's here. Up you get."

When winter arrived, mornings started with Uncle Ben's voice. He took his fire-starter role seriously, and that meant he was at our yurt every morning to

light our stove. After ours, he circled around to the other yurts and lit up their stoves too, then the stoves at the kitchen range. If we had fires set up at the storehouses or the square then he lit those too. The warmth of those fires was enough to wake us up, get us going, and encourage us to give another winter day the best we had.

In yurts that didn't have stoves, we'd cut through the floor to make an open space in the ground, then dug into the ground enough to add a steel frame in which one could start a fire. The round frame had legs and you placed it over the small hole you'd dug up, put firewood in the middle, then placed a pot on the frame. You could keep that fire going all day as long as you kept an eye on the air circulation, or otherwise you stamped it out when you were leaving your yurt and lit it up again when you returned. That was how you made it through the winter; making sure you never got too cold was an important part of life out here.

"It's only natural that when the body gets cold, it weakens. And that weakness can go all the way through to the heart. When both body and soul are defeated, you can no longer survive the cold."

I thought about Alna's words as I warmed myself by the fire. Then I put on my winter clothes and made sure I didn't leave any gaps for the cold to get in. With that done, Francis and Francoise and their baby baars came over and sat down by the stove. They always made sure to sit just close enough that when they shook their bodies, they took the stove's heat into their wool. Then they let out contented sighs as the warmth spread through their bodies.

Baars could survive winter on the plains thanks to their wool coats, but in reality they were kind of just tolerating it at best. In truth, they liked nothing more than keeping warm by the fire. Baars didn't fear fire. In fact, they made good use of it, and they were smart enough to know how far to sit from it. It didn't happen often, but I'd seen some of the dogkin singe their fur and tails when they got too close to fire, and whenever I saw it I was reminded of just how smart baars were.

Well, I supposed you could have also looked at it and said that the dogkin were clumsy, but...it was probably a bit of both.

“I’m heading out,” I said. “Watch the fire for me, okay?”

I put up my hood just as Francis and Francoise both bleated their healthy and happy okays. The two baars wouldn’t be putting out any fires in the yurts themselves, but if anything happened I knew I could trust them to call for help. Iluk was full of people with great hearing, and someone would come running when they heard the baars calling out.

Being able to ask the baars for this kind of thing was just another example of how smart they were. I found myself mulling this over as I ignored my desire to stay inside and instead stepped out into the cold.

My first stop was the village well. Thanks to the water traveling below ground, the well water had a little warmth to it. When I was done cleaning my face, I prepped a bucket and started pulling up water. I did a couple of trips from the cold outside to the warmth inside, and when I’d finished filling up the waterskins I headed for the kitchen range.

In this weather, the kitchen range had become the liveliest place in the whole village. Alna, the twins, and Aymer, who all woke earlier than me, were already there. Ellie and Canis were there too, as were the grandmas and the Wives’ Club, their kids, and the geese. Pretty sure the whole village was at the kitchen range, enjoying the warmth of the place.

The kitchen range wasn’t just for cooking and cleaning, however; it was also where people washed, sewed, engaged in conversation, and looked after the children. They split up in the evening when the stove fires were put out, but until then it was a place for both work and rest. I think maybe Alna had foreseen this back when we built the kitchen range, because I remembered it feeling bigger than I’d expected back then.

I said good morning to everyone when I arrived and checked if anybody was having any trouble or needed any help. When I was sure everyone was all good, I helped with breakfast. I asked everybody these things before breakfast because in the winter, we all ate in our individual yurts. We didn’t have the chance to gather and talk the way we had in the warmer weather.

I checked on our firewood usage, our food consumption, and everybody’s condition, and it all seemed fine to me, but then Alna came up to me with

something of a worried look on her face. Even more concerning was the way she lowered her volume to talk to me.

“Dias, I’m a little concerned about something,” she started. “It’s about Narvant and the cavekin.”

“What is it?”

“They’re using up a little too much firewood at that temporary workshop of theirs. We can’t use all the trees in the forest as firewood, and at this rate we’re going to have to resort to black water. Can you talk to Narvant about it before it gets to that point?”

“Well, sure thing, Alna, but what’s this black water, anyway? I haven’t seen it, and you haven’t mentioned it at all until now.”

“Oh, right. We’ve gotten a lot of oil from the black ghee, and Eldan left us a lot of good oil. We haven’t had to use lamps yet either. Black water is a kind of oil that bubbles up in the south. You can use it in lamps and for special heater implements, but...it smells downright horrendous. It stinks even on its own, but it’s even worse when you light it up, so I’d prefer to avoid it if we can.”

Alna took a lamp from a corner of one of the stoves and rubbed the edge of it with a finger. It was like a cup with a handle and a long spout. Alna put some oil in the cup section, then put a line of thread into the spout to absorb some of the oil. The wick part of the thread she lit up.

When she did that, the thread began to burn as it soaked up the oil, providing light in the dim morning. Whenever the onikin ran out of firewood or their usual oil, they would use items like this lamp, with black water as the fuel. But boy did it stink something fierce. Alna said that they only relied on it when they literally had no other options, and the onikin couldn’t stand the stuff.

“Well, I don’t think I could take it either if the scent of this filled our whole yurt,” I said. “So I’ll head out to see Narvant as soon as we’ve finished breakfast.”

Alna smiled gently, and a touch awkwardly, at my answer.

After breakfast, I passed by the stable and kept on heading south to where a

big yurt had been erected. In the center of it was a big stove kind of thing made from brick and stone, with more of the construction materials lined up next to it, albeit a bit haphazardly. Still, taken in its totality, this area was what Narvant and his family called their workshop.

The materials for the stoves were largely gathered from the southern wilds. They dragged their carts down there, picked up the rocks and stones that were scattered around, and mined the small hills around the area to gather what they needed. Sometimes they picked up the rocks just as they were, and sometimes they carved them into more appropriate shapes, and then they mixed them with the soil they took from hills and whatnot to make bricks.

That was how they'd made their stoves, and now the plan was to make even more bricks. Narvant and his family worked around the clock to make their workshop into something respectable. According to Narvant, once the workshop was done they wouldn't just be able to mend my broken armor—they'd be able to produce a new suit entirely. And if they could make armor, they'd be able to make all sorts of equipment and tools for use in our daily lives.

Once we could make what we needed for ourselves, life in Iluk was sure to be more comfortable, so I wasn't against Narvant and his family building their workshop, but...if they used up our whole winter stockpile of firewood, we'd be a long, long way from anything any of us would call comfortable.

In any case, I walked into the workshop knowing that I had to talk to Narvant, and I found him and his wife and son chatting about something in front of a stove. The stove was angular and built up from the earth. It looked a lot to me like a long pot that had fallen on its side, and at the end of its slanting shape, where it was tallest, stood a chimney. Along the actual body of the stove were a number of windows. I'd never seen anything like it, and I just stared at it until Narvant realized I was there.

"What do you think, young'n?" boomed the cavekin. "Quite the marvelous magical stone furnace, wouldn't you say?"

"Magical stone...furnace?"

I hadn't heard the term before. Narvant sighed like he couldn't quite believe it, but then he explained it to me.

“Exactly. A magical stone furnace! You’ve fought your share of monsters so you’d already know that inside of their bodies are concentrated clumps of miasma. Those are magical stones. Miasma makes monsters, and monsters make magical stones. Now I don’t know which one of them came first, but it doesn’t matter; monsters use the magical stones they produce to increase their territory by sullyng it with miasma. That’s their greater goal.”

“Miasma creates monsters,” he continued, “but it’s also their driving force, so you can’t just leave it to its own devices. With a special furnace, however, you can burn the stuff and turn it into a handy fuel of sorts. Burn enough of it and you even get a purifying effect. Two birds with one stone, you get me?”

“I heard you get lots of monsters in these parts, so we built this furnace up right quick. With a magical stone from a dragon, we’ll have a flame that’ll last us right through to spring. So, young’n, cough up one of the magical stones you got from those dragons you hunted.”

Narvant thrust his hand out, but all I could do was scratch the back of my head.

“I don’t know quite how to tell you this, Narvant,” I replied, “but I didn’t even know you could use magical stones that way, so we don’t have any anymore. I know people called the monsters I killed dragons, but they didn’t look like dragons to me, so it never felt to me like there was much use in keeping their magical stones.”

“What?! Y-You don’t have *any*?! Not even one?! We’re talking dragon-level magical stones here! I mean, okay, so if you don’t know how to use them then they’re just stones, but... No. They’re actually stones wrapped in pesky miasma, but still! You don’t have any?!”

Narvant let out a groan, then went on.

“Well, we’ve got no other choice. I didn’t want it to come to this but what choice do we have now? We’ll just have to make do with whatever other magical stones you have. You slew a whole pack of giant lizards, right? We can use them, so give ’em up.”

“No, I mean we don’t have *any* magical stones, Narvant. Not one. Right around the time you came we had that frogkin merchant at the village,

remember? Well, between him and the onikin who helped us gather the lizard materials...”

I still had more to explain, but my voice trailed off as Narvant clutched his head in his hands and groaned like he had a mean headache. Ohmun and Sanat, who’d been listening to us talk, did likewise, and then they all sighed a long and painful sigh together. When they were done, they put their heads together and started to discuss what to do next.

The cavekin family’s discussion went something like this: Narvant and his family had used up a lot of firewood in order to build their magical stone furnace. But the magical stone furnace wouldn’t need firewood once it was built because it could run on magical stones as its fuel. So while they’d used wood to start with, Narvant wouldn’t need it once he got his hands on some magical stones. When the furnace was working as it was supposed to, the cavekin would get to work improving tools and the like for Iluk.

That was the plan, anyway.

That plan had crumbled to pieces, of course, when Narvant realized that we didn’t have the magical stones that would fuel the furnace in the first place. All he and his family had succeeded in doing was working really hard and wasting firewood.

As a craftsman, Narvant refused to stand for it, and he let out a harumph and strode into the back of his yurt. He returned in no time with a big, old, and crude-looking axe.

“Only one thing left to do!” he boomed. “We’ll hunt some monsters and take their magical stones! Even if we can’t get something of dragon-level quality, we’ll just hunt something big enough, or we’ll hunt enough of the small fry to keep this furnace burning!”

His shoulders shook with fury and he stamped his feet. I decided that I’d help him out, but before I could speak, Narvant leveled his gaze at me.

“Young’n! You’re taking me to where the monsters come from and to where you last hunted a dragon! And when we get there you’ll help me hunt! I want you to watch and learn! Ohmun! Sanat! Keep the furnace ready for lighting!”

Usually Narvant was a fairly soft-spoken individual, but his voice was so bold now that it seemed to rise from the depths of the earth. He took his axe over to his cart and threw it in the back, then set his hands on his cart and trudged off with it.

“I’m so sorry, Dias,” said Ohmun, “but now that he’s made up his mind there’s no turning back. It’ll be a bit troublesome, I imagine, but humor him, would you?”

“Dad’ll be fine even if a dragon swallows him, so there’s no need to stress,” added Sanat. “That said, we can’t start work without some magical stones, so we’re counting on you, Mr. Domain Lord Sir.”

I gave the two cavekin a nod and dashed off after Narvant, who didn’t really know where he was going.

First, though, I brought Narvant back to Iluk so I could explain to Alna what was going on.

“Ha ha! Hunting is a manly endeavor! Go get ’em!”

Needless to say, she had no complaints.

So I went to the yurt and grabbed my axe, and I rested it on my shoulder while I walked on with Narvant as he pushed his cart along. We headed north, aiming for the wide expanse of stone at the foot of a rocky mountain.

The farther north we went, the colder the air got. The wind grew stronger too, and there wasn’t a single blade of grass in sight. You could have called it a wasteland, and you would have been right.

“As you can see, we cavekin are stocky, with short arms and legs,” Narvant started out of nowhere. “We ain’t especially quick on our feet, and fancy fighting styles ain’t our thing. So we rely on our brute strength. That means a full frontal assault!”

“We cavekin are strong and we’re durable, so we like big weapons, big shields, and heavy sets of armor. Throw a helmet on to cap it off and then throw us at the enemy. That’s the way we cavekin fight. No matter how heavy the armor or the weapon, we can handle it. And our small stature means that

with big, rounded shields, we can pretty much hide and protect our entire bodies with ease. Get ten or twenty of us together, and we'll tear down any fortress or castle you put in front of us."

"That is...pretty amazing...?"

He'd kind of blurted out that little spiel without any warning, so I didn't really know what he was trying to say. Narvant spun to look at me all confused, and he let out a sigh.

"What I'm trying to do, young'n, is tell you the way we cavekin fight monsters. I'm telling you that if we ever find ourselves at war, that's how you ought to use us. Our skin is coated in a special kind of hair that lets us withstand even boilin' oil. You can think of our arms and legs as sledgehammers in their own right."

"Okay. But I should tell you, Narvant: I don't think I'll ever want to storm a castle or bring down a fortress or anything like that. Bandits I'll drive away, and monsters I'll hunt, but I'm done with war. I really am. I'm certainly not going to go starting one, and if it breaks out somewhere I'll try to keep my nose out of it. All I want is to live in peace...together with the residents of Iluk."

"Huh. Figured you to be a more warlike type, what with them calling you a hero of the war and all, but I guess not... How about this, then? Just keep what I tell you in mind for when bandits appear, yeah? We cavekin aren't very quick or mobile, but drag us into the battlefield on horses or the like and throw us at the enemy and we're good to go. Load us on a catapult, even. We'll handle a couple hundred bandits without breaking a sweat."

Narvant sounded like he was making jokes to me, but he stopped pushing his cart all of a sudden, then dropped to the ground and sniffed it. A moment later, he put his ear to the ground. I watched him do it, then figured maybe it was important, so I dropped to my knees to do the same thing.

"What the heck are you doing?" asked Narvant, his expression and voice a portrait of exasperation.

"W-Well, I saw you doing it, and I thought I should too..."

"Only us cavekin can do this, so it won't do you any good copyin' me. We've been living in caves for so long that we've developed special skills of our own,

and they're not something that anyone can just do on demand. Anyway, there's something a little ways to the west of here, so let's check it out."

So off we walked, and Narvant took some time to explain to me the special skills he'd mentioned. He said that his people had been living in caves for a long time, so the reverberations of the walls and the ceiling were a source of information for them. He could tell where someone was, if there was more than one, how much they weighed, and sometimes even what race or what sort of monster they were. When he put his ear to the ground earlier, he'd been using that same sensory skill of his.

Outside of living creatures, cavekin could read mountains by the sort of water that flowed down them and the smell and taste of the nearby soil. They could also work out what sort of ore was buried in a mountain and how it came to be.

For me, water and soil tasted the same no matter where you drank or ate them, but for Narvant and his people the tastes could be as different as sugar and salt.

"This mountain here," said Narvant, "it's got some good-quality iron ore ready for the taking. Not much in the way of toxic gas, and if you dig a proper tunnel for it, the place is perfect for setting up a mine. There isn't much else in the way of other metals, unfortunately, but based on the sense I'm getting there may be a salt lake; I'm getting a feel for a stratum layer of pretty good salt."

"Might be hard to make that mountain into a mine," I replied. "This area is home to monsters, or at least they all seem to gather around these parts, and occasionally you even get monsters that are hard to deal with like earth dragons. We'd have to do something about them if we wanted to get a mine up and running."

"Then that's what you'd do. Simple as that. If war's something you want to avoid, then build up a military and hunt down every last monster in these parts to show your neighbors that you're not to be messed with. I'll guarantee you that any would-be invaders or war-happy idiots will think twice before making a move."

I wondered how exactly I was supposed to respond to a comment like that as we kept on walking, and then Narvant stopped me with one of his stubby arms.

With a gesture he had me look ahead, where I saw some rocks covering the ground, as well as a clump of trees. I looked at it for a while, and I was just about to tell Narvant that there was nothing there when I realized that something was amiss. I rubbed my eyes and looked again, then rubbed my eyes again.

There were more than ten trees in total, all of them standing tall with bright, lively green leaves...which begged a couple of questions: how did trees even grow out here, and how come they hadn't withered away in the winter?

"Those monsters are called treants," whispered Narvant. "They look like trees to lure in and attack people, animals, and even birds. But I'll tell you one thing: they look *really* stupid out here in a place like this. They use some pesky magic, but...are you wearing that amulet I gave you, young'n?"

I nodded.

"I don't leave home without it," I whispered back. "It's hanging from my neck and hidden in my shirt."

"Good, then between that and my beard, you're well protected. As an added bonus, there ain't a better weapon for treants than an axe, and that's my weapon of choice. They'll make good fuel—their bodies *and* their magical stones. We're in luck, young'n; fortune smiles on us today."

Narvant let go of the handle to his cart and reached for his axe as he talked, then readied it in his hand. When I saw him doing that, I gripped my own axe tighter and held it at the ready. Then we closed in on the monsters, careful to keep our steps as quiet as we could.

Once we reached a range that was just outside of a comfortable battle-axe throwing distance, Narvant spoke in a booming voice. I guessed he must have deemed us close enough that it didn't matter if we were noticed.

"Young Dias! Sit back and observe me in battle! As village chieftain, it is your duty to understand the way in which we cavekin fight!"

"Okay!" I replied as Narvant charged in, his axe raised up high.

I kept my axe ready so I could rush in whenever Narvant needed me, and I watched. Narvant ran in as the treants began to move to intercept him. It

looked to me like the treants had roots for legs and branches for arms. They dragged their roots along the ground and rustled as they moved, and they moved much quicker than I expected. Making use of their numbers, the treants quickly surrounded Narvant before lifting up their branch-like arms and flinging them back down like whips, right at the cavekin.

In response, Narvant didn't even try to get out of the way, and he just let the branches smack him in the head, in the face, and all over his body. The crack of the impact echoed, but Narvant didn't even flinch. Instead he just ran at one of the treants and, ignoring its whipping branches, gave his axe a clean swing from left to right.

The sound of Narvant's axe hitting the treant was less like a blade and more like a hammer. The impact zone on the treant's body shattered, and it lifelessly crumpled to the ground. Realizing that their physical attacks were useless, the treants started using magic, stiffening the ends of their flexible branches into high-speed spears.

I didn't like the look of it and was about to rush in to help, but Narvant shot me a gaze that said, "I've still got this." The treants then launched their next attack, driving their spears at Narvant wherever there was an opening, but he took it all without so much as blinking and swung his axe. Right to left, left to right.

Two treants, then three, then four shattered from the blows of his axe. It was then that the treants made some distance, realizing that close quarters were not doing them any favors. They shook their bodies and waved their limbs in a strange manner, readying more magic, but Narvant chased after them.

Unfortunately, the treants were nimble on those multiple legs of theirs, and Narvant couldn't get close to them no matter how much he swung his axe. Little by little, exhaustion started to get the better of the cavekin. Narvant's expression grew strained as all the running wore him out, and with ragged breath he shouted for me.

"Young— Young'n! Lend us a hand! They've discovered my weak point!"

I gripped my battle-axe tight and launched myself at the treants surrounding Narvant. I lifted my axe up, then brought it down with all the power I had and

split one of those treants straight in half. The sensation didn't feel like a living tree but more like one that was all dried out. It was a much more fragile monster than I'd been expecting.

