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II

THE TWINS' PRAYER

ILLUSTRATOR
Kinta



The Frontier Lord Begins
with Zero Subjects

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Cast of Characters



Dias

Lord of the Nezrose Plains.



Alna

Onikin tribe member and Dias's wife.



Klaus

Ardent supporter of Dias and captain of the domain guard.



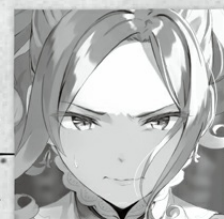
Senai and Ayhan

Twin sisters.



Eldan

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



Diane

Sanserife Kingdom's Third Princess.

The **Frontier Lord** Begins
with **Zero** Subjects

Report

Subjects: 0 to 16

The heroic savior of the nation, Dias, was assigned the previously thought to be uninhabited Nezrose Grasslands, and thus became the Frontier Lord.

Dias proceeded to befriend the onikin tribe, who had made the plains their home, and came to live with one of them: a girl by the name of Alna. He also received two sheep-like creatures known as baars. Upon slaying an earth dragon in the region north of the plains, Dias earned the title of Dragon Slayer. As a result of his efforts, he also found himself engaged to Alna.

Iluk Village was established after Klaus, a former knight who had long looked up to Dias, and twelve elderly women displaced from their home (led by the one named Maya) all became domain subjects.

Upon meeting a visiting merchant, Dias adopted Senai and Ayhan, twin sisters with strikingly long ears. He then encountered Eldan, a lord looking to save the demi-humans in his own domain, and the two formed friendly relations.

Dias thus continued his development as lord of the plains, and his story continued to unfold...

A List of Facilities in Iluk Village of the Nezrose Domain:

Yurts	Storehouse	Privy	Well
Livestock Pen	Assembly Hall	Village Square	

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????—Dias

“Y-You’re going to try your hand at farming? Sir Dias, such a thing is impossible in the plains. As I’m sure you’ve noticed already, all that grows out there is grass. Not to mention, many before you have tried their hand at cultivating fields on the grasslands, but all have failed.”

“My own father, Enkars, ignored the laws of the royal family and tried to use the plains as though they were part of his own domain, but his scheme failed. He tried everything to grow produce, but none of it worked. Sir Dias, farming is not the only way for you to acquire food...”

That’s what Eldan told me in the midst of a murky fog. He was clearly very worried and was really trying to persuade me to put my efforts elsewhere. I took his feedback and thought about it, but in the end I just had to tell him how I felt.

“I still have to give it my best shot,” I said. “Better to try and fail, and all that.” I thought that’s what I said. I *felt* like that’s what I said.

“Well, if you’re most certain, then okay! I will do everything in my power to support you in your endeavor! Once I’m back home I’ll arrange for some farming tools and have Kamalotz bring them to you! We still have mountains of them from when my father tried to cultivate the lands himself; they’re yours to use as you wish!”

As he finished, Eldan thumped his chest with a fist, and his face filled with a huge grin. I wanted to tell him how grateful I was, so I said...*something* to that effect, though I don’t know exactly what. All the same, Eldan nodded.

That was about the time I realized I was dreaming. The things that Eldan and I had talked about when we first met were coming back to me in my sleep and replaying in my dream. Well, maybe not quite *as* they had happened, considering Eldan had never flapped through the skies with his gigantic elephant ears. Also, there had been no murky fog surrounding us back then

either. What the heck was going on in my dream?

Once it hit me that I was dreaming, I woke up and found myself in the dim dusk of my yurt, in bed. The morning sun was just starting to peek from the skylight. My head felt heavy and I was still a bit groggy from lack of sleep.

The previous night, Alna had picked up some foolish bandits with her sensor magic, so we'd taught them a lesson, taken their weapons, and driven them out of the domain. Then we'd come back to Iluk Village, stashed the weapons in the storehouse, and finally jumped into bed.

The problem was, all that excitement so late at night meant I couldn't get a restful sleep; those pesky bandits were annoying me even after I'd kicked them out. That left me groggy and lost in my own thoughts until I heard a couple of voices.

"Francis, Dias's hair is *not* delicious," said one on my right.

"Yeah, you can't eat it," said one on my left.

It was Senai and Ayhan, both talking in their sleep. I slipped out of bed quietly so as not to wake them, astounded that they seemed to be sharing the same dream. I looked around the yurt, but I couldn't see Alna anywhere, which meant she was already up and outside somewhere. I knew she was an early riser, but I was surprised that she was out of the yurt so early; usually she would have been preparing breakfast around this time.

And if she is then I guess I'll help her.

I left the yurt and was met by a morning mist, surrounding the plains in a gentle haze that was chilly on the skin. I headed first to the village's well, where I found Alna and the grannies, all hunched down around buckets of water, washing food for breakfast.

The ladies laughed when they saw me and told me I was a very sleepy-looking early bird. When Alna noticed, she joined in. I listened to the laughter while I splashed my face with well water, washing away my drowsiness and cleaning myself up.

I told Alna that I'd help out with breakfast, but all I could really do was keep

an eye on the heat of the stove and stir the pot to make sure our breakfast didn't burn. It wasn't much, but Alna was always happy for it and she always thanked me.

The sun rose, and breakfast was ready by the time the haze had cleared under the sunlight. There wasn't a cloud under the vibrant blue sky, and that meant we'd all be eating outside. Alna woke the twins, and now that Klaus was finally up the two of us went about putting the rugs and the tables in the village square. When the tables were set up Maya and her troupe of grannies started putting the food out.

Once we were done everybody came together at the tables and we all had breakfast. We chatted among ourselves, and I asked the villagers if there was anything bothering them and how they were feeling. There were no real problems to speak of though, and everyone was pretty comfortable and in fine health.

In fact, Grandma Maya and her friends were all looking sprightly. Compared to how they used to live they were the very picture of health; they slept well and woke early, and the aches and pains in their joints had eased up.

I had to think this was thanks to Alna's use of medicinal herbs. I'd noticed an improvement to my own health since I'd started eating them too. Those herbs were part of each and every day, whether in our food, in Alna's tea, or in her other herbal concoctions, and when I thought about it, I realized that we really used a whole lot of herbs.

"If our small village uses this many herbs, then the onikin village must use so much more," I said as the thought dawned on me. "Alna, where in the world do the onikin get so many of them? Do the herbs grow somewhere?"

"We gather herbs when we find them, and we trade with merchants for whatever else we need, but for the most part we grow them to ensure that we always have enough."

Huh? The onikin people grow herbs? But that would mean...

"So do the onikin people have fields of herbs then?" I asked.

"Dias, don't be stupid," replied Alna bluntly. "We have to be ready to move

our entire village at a moment's notice, so of course we don't. We grow our herbs in pots that we can carry with us."

Oh, I see. Potted plants, huh?

Admittedly, I was hoping that I'd be able to learn something from them if they had fields, but when I thought about it some more, I realized that there was probably a lot I could learn from the onikin's potted plants too.

"Alna, could you tell me more about how the onikin grow their herbs? I think it'll help me when I try my own hand at farming."

"Sorry, Dias, but I don't really know all that much about it. You're better off asking the chieftain."

That took me by surprise. Alna was so knowledgeable about using the herbs, but she didn't know anything about growing them? As it turned out, the growing of the herbs was left to the village's elderly and those who couldn't hunt due to injury or whatever else. Alna had never been a part of growing the herbs. It was actually considered inauspicious for healthy onikin to take part in the growing process, so while they were taught all about how to *use* herbs, they weren't taught a thing about how to *grow* them.

Moll was pretty much at the center of the village's elderly, so she was the best person to ask for quick answers to any questions I had.

"Hm," I murmured. "Well, if that's the case, then I guess I'll be making a visit to the onikin village to see Moll. Anybody want to join me?"

Alna and the grandmas said that they had chores to do, so they couldn't go. As for Klaus, he had to stay to ensure there was someone to guard our village, so he couldn't go either. Senai and Ayhan stubbornly refused to go somewhere full of people they didn't know, so in the end it was just me, Francis, and Francoise.

It wasn't a long trip to and from the onikin village, and I didn't have to worry about danger on the way, so I didn't need to prepare all that much. I left my axe in my yurt and headed right out.

At the Onikin Village

While we walked, Francis and Francoise ate their fill of grass, and I stared out at the plains and wondered about where best to start cultivating fields. We did a little wandering along the way, but we made it to the onikin village before noon.

I told the guards at the entrance why I was there, and they let me inside without a fuss. I could hear a few of the onikin men mumbling about how I'd stolen Alna away, but I tried not to pay it any mind as I walked to Moll's big old yurt, located right in the middle of the village.