Perhaps they were built like that to be quick or flexible, but all that mattered to me was that they were easily breakable, so I let my axe swing light and easy. Narvant couldn't catch them, but with my longer legs I could, and I couldn't feel any of their magic so I didn't give it a second thought. I ducked and I dodged and I deflected any branches they threw at me, and as I fought back I whittled down what was left of them.

Treants were among the weakest of the monsters I'd fought thus far. If I had to compare them to something, I didn't think they were even as strong as black ghee. I had to wonder if perhaps that was the whole reason they had to camouflage themselves as trees in the first place.

My mind wandered about their combat abilities as I fought, until finally there was only one treant left, which was facing off against Narvant. It didn't have a face to speak of, so perhaps it was just something I felt, but that last treant looked uncertain about its chances. It was shaking like it might burst into tears, and I couldn't help thinking that it'd be better off just running from us.

"Monsters can't run, even when they want to," said Narvant, seeing the look on my face. "In return for accepting the miasma, the miasma controls their minds and their instincts. It tells them to spread their poison and to kill any who don't have it."

He gave me a moment to absorb that information, then went on.

"It would be one thing if they just wanted to win, but the miasma demands more. Faced with this place and with us, unsullied by the miasma, a monster cannot run. The miasma will not allow it. That is their greatest weakness and the saddest part of their existence. If it's mercy you're thinking of, the nicest thing you can do now is chop that treant down, purify it of its miasma, and return it to the natural world. Perhaps as the circle of life continues to turn, it may someday find itself reborn as an actual tree."

Maybe the treant heard and understood Narvant, because in something of a crazed rage it threw itself at us. Acting almost as one, Narvant and I moved, my

axe aiming high and Narvant's aiming low, breaking the treant into pieces.

Narvant let out a sigh now that it was all over, then threw his axe to the side and took out a knife to start taking apart the monsters immediately. First he removed the magical stones, then he cut off the branches, and then he dug a hole in which he gathered all the fallen leaves. Then he took out a metal stake of some kind, and with his knife he struck it and created a spark to light all the treant parts.

"The quickest purification is by fire," said Narvant as we watched everything burn. "Even these leaves are part of the monsters too, and it would be a sad thing for a passing animal to eat one by accident. We'll burn them, purify everything, then bury it all in the soil. We'll take the magical stones and the timber back with us. We only need the treant materials we can use with the furnace. Now come on, help me gather up the last of these leaves."

And so that's what we did. We gathered up all the scattered leaves and watched them burn. We made sure that not a single hint of the monsters remained.

At That Same Time, in Iluk Village—Klaus

While Dias and Narvant were fighting treants for furnace materials, the Iluk Guard had assembled at the kitchen range for a special training session of their own, and it was anything but ordinary.

“Ellie has made and delivered all of your winter clothing!” shouted Klaus. “The degree of thermal protection will differ depending on your clan! Senjis, your clothing is made of thick material! Mastis, you’ve got thinner material with a focus on breathability! I expect you all to be grateful for the lengths Ellie has gone to, and that means learning how to take proper care of your gear, *including* how to wash it! In times of war, *you* alone are responsible for maintaining your equipment! And so you will learn to wash your own clothes even if all you have at hand is freezing-cold water!”

The dogkin that made up the Iluk Village Guard responded with affirmative barks, then took their washing tubs and their winter clothes—which were tailor-made for their body types and complete with hoods just like Senai and Ayhan’s outfits—and ran over to Ellie for washing instructions.

The dogkin learned how to wash their clothing, and also what *not* to do when washing their clothing, and put that knowledge into action through practice as Klaus watched over them from a distance.

“You’re going to have them practice preparing food after this, right?” asked Canis, walking up to her husband. “Do soldiers really have to learn those skills too?”

Klaus had been watching with a fierce severity on his face, but his features softened at the appearance of his wife, and he lit up to answer her.

“Of course,” he replied. “As soldiers, we have to be able to take care of ourselves. You eat well, you sleep well, and ideally you keep yourself clean so as to not fall ill. At the very least, those of us serving directly under Lord Dias will, to a man, hold true to his principles.”

“But wouldn’t those same principles be the cause of problems during a war? Wouldn’t things like washing and cooking slow down the village guard’s overall mobility?”

“I can assure you that’s not the case, Canis. Maintaining a well-regimented lifestyle results in healthier soldiers, and healthier soldiers are more active on the battlefield. Back when I served under Lord Dias in the war, our troop was the fastest in the entire kingdom.”

“The fastest? I can scarcely imagine it...”

“One factor was Dias himself, who always led us from the front lines and constantly kept the rest of us motivated. But the bigger factor was simply that our troops never indulged in looting and plundering. Once you commit to looting a location, it takes time. You can even lose days to it. By staying away from such practices, our troop could move with much greater speed than any others.”

Klaus continued, “We didn’t harm the lives that were being led in the towns and villages we passed. We either bought our food from them or went hunting for ourselves. But if we stayed in a single place for too long, we ran the risk of that place running entirely out of food, so we were always on the move.”

Though Canis did not doubt the veracity of her husband’s words, she still could not entirely fathom them, and so her head tilted to the side in confusion. When Klaus saw this, however, he responded with a gentle smile.

“If you don’t get it, you don’t get it,” he said, “and I think that’s just fine.”

Eldan’s Room in the Domain Lord’s Residence, Mahati—Eldan

At the very same time that Klaus and Canis were talking, Eldan and Juha were also, completely by coincidence, discussing the very same topic.

“But, Juha, how in the world were you able to maintain your soldiers’ morale?” asked Eldan. “Regardless of your decision to not allow looting, surely on occasion it was a necessity...”

Juha had been discussing the past with Eldan, and in response to this question he cringed.

“What it comes down to,” he replied, “is a special skill of sorts, and one unique to the nation’s heroic savior. Soldiers that don’t loot end up starving...and not just physically. They starve mentally and spiritually as well. In war, every day brings the threat of the unexpected. Nobody can predict what will happen tomorrow, be it battle or illness, and as soldiers tire of this stress, their hearts require sustenance and healing. One way to give them a release is through the acts of looting and plundering, but that darned Dias did it through words alone.”

“‘Great job,’ he’d say, or ‘You’re doing excellent,’ or ‘Keep up the good work.’ That encouragement, more than anything else, was enough for our soldiers...”

Eldan didn’t believe it. He simply couldn’t. If a soldier’s morale could be boosted by mere words alone, then no general would ever worry themselves with issues of how to keep their soldiers in line. Eldan was about to give voice to these very thoughts when Juha raised a hand to stop him, a gesture that said he already knew what Eldan was thinking.

“Dias is a man who is honest to his core. He does not know how to lie. Now imagine receiving a compliment from such a man, a man known throughout the kingdom as an unrivaled hero, in whose words there is only genuine praise for your efforts. Would your heart not be swayed? When Dias spoke to those soldiers whose hearts were starved, what he gave them was an honor and a recognition that they hungered for.”

“Dias always led at the front lines, and he was always a shining example of what he believed was just and right, and the timing of his praise was always, it must be said, *impeccable*. What made it so infuriating was the fact that it was never a planned act either. He just came along and did it whenever he felt like it. But with their spirits refreshed and their honor restored, those soldiers strove to be more like Dias and to follow in his footsteps... Have you ever heard anything quite so ridiculous?”

Juha’s answer resonated with Eldan, and the latter could do nothing but agree.

“I see...”

Eldan had, in truth, experienced this effect firsthand. Never had he known

such happiness as the day that the hero he had long looked up to had recognized his efforts. When Dias had sided with Eldan and encouraged his long-held dreams...in that moment Eldan had felt a joy of such depth that he had worried he was about to awaken from a wonderful dream.

And had he been told such a thing as a soldier on the battlefield, his will at its weakest and spirit on the verge of snapping, that same praise would have been that much more powerful.

“As the soldiers became their own versions of Dias, as we occupied enemy territories, the residents who should have despised us instead came to heap upon us further flattery. To be looked at and praised in such a way only further boosted the morale of the men and the honor they sought.”

“Our forces were actually *welcomed* by enemy citizens, who then became new allies. Things only picked up speed from there; our voluntary forces, made up of commoners and ordinary farmers, became men of order and discipline. In time, they transformed to the point that they eclipsed even the knight order in terms of their abilities.”

“But all of this only happened because of Dias, and only because of the circumstances of that war, and it is about as rare of an occurrence as rare can possibly get. As such, it is useless to us in our studies.”

Juha then turned to look out the window, his gaze pointed to the grassy plains in the west.

“That idiot wasn’t even *trying* to do what he did,” he said. “He even surprised himself. I don’t doubt that there’s more yet to come, and it wouldn’t surprise me if he was up to something right this very instant.”

Eldan let the words of Dias’s war buddy sink in and looked down at his arms. They were thinner now but also stronger than they’d once been. Then he nodded to himself, knowing that he, too, had been a part of the blessings that Dias had brought on his travels.

In the Desolate North—Dias

“But what were these treants doing in a place like this?” I asked. “A place this

desolate doesn't seem appropriate for monsters that camouflage themselves as trees."

The treants in the back of Narvant's cart just looked like timber now. In answer to my question, the cavekin let out a thoughtful "hmm..." and after some thought, he picked up a piece of treant and answered.

"Nobody knows how monsters think save for monsters... Perhaps there was some reason they couldn't stay where they should've been and that brought them here. Maybe something happened in the forest, which is usually where you find them. Or maybe something happened on the other side of the mountain, in the dire realm where monsters nest."

"We've been going to the forest to the east quite a bit to forage for the winter. Could that have something to do with it?"

"Huh? Nope. It's like I told you before, if they had seen you in the forest the miasma would have compelled them to attack. So it would've been something different...like someone placing a barrier, perhaps. Like perhaps they had a reason to leave the dire realm and head to the forest, but they were stopped here because of a barrier in the forest."

I was puzzled by the word "barrier." Narvant's eyes narrowed and a strange look flashed across his face as if he were connecting some dots, but then he loaded the treant onto the cart and grabbed its handles like we were done talking about it all.

"C'mon, young'n, let's not waste time thinking about it. We should get back to the village. Once we get some fire in the magical stone furnace, the first thing we'll do is see to that armor of yours. Then we'll make up some tools and make sure the people of Iluk live an easier life. That's the kind of thing we cavekin like to do. It's our calling, I suppose you could say. We cavekin like to work for our food."

So I hoisted my axe on my shoulder and decided not to think about the treants. I put a hand to the cart to help Narvant push it along, and we headed back to Iluk.

At the Temporary Workshop, South of Iluk—Dias

Narvant and I passed by Iluk to say hello to the village guard who were training at the kitchen range, then reported to Alna that the firewood issue was sorted. Before we went south to Narvant's workshop, we stopped by my yurt to get my armor. It had been all battered after the fight with Diane's forces and was basically unusable in its current state. I plopped it on the cart and pushed it to the workshop.

Ohmun and Sanat noticed us right away and came running over. They gathered up the treant materials and the magical stones and hurriedly got to work lighting the furnace up. Narvant gave a satisfied nod seeing it running, then picked up the boots and gloves from my armor set and started getting a feel for them. He felt the contours and tapped them here and there.

"Well, this is some rough work if I ever saw it," he said. "I bet it makes a real racket whenever you move, doesn't it?"

Narvant took a seat on one of the treant trunks, then closed one eye as he peered closely at my boot.

"Well, it *is* made from iron," I said, curiously. "It's going to make some noise, isn't it?"

"Listen to you, spouting nonsense," replied Narvant. "A good set of armor doesn't make any weird noises. That's just common sense. If an armor set makes a lot of noise, that just means you're looking at third-rate work. You see, noise in an armor set means that pieces are banging or scraping against one another. That can cause damage without a fight happening, and it can even lead the enemy to you. That ain't quality work."

As he complained, Narvant ditched the boot in his hand, then inspected my shoulder pieces, my knee guards, and my chest piece, and then he sighed disappointedly.

"I know you said you've been using this armor for a good long while, and all I can say is that it's a wonder it lasted so long. It ain't just poorly made, it's also made with low-quality metal. I don't know if you can even call it armor. You'd have had about the same protection if you'd just stuck steel plates to yourself."

But isn't sticking steel plates to yourself what armor is?

I tried real hard to work out what he was saying. My head tilted left, then right, then left, then right again. Narvant sighed from watching me, then tossed aside the piece of armor in his hand and walked into the yurt at the center of his workshop. When he came out, he was carrying a strangely crafted metallic object.

"I whipped this'n up for fun, but it's still a good example. This here is proper protection. What I'd call a *real* piece of armor. Here, have a closer look," he said, passing it over to me. "Imagine it as part of a boot."

Is this really all that?

I took it in hand and looked it over to get a feel for how it was made. It was a number of thin, layered metal pieces held in place by rivets, and it was like a snake's belly in terms of how smoothly it moved. On top of that, each piece was crafted so there was space for the connecting pieces to move within, and this meant that even when the metal shifted, it didn't make a sound.

What I held in my hand was just part of a boot, but it was easy to imagine making similar pieces and putting them together to make a set of greaves or a whole suit of armor. A suit of armor like that wouldn't obstruct you in any way, and it would be easy to move in too.

"Well? It's something, ain't it?" said Narvant. "What's important for a craftsman is to learn and improve on what already exists. You see, for snakes and lizards and dragons, their 'armor' is their scales. They're born wearing it. What you're holding in your hands is based on that idea; I took a look at how their scales worked when I was taking them apart for materials."

"So I hope now you can see, after comparing the two, why I called your armor rough and third-rate. We can fix what you've got, sure, but I reckon we might be better off taking the time and care to melt it down and build you a real set of armor from scratch."

I finally started to see what he was getting at. "Come to think of it, the dogkin cloaks are made from earth dragon materials, and they're based on a similar scale design. They don't have any trouble moving around. A suit of armor like that... Yep, I bet it would offer a lot of benefits in terms of mobility. I don't mind

you melting my old armor down at all. I'd be happy for you to do what *you* want and build the armor you think is best."

Narvant offered a grunt in the affirmative, then smiled with such vigor his beard swayed. Then he strode off towards the furnace with his cart. I watched Narvant and his family at work for a time, but when I figured there was no need for me to be there any longer, I said goodbye and went on my way.

Narvant had the magical stones that he'd need for the time being, I had a new set of armor on the way, and now that we had the ability to make metal objects, we could rely on Narvant instead of the onikin tribe for that sort of thing, which would make things easier overall.

Given that Narvant came up with such unique ideas, I had a feeling that he'd surprise all of us with some of his future work, and that's what I was mulling over as I made it back to the village square, where a cold wind blew and I noticed a little flitter of white across my vision. The wind grew stronger still, and I looked up at the sky.

Could it be?

"Wow..."

Snow was beginning to fall. I had expected it a little later, but here it was... Winter had truly arrived in Iluk. According to Alna, snow didn't fall in one big heap, but rather it accumulated little by little, until before you knew it the whole ground was covered in white. I walked on back to the yurt imagining how the plains would look all blanketed in snow. I brushed the flakes of snow off my shoulder on my way inside, where Francis and Francoise, their little ones, Alna, and the twins were all gathered by the fire.

"It's snowing," I said, sitting down where I always sat. "Winter's here."

Alna and the twins showed me the sewing and knitting they'd been doing—at some point even Aymer had acquired a mousekin-sized knitting set, and it was clear to me that they were all starting on the work they intended to do over the winter. I saw them all there with their projects...and I scratched my head. That was when I realized I would have to find something to do indoors over the season.

A Few Days Later, in Snow-Covered Iluk

The snow had piled up outside, and we were all spending more time indoors, but that wasn't to say we didn't still have work to do outdoors. We left the yurt to cook, to wash, and to clean, and we went outside for the baars, the white ghee, the geese, and the horses.

We also had our guards doing their regular patrols, and then there was work we could only do in winter, like snow washing. On sunny days we would lay wool and fabric for clothing and yurts out along the snow. The melting snow would absorb the dirt and grime that had gotten into the fabrics, and so we snow washed everything we could.

That said, we couldn't do that on days when it was snowing or days with lots of clouds. When the wind was especially strong or it was especially cold outside, you had to spend the day indoors to make sure you didn't get sick.

On days like that, Alna and the twins would knit or sew or sometimes study medicinal herbs and how to treat different illnesses. They worked like they didn't have the time to just laze about, but me? I spent a few days doing exactly that. I had, however, asked Alna if there was anything that I could help out with in the yurt.

"You've worked more than enough all the way up to winter, so you can feel free to spend this time however you like," she'd said. "You can go hunting when the weather is clear out, and you can rest and recover your strength when it's not. That's how we spend our winters. If you were a little less clumsy there's some stuff I'd have you do, but if you're *that* bored, why not polish your axe?"

When the leader of a household lacked manliness—which was to say he hadn't prepared for winter—then no matter what the weather was like, he had to go out and hunt to feed his family. But that wasn't at all the case for us with our winter surplus, which meant there simply wasn't really much for me to do.

With that in mind, I'd asked Alna how onikin men spent their time during the winter.

“They do all sorts of things; they drink liquor, they make bows and arrows, and they decorate their quivers and scabbards with carvings,” she’d told me. “Things like that. Some of them don’t do anything at all. I guess it comes down to the individual.”

So, I’d tried to do as she’d said, but after just a few days of doing pretty much nothing, I realized...that I just couldn’t take it. Doing nothing was driving me crazy. If I didn’t put in a day’s work, I could barely eat. I couldn’t taste anything. I started to feel sick. This wasn’t just a case of my personality not matching with the winter either; I felt like I might actually fall ill if I had to spend all my time in the yurt.

So I told Alna that no matter how cold it was, and no matter how bad the weather was, I was going to go outside and do some work. I’d do some farming, or otherwise I’d go hunting. I’d find *something*. Well, when Alna heard that she let out a little sigh, took a small leather bag, and threw it in my direction.

“You don’t have to explain yourself, I already know what you’ve been thinking,” she said. “Normally I’d tell you not to be stupid, and I’d tell you to take the winter seriously, but I think staying inside might actually be *worse* for your health. I’ve put some herbs in that bag for warming your body, and some spices that we got from Eldan. Eat a spoonful of that to warm your body, then make sure you put on all your winter gear. I think you’ll be safe enough as long as you don’t go too far from the village.”

Then she pressed harder, saying, “But no going anywhere alone. Make sure to bring one of the mastis with you; they’re good in the cold. And don’t forget to follow the rules for winter hunting.”

“Thanks, Alna,” I said, grateful that she’d gone to the trouble of preparing the bag for me. “But, uh...what are the rules for winter hunting? Could you remind me?”

“Firstly, no hunting females,” said Alna, who went back to her knitting as she talked. “Same as when we were doing winter preparations. While it does depend on the animal, winter is often a time for breeding and child-rearing. We don’t do anything that’s going to actively harm animal numbers.”

“Similarly, we don’t harm the males in a pack. If you hunt a male that is the

protector of a pack, you might be dooming the whole lot. So hunt males that live independently.”

“Also, no overhunting. One or two animals is enough for one day. Animal meat can be preserved by freezing it, but the flavor drops over long periods of time, and dressing lots of animals in the cold is backbreaking work. If you’re going to hunt more than one animal, do it when the weather is good.”

“All of that said, when it comes to monsters, all those rules go out the window. You see a monster, you kill the monster. Any and all of them.”

I nodded as I listened, and then I rolled my shoulders and my arms to get loosened up. I put on my winter gear, opened up the bag that Alna had prepared for me, and put a spoonful into my mouth.

“Yikes! This is hot!” I cried.

“What did you expect? It’s herbs and spices,” said Alna.



In any case, with Alna staring at me with narrowed eyes and the baars and the twins all laughing at me, I swallowed the spices and kept on with my prep, hoping for the warmth from the spices to kick in sooner rather than later.

When I'd built up a nice sweat, I took a hold of my axe and headed for the door.

"Be back before sundown," Alna said.

Outside, a cold wind blew under thick clouds. It wasn't quite a snowstorm, but it was powerful all the same. All the doors on the yurts were shut tight, and I couldn't see another soul out here in the snow...that is until Marf, the masti leader, came bounding on over, having caught my scent.

The mastis had come from a colder region, so they were capable of living through the winter cold with nothing more than their bushy fur coats. Still, with Ellie's winter clothing, there was practically nothing that could stop them: not the cold at present, and not a big ol' blizzard. For that reason, we had made the mastis the core of our winter patrols, and that was what Marf had been doing when he spotted me.

"Lord Dias, what's goi... Ahem, whatever is the matter? If ya need somethin' just...ahem, you need only give the order...please."

"Well, I was actually just going hunting," I said.

When I said that, Marf's tail started wagging like crazy, which sent his cloak waving all over the place.

"I will join you!" barked the masti.

"All righty."

Marf took a place at my side, his tail beating up snow behind us, and I looked out at the winter landscape wondering which direction to go in.

Hunting in the winter—or more to the point, hunting in the snow—was much harder than I'd imagined. I mean, everything was *white*. There was nothing to hide behind, so just standing there made you stick out like a sore thumb. With wild animals being so cautious and sensitive to changes in the environment, it

was anything but conducive to hunting.

I was thinking about how it would be a bit easier if there were trees or rocks to use as cover, or if you were armed with a bow, and while I was thinking about that Marf shoved his nose into the snow in search of any scents that potential prey had left behind. As he walked on, I followed along.

In this all-white, snow-covered land, black ghee and animals like them survived by going to the forest and eating the leaves of trees that had yet to be covered in snow, or otherwise looking for edible grass under the snow cover. The grass on the plains didn't wither entirely under the snow, and according to Alna, it turned into something not unlike the grass cheese we'd made. This was one reason she'd told us not to make any more fodder than was necessary.

Marf was sniffing around for any animals that might have stuck their heads under the snow to eat some of that grass cheese, and when he caught a scent his tail stood upright before swaying to and fro. Then he marched in the direction of potential prey.

I'd thought that perhaps we could have used matani dust to hunt black ghee, but Alna had informed me that the dust was only used in the early spring. When the snow melted and spring arrived, animals like black ghee feasted on the plentiful grass across the plains, and sometimes they went as far as eating the baars' share as well. That's why during that period matani dust was allowed: to cull black ghee numbers in the name of balance. Once the numbers had come down, matani dust was strictly forbidden.

And when I thought about how effective the dust was, even I could see what would happen if you used too much of it. Hunting was something of a necessity, even when you had enough food, and even when you were busy with other work. Back when I'd first come to the plains, though, I'd benefited from the food, the hides, and the fact that I hadn't needed to call on extra help for the hunt.

"There's nothing out here," I muttered. "It's all just white no matter where you look. And with all that cloud cover, even the sky is white...or gray, I suppose."

All of it really drove home how harsh the winters were here. It wasn't just

cold; it was almost entirely deserted. This was a place where if you couldn't hunt, you'd starve before you knew it. For a moment, I imagined how it would feel to look out at the white, desolate landscape having not properly prepared for winter. If you were in a situation where you had to hunt *something* or you'd starve to death, the depth of that despair would have been unimaginable.

Being out here impressed upon me what it really meant to live out on the plains, and I felt a certain resolve carve itself upon my heart. As the lord of these parts, I had to work hard to make sure that none of my people ever went hungry in these conditions.

"Lord Dias," said Marf, lifting his snow-covered face from the ground to look at me. "Something is...wrong. I know that something is nearby, but I don't know where. And this scent... I think I know this scent..."

Marf's head tilted to the side, and then he shook his face and fur free of snow. I looked out at the snowy plains around us. I didn't doubt Marf's nose, not for a second, and so I scanned the landscape for signs of whatever was nearby. That was when I saw it: something fluffy, shivering in the snow. It was white and woolly, and... That was when I nodded to myself.

That's how they blend in with this environment...

I walked on over and spoke as kindly as I could.

"There's no need to be afraid," I said soothingly. "We're not going to attack you or anything like that."

The exact meaning of my words might not have gotten through, but I was confident that creatures so smart would catch the gist of what I was saying. And sure enough, two baars appeared from the cover of the snow.

"I'm guessing that you two are a couple, then?" I said, gesturing as I spoke. "You really do get skinny out in the wild, huh? Well, I've got a village that's pretty friendly for baars. Want to come stay with us?"

When it came to whether or not baars moved in with humans, it was always something the baars decided for themselves. You couldn't force them or push them into it; baars always had to make up their own minds.

"Baa..." murmured the male baar.

He looked like he was still thinking things over. He looked at me, then at Marf, and then at the baar I guessed was his wife, and he mulled it over. I watched him as he worried, but I stayed calm. I was happy for him to take his time.

That was right about the time that I noticed a black shape behind the baars, running into view from the distance. There was an intensity in the shape that wasn't normal, and I could tell right away that whatever that creature was, it had its heart set on killing those baars.

"Marf!" I shouted, running in front of the baars. "I'll handle whatever is closing in! You protect the baars!"

I gripped my axe tight in hand and dashed out towards the black shape. Was it a monster? Or was it just a predator looking for an easy meal? Whatever it was, I was the one who had pulled the baars out of hiding and revealed them to this creature, and so I couldn't simply stand back and pretend that this had nothing to do with me.

The black shape sped through the snow on its four legs and charged towards me. I timed the distance of its approach, then swung my axe from left to right. But the blade of my axe met with only snow, which flew through the air as the black shape evaded my blow and, with a fierce roar, launched itself at my throat.

But my first attack had been a feint, and as the creature hung in the air I brought my axe back, from right to left, slicing the beast in two.

"I'm used to that kind of movement thanks to training with Marf and his mastis!" I barked. "You lot don't stand a chance, so you'll only get one warning. Leave here now!"

My voice boomed past the dead creature lying in the snow, aimed at the growling black shapes beyond. They were either wolves with black fur or wolf-type monsters. In total there were eight of them, and if they *were* wolves, then they were certainly big. They were larger than Marf and would have stood as tall as Klaus at full height. Their claws and fangs were unusually sharp, and at least from my point of view, I guessed they were monsters.

Wolves were smart, and if they saw one of their pack sliced in half, usually they would retreat. But the murderous gazes of the black shapes never

wavered. They glared at me as they snarled, then launched off the snow at me.

Wolves formed packs and fought in teams. When they appeared near human settlements such as towns and villages, you had to assemble larger numbers than the pack, surround them, and take them all down at once. I'd been a part of such group hunts a number of times in the past.

Wolves were plenty smart and put that to use by working cooperatively at close range. They aimed for weak points so as to break the enemy formation, and so I was on guard, waiting to see if they would set their sights on Marf and the two baars...but they did no such thing. The eight beasts showed not a single hint of teamwork and instead single-mindedly flung themselves at my throat.

"Too slow!"

I swung my axe. The wolves saw it and tried to evade by twisting their bodies, but one of them didn't make it in time and was sliced in half. I stood at the ready, sure this time that the wolves would run or otherwise change their tactics, having seen yet another of their pack slain. And yet, filled with only bloodlust, they simply threw themselves at me yet again.

"So you really are monsters, then!"

They didn't behave like wolves or any wild animals. Their train of thought was a monster's through and through: kill, murder, destroy. I readied my axe for the next attack and switched my focus; I was no longer fighting wolves. I was up against monsters.

"Monsters that haven't deformed! How rare!"

I took a big step through the snow and brought my battle-axe down with maximum force, and the blade plowed through the earth and snow flew into the air. My words meant nothing, but I hoped I could intimidate them with my strength: *You do not stand a chance. Turn back now.*

The monsters didn't heed my message, however, and with fangs bared they sprang into action. I refused to let myself be poisoned and collapse with a fever. Not again. Not like with the wind dragons. I drew my axe from the ground and jumped back, evading their chomping jaws.

When the monsters landed, they didn't look to change tactics and simply

jumped at me again. Dodging out of the way once more, I began swinging my axe in small, controlled arcs, cutting down my attackers one by one.

I was used to these movements and attacks from training with Marf and the village guard, but these monsters had no thought behind their movements. No plan. No coordination. It didn't feel like I was fighting monsters or deformed creatures. Their technique consisted of little more than blindly lashing out—careless and unrefined, lacking the natural advantages inherent in both monsters and beasts.

Narvant had told me that miasma gave birth to monsters and that it controlled them, and as I looked at the attacking wolflike monsters I wondered if they weren't yet fully under the miasma's influence. They were in the midst of *becoming* monsters but weren't quite done. It was the only way I could account for the brazen but thoughtless full-frontal assault.

"Which means you've given yourselves to the miasma!"

I knew that the wolves couldn't understand me and that my words were never going to reach them, but I shouted at them as my axe sliced through the air and slew the final monster, bringing our battle to an end.

Had I been up against pure wolves, the battle never would have been so easy. They were cunning creatures, and the battle would have been drawn out and painful. But then again, if I had been up against wolves, they would have fled at the sight of the first of them to fall.

"You never should have stooped to the level of monsters..." I muttered to the corpses as I wiped the blood from my axe. Once it was cleaned up, a new black shape emerged in the distance. And then even more.

Just how many of these monsters are there?

I was on guard and at the ready, but what appeared this time was smaller than the monsters I'd just slain. They were proper, genuine wolves. They were cautious of me, and they kept their distance, looking in my direction without a hint of enmity or aggression. Their eyes looked over the battlefield, apprehensive at the sight of the fallen monsters.

"They were members of your pack?" I asked.

I watched the wolves carefully, knowing that they wouldn't understand me. Marf and the baars walked to my side, carefully and cautiously observing the wolves.

"Their fur lacks sheen," Marf observed. "It is winter, and yet their hair is thin, matted. Their bodies and faces are gaunt. When winter was coming, they could not hunt enough prey. They did not have enough food. Without that sustenance, they could not build their bodies for the cold. I think it's because of that...that they succumbed to the temptation of the miasma."

The wolves who had given in to the miasma had likely left their pack, and the ones who hadn't had come here following them. Maybe they would have even tried to free their brethren from the miasma's control before it was too late. The cautious wolves stared at me in silence, then turned and walked on back towards the mountains.

We watched the wolves go, speaking not a word until the two baars, having made up their minds, looked up at me with a fire in their eyes.

"Baa!" said one.

"Baa baa!" cried the other.

Faced with the resolute couple and unable to understand what they were bleating, Marf and I could only respond with looks of confusion.

At That Same Time, in the Dias Family Yurt—Alna

While Dias and Marf were doing everything they could to understand the baars they'd just saved, Alna was quietly busy with some needlework in the family yurt. She'd cut out a piece of tanned leather and was now sewing a special leatherworking needle through it to draw an image with thread. The image was a specialty of Alna's: the profile of a baar.

She'd captured their unique nose, their rounded eyes, their curly horns and their fluffy coat. Anyone who had ever seen a baar would have been astounded by the likeness. And it was here, as Alna worked, that someone raced into the yurt to give a report.

"Lady Alna! Intruder from the east!" shouted a dogkin. "Probably a human! They look wobbly on their feet and very cold! If we leave them as they are they'll probably collapse in the snow and die! What should we do?!"

The dogkin had been on patrol, and Alna, who had just gotten into a nice sewing rhythm, let out an exasperated sigh. She put her still-unfinished work of art to the side and got to her feet to grab her winter clothes from the wall.

"I assume you've come to me because Klaus is busy?" she asked as she put on her gear. "I'll check it out if so, but I'll need some of you to join me!"

The dogkin barked their agreement, then howled a message to their companions.

Clad in her winter clothes with bow in hand, Alna rode Karberan east, with ten dogkin following her.

"Sure is easier when you've got horses," murmured Alna. "No wading through the snow, and no trembling in the cold either."

Her breath came out in puffs of white, and Karberan's ears fluttered in response, the horse's eyes narrowing with a simple joy. Alna gave her horse a pat on the neck, and Karberan gave a little more enthusiasm in working through

the snow. The horse's body grew warm as it did, and that warmth traveled into Alna too. She let out a relieved sigh.

"Yep, it really is completely different," she sighed as they proceeded through the landscape of white.

"Lady Alna! We should see the intruder soon!" shouted a dogkin, trampling and jumping through the snow.

Alna squinted for a better look through the snow. Hers was a gaze that could accurately target a bird soaring the skies, and she scanned the area but found nothing. Still, the dogkin were sure of themselves, and so they continued onwards.

When the lands were covered in snow, and the winds blew often, Alna's sensor magic lost some of its efficacy. On occasion, this meant it would fail to catch the arrival of intruders or monsters. This was usually not a problem; after all, in the winter monsters largely remained in their nests and people had little reason to trek out this far. So Alna had not worried very much about the slight dip in her sensor magic abilities until now. With Dias's arrival, however, her mindset was beginning to change.

Alna was coming to see that it was necessary to be able to defend the domain without relying too heavily on magic. To this end, the presence of the dogkin was a true blessing. Their noses were active and effective even in the winter environment, and they would sniff something out whether it was in the snow or even beneath it. They could also hide in the snow themselves as they tracked their targets, and they were not hampered in battle by snowy conditions. Indeed, they had even overwhelmed Klaus in mock battles when he had gotten stuck. The only person Alna knew who could take on the dogkin groups in such conditions was Dias.

It was with these thoughts in mind that Alna continued to scan the snowy plains, and the dogkin around her pushed forwards to lead her, their tails wagging.

As the dogkin inched forwards, they remained hidden. Little by little they proceeded through the winter plains, always ready to attack or counterattack

as necessary. Their target was a figure that had fallen in the snow. The dogkin made sure it was completely surrounded, then looked to Alna for her orders.

“They’re dead, huh...?” she muttered.

Alna dropped from Karberan, took her dagger from its scabbard, and approached cautiously.

“They’re alive, actually,” one of the dogkin by Alna’s side corrected. “Their breathing is shallow, but they *are* breathing.”

Alna looked at the figure carefully and was about to use her soul appraisal, but she eventually decided against it.

This person might be equipped with something to block the spell, like Narvant. But given the circumstances, we can handle them easily, regardless of whether they’re an enemy or out to surprise us. Perhaps this is a good opportunity to see if I can read this person’s intent without the use of my magic?

Alna thought back to everything that had happened with Narvant and his family. Then she signaled to the dogkin with her eyes, unsheathed her blade, took the figure by the shoulder, and turned them over.

What? They’re so light! It looks to be a man, but he is skinny and weak. And still so young. How pitiful.

“Hey, wake up,” said Alna. “Tell us who you are.”

The man was clad in a cloak, and Alna stood up and gave his shoulder a kick. And then another. After a few kicks, the man opened his eyes. He was surrounded by dogkin, all of them ready to bite down on his arms and legs at a moment’s notice.

“Huh...?” he uttered. “I-I d-don’t know who you are, but... Please... Warmth, water...please...”

He was freezing, and thirsty, and in need of aid. Alna sighed at the sight of his begging, then called Karberan over. From her steed she took a fur rug and leather water sack filled with medicinal tea, which she had prepared in case their intruder turned out to be a person in need of rescue. She gave these to the dogkin.

The dogkin sprung into action, following the lessons they had learned from Klaus for emergency situations. First they laid the fur rug on the ground, then moved the man's body on top of it. As they wrapped the man in the rug, a few dogkin crawled in to warm the man's body with their own. Then they brought the water sack to the man's lips and encouraged him to drink. When he did not respond, the dogkin began to discuss the only remaining option: feeding him via their own mouths, as Klaus had taught them. The man, however, seemed to hear their conversation and scrambled, with the last of his strength, to drink the medicinal tea.

With his body warmed and his thirst quenched, life began to return to the man, and as his mind began to clear, he spoke.

"Wh-Whoever you are, thank you ever so much for rescuing m— Huh?! Dogs?! But you were speaking just now! Could it be?! And you! Is that...a horn?!"

The man was in a panic as his eyes went from the dogkin around him to Alna, and Alna found his flustering pitiful. She glared at the man. She had found Dias under similar circumstances, but he had been much calmer. He had at least kept his cool.

"I'll ask the questions," said Alna. "*Your* stupid ones can wait until later. Now, who are you, and why did you come here in the winter?"

As Alna's temperament impressed itself upon the man, he gulped nervously. He looked around again to observe his surroundings. He saw that the dogkin were not out to murder him but that they were nonetheless suspicious. He also saw the dagger in Alna's hand, and something in him deflated just looking at it.

"I serve the Sanserife Kingdom's royal palace. Or rather, I...*did*. I am without rank now. My name is Hubert, and I am a citizen of Sanserife. I come here now...because the king, he ordered me to serve and support the lord of this domain, Sir Dias. I could not simply discard the wishes of His Majesty, and so I made my way here as quickly as I was able. It was a long and winding road, and the truth is I did not know that this place was so very cold..."

"From the kingdom... And you are telling the truth? You are really here to support Dias?"

“Why would I lie? I came here and very nearly *died*... What reason would I have for lying now?”

“Perhaps you need to fool Dias to get closer to him so you can bring him harm and take his rank as your own...or something like that,” replied Alna.

Alna watched Hubert very carefully. His long, sooty hair was tied behind his head, and over his thin droopy eyes sat a pair of glasses, slightly different from those that Aymer wore. His thin face was covered in stubble. At a guess, Alna thought he was about thirty. He was quite tall, but Alna couldn't get over how sickly he looked; it was as though he might snap in half under a little force. His body shook, more from fear than from the cold, and Alna did not get the sense that he was lying.

“I-I would do no such thing,” Hubert said, pushing the words out through his trembling. “Stealing someone's rank... Under the kingdom's laws the act is punishable by death. You may not be aware, as someone who hails from elsewhere, but becoming a lord of the Sanserife Kingdom is no simple matter.”

Alna's gaze grew stiffer.

“Hmph,” she replied. “Sounds like *you've* got it wrong. These dogkin and I, we are proud citizens of the kingdom ourselves, and residents of this domain.”

“Huh? What? Whaaat?!”

“I'm Dias's wife. Of course I'm a resident.”

Hubert's jaw dropped. It was maybe the most pitiful thing that Alna had ever seen, and in that moment she made up her mind about the man, without any need for her soul appraisal. She sighed at herself for ever feeling cautious about approaching him in the first place. When she spoke next, it was with a softer tone, to which she added a dab of sympathy.

“But one thing,” she said. “Didn't you come here through the neighboring domain? Didn't you ask about Dias while you were there? Didn't you hear anything about this place? If you'd just asked around some, you never would have found yourself in the position you're in.”

“W-Well, uh... No. I-I didn't ask. I know Kasdeks to be quite discriminatory towards beastkin, and while I may look the way that I do and have no

noticeable features to speak of, my grandfather on my mother's side is beastkin. So I hired help and passed through the area hidden in a caravan."