"Moll, are you in there?" I said as I stood at the door. "Got something I wanted to ask you about. Do you mind if I come in?"

"No need for long introductions. Just come on inside already!" she shouted back, louder than I'd expected for a woman her age.

I couldn't help but chuckle as I entered the yurt with the two baars. It seemed to me that Moll still had a lot of pep left in her and would live a lot longer yet. I took a seat in front of Moll, who was at the far end of the yurt, and got straight to the point. I told her about how I was planning to do some farming and explained that I wanted to learn about what the onikin did with their potted plants since it might help me in my own efforts.

With each word I spoke, Moll's expression grew grimmer; her face filled with wrinkles as her brow furrowed deeper and deeper. All that pep from before seemed to desert her as she replied in a low voice.

"Farming," she muttered slowly. "I don't think you'll meet with success in that endeavor. Now I don't know why, but crops won't grow on the plains. You may as well call it impossible. Some generations ago our ancestors had a special method for farming here, but the methods have since been lost to war and time. I'll tell you all about our herb cultivation, but I don't have anything for you when it comes to farming the lands."

Eldan had told me pretty much the same thing. He'd said that the only thing that grew on the grassy plains was, well, grass. I could tell then that it really *was* tough to farm the lands. But I didn't think that was any reason to just give up. If the onikin people had succeeded in the past, then that meant there was a chance that I could succeed too.

“I’d really like to learn more about how you grow your herbs,” I said. “I’ve already been told about how difficult the lands are to farm, but I still want to give it my best shot. I’m hoping I can learn something from your ways.”

Moll nodded, still frowning, and then she pulled a leather bag over from the corner with her cane. She took from it a big green gem, which she plonked down in front of me.

“Well, if you’re that insistent on it, I’ll tell you what we know. But let me tell you, it’s a very simple thing. We use these verdant leaf stones to do it. We dig up some soil, put it in a pot, then mix it with crushed animal bones, crushed leaf stones, and water, and leave it all to sit for a while. Once the soil is ready, all that’s left is to plant the seeds or bulbs. Without the verdant leaf stones, however, the herbs grow poorly, if they even grow at all.”

“Stones? You grow herbs with stones and bones? I always knew you needed water, but still...”

“Say what you will, but if it works, it works. That said, when we try the same methods for vegetables it doesn’t work. Not ever. It’s a strange thing. We prepare a field and spread the seeds, and it doesn’t work. Even when we try growing potatoes and beans in pots, the most we get are a few sprouted leaves before it all withers away.”

I reached out for the verdant leaf stone, awed that a simple-looking gem was capable of so much. I gripped the stone in my hand to get a feel for how hard it was, and it gleamed with a vibrant green as it shone in the rays of the sun.

So they grow herbs by crushing this up and mixing it with soil, huh?

“So you can grow herbs by mixing the stones with soil in pots, but you can’t do the same with any other produce,” I muttered. “But what’s the difference? To me they’re all just plants...”

“It’s as much a mystery to us as it is to you,” replied Moll. “If you really want an answer, you’re best off asking some forestkin, if you can find them.”

“Hm? What are they?”

“They’re exactly what it sounds like. They live in the forest, and they know all about growing plants and fields and the like. It’s said that they can turn any

wasteland into thriving greenery with the wave of a hand. But I've never seen one myself; I've only ever heard the stories, so I don't even know if they really exist."

Ah, I see. And they certainly sound like something out of a fairy tale. But if we ever found one, they'd potentially be able to help us with our fields. Still, I'm better off relying on these verdant leaf stones than a race of people who may or may not exist. I'll crush the stones up and spread them over the fields to try and grow some vegetables, and maybe even try some fertilizers out of bones and stones too.

My mind was made up, but there was still something I had to ask Moll.

"And uh...just how valuable are these gems?" I asked, looking down at the verdant leaf stone in my hand. "It looks like they're worth a whole lot more than just crushing into dust."

"Hmph," snorted Moll in response. "What are you even talking about? Did you say gem? Verdant leaf stones are nothing of the sort. They're just rocks, and all they're good for is crushing up for fertilizer. Head south and do some digging and you'll find more than you'll ever need."

They're just buried under the ground? You don't have to mine them out of stone? And they're plentiful?

I couldn't begin to imagine that something so beautiful wasn't even considered a gem by the onikin people.

"If there really are so many, would you mind sharing some with me?" I asked. "I'd like to take some back to Iluk Village."

"If you want them, take the whole bag," replied Moll, pushing the bag of stones over to me with her cane. "And if you need more, just come here and we'll give them to you."

She was so rough with how she handled the stones. She wasn't joking when she'd said they were worthless. I put it down to a difference of value, but I still couldn't believe it; I really thought that with a bit of polishing you could make a fortune selling the verdant leaf stones in the royal capital.

I took the bag in hand and had a look inside, and Moll's face softened

somewhat as she watched me.

“We’ll give you as many leaf stones as you need, and we’ll share all the knowledge we have,” she said slowly. “We’ll even give you a hand if you need it. In return, will you teach us what you learn if your fields grow? With stable food sources we can grow in number and expand our village. We long for fields of our own, here on the grassy plains.”

I could tell by the look on Moll’s face that her words were something of a plea, but she never had to worry about a thing.

“Of course,” I said. “The growth of the onikin village will be a boon to my people as well. Should I succeed, I won’t just tell you how to grow fields, I’ll bring you mountains of potatoes to boot!”

Moll’s wrinkly face morphed into a kindly smile, and she cackled with laughter.

“I see, I see! I should have expected as much from you, Blue Dias. In which case I’ll be hoping for good news, just as I hope for Alna’s children. In fact, shall I prepare you some herbs to help with just that thing? It’s a treasured herb, but you will have little time to make children if you spend too much time working the fields. For you, Dias, I do not mind sharing such resources.”

“Uh, you know what? How about we talk about those herbs another time? And uh, I didn’t even know that such herbs even existed in the first place. But look, really, I never really intended to rely on *that* kind of help, and we really *don’t* need them just yet. No, really, we don’t. And uh, anyway, just how does it help with, you know, *that*? Is it like a stimulant for men? Anyway, look, please, I’m begging you, please don’t give something so dangerous to Alna. *Please...?*”

Upon Return to Iluk Village

With my bag of verdant leaf stones in hand, I returned to Iluk Village. Senai and Ayhan were drawing something on the ground with some sticks, but they dropped everything the moment they saw me and came running over.

“Wow! You really came back early today!”

“Welcome home!”

The two girls beamed up at me.

“Hey, girls,” I said, “I’m back.”

They each gave a satisfied nod and ran off to the village square and shouted, “Dias is home!”

Then they ran over to the clothesline, which we’d made from spare yurt materials, and made sure to inform Alna and all the grandmas that I was back.

“Okay,” replied Alna with a chuckle.

“Thanks for letting us know,” added Grandma Maya, who gave the girls a pat on the head.

The girls then ran back to me, looking very happy with themselves as if they expected a pat from me too. That was when they noticed the bag in my hands and their eyes went wide. They jumped up and down excitedly as they pointed at it.

“What’s that? Did you get it at the village?”

“Show us what’s inside!”

I knew that the stones inside weren’t toys to be played with, but I also knew by the light in the twins’ eyes that they were going to keep on bugging me all day long if I didn’t show them what was in the bag. So I let out a sigh and resigned myself to my fate; I put the bag down on the ground and opened it up so the girls could see inside.

I knew that the girls loved jewels, gems, and crystals, so I expected them to want a verdant leaf stone too, but as soon as they saw what was inside, the excitement on their faces just plain vanished.

“Ugh, that’s it?” asked Senai.

“Boring...” sighed Ayhan.

They looked dejected, but then a fiery spark lit up in Senai’s eye.

“They’re just rocks!” she said. “Who needs them?!”

Ayhan, for her part, continued to look disappointed and groaned, “And there’s so many of them.”

I scratched my head. Just a minute ago the girls had been so excited. That was when Francis and Francoise came to the rescue, bleating something or other, and while I didn’t understand what they said, the girls’ moods brightened in an instant.

“Yeah! Let’s play!” they said before they then started running around.

In the end, I was glad to see the girls happy again, and I was thankful to the baars, but why had Senai and Ayhan taken one look at the verdant leaf stones and called them boring rocks? As far as I could see they were beautiful gems, and I thought they were just as pretty as the jewels that the twins had braided into their hair.