"It's not the Kasdeks domain any longer," explained Alna. "Dias's friend Eldan became the domain lord there. He renamed the lands Mahati, and every day he strives to make his home a place where humans and beastkin can live in peace and harmony. If you'd gone to him instead of hiding and told him you were on a journey to see Dias, he would have welcomed you—and not only would he have seen you to your destination safely, he would have provided you with horses and protection. I'm sure of it."

That was about as much as poor Hubert could take. Upon the realization of this shocking truth—that he had put himself through needless hardships and almost died because of them—he promptly fainted. The only word for it in Alna's mind was, unsurprisingly, *pitiful*, and she once again sighed. She took the edge of the fur rug in her hand and, with the help of the dogkin, dragged Hubert through the snow like cargo on a sled.



Awake in the Strangest of Tents—Hubert

Hubert woke to warmth and the scent of a unique blend of spices in the air. He looked up to see a cloth roof and realized he was in a tent not unlike those he had seen on the battlefield. It was incredibly sturdy as far as tents went, and it kept in the warmth to such an extent he was almost fooled into thinking it was no longer winter.

Where in the world am I?

He raised his head and looked around. Surrounding him from every angle were the doglike beastkin he had encountered before he fainted, all lying around on the floor. He understood then that the dogs had brought him here and warmed his freezing body with their own. Realizing that he owed them a word of thanks, Hubert sat up.

“Huh?!” When he rose, however, he sputtered at what met his eyes.

Before him was a man—he assumed because of their build—dressed as a woman, sitting in the middle of the tent. There was a pot in front of him, and he was preparing some medicine or something.

“Ah, you’re awake,” said the man(?). “Alna, your visitor is up! The medicine is ready, but perhaps we should talk to him first.”

The man(?) had a higher-pitched voice than Hubert had expected. From the back of the tent, the woman he had met earlier—the one with the horn—appeared.

“What is it? You’re still worried, Alna? Look, I know that it’s important to be careful so that the whole Narvant thing doesn’t happen again, but isn’t it a bit weird not to use such a convenient spell *at all*? We checked the guy’s belongings and he wasn’t carrying anything suspicious, and it doesn’t look like he’s using any sort of magic either. So use your appraisal spell, and based on his color we’ll go from there.”

The horned girl looked reluctant, but she muttered something and her horn glowed blue. *Appraisal, color*. The two words echoed in Hubert’s mind. He wasn’t certain, but he thought the words had something to do with the girl’s

horn and the way it was lighting up. The man(?) then walked over to Hubert and knelt down.

“Now, I heard that you came here because you wanted to serve the domain lord, Dias. Is that true?”

“Yes, I swear on it.”

“And you came here by order of the king, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Did you have orders from anyone else or perhaps your own personal agenda?”

“N-No, I wouldn’t dare...! All I’m trying to do is follow my orders. I’m nothing more than a civil servant—what possible agenda could I have?”

“Which is to say you don’t mean Dias or any of his people harm, right?”

“Of course not. I could hardly harbor ill will for someone I’ve never even met. My job is to serve Lord Dias in my role as civil servant.”

The horned woman watched him as he spoke, her horn continuing to glow blue as she did. Then she and the man(?) both sighed.

“Looks like we were all worried for nothing.”

The man(?) introduced themselves as Ellie and began explaining who they were, where Hubert had been taken and was now located, and what Dias had been up to since his arrival.

“I see... I understand now,” said Hubert. “But hearing about it only makes me more vexed at my own uselessness and stupidity. And based on all you’ve just told me, I assume that the man over there, here in this assembly hall, is Sir Dias...?”

Hubert sat upright on the bed that had been prepared for him, sipping at the medicinal tea that Ellie and Alna had made. He was watching Dias, two girls, some sheeplike creatures with their children, and two *more* sheeplike creatures that Dias had returned with. Dias, it seemed, was doing his very best to talk things through with the animals he had returned with.

“Yeah, that’s papa,” said Ellie. “Lord Dias, the Duke of Baarbadal, who governs these plains. Looks like he’s more interested in those baars than he is in you at the moment. But that’s only natural; more baars means more wool, so it makes sense that he’d want to settle those negotiations. So you’ll have to wait a little if you want to talk with him.”

“Still, he went out on a random hunt, ran into some monsters, and brought some baars back home with him. Papa’s luck is really out of this world.”

“Hmm...” murmured Hubert, his brow creasing and his mouth shaping into a frown.

There wasn’t anything he could do if a more important priority had come up. And it wasn’t like he had any complaints either; the extra time allowed him to talk to people and learn more about Iluk. At the moment, he was mostly concerned with the word “baar,” which had been repeated over and over as he’d talked with Ellie and Alna. He gathered it was the name for the strange sheeplike creatures, and they were indeed very curious. Everything around him was very curious, in fact.

“Hmm...” murmured Hubert again.

The baar was an animal that understood human language, was capable of conversation to a certain extent, and produced very high quality wool. It was hard for Hubert to believe that such an animal really existed. Then there were the dogkin sitting here and there in the assembly hall. None of them looked gloomy in the slightest, and in fact they seemed to be enjoying themselves. The obvious love of life in the moment that surrounded Hubert made him think of a story his grandfather had once told.

But it was then that Dias walked over, scratching at his head now that he’d finished talking with the baars.

“It’s no good,” he said. “Those baars want to stay wild, no matter what. Francis and Francoise tried to talk with them, but there’s no use forcing them to stay with us, so we wrapped things up.”

Alna, who until then had been watching Hubert with an uncertain glare, lightened up at Dias’s words.

“If that’s what they want, then that’s how it is. We should respect their wishes all the same. But if that’s all you were talking about, why did your discussion take so long?”

“So the baars want to stay wild, but they asked us for food and a place to stay. I told them that if they joined the village I’d give them a yurt and feed them as much as they could eat, but...”

“Well, they’re asking for a bit much, aren’t they? I mean, I understand them wanting to make it through the winter and all...”

As Hubert listened, he thought back to what Ellie had said and organized all the information he’d learned. Before he even knew it, he was speaking.

“Um... I do apologize for sticking my nose into things, but allow me a comment, please. According to what I’ve been told about Iluk, you intend to build a road in order to grow your wealth through trade, yes? If that’s the case, then perhaps these new baars can be best thought of as a kind of trade deal?”

Hubert continued, “The village can provide the two baars with food and shelter, while the baars can... Well, suppose they can allow for a portion of their wool to be sheared in return. How does that sound? Once you start allowing trade here, you’ll get a lot of merchants coming, and it’s likely that some of them will ask for the same thing: food and shelter. Now, you’ll have to work out the value of the food you provide and the baar wool...and work out the difference when you buy and sell at the neighboring region...but you can think of this as practice, a chance to get a feel for that kind of trade.”

“Given the current cold weather you might not be able to ask for much wool, and it might put you a little in the red, but I’ve felt the deathly chill of winter myself. It’s not like you can just throw those baars out to fend for themselves either. So yes, I think I would like it if you helped the baars much as you helped me.”

At Hubert’s suggestion, everyone reacted a little differently, with variations of shock and a few stern looks. Dias, however, who showed only simple surprise, dropped into thought. Hubert was worried that he had perhaps said too much, but then Dias clapped his hands together.

“That just might work!” he boomed.

The other people in the tent began to smile as Dias went on.

“Then that’s what we’ll do. We’ll bring those baars in, and we’ll go to Mahati to do some trade. And with all that decided... Uh, who are you and what are you doing here?”

Hubert chuckled at the fact that Dias had accepted his suggestion even before any sort of introduction. He stood to his feet and introduced himself in the manner befitting palace staff.

Tanning Hide, Three Days Later—Dias

Three days had passed since Hubert joined Iluk as a new resident and two baars began staying with us to see through the winter. Those two baars spent their days walking the outskirts of Iluk, looking for grass under the snow, and having portions of their wool cut by the grandmas. They spent their nights in a small yurt used for storing baggage.

Those two baars were intent on staying true to their wild roots, and so they didn't try to get especially friendly or engage in much conversation, but they learned enough of our language that they'd bleat a good morning, good day, or good night when they passed people by. They were polite, and the villagers were all happy to have them for the winter.

Hubert had arrived in Iluk on the same day, and he spent his time rushing around the place. He was always busy. According to the man himself, doing this helped him to get an understanding of what the village had and what he should be doing. He ran around like he didn't know the meaning of the word "rest," always talking to this person or that person about everything he could.

I mostly saw him talking with Ellie and Aymer, and even though I always saw it from a distance, I could tell their conversations got pretty dang passionate.

I wonder...are Hubert and those two...?

I was thinking about it all with my knife in my hand as I took to tanning one of the wolf monsters' hides over a log.

"That's not it at all," said Ellie as she walked over. "There's been nothing romantic about any of it."

Yet again, someone had read what I was thinking by the look on my face.

"Well it's just, you know, Klaus and Canis had their thing going on and I never noticed it," I said, "so I just wondered if maybe something was quietly brewing right where I didn't expect it..."

"It's not. And besides, skinny just isn't my type. We've only been talking a lot

about Hubert's job here. We're trying to get a comprehensive understanding of what a civil servant does."

Aymer worked as the educational coordinator, so to speak, but she was also the village's record keeper. Ellie, meanwhile, handled trade, storehouse and inventory management, and our finances. All of that work was usually the work of a civil servant, which was Hubert's job. Hubert was looking to take some of those responsibilities off their hands, and so he was talking to Ellie and Aymer about what they'd done and how it had gone and all the particulars.

"I'm only interested in trading, really, and though Aymer has been doing the work of a civil servant, she's mostly skewed towards the educational side of things. Hubert is doing what he can to bring everything together. A civil servant is meant to help you, papa. They keep a record of everything, they handle clerical tasks and taxes, and they aid in the development of technology and the cultivation of land."

"Basically," she finished, "Hubert is Aymer's and my boss, kind of, or more like a general manager. He connects the citizenry to its leadership."

Ellie started helping me with my tanning, and so we kept talking as we picked away at the dirt and grime on the wolf monster hide.

"And, uh...that's a job we really need, is it?" I wondered aloud. "I mean, so far I think things are going just swell the way they are, no?"

"For now they are, absolutely, but once our population starts to grow and the village gets bigger, it's not going to be nearly as simple. There's tax season to think of, and organizing what has to be sent back to the kingdom. Which brings up another point. Have you thought about how you're even going to collect taxes, papa? Have you thought about how you're going to pay the kingdom? Do you understand how all of that works?"

"Ah. Well, um, I remember Eldan teaching me something or another about it when he visited...I think..."

"Well, all that 'something or another' that you can't remember is what Hubert will handle for you. Until now I've always assumed that I would be doing it, but if we've got an experienced civil servant here, then it just makes sense for them to do it instead. Efficient and easy, and neater than if I handled things, I'm

sure.”

“I see...”

I nodded my head, and it seemed to me that all the annoying parts of managing the village—all the parts where I had to use my head—I could now leave to Hubert.

“And that Hubert, he’s so very *ordinary*,” added Ellie. “And by ordinary I mean that he thinks the way a normal person does. All he ever says, it’s logical and straightforward. A civil servant to a T if there ever was one. You are always doing the craziest things, papa, extraordinary, unbelievable things, and I think it’s just great for you to have an ordinary person right there by your side, helping you to run things.”

“H-Hang on, hang on, I don’t think I’ve done anything *that* crazy, have I? I mean, since I got here all I’ve really done is hunted and worked the fields...”

I had some more to say to defend myself, but that was when Hubert arrived. He was looking through a sheaf of papers as he talked.

“Pardon me for interrupting your work,” he said. “Those cow...things, the white ghee, I wanted to ask you about them. Do you mind?”

I tilted my head, curious.

“Go right ahead,” I answered.

“I was informed that the pair you received came from the neighboring region,” Hubert said, his gaze growing more serious as he spoke. “It looks like you’ve raised them for almost a year now. How has it gone?”

“How...?”

I didn’t know what Hubert was getting at. Hubert’s eyes, however, only further narrowed.

“I don’t know the market value for a white ghee, but based on how much meat they carry, I’d wager they’re quite valuable. Now, if the neighboring lord gave you two of these fairly expensive livestock, it’s likely they had the following idea in mind: you raise them, take care of them, work out how much you have to feed them, get an idea of exactly how many you can reliably take

care of, and then order more of them. Sounds about right, wouldn't you say?"

Hubert explained that with the grass in the plains it'd be easy to breed more white ghee, and we could sell or consume them ourselves. Either way, he insisted on getting more than the two we had, and regardless of potential breeding operations we'd want to at least triple that.

"That's what I was thinking, but, is it possible that...you haven't considered *any* of this?"

"Uh... Um... Well, we certainly did our best to take care of them," I replied, "but I never thought much about increasing their number or how much we feed them. Have you tried asking the dogkin about it?"

"Yes, I already did that. But they tend to be a bit instinctive when it comes to these matters. They said that they 'just kind of decide on how much to feed the ghee depending on how the ghee feel' and that 'we just take them out and feed them about this much or so.' They couldn't answer any more definitively than that."

His explanations went on for a hot minute. "If we just increase the number of livestock without any planning we'll run out of grass, so it's essential that we get a better understanding of exactly how much they eat. Now, I'm not in a position to comment on your decision to split the domain lands with the onikin people, but it's going to result in a severe reduction in grass for the livestock."

"That's why it's so important that we get a comprehensive understanding of how much the village animals consume. The baars, the horses, the white ghee; knowing how much they eat will allow us to understand our limits and how much more livestock we can accommodate. If we have a surplus of fodder, then we should write up a treaty on ghee imports...but actually, after seeing that female ghee, I'm quite certain that she's pregnant."

"If she *is* pregnant, then we need to ascertain how long the pregnancy period is and learn more about how the ghee give birth as well as how to care for them afterwards. There's a lot of information we're lacking."

"Which means that when we send our trade group to sell those hides..."

Hubert continued to talk, smoothly stringing his thoughts into words without

pause. As far as I was concerned, those little problems of his weren't nearly as important as the fantastic news that one of our ghee was pregnant, but with Hubert still talking I couldn't squeeze a word in edgewise.

"Also, the shearing we're doing with the wild baars is going much better than I expected. We're only shearing the excess that the baars no longer need, but it's quite the stockpile we're amassing. So what I'm thinking is, we should take things another step further and put a little more effort into our wool production, so with your permission..."

The words just kept on coming, and my brain was screaming for a break. I looked over to Ellie, hoping she might be able to save me, but...she'd seen this coming before it started and had already run away. I looked around but she was nowhere to be found. So with no means of escape at my disposal, I sat still and let Hubert's seemingly endless shower of words rain down upon me.

A Few Days Later

We had the cloth we'd made from the wool we'd sheared from the baar couple, and we had the hides from the wolf monsters I'd hunted. I thought that was enough for us to take to Mahati to trade for livestock fodder, but Hubert clearly thought otherwise. His opinion was that it was a wasted opportunity to send just that. Given how much wool we were getting, he offered that we should increase the amount we were taking to Mahati to get in some real, proper trading practice.

With that in mind, he approached the two visiting baars with a proposal.

"Even though we've only been shearing your excess wool, you've given us so much more than we expected. We wanted to see if we could take things a step further. If we can produce just a little more we'll be in the black. So here's what I'm suggesting: would you be at all amenable to the idea of calling for other wild baars in similar situations to yourselves, who are struggling to make it through the winter? It doesn't have to be a whole herd of course, and even just one or two would be fantastic. We'll of course provide more food, and we can even throw in some sugar and salt. How about it?"

"I've been told that wild baars are especially cautious animals, but perhaps

they'd be willing to listen to fellow wild baars like yourselves? I feel it's at least worth a shot. And of course, the more you can bring here the better; we'll be able to provide all of you with so much more that way."

The baars must have liked the sound of the payoff, because they headed out of Iluk Village into the snowy fields, where they bleated at the top of their lungs. Within three days we had an astounding five families of wild baars staying in Iluk over the winter, which amounted to an extra sixteen baars.

I'd never imagined we'd see that many, much less at once, so I ran over to Narvant in a panic and asked him to make up some yurt frames from our leftover timber. Then we used the looms to make up the walls and roof. In the end we successfully produced a temporary residence for all the visiting baars, though I suppose it was better to call it an inn.

With a total of eighteen baars suddenly living in Iluk, we were consuming more dried grass and grass cheese than ever, but the more the baars ate, the more wool we received. All that extra wool was sheared, washed, weaved into cloth, snow washed, rolled up so it was easy to carry, and then piled up on a cart that Narvant had constructed.

The cart—which was built so you could attach either sled skis or wheels to it—was something Hubert had suggested, and it sure was something. You used the sled skis until you got to where the forest met Mahati, and then you attached the wheels for the rest of the journey.

When the cart was packed to the brim with baar fabric, it was finally time to use it.

"We're ready to trade," said Hubert, standing proudly in front of the cart. "And fortunately for us, we've got a talented haggler in Ellie. I think with a tried-and-true merchant in charge, we're sure to sell high and buy low."

All the preparations were done, and Ellie was already sitting in the cart herself, fully clad in her winter clothing.

"Leave it to me!" she said. "I'll sell this baar fabric and these hides for a great price! The hides are admittedly of a questionable quality, but 'monsterish wolf hide' is sure to be a rarity, so I'm certain I can find some rich idiot to buy it up. Unfortunately we didn't get any magical stones, which I guess is because the

wolves hadn't completely turned into monsters when they were hunted, so the hides will have to make up for it!"

Narvant and his family did some last-minute adjustments to the cart, and then they all nodded. In front of the cart, attached to it via rope, were a number of masti dogkin. Dressed in their winter clothing and equipped with their dragon fangs and dragon scale cloaks, they were both sled pullers and Ellie's bodyguards.

Given the size of the cart, I would have liked to have it pulled by the horses, but because of the season we were limited in terms of being able to feed the horses along the way. With that in mind, instead of packing the cart with a mountain of fodder, it was better to leave the job to the dogkin and pack the cart with lighter food like jerky, biscuits, and seasonings.

Fortunately, the cart was packed with only baar fabric and wolf hides, so it wasn't particularly heavy. Anything too heavy and we would have had to consider a different mode of transport. While I was thinking about that, Hubert turned to Ellie with a stern gaze.

"I know I've said this a hundred times already," he said in a serious tone, "but in a worst-case scenario, don't worry if this trade attempt of ours isn't profitable. What we need more than anything right now is information...and that means simply working out the results of what happens when we feed the baars and sell the wool they provide us with in return. If we don't profit this time, then we'll tinker with how we do things and eventually make our way to a profit. I know that as a merchant it's not the way you like to think about things, but please keep all of what I've told you in mind."

"I've worked my utmost to make sure we end up profiting from our work, and my own calculations say that we should, but...I ask only that you don't be forceful in your bargaining and that you refrain from pushing any deals by using the duke's reputation."

"Yes, yes, I get it, I get it," replied Ellie. "You don't need to tell me again. You want secure trade and a clear idea of the market value of baar fabric so we can establish a baar-wool economy, right? I mean, even though we've kind of already started."

Ellie then looked out towards the wild baars, who were bathing in the sunlight. They were essentially guests, and so we hadn't given them names and didn't take care of them any more than necessary, but sometimes they wanted to be brushed. The dogkin did that for them on the condition that we got some baar wool in return. In essence, the baar wool was a payment for the dogkin's work.

"I think Dias handing out coins to the dogkin as a reward was not a bad idea in and of itself," said Hubert, beginning another lengthy explanation. "However, some of the dogkin kept the coins as personal mementos and tucked them away. In that sense, Dias's gesture was a failure in terms of trying to establish a monetary economy."

"I think that payment in baar wool will be far easier for the dogkin to understand compared to coins, as it can translate directly into things they know. They'll come to understand that they receive a certain amount of wool for their labor, and that wool will become their clothing and their homes."

"Once this value system is well understood, we can teach them how much baar wool is worth in terms of monetary value and slowly get them accustomed to a monetary economy. But we mustn't rush. We'll make it a part of daily life and match our education to the pace of their understanding. Fortunately, given the warm temperature in Mahati, we should be able to trade for a good amount of fodder even during the winter..."

Hubert had a mighty bad habit of going on long rants, and now was no different. Realizing what was happening, Narvant and his family slowly walked away from the cart, and the mastis quietly departed, pulling the cart through the snow behind them. Ellie, too, didn't say a word and simply waved silently as she was pulled away with the cart, and...that left me on my own with Hubert. I figured that I should at least hear him out, and so that's what I did.

In Hubert's hometown, in the southeast of the kingdom, they cultivated cotton and already had an established cotton currency, so to speak. Basically, people traded with cotton instead of coin. That currency had gotten Hubert thinking that the same thing could be done with baar wool, and I figured that sure, given the amount we received and the fact it was a pillar of daily life, a similar thing was certainly possible. Once it was properly established, I had to

think it would make trade with the onikin that much smoother as well.

Homes and clothing were things people would always need so long as they were alive, and they'd continue to have a set value based on their necessity. In other words, their value was stable and secure, and much more so than coins, which were just pretty to look at and have.

Hubert didn't let up for a good long while, and he kept on going even as snow began to fall and pile up on his head and shoulders.

The Western City of Merangal, Mahati—Ellie

Ellie's trade cart traveled the snowy plains into the forest, where she changed the sled skis for wheels before continuing on to Merangal. The city was so lively and bustling that Ellie almost forgot it was winter. The stone buildings that lined the streets, and even the streets themselves, were filled with countless people going to and fro. Everywhere Ellie looked, merchants were making deals, calling out to potential customers, carrying goods, and pulling carts along.

Compared to Bangal, which was the entrance to Mahati from a number of different places, Merangal was a quieter location with a smaller population. All the same, the energetic and ever-smiling faces of its people gave one the impression that it was as busy and vibrant as any of Mahati's cities, big or small.

"It was a little calmer the last time I was here," remarked Ellie. "But even in winter the place is so full of hustle and bustle. This is truly amazing. I wonder if it's because all the farmers are working in the cities now that they've got nothing to harvest... It's like a completely different world from Iluk."

Ellie got down from the cart and began to pull it along together with the dogkin. Beastkin were populous in these parts, and Ellie didn't want to look like a slave driver forcing her dogkin to do all the work. However, it seemed her worries were misplaced; when Ellie looked at the other carts in the city, beastkin were pulling their carts along happily as if showing off how strong they were, while smaller and lighter beastkin sat inside the carts managing their wares. Big or small, the beastkin in the city put their individual energies into the things they were best suited to.

Ellie could see that cooperation between races—beastkin and beastkin, beastkin and human—was just a part of everyday life in the region. Ellie let out a little relieved sigh at the sight of it.

“When we last passed through here all I could think about was papa, so I never noticed that everybody in this city works to their own individual strengths. Eldan hasn’t been governing the region for long, but it feels very much like this way of life is the way they’ve been living for countless years. I’m astounded. But if he was able to encourage such a culture here, I wonder why he couldn’t find a place for you dogkin to thrive... You’re all so wonderfully hardworking.”

Ellie looked down at the masti by her feet, and the masti looked up, wagging their tail as if to say, “Do you need anything?”

“No, no, it’s nothing,” she said. “You guys must be exhausted from our trip, but do you mind if we push on just a little more? I want to take a look around and scout some of the shops before we find a place to stay. Then I’ll do some information gathering. Intel is my specialty, and it’s the perfect chance to flex my charms! I’m going to do the very best I can, especially after you all did the work of carrying our things here!”

Ellie’s fists clenched with excitement, and the dogkin nodded confidently as they once again faced forwards. In their every gesture, from their stances to the wagging of their tails, the dogkin cried, “We’ll do what we do, and we’ll give it everything we’ve got!”

“You all really love to work, don’t you?” remarked Ellie. “But all the dogkin around here are large-ilk... I wonder why...”

“Lord Eldan has been rather worried about that very same thing...but he hasn’t been getting anywhere. He’s currently looking to bring the topic up with Sir Dias for some advice.”

Ellie hadn’t actually been speaking her thoughts to anyone in particular, and so she was shocked to get an answer. Still, she masked her shock with calm and turned to the voice, which happened to be one she recognized. Exactly when the owner of the voice had turned up, however, she did not know.

“Why, hello there, Kamalotz,” she said. “Fancy meeting you here. Are you on

a stroll, perhaps?”

Kamalotz smiled his kindly smile and gave a deep, respectful bow as he spoke.

“No, we received word that you were coming, and so Lord Eldan asked that we welcome you. He has rooms for you all at his residence and has prepared a reception. Please follow me.”

“We’ll happily accept an invitation from the lord of the domain, but with all due respect, our main objective here is trade. I would like to start on preparations for that beforehand...”

“That being the case, I urge you to first come with me to see Lord Eldan. He has all the information you will need, including what goods each trading company offers, how trustworthy they are, and the scope of their capital.”

Though Ellie replied with a relaxed smile, internally she was less pleased. Ellie was the sort to acquire information firsthand. She liked to see places with her own eyes, hear information with her own ears, and travel to locations on her own feet. Accepting intel as given to her was not her preferred way of doing things. However, she could not ignore the hierarchy of authority. She also knew that Eldan’s intel was solid, given how quickly he had learned of Ellie’s arrival and the speed with which he had located her.

“Thank you very much. Please lead the way, then,” said Ellie, sighing internally.

Kamalotz nodded with a smile, then walked boldly down the middle of the street towards the marble villa at the end of it. Everybody in Merangal knew who Kamalotz was, and so the people parted for him without so much as a word, their curious gazes hovering over Ellie as she followed after him.

I didn’t want to make a scene like this, but there’s no helping it now. We’ll just have to make the most of it. If I introduce myself as an official trading acquaintance of the lord here, I’m sure it will lead to good things. And thank goodness I touched up my makeup before we entered town. Come now, all of you—gaze upon the beauty that is Ellie!

And so Ellie walked behind Kamalotz, wearing a winter outfit similar to the one she’d made for Alna, albeit with some personal touches. Her chest was

nicely padded, she kept her hat down over her eyes, and with her refined, graceful gait she looked like any other beautiful woman. However, the beastkin were known for their advanced sense of smell, and they quickly caught the scent of what was underneath her clothes. In truth, this was why they looked on her with such curiosity, though there was no way Ellie could have possibly known this, and so their gazes only served to further buoy her confidence.

At the Domain Lord's Residence, Meeting Eldan

The marble villa that Eldan called home was the symbol of Merangal. It was built around an expansive garden with a fountain at its center, an architectural style rarely seen in the kingdom. Each room was built around airflow, boasting wide-open spaces and large windows from which hung light, airy curtains. Walls were avoided where possible, and so the upper floor of Eldan's two-story home was supported by thick pillars.

The open space allowed one to see that the beauty of Eldan's villa was in not just its garden and its marble construction but also its artistic sensitivity; a glance upwards revealed a ceiling decorated with intricate carvings. Ellie's eyes were drawn to this beauty before she was even properly cognizant of it.

She followed Kamalotz past the exceptionally muscular guards at the villa entrance, then by the intricate sculptures that lined the interior. When she stepped foot into the garden proper, the sight that met her eyes took her breath away. The villa itself was stunning on its own, but the garden, with its fountain at the center, was utterly exquisite. The plants surrounding it were vibrantly green even given the season, and a passing breeze drifted gently through their leaves.

"This is...amazing..."

What in the world could have inspired such unique culture? Such unique art?

As she followed Kamalotz, Ellie was so enchanted by it all that she wasn't even aware that she had spoken. In front of the fountain was a blanket spread across the ground. Upon it sat a young man with one of his knees up. He smiled and waved.

“My, such a handsome young...” Ellie mused, but as she looked more closely her voice took on a thicker, deeper tone of shock. “Huh?! What?!”

Kamalotz looked as calm and composed as ever, while the dogkin carrying their baggage looked confused as to what had just happened. Ellie, whose face was still twisted with disbelief, stared at the young man most carefully.

“Oh my...” she uttered, her disbelief now filling her voice. “Is that you, Lord Eldan, Duke of Mahati? But you’re so much slimmer, so much taller... You look like an entirely different person.”

The basic shape of Eldan’s face and his hairstyle were recognizable enough, but he had grown taller and shed much of his unnecessary weight, replacing it with lean muscle. He was the sparkling portrait of a dashing youth, and the look on Ellie’s face seemed to entertain him greatly. He waved them over.



Ellie approached the carpet and, after a polite bow, took a seat and courteously greeted Eldan. Whenever Ellie engaged in business negotiations, she always took on the personality required for them. Usually that meant playing things obsequious and subservient or forceful and confident. In Eldan's case, neither were necessary on account of him having such a good relationship with Dias. As such, Ellie spoke naturally and without any flowery charm. Eldan responded in kind, and the two engaged in some light conversation before getting down to business.

"I have to say, I'm most surprised," she said. "You look completely different to when I last saw you. You're so dashing..."

When Eldan replied, it was with a voice that was deeper and more manly than when they had last met.

"And I owe all of it to Sir Dias," he said. "Meeting him and learning from him inspired me to work on myself again, and...well, these are the results. That said, I still have so much further to go, and there is still much more for me to do to rid myself of this remaining fat. The doctors say that if I apply myself diligently to training for half a year or so, I will have a body commensurate with my age. That, for the time being, is the goal I strive for."

Eldan made a point of not mentioning the sanjivani in his reply, and Ellie nodded and praised Eldan's efforts without acting sycophantic about it. Once the conversation tapered off, she moved along to the topic of the day.

"Well, as I'm sure you're aware, we've brought with us some baar-wool fabric we're hoping you would like to buy, and we'd like to use the sales to buy ourselves some fodder. We'd of course like this to be the start of a long and fruitful relationship, so we ask only that you pay a reasonable price for what we offer."

Had it been possible, Ellie would have liked to get a feel for the price from the actual merchants in the markets, and it was with these thoughts in mind that she gestured to the dogkin, who brought in the baar wool and laid it out in front of Eldan. They did so with tails wagging, and the look in their eyes practically shouted, "He's going to love this stuff! He's going to pay so well for it!"

Eldan smiled at the excitement in the dogkin's eyes and took some of the

fabric in hand, rolling it out across his arm and inspecting it carefully before calling Kamalotz over. He whispered something into the man's ear, then turned to Ellie.

"We had a chance to see this fabric when Canis's wedding gift was delivered, so baar-wool fabric is already known in these parts. As you can imagine, that means there are also eager buyers—my wives first among them. Then there are a number of merchants with whom we have good relations... Given how much you have brought, however, there will not be enough for everyone."

"With that in mind, and with consideration for your request, I have called for our most trusted merchant to give the fabric a monetary valuation. Half of what is here will be bought by my wives, and the rest can be sold to others. I am certain our merchant will give you a fair and just price, but...given the limited quantities, competition *could* cause the market price to go as high as the stars themselves. That said, I hope you are amenable to the offer we make."

Ellie nodded her agreement. From within the villa, in which the garden sat at the very center, a number of women arrived wrapped in various fabrics. They ran over and let out cries of awe as they took the baar-wool fabric in hand and held it against themselves, imagining how it might look as an article of clothing and talking excitedly with one another.

Ellie assumed they were the wives in question and that they'd been listening in on the conversation. She watched them with a smile, savoring their enjoyment, but she remained quiet; she knew there was no need to push any of these women into making a purchase.

In this way, some time passed, and Ellie and Eldan watched the latter's wives marvel at how breathable the fabric was and its feel and firmness. After a little while, a beastkin ran in with something of a panicked expression. They looked similar to a dog, yet not quite the same.

"L-L-Lord Eldan!" they began in a high-pitched voice. "I am beyond honored that you would select me from among so many of this city's merchants! I will evaluate these goods immediately!"

The beastkin merchant bowed deeply. They wore clothing not unlike Eldan's, and through the gaps in it Ellie saw black fur.

A jackal beastkin... Mahati is nothing if not diverse.

She watched the merchant carefully, knowing that at any moment she might be required to talk sales, which would mean selecting the right role to play. The merchant took to their work earnestly, inspecting the quality of the baar-wool fabric with great care and respect. When they were done, they faced Ellie and offered a sum that far surpassed what Ellie had predicted. So surprised was she, in fact, that in her response she forgot to play any role at all.

“That’s a little high, isn’t it?” she remarked. “All we’re asking for is, as I said, a fair price that will encourage a long relationship between our regions...”

The merchant, however, shook their head.

“You may think, based on the quality and the amount, that this price is on the high end,” they said, “but that is only if you are not considering the rarity of the product. Lord Eldan’s wives adore this fabric, and when we factor in scarcity and its first appearance in the local marketplace, this price is appropriate...and perhaps even a bargain, at that. I, too, would have priced things differently were it simply a matter of money, but that is clearly not the case.”

“As such,” they continued, “this is the going price for now. In future, we can negotiate a change in this price so as to come to a more appropriate value based on the state of the market. We, too, would like to ensure continued business relations.”

As the merchant spoke, Ellie’s eyes went to slits and she forgot to breathe, her every ounce of concentration focused on the beastkin’s body language. Her experience, her instincts, and Eldan’s continued smile told her that the merchant was not lying.

“Well, I think it is indeed fair to say that we cannot ascertain the fairest price based on so few sales. So with that in mind...I will gladly accept the price you have set.”

And with that, Ellie picked herself up and sidled charmingly up to the beastkin so as to engage in a negotiation over the buying price of fodder. The beastkin, who had at first smiled with relief, thinking their talks finished, now smiled with a clear resolve at the understanding that a new round of negotiations was set to begin. But before any such discussion could start, the panicked flapping of

wings filled the air as Geraint arrived at the villa.

“The forest!” he said. “Our people watching the western forest have an urgent report! A flame dragon has been spotted in the skies to the north, and based on the direction it’s headed it looks to be on a collision course with Iluk Village!”

A flame dragon: a monster that soared the skies and scorched the lands with its fiery breath. It was the first and often final image that people conjured at the mere utterance of the word “dragon.” Geraint’s report left Eldan and Kamalotz looking worried and tense, Eldan’s wives shivering with fear, and the fur of every dogkin in the garden standing on end.

While everyone else was frozen, going pale, or about to pass out from shock, Ellie alone was unperturbed. Calm as ever, she turned to Eldan with a smile.

“A flame dragon. My oh my, those materials aren’t going to be easy to sell. Do you perchance have a going price for flame dragon parts, Lord Eldan?”

At That Same Time, in Iluk Village—Dias

Iluk should have been the very picture of a quiet winter, but all of a sudden everyone was rushing around. The air was filled with panic. The dogkin on patrol had seen a flame dragon soaring through the skies. It was a dragon that was red, winged, covered in scales, and armed with sharp claws on its arms and legs. It was straight out of the old legends, and apparently this one was heading for Iluk.

When I’d heard the report, my mind had gone back to when I was a child, listening to my parents tell me stories of dragon slayers. I fell back on those stories as I issued my orders and prepared the village for battle. We had to be ready in every way we could so as to stand up against our enemy and throw everything at it. This was a real dragon...a fearsome beast.

If we lost this battle, Iluk Village would be razed to the ground, and the baars that had come to us seeking shelter and protection would be lost.

No, even if they hadn’t come to Iluk, it’s likely that the dragon would have wanted to burn the entire plains, baars and all.

I was determined not to let that happen. And yet, at the same time I felt a twinge of excitement. We were about to face off against a genuine dragon. Not a turtle. Not a dragonfly. A real, bona fide *dragon*!

I knew that there were more important things to think about and bigger issues to fear. And yet...I couldn't stop my blood from heating up with anticipation.

Watching Over Eldan and His People—Ellie

All negotiations had been paused when news arrived that a flame dragon was passing over Baarbadal with the intent to attack. As soon as Eldan had been informed of the situation, he began issuing orders.

Kamalotz was to lead a squad of reinforcements that would leave immediately. Geraint and his fellow dovekin would act as their intelligence network, providing updates as quickly as possible. On and on the preparations went. Meanwhile, Ellie sat among all the panicked comings and goings, watching over it all until the dogkin began to panic and whisper among themselves. "Should we return to Iluk?" they wondered.

"Have a little faith in papa, would you?" Ellie said, soothing them.

Well, at least Eldan's reinforcements will be able to help carry the materials when the battle is over, and I'm grateful that we'll have constant updates. But seeing as I'm a visitor here, it's really not my place to go butting my nose into things.

Ellie didn't want to intrude on the conversation, and so she simply kept her distance as Eldan and his people continued to fluster about. After a not insignificant amount of time, the first report arrived from the dovekin.

The dovekin network was using the rest area on the road that linked Baarbadal to Mahati, and it was from there that the first dovekin had received a status update, which it had taken to the second bird, who'd then taken it to a third, and so on and so on. Thanks to the dovekin being able to fly, this process was very quick.

Eldan stood gallantly in the center of his garden, his arm bent to receive the

dovekin. He listened carefully to the agent's report, then had one of his civil servants hurry for a pen and paper to record the information. He then relayed what he had been told to Ellie, with questions for her as well.

"It seems that Dias has elected not to face off against the dragon alone and has prepared all the military power at his disposal to meet the monster's arrival. That means all of Iluk's able but also a number of archers from Alna's tribe. They are currently moving northeast, to cut off the dragon before it arrives at Iluk."

"Miss Ellie, until now Dias has almost always fought dragons alone. What would have caused him to assemble such forces for this particular battle? Does Dias know that the flame dragon is an extremely powerful monster? Does he know that the battle he faces will be the most difficult he has faced thus far?"

Ellie had no real way of knowing the answers to Eldan's questions, but she had known Dias so long they were practically relatives. As such, Eldan's questions were ones she felt she could answer fairly confidently, even if her words were, at their core, an educated guess.

"I think that, perhaps, papa is copying the heroic myth of the dragon slayer," she said. "Surely you know the story: the one about the hero on his black steed, spear in hand, leading a troop of brave knights against a red dragon?"

It was a story known by all the children throughout the entire kingdom—a heroic tale considered a classic even among the classics.

"Of course," replied Eldan.

"Well, papa always adored that story, and he loved it so much that he told it to us as a bedtime story so often that we all got sick of it. I have a feeling it was a story that his own parents had told him countless times too."

The hero in that story led a unique unit, one made up of young, old, male, and female alike, because the hero accepted any and all who were willing. This had appealed to the young Dias, so much so that the idea had perhaps formed the foundation of the very man he'd become. Ellie chuckled at the thought, and it dawned on her that the old legend was likely the very reason that Dias had been unable to truly accept the earth dragon and wind dragons as actual dragons.

“Then again, it *is* papa we’re talking about,” she continued, “so this idea might have just struck him in the moment, but there’s no need to worry about him or any of the others. When they work together, there’s nobody in the entire world who can stop them.”