I was standing there with my head tilted in confusion, trying to figure out the difference, when Alna came over. She’d finished hanging out the washing and she was curious about the bag too. She took a look inside but was disappointed by what she found.

“What? It’s just rocks.”

“Alna,” I said, “I don’t get it. These are downright beautiful to me. Why are all of you calling them rocks?”

“Why are you even asking?” she replied. “All you need to do is look at them and you can tell they’ve got no magic... Oh, I think I get it. You can’t sense any magic at all, can you, Dias? Anyone with some sensitivity to magic can feel that these stones aren’t naturally magical or imbued with magical power. They may

look like gems, but without any magic they're just worthless rocks."

Oh, okay. So they can all tell something's magical just by looking at it. And the difference between a gem and a rock in this case depends on whether it has magic in it.

"But hang on a second," I said. "I know *you* can sense that kind of thing, but Senai and Ayhan can too?"

"They're still young, and they're undeveloped in some ways, but they're incredible for their age," replied Alna. "Sometimes they sense traces of magic that I can't, and even though they're hornless it's like magical power is the air they breathe. They lack knowledge, so they can't cast anything we'd think of as a spell, but with time and proper study they may even become more powerful than Moll herself."

When I looked at the twins, chasing the baars around and hugging them and crying with joy, all I could see were two normal little girls. Hearing that they had a talent for magic that surpassed even Alna's blew my mind. I couldn't make heads or tails of things like magical powers and spells, but it made me really happy to know that the girls had the potential to do really special things. Just the thought of it had me grinning.



I didn't know what the twins were going to do when they grew up, but with talent like that there was no doubt their future was going to be a bright one.

Maybe when they spread their wings and fly off into the world it'll be as archmages...

"By the way, Dias, what are you going to do with the stones?" asked Alna, rousing me from my thoughts as she knelt down and rummaged through the bag on the ground.

"These verdant leaf stones get crushed into dust and put in the soil to help grow herbs," I replied. "Moll said that the stones are a necessity, because otherwise they can't grow a thing. And I figure if the stones work for herbs, then they'll probably work in fields too. Moll gave me some."

Alna frowned and let out a worried murmur. For her and the other healthy onikin, these stones were a part of herb cultivation, and that wasn't something the healthy took part in. Naturally, she was a bit hesitant. Still, she took one of the stones in hand to inspect it. She checked its weight, held it up to let the sun shine on it, and then gave it a knock with her fist. After that, she picked up a nearby rock and broke the leaf stone open with a sudden crack.

"Huh. They're more fragile than they look. A stone mortar would usually be fine, but given how strong you are, Dias, I think a steel mortar is a better idea."

Alna threw the broken verdant leaf stone back in the bag, rose to her feet, and ran off to the yurts, leaving me staring in the bag with eyes wide open. I knew I had to break the stones anyway, but I wasn't expecting Alna to casually crack one open. But were they really all that fragile? I got curious, so I picked one up and started hitting it with my fist, but it was pretty tough.

"What in the world are you doing, Dias?" asked Alna. "Even someone as strong as you isn't going to break one of those stones with your bare hands. So before you go breaking your own fingers, how about you relax a bit and try using a mortar?"

She held out what looked like a large steel bowl with a concave indentation in the center. There were scratch marks at the bottom of the indentation. She also handed me a large steel club about the size of a short sword to go with it. It was

pretty heavy. Once Alna had given it to me, she started to walk off.

“Uh, wait a second, Alna,” I said. “What is this?”

“Pretty obvious, isn’t it?” she replied. “It’s a mortar and pestle. Have you never used one before? We use them to crush up medicinal minerals or to process crystals. I thought we’d need them in case we ever had to do that kind of work, so uh...should I explain how to use it?”

I had a feeling that all I needed to do was put the stone in the concave part of the bowl and hit it with the club, but all the same I asked Alna to give me the rundown. She told me to sit cross-legged with the bowl resting on my legs and to put the thing I wanted to crush in the middle of the mortar as I’d suspected. Then all I had to do was break it with the club.

The reason it was shaped like a bowl was, firstly, to make it easy to rest on your legs. The design also helped to stop bits and pieces of stone or whatever else you were crushing from flying everywhere. I also noticed, when I looked more closely, that one part of the bowl was shaped into a spout, to make it easy to transfer the crushed materials to another container.

Alna told me that mortars and pestles also came in wooden and stone varieties and that we kept them next to the stove in the center of the yurt. I’d never noticed them before. I was a little disappointed in myself for not being more observant.

“Compared to the others, one made of steel won’t break easily, so you don’t have to hold back,” said Alna. “Anyway, unless you have any other questions, I’m going to get back to my chores, okay?”

“No, I’m good. Thanks, Alna. I’ll get right to it.”

Alna flashed me a smile and ran off to help the grandmas, who were hanging out the bedding to give it some sunlight. Her smile took me a bit off guard, but Alna had been smiling a lot recently. I started to wander into other thoughts, then pulled myself back to reality. I had more important things to think about, like getting to work with this new mortar and pestle.

I went over to the storehouse and grabbed myself a pot to put the leaf stones in once they were all crushed up, then went back to the village square and sat

down with the mortar on my lap. Now I was good to go.

I took a stone from the bag and put it in the bowl, then smashed it with the pestle. Unlike when I'd tried hitting the stone with my fist, this time it broke all nice and easy. I'd put a bit too much power into it though, and I could feel the shock tremble through my legs. I eased up a little for the next strike and realized I didn't need nearly as much strength as I'd first put in. Now all I had to do was work out the best spot to hit and the best angles to work from.

The more I hit it, the more pieces the stone broke into. And the more I hit *them*, the more they broke up too. Eventually the stone was reduced to tiny fragments, but I kept on crushing it. When most of the bowl's contents were little more than dust, I lifted the mortar up and poured the contents from the spout into the nearby pot. That was one down, so I reached into the bag, plopped another green rock in the mortar, and got back to work.

Once I got into the swing of things it turned out it was actually pretty fun, and I got totally lost in it all. Before I knew it I'd worked straight through to sundown.

The Iluk Village Square, Five Days Later

When I finally crushed down what I thought was the last of the leaf stones, and after I poured what was now dust into a pot, I lifted up the bag Moll had given me just to make sure it was empty. It certainly felt light enough to be, but all the same I turned it upside down and gave it a good shake. As expected, there were no more leaf stones.

I tossed the bag off to the side and let out a great big sigh. I was finally done, and I raised both arms up high and gave my body a good stretch. I stared out at the big old blue sky and then fell back down into the grass of the village square. All the tension slowly eased from my body.

As of today, it's been...five days since I started crushing these stones.

At some point in the middle of breaking down all the green rocks, Senai and Ayhan had come up and looked in my pot.

"Is this all *really* dust? There are still rocks in there," they'd remarked.

This had sent me into a panic, so I had taken a good look in the pot and it turned out they were right; I hadn't broken up all of the stones neatly. So I'd emptied the pot and crushed everything all over again. It took me five days to smash it all up, but I think that was on the speedier side, all things considered.

Still, after five long days of work, sitting down and hunched over the whole time, my lower back ached, and I had to wonder if my hips were bent out of shape. All I wanted to do was lie there on the ground, stretch out my lower back, and rest. When I saw Alna running over with a nervous look and her horn glowing green, though, I knew I wouldn't have the luxury. Something had set off her sensor magic, and we'd need to address it.

I sprang to my feet and loosened up by swinging my arms and twisting at the waist. When Alna got to me, I could hear the uncertainty in her voice.

"Dias, something is coming from the east. There's multiple signals, and it's a large group...I think."

This wasn't like her at all, and it put me on guard. "You're not as sure about this as usual, Alna. What's wrong?"

"Something feels strange," she replied. "My sensor magic is working fine, but I can't clearly work out the number of the group approaching us. I know that there's a group of people, and lots of horses, but I'm also picking up a creature that isn't a horse. Several of them, in fact."

Huh?

When I heard that something was coming, I'd figured it would be Kamalotz to deliver the farming equipment that Eldan had promised. However, the number of horses bothered me. If it was Kamalotz just bringing farming equipment, then surely a one-horse carriage would have been enough, right? On top of that, I didn't know what to make of the creatures that weren't horses.

And if it wasn't Kamalotz, then was it possible that the bandits I'd driven away hadn't learned their lesson and were on their way back?

"How far away are they, and what's their current speed?" I asked. "Do we need to hurry?"

"They're moving slowly, and they're still a ways out. If we needed to hurry, I wouldn't be standing here talking to you—I would have kicked your butt into action as soon as I found you."

Hm, yep. You're, uh, nothing if not reliable like that.