Eldan dropped into thought as Ellie’s resolute confidence impressed itself upon him, and he looked out at the sky to the west.

“Even together with his archers, they lack military power for the likes of a flame dragon. But with Dias leading them, perhaps they can find a way to slay even such an awesome beast by methods the rest of us would think unimaginable...”

Eldan continued to watch the sky, waiting for the next dovekin update. In that time, though, some of the fear he’d felt from earlier had since faded, replaced by the excitement of a child waiting patiently for the next chapter in a grand tale.

As Cold Winds Whip Through the Skies—The Flame Dragon

Pesky gods. How many times must they block our southern advance before they are satisfied?

The dragon's wings, releasing miasma with every movement, flapped powerfully as the beast soared through the sky. Its two arms and two legs were equipped with viciously sharp claws, and even the joints of its wings sprouted ominously sharp hooks. The monster was covered mostly in red scales, though its jaw, neck, and stomach were white, and the scales that covered its back were so dark as to almost be black and pointed at such sharp angles they looked like they could cut. Horns sprouted from the dragon's face, the eyes of which held a brutal cunning unique to predators. The dragon's mouth was abnormally large, and in it sat countless sharp fangs.

In shape and form, this was a creature truly worthy of the moniker of "dragon."

Though the monster had lost much of its intellect to the miasma's contamination, in its place had bloomed a new, unique wisdom of sorts. The dragon thus roared its message across the lands:

"This time nothing will stop us going south, and this time the lands will fill with miasma!"

But what happened to the others? Even if those pesky gods had sent them packing, why didn't they return? Why didn't they report? Is it possible they fell prey to those at the mountain border, who are beginning to gain a foothold?

No...that's not possible. The slow-witted turtle might have fallen but not the sky bugs. That they never returned is most strange. What did the gods do? What are they planning? I do not like this at all.

As the dragon considered the circumstances, snow drifted from the white plains below, as if kicked up into the air. The dragon's eyes narrowed and it

looked more closely, but it saw nothing. The world below remained white, and the dragon sensed not even a hint of another life-form. And yet, the snow continued to flutter and dance, as though it were heading directly for the creature, growing to such size it could almost be mistaken for a blizzard.

The blizzard proceeded forwards until it was right in front of the dragon, then split into two. The two white clouds moved as if to trap their target between them. It was then that the dragon heard a fearsome voice bellow into the air. This was no ordinary snowstorm, the monster realized. Something was afoot.

The voice sounded like a beast of some kind, and it was not at all like the voices of the gods. But all the same it was unusual, and it made the dragon uneasy. It did not know what was happening, and so it did not know how to react.

Then it heard the voice a second time.

The booming voice was an order, and as it faded countless arrows burst from the snowstorms, whistling through the air as they headed straight for the flame dragon.

“You would dare to try such brazen stupidity against me?!” roared the dragon.

It was bold of the attackers to hide themselves in the snow, but what damage did they intend to do with such twigs as these? The flame dragon’s scales were nothing if not durable, and the dragon laughed at the twigs, which had no chance of doing any damage. And true enough, the sticks bounced off the dragon’s hide with a *clang* and dropped back into the snow.

“Did you expect anything less?!” growled the dragon. “Your twigs will leave not a scratch upon these scales!”

The flame dragon once again burst into derisive laughter, bemused but unbothered by whatever was hiding in the snow. But it was right at that moment that intense pain shot through the dragon’s wing joint, together with a sound the dragon had never heard, such that it reverberated through its scales and bones.

An instant later, that same booming voice cried out again. This put the dragon

on edge; it felt like the order for an all-out assault. The dragon immediately began to brew a powerful mix of miasma in its belly. It did not know what was happening, and it did not know how these attackers had pierced its proud wings, but it would not let them do so again. With a flap of its wings the dragon steadied itself and spewed fire across the plains.

But even as flames covered the plains, the voice continued to shout, and the snowstorms deftly avoided the fire as they continued their approach. That was why the attackers had broken into two groups; their aim was to spread the snow through the air more widely, and in doing so make it harder for the flame dragon to know where to aim. The tactic had been successful, as even now the dragon had no idea where to fire next. Without a clear target, it could only hope for the best wherever it attacked.

But as the dragon pondered, the voice shouted another order.

This time the dragon channeled the miasma into its wings and, with a powerful flap, spread a gust of wind that knocked the attackers' twigs off target. The dragon bellowed with laughter.

"All you have are your sticks! Is this the best you've got?!"

The dragon laughed yet again. It was proving to its attackers how proud and noble a creature it was. But as the dragon continued to laugh, a sound whistled through the air from *behind* the dragon, separate from the snowstorms in front of it. The dragon flapped its wings in a panic, but it could not spin around to defend itself from the rear, and the whistling sound ended in sharp pain, which flooded the dragon's body from the joints of its wings.

The twigs had somehow pierced the tendons in the dragon's wings, and it plummeted unceremoniously into the snow below.

Watching Through a Telescope—Dias

"Thanks to Zorg and his guard drawing the dragon's attention, Alna and the twins' sneak attack was a success," said Klaus. "That concealment magic of hers really is incredible."

He was looking through his telescope, covered in white baar wool to

camouflage with the snow. Behind him, the waiting dogkin replied with quiet but resolute barks, their tails wagging to and fro.

“Without its wings, I thought it’d be about the same as fighting that turtle,” I said. “But...this dragon is *quick*. Even in the snow it’s still just as dangerous. It was all Zorg could do to get himself and his men to a safe distance. But I guess that’s a dragon for you... They’re a real cut above the rest.”

I watched the monster through my own telescope, and I couldn’t help but feel a certain admiration for it. Klaus must have heard it in my words, because he sighed.

“Well, I guess that means we’re up, then,” said Narvant, from his hiding spot next to Klaus. “Those earth dragon arrows worked pretty good to hurt it, but when it comes to *slaying* a dragon, you need something more destructive. That’s why we constructed something especially for the occasion.”

Sanat, who was sitting next to his father, put a hand to their secret weapon. He’d figured that we’d need it at some point, so he’d put it together in his spare time. Now, he was preparing it for our next assault, which we hoped would be enough to put that rampaging dragon down for the count.

“Listen up, everyone,” said Narvant. “Just as the name implies, a flame dragon’s got fire unlike anything you’re used to. You cannot allow it to get you, so avoid the flames at all costs. And when that dragon is breathing its fire, you leave things to us cavekin; we’re especially resistant to high temperatures.”

With that said, Narvant pulled on the reins that were connected to some dogkin, then covered them and their secret weapon in an herbal liquid that was flame resistant.

“Now I know I said all this before we left, but it bears repeating,” said Narvant. “Firstly, Sanat and I will jump in and you dogkin will pull us along as fast as you can. Once we’ve hit a good speed, we’ll cut the ropes. As soon as we do, you guys get clear and put as much distance between yourselves and the dragon as you can. Sanat and I should have enough speed built up to give that dragon a good plowin’. We’ll smash it to draw its attention, which will give Dias and Klaus a chance to get into position for their attack. You two will be aiming for the dragon’s belly and its throat. Deal enough damage and it won’t be able

to breathe any fire. If we take the monster's fire and its wings, we're pretty much just dealing with another giant lizard, which means we can launch an all-in, full-on, no-holds-barred assault."

The dogkin, Klaus, and I all nodded. Narvant and Sanat gripped their axes as they climbed aboard their boxes, each of which had a sled attached to it. The wooden boxes were simple things that could carry a number of people, and there were holes on the left and right from which one could fire arrows or launch rocks. The roofs and the fronts of the boxes were covered in several layers of black ghee hide to act as fire protection. The hides were coated with an herbal mix which made them resistant to the dragon's fire for short periods of time.

The sleds, meanwhile, were covered in wax so they would glide through the snow and pick up speed quickly. And the front of the box? Well, that was decked out with a big steel, hammer-like object in the shape of a baar's head.

Narvant called the boxes "baar wagons."

The wagons were designed to be pulled along by horses or dogkin. They weren't just designed to deliver soldiers and weapons to the battlefield, though; the passengers could also attack from inside, and the wagons could be used as battering rams. With enough of them lined up together, you essentially had a mobile encampment of sorts.

Narvant and his family had put some wagons together thinking that they would come in handy should the plains ever become a battlefield, but ramming them into an honest-to-God dragon was probably the last thing I'd have imagined them being used for.

While Narvant and Sanat got settled into their respective wagons, Klaus and I ran up and took position behind the wagons to use them as shields. Once we were all ready, the plan was to cut through the snow and reach the dragon before we were completely bathed in flames.

"All goes well, you won't have to deal with even a lick of fire," said Narvant, looking at us from one of the holes in his wagon, "so wipe those gloomy looks off your faces. If worse comes to worst, you'll have the girls looking out for you, and that means we can get away under cover of concealment magic and

prepare for another attack.”

“We shouldn’t be thinking in terms of failure,” he added, growing giddy. “We should be thinking in terms of victory, and that means working out what we’re going to do with all the wonderful materials we’ll get as loot! And let me tell you, there’s a lot to look forward to. We’ve got some nice dragon parts and a big ol’ magical stone coming our way, I guarantee it.”

Klaus and the dogkin and I all nodded resolutely, and Narvant and Sanat nodded back.

It was time to launch our assault.

First the dogkin let out a howl to Alna and the onikin warriors, who’d been running around attacking the flame dragon from the cover of their magic. Then, the dogkin ran straight for the dragon. Klaus had his spear at the ready and I had my axe. We hunched down low and followed after the wagons. The wagons left us behind at blistering speed, and the dragon must have noticed. Its eyes, gleaming red and yellow like a raging fire, widened with surprise.

The dragon’s gaze wasn’t on the dogs or the wagons but rather on the steel baar heads. They were the only part of the wagon made of metal, and for whatever reason the expressions on those steel baar faces were great big smiles. The dragon locked onto them with a fierce confusion on its face, like it could not for the life of it understand what it was looking at.

But the wagons ignored the dragon’s expression and kept picking up speed, closing in with every passing moment. From inside, Narvant and Sanat swung the knives in their hands and cut the ropes connecting the wagons to the dogkin. With a grunt, the dogkin split to the left and right, while the wagons barreled on straight ahead. Still looking shocked, the dragon frantically opened its mouth and spewed a wave of fire. Flames billowed forth, consuming the wagons, but it wasn’t enough to stop them. Sanat’s wagon plowed into the dragon’s left leg, while Narvant’s wagon collided with the dragon’s stomach.

The smiling steel baars slammed into the dragon, which roared in response, its rage echoing over the plains. At the same time, the roofs of the wagons sprung open, and Narvant and Sanat leaped out with their axes in hand, swinging like mad. But the dragon’s scales were formidable, and their strikes

bounced off it harmlessly.

Unwilling to give up, Narvant and Sanat continued to swing away. The dragon tried to hit them, and kick them, and shower them in fire, but the wagons had done their damage. The dragon was slower now. Its flames had lost some of their strength, and it struggled to land a clean hit. Still, Narvant and Sanat ignored the state of the dragon and continued their assault, throwing caution to the wind and daring the dragon to hit them or set them alight.

That was happening right as Klaus and I arrived in front of the dragon ourselves.

“Wow! A dragon!” I remarked. “A real dragon!”

“Yes! It’s a dragon!” replied Klaus.

We took in the size of the monster and noticed that its movements had dulled since the battle began. It was at least two times the size of me...no, actually much bigger...and in any case it was so powerful and so menacing a creature that it was almost overwhelming just to gaze upon.

But it wasn’t just the dragon’s size or presence that was impressive; it was also the tremendous heat that emanated from it. Even though it was winter out here on the plains, it felt like summer around the dragon. Then there was how sharp its fangs and claws were; it was enough to make one want to turn and run away. But I had a plethora of reasons to fight. There were Narvant and Sanat who were right now in the heat of battle, there were the onikin who had lent us their strength, and there was every single resident of Iluk Village. When I thought of the baars trembling in fear, I knew that I had to stand tall, so I strode forwards and I raised my axe with everything I had.

My first target was the dragon’s stomach. I was going to hit it and hit it hard until we had the beast’s fire out of the picture. If we could stop the dragon from using its fire, then everyone in the fight could all attack at once: Alna and the twins, Zorg and his men, and all of the dogkin. So I swung my axe and watched as it slammed into the white scales of the dragon’s belly.

“Aha, so it’s not as tough as earth dragon hide!” I cheered.

My axe had succeeded in shattering the dragon’s scales, and the dragon let

loose a deafening roar. Klaus then leaped in and sent his spear through the opening I'd created, deep into the monster's stomach. He did it again and again, and I followed suit, swinging my axe over and over and over, always aiming at the dragon's guts.

The dragon's scales cracked and they shattered and they flew all over the place. With each broken scale, the monster roared with greater pain, but Klaus and I stayed on the attack, even when blood sprayed out all over the place.

"With you here that dragon is like melted cheese!" shouted Narvant. "And to think that its hide is supposed to be as strong as an earth dragon's!"

He and Sanat were each attacking a separate leg, running around in circles swinging their axes.

"No, you're wrong!" I shouted. "Earth dragon hide is way stronger! More than ten times stronger, I'd bet!"

The flame dragon flailed its arms around, trying desperately to catch me and my axe. Knowing that it would send us flying, Klaus and I took some evasive maneuvers and turned our weapons on the dragon's arms.

The dragon, however, was determined to catch us, maybe even to eat us, and it grew more frantic. It wasn't even thinking about avoiding us or defending itself. But it couldn't catch us, and Klaus and I worked in unison to dodge, attack, and repeat. We waited for one or the other to create an opening, and we never got in each other's way. It was just like old times.

Klaus's movements were exactly like those of when we'd fought back in the war, but his power and speed were on another level entirely. He had really grown of late. But seeing him move like that only spurred me to keep up. The last thing I wanted to do was slow him down, so I clenched my fists and my body responded in kind. I surprised even myself; I could move faster than I thought. Even my aim improved.

The more powerfully I tried to move, the more freely I moved, free from aches and pains. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't remember ever moving like this even when I was younger. But I couldn't think about it for long, because even though its wings were supposed to be out of action, the dragon lifted them up and beat them left and right at tremendous speed.

“Narvant!” I shouted. “Sanat!”

The dragon wasn’t only after Klaus and me, and it hit both the cavekin dead-on. There was a huge crack on impact, and then the two cavekin went flying through the air before tumbling into the snow.

“You’ve gone and done it now!” shouted Narvant.

“That hurt, you damned lizard!” shouted Sanat.

Even sitting there in the snow, the two were still just as energetic as before. Hearing that they were unhurt sent a wave of relief through me, but I couldn’t linger on that for long either.

“Lord Dias!” shouted Klaus, almost screaming. “The dragon’s stomach, it’s...!”

I spun to look at the dragon’s stomach and saw that all the work we’d done chopping it up was gone. It wasn’t perfectly healed because there were scars all along the monster’s belly and the broken scales remained broken, but the cuts we’d left had closed at a crazy speed, covered by skin or membrane or some such thing. It looked to me like the wings were healing in pretty much the same way too.

No, that’s not quite right. It still can’t fly, which means maybe it can’t heal itself completely... By the looks of things, it can only heal itself enough to keep moving.

“Well, that makes things all the more difficult,” I muttered, “but then again, *this* is what makes a dragon a dragon, and it sure is exhilarating!”

I watched as the dragon roared, swinging its arms and its wings around while it trained its glare right on us. Klaus heard what I said, and he heaved a great big sigh that I could hear even with that dragon growling and barking. I couldn’t help but chuckle at the guy. The thrill and exhilaration rushing through my body turned to power and I unleashed a slice that opened a giant gash along the dragon’s freshly healed stomach.

I kept that up, making sure that the dragon’s movements were dulled by my assault, and I turned to Klaus.

“Take care of the dogkin!” I shouted.

And with that, I separated from Klaus to take the dragon on solo. After the dogkin had been released from the baar wagons, they'd taken up position around the flame dragon. They were growling and waiting for their chance to take a bite out of their foe, but I could tell by the speed of the dragon's healing abilities that their jaws wouldn't do much good. I was also worried about their safety, what with the dragon going so berserk, so I wanted to make sure that Klaus got them in line before they did anything rash. Klaus responded immediately, calling each of the dogkin by name and getting them to a safe distance.

Narvant and Sanat, who had been sent flying, were back on their feet and ready for another charge. They, too, made some distance between themselves and the dragon, though it looked like they had a plan of sorts. In any case, as I faced off against the dragon, now on my own, arrows started raining down on the monster.

All of the arrows were fired with clear care not to hit me, and they were aimed at the dragon's back, its wings, and its tail. Most of them simply bounced harmlessly off the dragon's armored hide, but some of them still stuck into the dragon's body, and it let loose a roar full of rage and sorrow.

The monster glared at me as I swung my axe at it, then looked left and right, desperate to find the onikin who were hiding under the cover of their concealment magic. But no matter how much it glared, and no matter where it looked, the dragon couldn't find what it was looking for. The beast's frustration only grew, and its eyes glimmered with a deep-red light. It roared again, now with exasperation in the mix.

Where are they?! Why can't I find them?!

That was what I heard in the dragon's roaring and saw in its now bloodred eyes. Its focus turned back to the one it *could* see, and it swiped its claws to tear me to shreds.

Do I dodge, or do I defend?

I had only an instant to decide, and before I knew it my axe was soaring in an arc straight towards the dragon's clawed hand. The dragon continued time after time to rake at me with its claws and its wings, and I fought every attack off by

hitting back with my axe. When I saw an opening, I threw my axe at the monster's stomach, knowing that I had to keep it from spewing forth any flames.

The dragon had been on such a rampage that the ground around us was gouged and scarred. I stood on the uneven ground, spread my legs slightly, and swung my axe in every direction. Left, right, up, down, I swung with everything I had and with such vigor that at some point I stopped breathing. I only had eyes for my target: the dragon's belly, which healed with each attack.

However powerful its healing abilities are, it must feel pain. And I'll bet that at some point it's going to run out of blood too.

My axe never stopped moving. I believed all the while that at some point the dragon would run out of energy and that when it did, its healing would slow. But no matter how much I hit the dragon, it just kept on healing, and I began to feel my body hitting its limit. Pain welled in my chest as my body screamed at me to breathe. But I knew that if I did, I'd slow down, and my attacks would weaken.

What am I gonna do?

The thought flitted through my mind as I gritted through the pain and swung. The dragon must have felt my movements slowing, because it found the strength within itself to swing even harder than it had until now...and though I managed to knock the right arm away by meeting it with my axe, I couldn't stop the left, so I dove for the ground to avoid it.

I managed to get out of the way of the claws, but I was at my limit, and I finally took a heavy breath. My lungs filled with fresh oxygen...but I was on my knees in front of a flame dragon, and I had just given it a birthday present of an opening to capitalize on.

It didn't matter what I chose to do next. I could swing my axe, I could stand up, or I could dodge again, but all of those things required time I didn't have, and so I resigned myself to eating the dragon's next attack...

"How far the mighty dragon has fallen! Wingless even!" shouted one.

"I'm over here, you stinking lizard!" shouted another.

But then I heard voices ring out from the left and the right.

It was Alna on the left and Zorg on the right. Two arrows flew through the air along with their cries, bouncing off the dragon's scales. It scanned left, then right, and finally its jaw curled as if it were smiling, ecstatic at the realization that now it finally knew the locations of the prey it truly sought.