In any case, seeing as we had some time, I figured I would tidy up the pot and the mortar and pestle, then put my equipment on. I also had to make sure I told the twins we'd be going out for a little while; if we left without letting them know, there was no telling what kind of outburst they'd have for us when we came back.

I told Alna my plan, and she easily agreed. We put the pot and stuff in the storehouse, then I told the twins and villagers that I was going to check out who was approaching the village. After that, I went to my yurt, put my armor on, got my axe ready, and brought along the telescope too. When I was good to go, something caught my attention.

Why is Alna getting ready too? And that makeup...

“Alna, why are you putting on your battle makeup, and...strapping on your bow and quiver?” I asked.

“Because I’m going with you, of course,” she stated. “For all we know they could be enemies, and we don’t know for sure how many we’re looking at. I can’t let you go alone, no matter what you say. I’m going, and that’s final.”

She was more stern than usual, and the look in her eyes hinted at a touch of worry. And I had to admit, having her magic around sure was helpful.

“All right. Nothing would make me more confident than having you out there with me,” I said. “Thanks for your concern.”

Alna’s eyes went wide, and then she suddenly dropped into silence for a moment before slapping me on the butt with her quiver.

“Huh?! Alna, what the—?! Oh, you think we should hurry?”

But Alna didn’t reply. Instead, she slapped me on the butt a second and third time.

“All right! All right! I get it! I’m hurrying! Quit hitting me!”

We ran out of the village with Alna smacking me on the butt and headed east, guided by Alna’s magic. We sprinted through the wide plains with a comfortable wind at our backs, and after a time, Alna spoke.

“We’re close!” she shouted. “They’ll enter our field of vision soon!”

We both came to a stop, and Alna pointed in the direction she sensed our unknown visitors. I took out my telescope and looked through it while I caught my breath. Through the lens I caught sight of humanoid shapes and a number of carriages. I turned my attention to the carriage in the lead, covered by a tarp, and at the reins was none other than Kamalotz.

Around Kamalotz’s carriage were a number of demi-human guards, and following behind him were two more carriages. They were slowly coming towards us in a long line, and then I noticed that the carriage at the end of the line was being pulled along by some animals I hadn’t seen before.

They don’t look like horses. They’re more like white-haired oxen. They remind

me of black ghee.

“What in the...?” I uttered.

I stood there in silence, staring through the telescope, captivated by the ghee-like creatures. Alna asked me what I saw, but I wasn't sure how to explain it, so I simply passed her the telescope so she could get a better look for herself. She looked puzzled as she took the telescope from my hands and observed the incoming carriages.

“Oh, it's just Kamalotz,” she said. “You should have told me. Hm? Oh, okay. So he's brought some white ghee with him. So those are the other creatures I picked up on. Including all the guards and all the stuff they're transporting, my magic couldn't parse it all.”

Ah, the white oxen that resemble black ghee are called white ghee, huh? So the black ones are black ghee, and the white ones are white ghee. That makes things easy.

The white ghee looked pretty much identical to black ghee, but even from this distance their behavior was clearly more placid and gentle. Their bearing hinted at a rugged strength behind their docile attitudes, so in that sense they reminded me of black ghee, but otherwise they were nothing alike. These white ghee were as calm as they came, just casually pulling along their carriage without any resistance.

But while I was thinking about how calm the white ghee were, I noticed Alna flinch as she stared through the telescope. She'd noticed something, and her body tensed as she leaned forwards.

“Dias, that second carriage...” she said. “Something is inside of it, behind the tarp. Something small is moving around back there.”

“Huh?” I said, puzzled.

Something small? What could that be?

“There's lots of them,” continued Alna. “It looks to me like they're trying to stealthily keep an eye on what's happening outside of the caravan, but...their presences just disappeared.”

Kamalotz was only supposed to be bringing us farming tools, so it was already strange to me that he had three carriages. But now Alna was telling me that something small was riding in the middle carriage? That was even more suspicious.

“It won’t do us any good worrying about things from here,” I said, “so let’s ask Kamalotz directly.”

Alna nodded, so the two of us began walking to meet with Kamalotz and his carriages.

Aboard a Moving Carriage—Someone Small Crawling around Inside

I gently lifted the lid on the wooden box inside the dim carriage as it rumbled along, careful not to make any sounds that would alert the people outside. Inside of it were beans. Beans weren't particularly tasty and I didn't much like them, but we weren't in a situation where we had the luxury of choice, so I decided to take some with me.

In the carriage's other boxes were jerky and dried fish.

Is there no fruit here?

We were lucky in that we'd snuck aboard the carriage carrying foodstuffs, but we weren't quite so lucky when it came to what food was aboard. I didn't like any of it.

Oh, what's that red fruit? Oh, no way, I can tell by the smell that it's spicy!

All of the remaining boxes on the carriage were the same, which meant the only thing worth taking was the beans. We might have to do some hunting while we journeyed, but unfortunately I never was much of a hunter.

"Hey! You! What are you doing?!" came a voice.

Oh no! Have I been spotted?! Oh, it's just you. Don't scare me like that.

"Keep your voice down," I answered. "If the people outside notice us we'll be driven out of the carriage!"

"With their tiny ears those guys won't hear a thing! More importantly, what the heck are you up to?!"

"What do you mean? Isn't it obvious? I thought I'd take some food."

"It'll only get in the way! We don't need it!"

"What are you talking about? Of course we'll need food. We've a long journey ahead of us. And once we leave this carriage, who knows when we'll have

access to food again? We have to prepare while we still have the chance.”

Perhaps it was fine for the others, who all knew how to hunt, but all the same, there was no guarantee we’d find something to hunt out there, so it was best to have supplies to fall back on.

Oh no, what’s with that grin and giggling?

“Heh heh heh. You still don’t get it, huh? Haven’t you realized yet? This carriage isn’t going south. It’s going *west*. You may have a little smarts, and you can read words and books and stuff, but it turns out you’re an idiot, huh? All that stuff about returning to the desert was a lie! Our real goal is the dragon slayer! If we kill a human who killed a dragon, we prove our own might! So before we head back to the desert, we’re going to take back our pride and honor!”

“Huh? No way, you must be joking! The whole reason I agreed to help you was because you said we were all going home! That’s why I thought up a plan to sneak us onto a carriage! Because you told me we were going home!”

“If I told you the truth you would have gotten all scared and you wouldn’t have taught us a thing! You’re the most cowardly of all us desert people, so I lied to you!”

“Wh-Who are you calling a coward?! You lied to all of us and got us wrapped up in all this danger! That’s not something an upstanding desert person would ever do!”

“You see? That attitude is what makes you a coward! The dragon slayer is just a piddly human! We can beat him! There is no danger!”

“But you’re talking about a man called a *dragon slayer*! You only get called that if you actually kill a dragon! That’s how strong he is! How can you say that a person like that isn’t dangerous?! And I’ll have you know that I’m not cowardly, I’m just cautious. And the way you’re talking about it...don’t tell me everyone else is in on it?!”

In the midst of our argument, others popped up from their hiding spots behind boxes, and by the looks on their faces every single one of them had a role in this suicidal plan. Their eyes were wide, their teeth were bared, and their

growls were whipping them into a frenzy. It was clear that all of them were raring to go and itching for a fight.

“We are the desert people! Proud, honorable, and strong! The humans are cunning, but they are weak! He may be called the dragon slayer, but he is a feeble human just like the rest of them! If he really *did* kill a dragon it would have been with a trap! The coward’s way!”

“Traps are for the weak!” cried someone else. “We can beat a feeble opponent, and we will!”

“The humans are all liars! They lied to us and tricked us! Defeating them is the right thing to do!”

“We are above them! We are superior to humans and superior to the dragon slayer! And we will make everybody out there know it! We will force them to give us all their food *and* the means to get home! That is the best plan, just like *he* told us!”

All of them shouted one after the other, and over one another, and I was helpless to do anything more than just cower and listen. I covered my ears with both hands in an effort to stop their ruinous words from getting to me. I wracked my brain for a way to convince them all to stop their foolishness.

If the rumors we’d heard in town were true, then the dragon slayer had killed an earth dragon on his own, and he hadn’t even been hurt in the process. We didn’t stand a chance against such a foe. We desert people had already lost so many, and I couldn’t let the others throw caution to the wind and lose their lives to a pointless death.

But if I can’t think of a way to stop everyone here, perhaps I can think of some way to stop the dragon slayer? Perhaps I could jump out of the carriage before everyone else and beg him to spare our lives. No, that won’t work. It’s far too dangerous, and just thinking about it has my knees shaking with fear.