I knew immediately that the two of them had revealed themselves to buy me some time. I rushed to my feet and took a large leap backwards to settle myself and prepare for my next move. As my breathing returned to normal, I readied my axe in hand and gazed upon the dragon once more.

The dragon was still grinning as it looked from left to right, perhaps deciding which one it wanted first, and feeling spoiled for choice to boot. It was so lost in its decision that it failed to notice the gap it had left. From behind me, two arrows zipped through the air, both of them piercing the dragon's eyes at almost exactly the same time.

The dragon let out yet another deafening roar and opened its mouth wide...and then even *more* arrows came soaring through the sky from behind me. At some point the remaining onikin had reassembled behind me and were launching arrows at the dragon's mouth. The arrows sunk into their fleshy target, which had no scales or hide to defend it.

As the dragon reeled in pain, two arrows flew through the air from behind it, piercing its wings and sinking into the ground in front of my feet. Although I had no evidence to reinforce my conviction, I felt certain that those two arrows had been launched by Senai and Ayhan.

I chuckled. It was like they were planning to take the best part from me. I calmed my nerves and prepared to launch myself at the dragon all over again. But as I did, I heard a booming voice echoing through the air.

"You didn't think we'd be back for revenge?!"

"Eat this, lizard!"

It was Narvant and Sanat. I glanced over to where I'd heard their voices and saw a baar wagon racing on the snow. The two cavekin were in it, and the dogkin and Klaus were pulling it with everything they had. I couldn't believe

that they'd had a third one at the ready, but as I stared at them in awe, Narvant once again cut the ropes connecting the wagon to the dogkin, and the wagon plowed straight into the dragon's side.

Either this particular wagon was a slapdash job, or the impact was tremendous, because the wagon burst into pieces. Narvant and Sanat flew out from the wreckage and straight at the dragon. Suddenly they were on it and attacking with Klaus by their side. The force of the baar wagon and the relentless three-man assault sent the dragon toppling over.

And when I saw that, I was off like a flash.

With the dragon on its side, I knew that I could lop off its head. And no dragon could survive that no matter how good its healing was.

I propped my axe on my shoulder, and then with all the power I had, I swung it towards the dragon's neck...just as it opened its mouth and spewed fire at me and all over the place. Lacking a clear target, its fire lacked power, so I ignored it and took my shot anyway. I was ready for some burns, because I was *not* going to let an opportunity like this one go to waste.

And so, covered in flame, my axe came flying down towards the dragon's neck.

Unfortunately, it wasn't a clean cut, and my axe stopped part of the way through its neck.

So I hit it again, and again, and over and over on that same spot while flames engulfed me and the dragon screamed in its death throes, and finally I felt my axe come out the other side.

The monster's head rolled along the ground with a look of astonishment stuck on its face, its body twitching for a long while until it finally stopped for good.

We did it...

I let out a breath, but then Narvant and Sanat, who were standing on top of the fallen dragon, came running over and barreled straight into me. They lifted me up in their arms, took me away from the fire around the dragon, and plunged me into the snow. Once I was there, they piled me with snow and patted my legs. Only then did I realize that they were extinguishing the flames

that were covering me. I quickly sat up to examine my upper body but found no burns. Nothing hurt either.

I wiped the snow and grime off what was left of my pants and took a look at them too but found nothing especially out of the ordinary.

“The devil’s luck,” muttered Narvant. “It’s lucky the snow melted and made the ground all muddy. Looks like it’s thanks to rolling around in that that you got yourself some impromptu heat resistance. That saved you from any major burns.”

I breathed a sigh of relief, then suddenly grew curious.

Wait, “major” burns?

Narvant grinned at me and rubbed his beard.

“I’m sure you look fine at the moment, but based on the state of your skin, you’ve got some nasty burns all right. There’ll be some swelling, and it’ll hurt like hell, but I can tell you that’s a small price to pay for the head of a dragon.”

I listened to Narvant, and soon my head drooped as I started to feel the pain itching at my skin. I sighed and told myself I’d just have to accept it, and as I did I looked over at everybody running to meet me.

“I’m fine!” I shouted, waving both of my hands.



After the Battle

With the battle done and dusted, it was time to carry the flame dragon back to Iluk. I'd been expecting a whole heap of strenuous work not unlike what we'd gone through with the earth dragon, but actually it wasn't anywhere near as bad. With the help of a few horses and a few dogkin, the flame dragon turned out to be pretty easy work.

During the actual fight itself, I'd gotten the impression that the dragon was an extremely heavy, powerful beast, but carrying it completely bucked my assumptions. According to Narvant, however, it should have been obvious; any monster that could soar through the skies couldn't possibly be so excessively heavy.

Compared to the earth dragon, which had plodded and trudged along the ground, the flame dragon's body was designed in a fundamentally different way. If anything, it was more like a wind dragon in terms of how it was put together. Apparently, the sense of overwhelming weight and power that I'd gotten was on account of all the miasma.

What all of that meant was that transporting the flame dragon was a far easier task than I'd been expecting, and we got it back to the village fairly quickly. Once we had the body in the village square, Narvant, Sanat, and Ohmun took charge and got to work taking it apart with the help of some dogkin and onikin. I took a seat on a wooden counter in a corner of the square to watch over things while Alna took care of my injuries.

"It's just like Narvant said," Alna muttered as she inspected my legs. "No major burns. You'll hurt some, but you won't have any scars to worry about, and it doesn't look like we'll have to worry much about swelling or infections. So I'm just going to rub some ointment in to help with the pain."

She had some baar wool at the ready that had been freshly washed, and she used it to rub an ointment into my legs.

"This is horse oil," she explained. "When you use it on your face, it helps to

make it look more radiant. When you use it in hair, it gives it sheen. You can also use it for dry skin, and for minor burns and wounds it helps to soothe pain. At the same time, it also aids in the healing of wounds, which can help make scars less visible. In that way sometimes it's more helpful than the usual herbs."

Alna explained the steps while she went through patching me up. "All you have to do is put it on baar wool like this, then cover the burns or injuries like so, then secure it in place with clean cloth and string, and in just a few breaths you should start to feel the pain ebbing away."

Once she tied the wool to my burns, it went exactly as she'd said; the pain seemed to just fade away to a dull throb that was barely even worth thinking about.

"Wow, it's already so much more bearable," I remarked. "I mean, I believed you—I just didn't think it would work so quickly. Thanks, Alna!"

Alna smiled kindly, then took the horse oil jar in her hands and headed off to the kitchen range, saying that she had to help everyone prepare for the banquet. I watched her go, then rubbed my legs and decided I was in good enough shape that I could probably help out with the material gathering. Zorg, who was busy with the horses or something, saw that Alna was done patching me up and came over to me.

"Now that Alna's got you back on your feet, I'd like to talk to you...about the split."

"I discussed that very thing with everyone before we got started on the work here," I said, nodding. "How's fifty-fifty sound? Half for Iluk, half for the onikin?"

When I'd heard that a real, honest-to-goodness, genuine dragon was coming, I'd wanted to assemble as big and strong a force as I could. For that reason, I'd asked the onikin for their help, and they'd put a fighting force together in no time. They'd said not a single word about payment at the time and had chosen instead to put all of their focus into the task at hand: where to fight, how to fight, and how we could work together against our foe. And thanks to them, we'd taken down the flame dragon. I figured fifty-fifty would ensure that there'd be no arguments between us.

But when I made my offer, the cringing look on Zorg's face told me that he felt differently.

"You know, I had a feeling that you might say something like that, but even then I still can't believe you actually did," said Zorg, sighing. "In any case, my onikin guard and I talked it over, and considering that *you* were the ones who charged into the fray, and that *you* walked through the fire to deliver the killing blow, we can't just let you give us half of the spoils. If we did, we'd have a debt to you we might never be able to pay back. That wouldn't be good for either of us. We'd be happy with thirty percent."

"You sure? I mean, I know you had your concealment magic, but you still could have been burned pretty bad, and I can assure you I won't consider you in our debt or anything like that."

"Maybe you won't, but *we* will. And the truth of the matter is that if you weren't here we never would have stood a chance against a flame dragon. That thing would have left the grassy plains a smoking wasteland. The baars are here watching us take apart the dragon now, but under different circumstances they could have been burned to a crisp."

Zorg looked over at the baars before continuing, "So with all that in mind, a thirty-seventy split works best for us. None of my men have any complaints; they're all happier that we took that dragon down without anybody injured or dead. That said, we still haven't talked about payment for taking apart the dragon for materials, okay? A monster *that* big? That's going to take two or three days, so I'm expecting that you'll feed us and pay us something good for the job, you hear?"

He flashed me something of an awkward smile, then looked over at his men, hard at work.

"Yep, I'll take care of you," I answered and watched as Zorg ran off to join the others.

On the following day, with work going smoothly, we opened up the flame dragon's chest and took from it a big magical stone. Narvant and his cavekin family started whooping with joy the moment they laid eyes on it, and their

cheers could be heard all over the village.

As it turned out, the onikin used magical stones as fuel for their smithing work too. However, they were more interested in the claws and teeth, so the magical stone didn't bring out much of a reaction in them. Still, the cries of joy from the cavekin got the dogkin howling at the sky too.

"Well, I suppose we're lucky that the onikin aren't interested in the magical stone," I said, thinking aloud. "There's only one, and splitting it almost certainly would have required some negotiation."

I was helping Alna clean up after the somewhat quiet banquet the night before, and she looked up from her work to reply.

"You think? If you needed to split it, wouldn't you just...split it? Is it really such a complicated discussion?"

"Oh, now that you mention it, yeah, I guess we could just split it. Everyone talks about how valuable magical stones are, so it never occurred to me that you could just break it into pieces."

"I mean, for us onikin, one magical stone is no different from the next, whether it comes from a dragon or not. Speaking of valuable, you're not going to send this magical stone to your king? This stone isn't like the smaller ones we got from the wind dragons. It's even bigger than the earth dragon's too. Won't sending him the stone get you all sorts of benefits?"

I hadn't thought about that before, and it gave me a lot to consider. My brow furrowed as I looked back on things. I hadn't actually given the earth dragon crystal much thought; I'd just passed it to Eldan and it had made its way to the king. I hadn't considered any of the rewards and benefits that might eventually come from it.

That said, I had certainly reaped some nice benefits from the gift, whether I'd thought about it or otherwise, so I had to consider that same thing now, along with our relationship with the onikin... In the end, though, I figured it was less about the benefits and more about how I needed to send thanks to the king. But as I thought harder, my brow furrowed deeper.

Given the sheer joy in the cavekin when they'd seen the magical stone, it

wasn't like I could just tell them that I wanted to give it to the king, but at the same time I couldn't really think of anything else of value to send him. Thinking about all of that left me grumbling and moaning.

"If you're that worried about things, you should talk it over with everyone," said Alna.

So we walked over to Narvant and the cavekin to do exactly that. I told them what was worrying me, and they all listened patiently. When I was done, Narvant flashed me a smile as if to say, "I got this."

"Young one!" he boomed. "I get it! You want to let the king know that you're a loyal subject! And while we want nothing more than to keep this here crystal all for ourselves, even just half is more than enough for our furnace! So I reckon you can give half to the king!"

With that said, Narvant whipped out the axe he'd been using to take apart the flame dragon, lifted it up high, and brought it straight down upon the magical crystal—which was so big you had to hold it with both hands—and split it neatly in two.

I couldn't help but chuckle. I hadn't seen it coming, and I was impressed at how quickly Narvant had come to his decision. But while I may have been pleased with the outcome, a shocked and very sad cry came from nearby.

I knew I'd heard that voice before, but it sure wasn't one I'd expected, so I whipped around to check. And wouldn't you know it, there was Kamalotz, all decked out in heavy armor, together with a number of beastkin all equipped similarly. He had this dumbfounded look on his face—it was less like he couldn't believe his eyes and more like he didn't *want* to believe them. His mouth was hanging open so wide that I actually thought he might have dislocated his jaw.

"A magical stone... Th-They're practically national treasures...!" he moaned, collapsing to his knees.

Kamalotz had come by order of Eldan, who had sent an advance troop to support our efforts. Of course, the battle was already over, which meant that Kamalotz and his men had come for nothing. Still, Kamalotz was simply glad that everyone was safe, and his smile was the smile of a man who was glad to

realize that he didn't have to enter a life-or-death battle against a dragon. But being that he and his troop had come all this way, Kamalotz insisted on helping us with the rest of the material sorting.

There was a strong conviction in his gaze though, like a definite glimmer in his eyes. I got the sense that he was dead set on making sure we didn't break the dragon's stone into any more parts.

"I, uh... Well, thanks, Kamalotz."

That was about the only thing I *could* say, given the man's intense gaze.

In any case, everyone started up again on the material gathering. The cavekin were still in charge, and the heavy lifting was handled by the beastkin, who put in a fantastic effort. Everything was going really smoothly, and Hubert—who had turned deathly pale from the very moment he'd heard that a dragon was coming—joined us in the square, now looking a little more lively.

When Hubert saw the work on the flame dragon his jaw dropped, and when he saw the magical stone split in half, it dropped even farther. Kamalotz walked up to him with a look of genuine sympathy, like he knew that exact pain, and the two got to talking. They introduced themselves and chatted for a little while, and then Hubert came over, looking like he'd recovered a little from his earlier shock.

"Lord Dias," he said. "I have heard that you are giving half of the magical stone to the king, and I must say I think that's a wonderful idea. Now, we will need to come up with an equally wonderful excuse to explain exactly why the stone was *split in half*, but your actions are that of a most loyal retainer, and I agree with them wholeheartedly. I am curious about one matter, however... Do you intend to once again leave the stone with the Duke of Mahati in order to have it delivered to the king?"

"Hmm? Oh, yeah, I guess so. I mean, it's not like I can go myself, and we don't have anybody else to go either. If Eldan can handle that for us, that's what I'd like to do."

Hubert nodded, then looked at me with a serious gaze.

"In which case, do you not think we should offer some of the flame dragon

materials to the Duke of Mahati? Not as payment for transportation, but...more as a gesture of gratitude. On that same topic, why don't we use this as an opportunity to trade some of these materials for supplies, livestock, and food? Given the sheer amount of materials, we certainly will not be able to make use of everything. I think it would be better to trade the excess for practical goods rather than hold on to them unnecessarily. Having dragon materials in circulation around the domain is sure to be good for the Duke of Mahati, which means it is a win-win. I believe it to be a good way to further strengthen the ties between our domains."

"Good point," I said. "Let's ask everyone about it. Narvant in particular; I know he wants to put the materials to work making all sorts of stuff. But if everyone agrees, let's go with your plan."

"Very good. I'll gather everyone's opinion on the matter. At the same time, I'll find out exactly what we need. Let me handle the particulars of it all. Once I've detailed everything in a letter, I'll have it sent to Ellie in Mahati. We can leave the negotiating in her safe hands, I believe. Once I've done all that, I think I'll take Kamalotz to the stable. There's a lot I'd like to ask him with regards to the pregnant white ghee."

"All right then. I'm counting on you, Hubert."

He'd really put a lot of thought into things, and now he looked totally raring to go. Hubert looked genuinely happy to have my trust, and he nodded before speeding off to go talk to everyone.

"Hmm..." I murmured. "Narvant is handling the materials, Hubert is handling trade here, and Ellie is handling trade in Mahati... I just keep running out of work to do."

I'd spoken the thoughts mostly to myself, but Alna overheard me and grinned.

"If you ask me, that's great," she said. "When you've got less work like that to do, you can put more of your energy into the things only you can do. After all, you're leaving the work in the hands of others because you trust them, right?"

"Yeah... Yeah, I guess you're right. Narvant, Ellie, Hubert, they've all displayed skills that I trust wholeheartedly, and I'm always certain they'll do a better job than I ever could on my own. That goes for you with your cooking, the

grandmas with their weaving, and even the trust I feel for the dogkin and the baars too.”

I knew I didn’t need to say it out loud and that Alna already knew, but even then I wanted to make my feelings crystal clear about the work she and the others did on a daily basis. Alna’s smile grew even bigger when I told her as much, and I saw her put some more energy into her work.

“Yeah, I know,” she said.

She was racing around cleaning and putting everything away, and when I saw her it made me think that if I couldn’t at least clean up after myself, I really would run out of things to do. So I rolled my sleeves up and put my heart into the work at hand.

In the Yurt—Senai and Ayhan

At that same time, Senai and Ayhan were in the family yurt, sitting back-to-back while they worked on their knitting.

The points of their knitting needles took baar wool which had been spun into yarn, and with that they worked on finishing a circular piece. What the twins really wanted to do was what Alna did; they wanted to use tanned hide and big needles to work on embroidery. Unfortunately, such work required strength the twins did not have, and mistakes could often result in injury. That was why Alna had told them the following:

“If you want to work on leather embroidery, you start with knitting. Once you’ve both got knitting under your belts, I’ll teach you how to do embroidery.”

And so, with some reluctance, the twins had taken up their knitting needles and gotten to work. However, once they had begun, Senai and Ayhan discovered that there was far more to knitting than they’d thought, and they were surprised and delighted by all the different skills and knitting styles they had not known existed.

From Alna, they learned the onikin knitting style. From the grandmas, they learned the Sanserife knitting style. From Narvant, they learned the cavekin knitting style. Through these different styles it was possible to create as many

beautiful patterns as there were stars in the night sky.

Before they knew it, the twins were obsessed. They took their needles and their yarn, and without so much as a word—and with no wasted movements, to boot—they lost themselves in their work.

The girls were still young, and so it was difficult for them to settle their focus on housework and study, but when it came to knitting this was not an issue. They could knit for hours on end, and no matter how difficult the knitting technique, they picked it up in a flash. The two girls had spent most of their winter indoors like this, getting better at a speed that left everyone gobsmacked.

On this particular day, the twins were working on Alna's specialty, and the image that Ben now declared the Baarbadal crest: the profile of a baar. They used yarn dyed in red, yarn dyed in yellow, yarn dyed in a skin-like hue, and white yarn that had not been dyed at all. With these colors, they knitted an image that could only be called adorable, perhaps especially so because the girls spent so much time together with the baars.

Watching the girls were Francoise's six young children, who wanted nothing more than to run around and bleat happily at the sight of the finished image. The twins, for their part, made sure that there were no errors in their knitting, then put their needles down and let out satisfied sighs of success. Then they picked themselves up and spread their finished piece out so they could both look upon it.

The style and the colors were perfect, and the image was exactly that of a baar. The two girls beamed at one another, giggling as they did so. Then they showed the baby baars, who bleated with joy and raced around the yurt, which only made the twins smile even more. The girls couldn't wait to show the villagers, Dias, and Alna their work, and so with the baby baars following close behind they ran outside.

The Domain Lord's Residence in Merangal, Mahati—Ellie

The day after Kamalotz and his men had arrived in Iluk, a dovekin messenger arrived with word for Eldan, the details of which were relayed to Ellie, who had

been given her own room during her stay. Ellie thus set up another meeting with the lord of Mahati. The two now sat in Eldan's garden once more, facing each other. The bulk of their business discussion now concerned the flame dragon materials.

"Hubert has set out a broad plan, and I am in agreement," said Ellie. "Given that I'm here, I will handle the food, the livestock, and related matters. Does this work for you?"

There was an intensity to Ellie's gaze now. There had been no need to get into heated negotiations when it came to the baar wool because the main goal was to promote and spread their product. This was not the case when it came to the flame dragon. The materials were incredibly rare. They might never be seen again, and they were difficult, if not impossible, to simply go out and find. This made their value unknown, but the sky was clearly the limit.

This setting was Ellie's battlefield, and the moments before the battle began lit her heart with excitement. This was where she would show her mettle. Eldan saw the glint in Ellie's eyes and noticed her posture, and in response, his eyes flashed with a similar excitement.

"We are overjoyed at the prospect of attaining such rare materials, and we hope that discussions with regards to trade will prove fruitful for us both," said Eldan. "That said, while this is indeed a temperate area, winter is nonetheless winter, and as such it *is* possible that the prices for our food and livestock may have risen slightly as a result."

Had it been Dias sitting opposite him, Eldan would never have even imagined negotiating. Dias arrived at such meetings entirely defenseless and approached all issues with complete trust and total friendship. As such, Eldan could only ever respond in kind.

But it was not Dias sitting opposite him on this day. And if the person sitting before him had the eyes of a merchant and was resolved to fight like a merchant, then Eldan would fight as well.

"I had a little free time yesterday, so I took it upon myself to visit a sugar-farming acquaintance of mine," said Ellie. "I was informed that the pulpy residue that comes from sugar cane can be used not just for paper but also as

nutritious food for livestock. It is my understanding then that, given the season, one should be able to purchase a considerable number of livestock at a very reasonable price... Winter or otherwise, it seems to me that the market price is most fair.”

“No, *no*,” said Eldan, “for you are forgetting that winter is *still* winter and that I am being entrusted with the important duty of seeing a magical stone safely to the king himself...”

“No, no, *no*,” replied Ellie, “for I *know* that we are ensuring you are rewarded for that duty. And more to the point, for us—”

“No, no, *no*,” countered Eldan.

“No, no, *no*,” said Ellie, firing back.

As time stretched on, negotiations heated up, and a trade deal was not easily reached. In fact, it took a total of three days for Eldan and Ellie to reach an agreement that both sides were satisfied with.

A Few Weeks Later, in a Tavern in the Royal Capital

Almost a year had passed since the end of the war, and the glow of victory was fading into the comfort of everyday life. Peace brought with it better business, and at a tavern in the royal capital, people chatted about all manner of things. While most of what was discussed was forgettable, ordinary fare, and not even worth listening to, one table in particular had captured almost everyone’s attention, and not just because the two men at it were practically bellowing.

“Didja hear? That Dias slew another dragon!”

“What?! *Another* one? Won’t be long before we’re all just calling him the dragon slayer!”

“And get this! He’s givin’ its magical stone to the king again... I tell ya, the loyalty of heroes is just on another level, ain’t it? Apparently the magical stone broke in half during the battle, and the other half was crushed into dust...which isn’t all that surprisin’ when ya think about it. To fight a dragon y’probably gotta use siege weapons, right?”

“Wow... And he’s a duke now, yeah? He’s going above and beyond what anybody ever expected. He sure is something.”

“But the more he achieves, the more trouble he might find himself in, hm? There’s that whole issue with the king’s successor, y’know? The nobles that’ve heard about the dragon say he might sway how that goes. They say the flow of things’ll shift dependin’ on which faction Dias sides with.”

“That’s what they’re saying? And here I was thinking that Richard had it in the bag already.”

“Well, Isabelle and Helena are women, right? And women have ways of drawin’ men to their sides, yeah? And if they can play the Dias card, they might get the Duke of Mahati on their side too. It looked like they’d all but given up, but Dias might be enough for the two of them to try somethin’...”

“Ha ha! Romance and heroes, you say? Well, if that’s the battle at play, it’ll make for some great stories, and there ain’t nothing us citizens like better!”

The two men laughed heartily, and then they raised their mugs in cheers and drank down the contents.

“Tch!” spat one. “Empty already? Hey, barkeep! Another round over here, and no watering it down! We wanna get sloshed over here!”

The barkeep, who was washing some mugs at the time, answered with a nod.

“Coming right up!”

He poured the water out of the cup in his hands and walked over to the corner, where all the barrels of alcohol were. When he got there, he began to talk, as though the barrels themselves were capable of conversation.

“Looks like word has trickled down even as far as the commoners,” he said. “This matches what the guild has already dug up in its investigation, so I’d wager the rumors are indeed true. According to Aisa and Ely, Dias already has a young wife and the two get on like a house on fire, and an honest oaf like him isn’t likely to ditch her to marry a princess. But if you ask me, it’s because he’s the type to flatly *refuse* a princess that he could well get himself in trouble. Depending on the circumstances, the guild might have to act, so keep a close eye on what the nobles are up to.”

There were some muffled noises from behind the barrels, and the barkeep nodded before filling two mugs and carrying them over to the two men at their table.

“Here you go!”

The barkeep, a muscled man with golden hair and a beard to match, slammed the mugs down and grinned at the men, as if thanking them for the very rumors they’d just shared.

Extra Story: Days of Winter White

A Snowy Morning—Dias

“Dias! Wake up! Wake up!”

“Wake up! It’s all white outside!”

The voices of the twins rang in my ears as I pulled myself out of slumber and opened my eyes. It was early, and still a bit dark outside, but there was a sharp chill in the air. I yawned and took a deep breath of the icy air. The air wasn’t just cold; it was clear too—clear and quiet. It felt like about a year since I’d experienced anything like it, and I had an inkling then that snow was piled up outside.

“Morning, girls,” I said, taking a moment to yawn again. “I’m guessing that the plains turned white overnight?”

I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and was met with the twins, both nodding happily and already decked out in their winter gear. They poked and prodded me until I got out of bed to put on my own winter wear.

While I was getting dressed, the twins woke up Aymer, Francoise, and Francis, but they were careful to let the baby baars sleep. Once I was dressed, I saw that Aymer was too, so she climbed up on my arm and we left the yurt. I followed the twins outside with Francis and Francoise, and we were met by a whole wide world of winter white. Alna, who was already up and doing her morning chores, noticed us and spoke up.

“Morning, Dias!” she called out. “Isn’t this a snowy winter landscape if there ever was one?”

“Morning, Alna,” I replied. “Yep, I can’t help but be a little awestruck by the sight of it.”

I took in the sheer amount of snow all around me, and I felt a little shiver down my spine.

It was beautiful, and it was moving, but also it was *cold*. It was a clear message from the world itself that winter was here. Francis and Francoise must have been thinking the same thing, because they shivered at my feet. I wondered if that wool of theirs was just for decoration, and it made me chuckle.

Francis looked up at me then and bleated like he had read my mind.

“Woolly coat or no, when it’s cold it’s cold. You’ve got a coat of your own and you’re cold too!”

I was pretty sure that’s what he was trying to say, and I just nodded. He was right, after all, and that second shiver down my spine simply proved it.

“So cold! So much snow! It’s all soft and fluffy!”

“Wow! This is going to be so much fun! We can do anything!”

While the baars and I were shivering where we stood, the twins looked at the snowy landscape with such excitement in their eyes I could practically see them sparkling. Their heads were filled with thoughts of all the fun they could have. They were cold, sure, but it was eclipsed by how excited they were, and in a flash they were running around having a great time.

“Before you do anything,” I said, “you’ll wash your faces and do your morning chores. Eat breakfast and help around the yurt, and *then* you can do whatever you want. You can make a snowman, have a snowball fight, or even make yourself a snow cave...or a snow yurt.”

With all this beautiful snow around, there was no point telling kids not to play, because they’d play anyway. I figured it was best to give them the okay, and the twins responded with even bigger smiles than before. They were kicking up powder trying to dash to the well through the snow.

I walked on after them, because I had the same chores to do anyway. And little by little, the rest of the village woke up. We all said good morning to one another and went about our daily work.

Ordinarily, the twins would have been busy all the way up until around noon doing their chores, but they worked at a blistering pace and finished everything well before then. That meant that all of us—me, Alna, the twins, Aymer,

Francis, and Francoise—could play in the snow. The other villagers all threw themselves into their work, and the six baby baars were all huddled up together to stay warm in the cold.

“Let’s make a snowman first!”

“Let’s make lots of them!”

Now that they could finally play in the snow, the girls were ecstatic as they ran around the square. They cried out with joy and laughed, and skipped around and dove into the snow. They grabbed clumps of it and threw it around, and the soft snow went floating around everywhere.

“I can’t hold any of it!” cried Senai, laughing.

“It’s too soft to build with!” cried Ayhan.

When the girls tried to gather snow together to build a snowman, they quickly found that they couldn’t. It was at this point that Aymer, who was standing by their sides, brought out a leather waterskin, which she used to splash a little water over the snow. Once she’d done this, she took the wet snow and rolled it into a little ball, then added some more water and rolled it some more, and little by little the ball got bigger.

“For powdery snow like this, a little water will do the trick,” explained Aymer. “It’s easy to clump snow together when it’s a little wet, because it’ll absorb more and more snow as you roll it. That’s why it gets bigger, just like this. Then all you have to do is just roll the snow to where you want to use it!”

Aymer was shivering while she spoke, which wasn’t surprising; she hailed from the desert, after all. Cold weather was not her thing.

“Thanks!”

“Thanks, Aymer!”

The twins were beaming, and they picked the trembling Aymer up and put her in Senai’s collar where it was warmer. Aymer was surprised at first, but then she smiled and settled herself in, and she started giving the twins some direction and guidance as they put together their snowman.

Because the snow was so white, first they made a fluffy baar snowman, then

for some reason a Dias snowman, and then a whole snow cave. The snow cave was where they had their lunch, and when they finished they chased each other all around the village throwing snowballs at each other. Their excited breath came out in white puffs as they hurled the snowballs through the air; sometimes they hit each other and sometimes they hit their snowmen, and by the end of it their snow cave walls were decorated with snowballs too.

The twins had so much fun that they plumb forgot about the cold entirely. Their cheeks went red and they were both sweating, but this only made them laugh about how funny it was to be hot in the snow. I remembered then that people used to say that good kids beat the chilly weather and kept the colds away, and the twins looked to be the textbook definition of that idea. Just looking at them made me think there was no way the cold was going to get them down.

I thought about that as I watched the girls excitedly work on another snowman, and when things weren't going the way they wanted they ran up to me for help. Soon they got me, Alna, and even the baars chipping in, but we didn't have the faintest idea what we were helping with. I decided to ask them, and the two girls shouted back at me:

"It's a spring spell!"

"So we can pray for an early spring!"

The twins went on to explain that around this time each year, their parents would chant a spell using a tree with very unique leaves. They would look for young saplings that were likely to wilt and die in the cold, and they would dig them up, careful not to damage their roots. They'd bring these saplings home, put them in pots, and decorate their branches for the spell.

When it came time to chant, they'd wrap the trees in dead leaves and grass to help them beat the cold and make it through the winter. Doing this helped make the spring come early, and if those trees made it through the winter, then the whole family would be free from illness that whole year until the next winter. They'd live that year healthy and happy.

When they couldn't find the right trees for the spell, they made one with wood or stone, or even snow. That's what they were doing today: making a

snow tree. Well, we all liked the idea of it, so we helped the twins out, and we did it just like the twins told us to.

Our tree ended up like a tall cone, pointed at the top, with jagged points for the leaves. We added water to freeze it and make sure it held its shape, and at the bottom we gave it a kind of ice pot to sit in. We made it in the village square, right in front of the twins' garden. Then, as a finishing touch, the twins decorated it with their wood-carved toys and the jewels that Alna had given them.

Once the tree was completed, everyone offered it their prayers, and we covered it with the dried, faded grass that we were originally going to throw away.

"So that's it?" I asked.

The twins looked up at me, and on their faces were the biggest smiles I'd seen throughout the whole day.

"Yep!" they said together.

The girls giggled, then turned their eyes to their snow tree, covered in grass, and they muttered to one another.

"Now spring is going to come early."

"Is it here yet? Is it here yet?"

"Winter is fun, but spring is really great."

"Yeah, spring is so great, because all the grass and trees grow!"

Francis and Francoise, who were nearby and listening to the twins, took a deep breath, and then together they bleated a great big cry of sorts. The rest of the baars in the village must have heard the call, because they all came out of their yurts—even the six baby baars—and they walked over to the twins' tree, their woolly coats bouncing against the snow. The baars all bleated among themselves, then bowed their heads, raised their jaws, and prayed in their own unique, baar-like ways.

"Aha," I said. "The baars treasure the grass that keeps them fed, so if there's a lot of it coming then they have to pay their respects too. Which makes me

think... Yeah, I guess I'll offer a prayer of my own. I hope all of us here will always have enough to eat our fill."

So I offered that little prayer of mine, and I was silently joined by Alna, the twins, Aymer, and all the villagers that happened to be passing by who heard what I'd said. Nothing would make us happier than an early spring, so we took the time to offer up our prayers as we thought of the new season, still so far away.

Afterword

As always, I'd like to start with thanks. Thank you to everyone who has followed the story, everyone supporting me on Shosetsuka ni Naro, everyone who sent letters, everyone involved in the book's editing, Kinta for the illustrations, the book's designers, Yumbo for the manga adaptation, their assistants, and the manga editing staff. From the bottom of my heart, thank you. You are the reason volume five was published!

Okay, on to volume five. Before I wrote volume five, I asked Kinta to design winter clothes for everyone, and once again their color illustration inspired the volume's extra story. In fact, their embroidered baar profile was so charming I added a scene about it. Kinta's support really helped fill the volume out. I'm nothing but grateful for all their help and support.

This volume was focused on the end of fall and the start of winter. The plains turned white, and Iluk Village did their best to make the most of each day. With white snow outside, white breath in the air, and yurts covered in white, usually people would spend all their time inside their yurts, but it's not so simple a thing for Dias and his friends...

And so winter will continue right through into volume six.

Oh! This month the manga and light novel hit the stores in the same month! It wasn't the same day, but it was pretty close. The manga version is so popular I was really surprised, and even though I wrote the original I still find myself lost in just how funny the manga version is. With each volume, I am constantly impressed by just how amazing Yumbo is.

Speaking of Yumbo, on the day that the newest manga chapter was published, Yumbo appeared as a dogkin in a short story announcing the newest chapter, which was published on Shosetsuka ni Naro. In it they live in Iluk Village and draw comics of Dias's life by talking to the people of Iluk.

The gag has even found its way into the manga volumes, with the comical but slightly odd Yumbo Masti appearing in the pages. You might be thinking something along the lines of “...the heck is that?” when you see it, and now you know, and now you can put it together.

I never expected to see it in the manga, and I was so surprised and happy that my heart was racing the first time I saw it! That’s the manga for you, and it’s up to volume four now and only getting more exciting, so please take a look!

We’ll end this afterword with some PR in the form of what you can expect next volume. The long winter continues, and as spring slowly nears, we’ll see Dias and the residents of Iluk busy preparing for it.

Iluk Village is only going to get more lively as they build *that* contraption and do *that* thing and then even see the appearance of *that* character. During the winter the cold and the snow get in the way, so there’s no *this* and *that* from elsewhere, but spring is another story entirely.

Which begs the question: can Dias handle all that in the winter? Let me tell you, it’s going to be a bit of a busy period for the guy.

I hope you’ll look forward to the hectic days ahead for Dias, because I’m going to be working even harder than ever. So with that said, I pray that I get to talk to you all again in volume six!

Fuurou, November, 2020

Bonus Short Story

Magic Bread

At the Kitchen Range—Senai and Ayhan

“Perhaps I’ll make some magic bread today...”

Baar cloth was draped from the roof of the kitchen range to stave off the cold and the snow, and it was also used around the periphery of the location for the same purpose. Inside, Senai and Ayhan were crouched down by the warmth of an oven, dressed in their winter outfits. It was then that Grandma Maya appeared, a bag of flour in her hands as she murmured to herself about magic bread.

The twins’ curiosity was, naturally, piqued. They stood up and ran over to Grandma Maya.

“Magic bread?” asked Senai.

“What kind of bread is that?” asked Ayhan.

“Oh, you’re going to help me, then?” asked Grandma Maya.

Wrinkles spread across the old woman’s face as she smiled at the girls, who nodded.

“I see, I see,” said Grandma Maya, her smile brighter now.

She took the bag of flour to the kitchen counter, on which she placed a big plank of wood. There were other ingredients already on the counter, including dried berries, grapes, and apricots, a variety of herbs, butter and sugar in ceramic pots, and of course walnuts. The twins saw the ingredients, all of which were delicious even on their own, and they gulped back the drool they felt building in their mouths.

“Now, all of these ingredients taste wonderful alone,” said Grandma Maya, “but mix them together to make magic bread, and let that bread sit on a shelf

for a time, and then you're in for a *real* treat. So come on now, let's knead the dough."

With a practiced hand, Grandma Maya began kneading some dough, just like she did every morning. She mixed in flour, water, yeast, butter, and sugar while she worked. Once the dough was kneaded, Grandma Maya added thinly cut herbs and even more butter, and then she kneaded it all again.

"Next up, dried fruits and walnuts," said Grandma Maya. "Cut them up and crush them into bits and mix it all in. Make sure it's all mixed in so well that you get some fruits and some nuts with every single bite."

The only word for it was extravagant. Usually, the twins were forbidden from using nuts and fruits in this way, and were scolded when they used too much, but here they knew that with all these ingredients, there was absolutely no way that the bread would be anything other than delicious. And so their smiles grew wider as they mixed the ingredients into the bread just like Grandma Maya had told them.

With the dough all done, they put the bread gently into the bread oven, which had been warmed up since the morning. After tinkering with the temperature a little, they let magic happen, waiting patiently and quietly. The bread expanded as it baked, turning a beautiful golden brown and filling the air with a most mouthwatering scent when it was done.

Finally it's time to eat!

Or so the twins thought.

"Not yet," said Grandma Maya. "Now is when the true magic occurs for our magic bread."

The girls pouted to show their severe dissatisfaction, but they were stunned into silence when they saw Grandma Maya cover the bread in an exorbitant amount of butter and sugar. The girls' gulps were heard clearly throughout the kitchen range. They knew just how tasty, and just how sweet, the bread would taste with all that butter and sugar. At the same time, they could not believe how truly lavish a thing this magic bread was, and so they merely watched in silence as Grandma Maya went about her work.

The bread was now completely white, as if it were covered in snow, and the aroma of sugar and butter wafted around them.

“Magic bread will not go moldy, and so to finish the job we leave it on a shelf for a few days. But seeing as the two of you were so very helpful, and because you’re always such good girls, I’ll let you have a little taste once the butter and the sugar have settled.”

The girls were already lost in the ecstasy of the bread’s scent, but when Grandma Maya’s words reached their ears, they grinned with such joy that once again they lost the ability to speak, and their little hands gripped Grandma Maya’s skirt in excitement.

The old woman chuckled, gave the twins a pat on the head, and when the time was right, she chopped two small slices from the edge of it and passed them over. Filled with fruits and nuts, and enveloped in sugar and butter, the bread looked and smelled wonderful and, as expected, tasted like bliss itself.

And so it was that the girls savored the taste in their mouths. Both agreed that magic bread was indeed a most suitable name for what they were eating.



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The Frontier Lord Begins with Zero Subjects: Volume 5

by Fuurou

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