I didn’t know what to do, and that was when we all noticed the carriage begin to slow down. But it wasn’t just slowing down; it seemed to be coming to a complete stop.

Have we already arrived at the dragon slayer’s home?

I took my hands from my ears in a panic and listened carefully, picking up whatever I could hear around me and getting a sense for what was outside. One person had given the command to stop, and all the carriages had come to a halt. The wheels stopped turning as all the carriages went still. Outside, the person who had given the order to stop began talking with someone else.

“Sir Dias and Lady Alna, thank you for meeting us like this. We’ve brought you the items that Lord Eldan promised you.”

“Thank you for coming, Kamalotz. Um, I don’t mean to be rude, but there’s a few things I’d like to ask...”

Dias. That was the name of the dragon slayer. And as soon as they heard it, everyone smacked their tail on the floor or the boxes around us, filling with bloodlust. They bared their teeth but kept their growls quiet as they silently readied themselves. Their ears were up and their senses were on high alert as they listened, waiting with growing anticipation for a chance to launch a surprise attack.

There was no more time to lose. If I was going to stop them it had to be now. Even if I didn’t have a good idea, and even if it meant they all hated me, I had to put it all on the line and act now.

“No! It’s too dangerous!” I cried. “We don’t stand a chance! You’re all going to die!”

I leaped forwards to try and stop them, but I already knew that wouldn’t be enough. By shouting my message, I’d alerted everyone outside of the carriage to our presence. I hoped that by revealing our surprise attack, I might convince the others to give up, but, unfortunately, it was not to be.

Everyone easily weaved around me, and those who didn’t simply knocked me down and hopped over me. They no longer cared that their surprise attack had been spoiled, and they entered into battle mode. They were ready to kill.

I didn’t know if those outside had noticed the commotion, but the dragon slayer walked up towards the carriage, and that was when everyone knew he was close enough to attack. They leaped from the carriage and flew towards their foe.



All I heard afterwards were their cries.

The dragon slayer stood ready to receive the attack, everyone shouted, and then somebody let loose a cry of rage, which was followed by several sounds of heavy impact. The battle that never should have even started in the first place...had begun.

Nearing the Suspicious Carriage—Dias

When Kamalotz noticed Alna and me walking towards his carriages, he gave the order for everyone to stop. After the carriages rumbled slowly to a complete stop, Alna and I walked over to Kamalotz, who stepped down from the lead carriage and bowed politely. We greeted each other, and then I asked him about the carriages and what was inside of them. That was when we heard a panicked but somewhat muffled voice.

“No! ...oo dangerous... You...stand a chance! You’re...to die!”

It sounded like a woman shouting, and it came from the carriage we were most suspicious of: the second in line. Immediately after the woman cried out, we heard a ruckus within the carriage. I glanced over at Kamalotz, wondering whether he’d brought a dangerous gang or something with him, but the man stood mouth agape in shock. That told me he didn’t have any idea what was happening inside the carriage.

Kamalotz’s guards were all just as surprised, and even the driver of the carriage—a dog-faced individual—couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He almost fell out of the driver’s seat.

There was something in the carriage, and Kamalotz didn’t know what it was. Then there was the feminine voice calling out about danger and dying. To top it off, a group of creatures was going crazy inside of the carriage.

This was no time to just be standing around, so I readied my axe and approached the carriage to see what was going on inside. Kamalotz told me to stand back and get to safety and to let his people check it out, but that didn’t stop me. Yeah, the grassy plains were empty, but they were still *my* domain, and I was responsible for them. As lord of the lands it was my responsibility to address the situation, so I kept on walking to the carriage in question. But just as I got to within a few steps of it, a group of small *things* leaped out at me, all of them shouting.

“Take down the dragon slayer!”

“He’s off guard! Now’s our chance!”

“He’s defenseless! It’s the perfect time!”

All the voices sounded like they belonged to young boys, and the thoughts in my mind just spilled out of my mouth.

“Are those mice talking?!” I exclaimed.

At a glance they looked like mice, but they had shockingly long tails, and their long brown ears made me think of rabbits. Their bodies, however, which were wrapped in cloth rags, were bigger than a mouse but smaller than a rabbit.

“Wh-What are *you* doing here?!” cried an angry Kamalotz. “And more importantly, *what* did you just say?!”

I gathered that Kamalotz did in fact know who these small animals were, but the animals themselves showed no signs of listening or responding to him. They only had eyes for me, and those eyes were narrowed in sharp glares. They were capable of great leaps, and they showed this in the speed and force with which they leaped from the carriage and straight for me. There was a decent gap between me and the carriage, but the mice were carried swiftly through the air on the power of their jumps alone.

For a moment I faltered. I was confused. Was it okay to attack these mice? Was it okay to kill them? These thoughts slowed my reactions, and before I knew it the mice were closing in. I no longer had a chance to evade *or* counterattack. I readied myself as they bared their sharp front teeth and their claws, but then I suddenly heard sharp smacks ringing through the air as the mice were struck down. At the very same time, Alna entered my vision, her horn blazing red.

“Dias, you let your guard down,” she said, swinging her bow in her right hand and her quiver with her left, slapping attacker after attacker. “A mouse bite can lead to disease and maybe even death. You have to be more careful.”

The mice let out high-pitched squeals as they fell to the ground, but they quickly jumped to their feet and started running around. It looked like none of them were especially hurt.

“Did you go easy on them?” I asked, readying my axe now that I had the

chance.

Alna nodded, as if to say of course she did.

“I couldn’t just kill them,” she explained. “I might not know *why* he might be keeping a group of mice, but for all I know they could belong to Kamalotz.”

Okay, well, they *did* leap out of one of Kamalotz’s carriages, and Kamalotz himself *did* seem to know them. All the same, I had a hard time believing that the critters were his pets.

As soon as the mice heard Alna’s words, they were quick to fire back.

“We don’t belong to anyone!”

“You insolent wench!”

“How dare you speak down to the desert people, you impudent dog!”

And even though their surprise attack had failed completely, they still weren’t ready to give up, and they launched themselves at me over and over. But every time they did, Alna and I knocked them back to the ground—me with the hilt of my axe, and Alna with her bow.

“Wh-What are you doing just standing around?!” cried Kamalotz to his guards. “Protect Sir Dias and Lady Alna! And don’t let even a single one of those foolish little mousekin escape!”

The guards hadn’t been just standing around—they’d been protecting Kamalotz. But as soon as they heard his angry yelling, they sprang obediently into action. A few of them quickly stood in front of me and Alna, and the others ran in to catch our attackers. This got the mice shouting all over again.

“Bodyguards are for cowards!”

“You filthy humans!”

“Freaking dragon slayer!”

But even as they spat their venom, the mice scattered like baby spiders, putting their speed and tiny bodies to great use in an attempt to dash to safety. Unfortunately for them, the demi-human guards were quicker still, and they had the mice apprehended and contained in no time.

One guard went to a carriage and pulled from it a sack, and the mice were promptly thrown inside of it. It wasn't long before the situation was completely under control. The guards looked around to make sure there weren't any other stray mice about and started searching the other carriages for other hidden foes. Meanwhile, Kamalotz walked up to us, the color of his face and his expression the very picture of apologetic.

"Sir Dias, Lady Alna, that was all very much beyond disrespectful," he said, lowering his head, "and I don't even know how to begin to apologize..."

I told Kamalotz that there was no need, given that it wasn't him but the mice that attacked us, but Kamalotz wouldn't have it. He said that he was the one who brought them and that his lack of prudence allowed it to happen. With each and every word he seemed to drop his head lower and lower.

"At the end of the day, those attackers live in our domain, which means they are our citizens. Our own people attacked you, Sir Dias. I am here on behalf of my master, Lord Eldan, and for that reason I simply must apologize."

"Huh? Citizens? You *are* talking about those little critters, yes?" I asked. "So hang on a second. Even though they look the way they do, those mice are beastkin?"

"Yes," said Kamalotz, slowly raising his head again as he began to explain. "They may simply look like small wildlife, but they are recognized as a beastkin and demi-human race. The term beastkin covers a variety of races, including those who are more human than animal in appearance, those who are more animal than human in appearance, and those who look no different from typical animals. Your attackers belong to the last category. And though they may look no different from wild mice, they have an established culture. Their ability to wield tools, use fire, and speak a language makes them a beastkin race."

Kamalotz's explanation reminded me of the parables my parents had often shared with me before I went to bed. Among them, they had taught me that "language is a wisdom given to people, and thus only people are given the ability to speak."

I see. So that means that the mice are a people, and that makes them beastkin.

“Those mice are more accurately called big-eared hopping mousekin. They are similar to the mousekin race but unique due to their big ears and incredible jumping abilities. For that reason, they have their own unique moniker. The hopping mousekin insist on being called ‘the desert people,’ but they aren’t the only race that calls the desert home...”

So the big-eared hopping mousekin are simply named after their unique characteristics. That’s nice and simple.

But the desert... That’s a wide expanse of land filled with sand and rocks. Hm? Wait, they live in the desert?

“Is there a desert in Eldan’s domain?” I asked. “I’ve never heard anything about a desert within the kingdom’s lands.”

“Oh, no, the desert is the hopping mousekin’s motherland, but there is no desert in Kasdeks. The hopping mousekin originally come from a place far, far south of the kingdom, but many unfortunately fell prey to slavers.”

The story Kamalotz told about the hopping mousekin was linked to what Eldan had already told me about his efforts to protect demi-humans. The hopping mousekin had been captured by slavers and effectively turned into products. Just as they were about to be sold to an unscrupulous sort, Eldan had swooped in and rescued them, and they had come to live under his care.

Eldan had promised the hopping mousekin that when he was in a powerful enough position to do so, he would return them to their homes, but the mousekin could not accept that he wouldn’t escort them back immediately. They also didn’t trust Eldan; having been captured by humans in the first place, they couldn’t believe the words of a half-human like Eldan, so they rebelled against him.

But even in the face of the hopping mousekin’s criticisms, Eldan did his best to keep them safe and be generous with them. He sure was a stand-up guy. The hopping mousekin were already a race with a limited population, and the slavers had brought their numbers even lower. It was so bad that complete extinction wasn’t out of the question, and Eldan didn’t want to let such a thing happen.

“The hopping mousekin lived under Lord Eldan’s care, and with complete

freedom... Why in the world would they choose to do something as foolish as attack you?" pondered Kamalotz. "Lord Eldan is now the lord of Kasdeks, and he was making plans to send them home. The hopping mousekin were so close to getting what they wanted so badly!"

Kamalotz took a few deep breaths after his stressful explanation and steadied himself. Then he looked at me and waited patiently for my response.

The hopping mousekin might have been a beastkin race and citizens of our neighboring domain, but that didn't mean I was angry at Kamalotz or Eldan for what had happened. Especially now that I knew the whole story. I figured I would say as much, but before I did I looked at Alna to see what she thought of all of this. She hadn't seemed very interested in Kamalotz's story and had been focused mainly on seeing to her bow, but she'd been listening to everything, and when she felt my gaze she looked up.

"Kamalotz was white when we first met him," she said in a whisper, "and now he's blue. I think it's fine to just forgive him. But the mice that attacked us were all a strong red, and I won't hold back again if they decide to attack us a second time."

I nodded, and then I took what I was going to say and what Alna had just said and relayed a mix of the two to Kamalotz.

"Like I said before, what happened isn't anything for you to be apologizing for," I assured him. "But I appreciate the gesture, so if you insist on it, then consider your apology accepted. That said, I didn't much like what I heard out of the hopping mousekin, and I can't promise that we'll be so kind to them if they try to attack us again, so I'd like you to make sure they don't get close enough to try. As for their punishment and investigating their motives, if they had any, that's all more trouble than we want to deal with, so I'll leave that in your capable hands."

Kamalotz looked relieved to hear what I said, and his eyes lit up. Still, he insisted on bowing deeply and apologizing once more. As much as I said he didn't have to, Kamalotz couldn't let things stand as they were, and he said he would bring an apology gift of some sort when he next had the opportunity. And if it would make him feel better, I figured it was best to just let him.

Now that we were all done and dusted with the talk of apologies, a guard who'd been waiting for an opportunity to report walked on over.

"Sir Kamalotz," he said, "there's nobody else in any of the carriages. We've done a thorough check, so everything should be fine. We thought that perhaps there might be others in the boxes we brought, so we did a check of any boxes that looked like hiding spots and they were all clear. That said, there is far too much for us to thoroughly check everything."

"I see. And did you make sure to put your noses to good use to confirm there was nobody suspicious hiding anywhere?" asked Kamalotz.

"All of us went through the three carriages to confirm they were safe, and though we did try our best to sniff out anything suspicious, I wouldn't put too much faith in our noses this time around. The mousekin left their scent everywhere, and we're carrying a whole lot of spices. Even for dogkin like us, that makes the job pretty difficult."

The dogkin had a great sense of smell, just like their animal ancestors, and Kamalotz had hoped he'd be able to fall back on those senses. Unfortunately, there was a wall of spices blocking them. Kamalotz and the dogkin guard went on talking, and I found myself suddenly curious about the spices they were talking about. I knew they were bringing farming equipment, but what were the spices for, and why was there so much of them?

I knew Kamalotz was all wrapped up in wanting to apologize and double-check the carriages, but what I wanted most now was for him to just tell me what was inside of them...

Taking a Break near the Carriages

When the dogkin told Kamalotz that they couldn't do a thorough check with their noses, his brow furrowed and he told them to do one more check just to be certain. With that order given, things finally seemed to calm down.

Kamalotz decided to join the dogkin on their final check, but in the end they didn't dig up anything suspicious, and so they declared the carriages safe. Kamalotz had been extra prudent—perhaps excessively so—but he was relieved

now, and he began to write a few letters. When he was done, he gave them to the guard carrying the sack of hopping mousekin and ordered him to return to Kasdeks and report to Eldan. For Kamalotz, this was the best decision; he didn't want to simply leave the hopping mousekin in the sack, but he also didn't want to bring them into Iluk.

Once the hopping mousekin were taken back to Kasdeks, Eldan would find out why they had decided to attack me and then determine a just punishment. In any case, that brought the whole incident to a conclusion, and the stressed Kamalotz finally looked a little more relaxed. I decided that now was the time to ask him about the carriages and the spices, so I got up off the grass and walked on over to him.

"Hey, Kamalotz," I said, "your guard mentioned spices earlier, but what was he talking about? I knew that Eldan was going to send us farming equipment, but we never talked about anything else..."

Kamalotz gasped and quickly bowed in a panic.

"My apologies! With all the commotion I completely forgot to explain everything to you. As promised, we've readied your farming equipment, so you've nothing to worry about with regards to that. As for the spices, I believe it would be quicker for you to read these than for me to explain it."

With that said, Kamalotz took out some folded pieces of paper and an envelope stamped with a wax seal and passed them to me. I took them in hand, then started with the envelope. I peeled off the wax seal and opened the envelope to find a letter from Eldan.

Dearest Dias,

As promised, I have prepared for you a selection of farming equipment from our warehouses. Is this amount sufficient? I put together everything I thought you would need, but if you happen to need more, please don't hesitate to let Kamalotz know, and we will ready more for you immediately.

I couldn't help thinking that you would need some food until such a time as you are able to successfully harvest your own, so as an offer of goodwill Kamalotz has brought you various produce, including spices, tea, and sugar.

Much of it is unique to our region, and I do hope you like them.

These gifts, and the horses and carriages that carried them, are yours. I give them to you in the hope of smooth relations in the future and trade between our domains. It vexes me that I could not send you a more fitting number of horses, but things have yet to completely settle in my own domain. I beg for your understanding.

I was so glad to meet you and talk to you the other day. Our conversation was fruitful and very meaningful to me. I look forward to seeing you again.

Eldan Kasdeks

P.S. Everything that Kamalotz has brought for you is a gift. There is no need for you to pay us anything in return.

The letter was written in a beautiful script, and it was very easy to read, but when I finished reading it my jaw was practically low enough to taste grass. Eldan had prepared us luxury goods like tea and sugar, and he was giving us horses and carriages, and on top of it all he was telling me not to pay him anything in return for it all. I just couldn't believe it.

For a time I stood there worried. Was it *really* okay for me to accept all of Eldan's gifts for nothing? Then I remembered that Kamalotz had passed me another piece of paper, so I took a look at that.

The neatly folded piece of paper had the words "list of goods" written in small script, and I assumed that this meant all of the items that Eldan was giving me—in other words, his "offer of goodwill."

I timidly unfolded the piece of paper and was met by a long list of items, all lined out small and neatly. First it listed two carriages, four horses, and two mountain oxen.

Mountain oxen? That must mean the white ghee.

Following the animals and the carriages was the farming equipment—hoes, scythes, sieves, and a plow. Eldan even included pitchforks and a millstone. After the farming equipment, the list detailed all the different seeds in the carriages, and there was too much to summarize at a glance. Then there was all

the produce Eldan had written of: pickled vegetables, oxen butter, jerky, and dried fish.

The spices were also on the list, and it seemed that Eldan had included three boxes of three different varieties, along with three bottles of tea leaves and a pot of sugar. I didn't know how big the boxes and bottles were, so I didn't know how much of these things we were looking at, but knowing Eldan, it was probably a lot.

But even after all the produce, the list went on with cutlery and miscellaneous goods. Then there was horse equipment like bridle bits, saddles, and bards. At the very end of the list were the words "stable materials," and this surprised me the most.

What in the world does that mean?

I held back the urge to cry out in surprise, then looked up from the list and just asked Kamalotz what they were.

"Lord Eldan was worried that we might only cause you trouble by sending you livestock if you didn't have a stable, so we've brought the materials to build one for you."

It was true enough that you needed a stable for horses and cows and the like, but who was going to be putting those materials together...?

"Oh, and if you're worried about the construction, please rest easy. I can handle that for you," said Kamalotz. "The guards and I will put up the stable in no time."

Oh, uh, okay. So they'll build it for me too. I guess this is just more of Eldan's goodwill again. But wow, I have no words for all this.

Eldan had told me that I didn't have to pay him back, but after all he was doing for me, I really couldn't do nothing in return. If Kamalotz wasn't going to accept payment, then maybe there was something else I could do. Maybe there was something I could give to Eldan as a sign of my goodwill.

With that in mind, I guess it's gotta be earth dragon materials, huh?

We'd used a decent amount of the materials making Klaus's armor and a bow

and things like that, but even then we still had quite a bit just sitting around in the storehouse. I just hoped that giving them all we had left would be enough to make up for the sugar and the carriages and everything else.

In any case, it seemed to me that the best course of action would be to head back to Iluk and unload the produce. That way I could get a better look at how much sugar, tea, and spices Eldan had sent, and then I could determine the right amount of dragon materials to give back.

So, I folded up the list and looked at Kamalotz, who pointed at the carriages.

“If you’re ready to get moving again, why not take the reins of the carriage with the four horses over there?” he suggested. “They belong to you now, and what better opportunity to get a feel for handling the carriage?”

I looked over at the carriage and the four horses that were set to pull it along. It looked like learning to drive it would be a bit of a challenge, but Kamalotz said that there was already a driver on board who could teach me the ropes. Also, given that the driver’s seat was pretty wide, there was room enough for both of us, and I’d receive any needed advice as we went.

“The four horses there are all of superb breed and are very quick. I’ve no doubt that with a little instruction, you’ll be comfortable on the reins in no time.”

Just as I was about to open my mouth and agree, Alna spoke up.

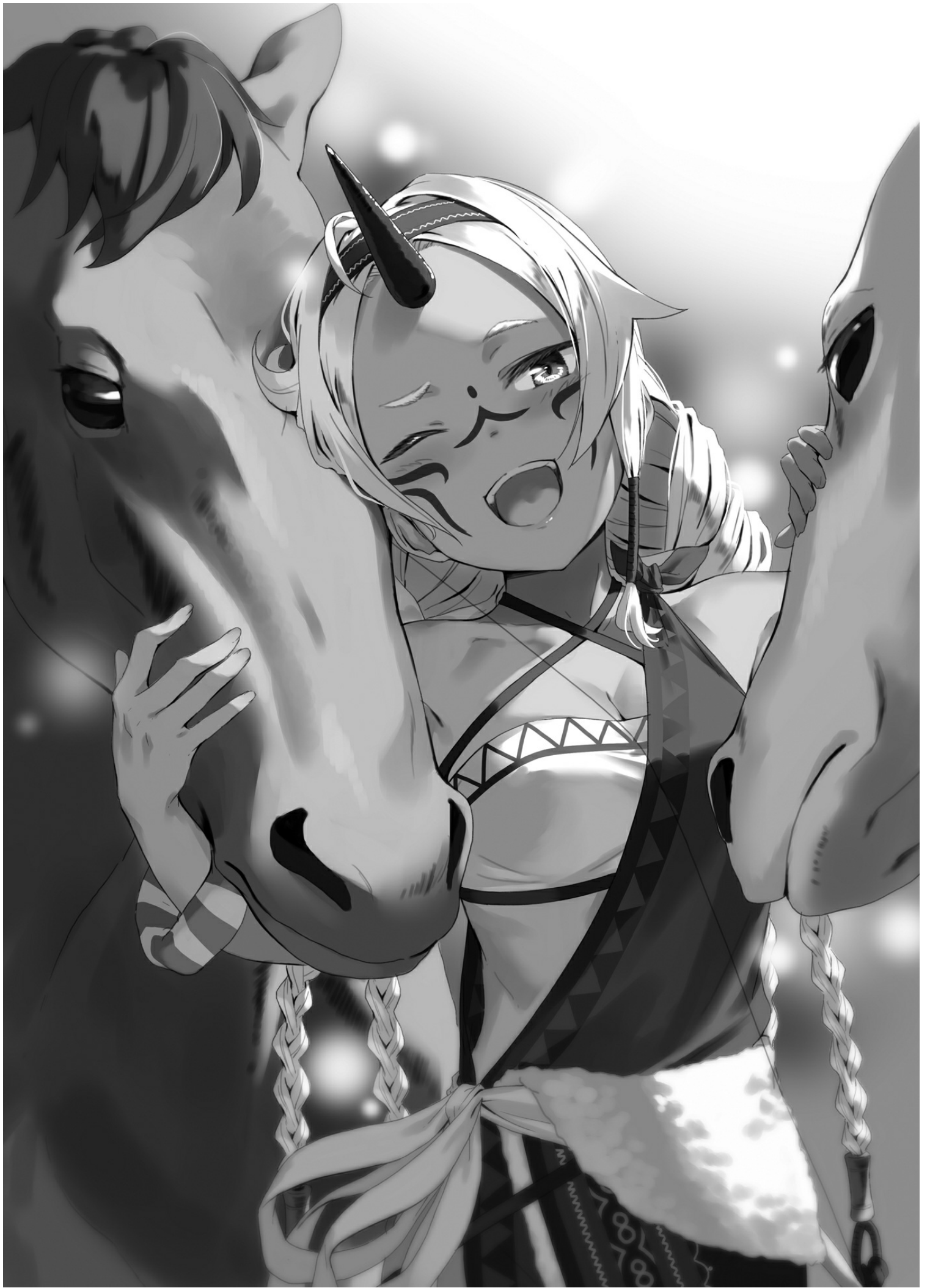
“Hey, Dias,” she started. “That stuff about you getting a carriage and those horses being yours... Is that all true? Are we really getting horses?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah, seems like it. Eldan really pulled out all the stops. It’s not just horses and carriages but sugar and tea too. It’s all on this list they gave us, so take a look.”

I passed her the piece of paper and she looked at it with such fierce concentration that I thought she was glaring, but then all of a sudden she burst into a blinding smile.

“Whoa! It’s true!” she shouted, unable to contain herself. “We’re getting four horses! Dias! Horses! We’re getting horses! What could be any better?!”

Alna shoved the list back at me and ran over to the horses. She patted each of them gently.



With each pat of the horses, she whooped with joy and used every word in her vocabulary to describe her delight, and it was very clear to me that the horses made her incredibly happy.

From what I could gather, horses weren't just for transport and carrying goods for the onikin. They were also important in combat, so they were considered just as valuable, if not more so, as baars. And given that the horses Eldan supplied for us were well-bred and quick, that made them even more valuable.

Owning multiple horses was a sign of wealth among the onikin, and proof of manliness to boot. Alna's own family wasn't rich enough to own their own horses, and so it was all they could do to occasionally borrow one from other families. Alna naturally had a lot of pent-up feelings about it, and these horses here just brought them all out of her.

"Ever since I was a little girl I've dreamed of being in a family that owns horses!" she cried. "You being so manly, I always hoped we'd get one eventually, but I never imagined my dream would come true so quickly!"

Alna was getting more and more excited by the second, and I figured I had to calm her down. So I walked on over to her, but before I could say anything she dove at me and wrapped me in a hug. Kamalotz and his crew were all surprised by Alna's reaction, but they smiled warmly at her joy and watched over us kindly, not really sure of what to say. I was a little embarrassed, admittedly, but Alna didn't seem to notice one bit.

Alna stayed there stuck to me, and she told me that she'd studied how to look after and ride horses ever since she was little and that she'd handle learning how to drive our new carriage. Actually, she even went so far as to say that I could leave all of the horse stuff to her. She *really* loved horses; that much was for sure.

"Um, Alna?" I said. "I get it. I do. So let's calm down, okay? I'm happy to leave all the horse stuff to you. Promise!"

When she heard that, she beamed even brighter, but then she snapped back to her senses and realized where she was. That was when she felt all the gazes on her, and her face went red as she leaped away from me and stared down at

her feet.

It was going to be a good, long time before Alna would fully recover.

In the Driver's Seat on the Way to Iluk Village

In the end, it turned out we didn't need to worry about all the instruction and teaching that Kamalotz had offered. While he and his guards were getting the horses and carriages ready to head for Iluk, Alna proved to them all that she was experienced and knowledgeable enough that she could handle our new carriage all on her own.

"Sir Dias, if you need to learn the ropes, I think it would be best to learn from Alna herself," Kamalotz admitted. "She knows far more than any of us."

At the same time, I got the sense that he was strangely worried because of what had just happened.

In any case, Alna sat in the driver's seat of the four-horse carriage, and I sat next to her. Then she took the lead of our train of carriages to guide Kamalotz to our village. He followed after us with the other horse-drawn carriage, and in the rear was the carriage pulled along by the white ghee.

As for my battle-ax, that was stored in the carriage. It wasn't going to be any help at the driver's seat, and in any case we were surrounded by Kamalotz's guards, so there wasn't any real need for it. So while Alna held the reins, I sat back and listened to the rumble of the carriage wheels and swayed as the carriage rumbled onwards.

"I'm sorry about earlier," said Alna timidly. "I got a little carried away by my excitement."

Her voice lacked the power and confidence I was used to.

"Well, it was a little embarrassing, but you were over the moon," I said. "You don't need to apologize for being so happy."

When I thought about it, ever since Alna and I started living together we'd only ever really talked about daily life and what to do about the domain's subjects and raising their number and such. We'd never had a single chance to sit down and just chat about our hobbies, interests, and families. I'd had no idea

Alna liked horses or that she'd wanted some of her own so badly. If I had, perhaps I could have been a little more tactful in how I'd told her we were getting some, and I might have even seen her flying hug coming. With all that in mind, I didn't think it was right of me to scold her for what she had done.

Then again, when I thought back to Alna when I felled the earth dragon and how she had been when our engagement was announced, I breathed a sigh of relief and thanked my lucky stars. Yeah, she was excited, but it could have been much worse than it was.

"But look at what I did," she groaned shamefully. "And in front of all those people. Didn't that bother you? Make you mad?"

"I can't say how I'd react if it was someone else, but I don't mind when it's you, Alna. It didn't really get to me or make me mad, but uh...it *was* a bit embarrassing, so I guess I'd like it if you could be a little more aware when we're with company."

Alna dropped into silence and nodded to herself a few times, then turned her focus to the path ahead and focused on the horses. I went quiet along with her, and the time simply rolled by as our carriage rumbled onwards. By the time we saw the familiar white cloth of the yurts, the sun had just started on its downwards path, and I spotted Klaus standing on guard at the edge of Iluk with his spear in hand.

When Klaus spotted us coming all he could see were the carriages, so he stood cautiously as he readied his spear. But when he noticed Alna and me in the driver's seat, he relaxed his grip and ran on over to us. I could see the confusion on his face as he took in the convoy we'd brought back with us.

"Lord Dias, what are all these carriages?" he asked.

Alna and I had run out thinking we had trespassers, but we'd come back leading a whole procession; it was only natural for Klaus to be confused. I gave him the full report: I told him that Alna's magic had picked up Kamalotz, that Eldan had sent us farming equipment, and that we weren't just getting that but also produce and the carriage we were riding.

"That's amazing!" cried Klaus, a bright smile on his face. "So not just the horses but the carriage too! I'll inform the rest of the village!"

Klaus ran back to the village square, and a few moments later, Senai and Ayhan appeared with big white clumps in their hands, and Francis and Francoise followed after them, freshly shaved. Behind them were all the grannies. It looked to me like they'd all been in the middle of shearing the baars.

"You came back safe!" yelled Senai and Ayhan.

The twins sounded bright and happy, and they waved around the clumps of wool in their hands to welcome us home as we slowly brought the carriages into the village proper.

Seeing Off Kamalotz in the Morning, Four Days Later

Kamalotz stayed with us for three nights, and we saw him and his men off in the morning, four days after they'd arrived. As their carriages headed off in the direction of the neighboring Kasdeks domain, Senai and Ayhan started weeping.

When Kamalotz first arrived, the twins had been so shy that they couldn't even introduce themselves. With a bit of time, however, they'd broken the ice and gotten so friendly that they all played together sometimes. Having to watch their new friends leave made the girls real sad and lonely. They wept quietly while Alna patted them softly on the head.

"Come on, you can't cry all day," she said soothingly. "We've got horses to take care of once we're done seeing Kamalotz off. If we don't look after them, they'll be all hungry and thirsty, and then *they'll* be the ones crying."

Senai and Ayhan gasped, then rubbed at their teary eyes, and after glancing once more at the carriages in the distance they ran off for the stable. Alna was close behind them, and Klaus followed, telling me that he wanted to get in some horseback riding practice. I didn't have any need to go to the stable, so with Francis and Francoise in tow, I headed back to our yurt.

Kamalotz had told me that the stable would go up quickly, and he wasn't joking; he and his men were finished in just three days. They'd put up the support pillars on the day they arrived in Iluk, then the roof had gone up the day after, and then the walls and fences had gone up the day after that. They'd done a little tinkering on that same day, but it hadn't been long before the stable was complete.

Kamalotz explained to me that the reason the stable could be put up so quickly was because the materials were ready-made and could be snapped together as necessary. Putting the stable together with ready-made materials made for great flexibility, which the people in Kasdeks preferred. It meant that a stable could easily be moved, expanded, and taken down.

Thanks to Kamalotz, we now had a long stable with six separate stalls, right next to the livestock pen. He also told me to send word if we ever decided to increase our number of livestock so he could help us expand our stable or otherwise build a new one. I appreciated the gesture, but I knew that if that ever happened, I'd insist on paying for the service.

With the stable all done, Kamalotz told us it was time for him and his men to return to Kasdeks. But being that it was evening at the time we convinced them to stay the night, and we held a little village banquet to show our gratitude to all of them. It had been a while since our last party, so we sang and danced our hearts out.

As the banquet came to a close, I decided it was about time to give Kamalotz our own token of goodwill, and so I offered him some of our earth dragon materials along with some of the magical stones we didn't have any use for. Unfortunately, it resulted in some confusion among Kamalotz and his men.

I'd gotten all the materials ready in advance and put them by the carriages, but the moment Kamalotz saw it he looked very troubled. He told me they couldn't possibly accept such a huge amount of such material. One of his guards let out a squeal and asked if I was scheming something, and one of his drivers fell to his butt in utter shock. In the end, Kamalotz took the materials, but he insisted on a few conditions. Namely, that the materials were not a gift and that Kasdeks would accept them with the express purpose of putting them to use for me and my people. He was so insistent that we had to write up an official document detailing it all.

Well, Eldan seems to be good at that kind of stuff, so I guess I'll just leave him to it. I think things will work out.

I had a feeling that Eldan would soon learn of Alna's fondness for horses, so I hoped that maybe he'd send us a few more.

I was thinking about all of that as I walked through the village square, where Grandma Maya and her friends were all sitting by a campfire. By their sides they had the teapot and utensils that Kamalotz had brought for us, and I could tell by the drifting aroma that the grannies were having a little tea party.

"Black tea again, Grandma Maya?" I asked.

“Seeing as the rest of you don’t drink it, who else is there to enjoy it but us?” she replied with a hearty chuckle. “It would be such a shame for it to all go to waste, rotting away before it ever found its way to a teacup.”

And that was true enough. I’d taken one sip of the stuff and decided that I’d had my fill. The aroma was beautiful, but I couldn’t say quite the same for the flavor, which for me was just too bitter. To be honest, I couldn’t wrap my head around why the wealthy and the nobles liked the stuff so much. Alna and Klaus were the same as me, and that left only the grannies to drink the black tea. Fortunately they enjoyed it.

Senai and Ayhan loved the smell of the tea leaves but, like me, weren’t much for the taste. They took to putting a few tea leaves in tiny pots with wooden stoppers and carrying them around so they could smell them whenever they wanted.

“You let us drink all the tea we want, and we can indulge in sugar to our hearts’ content,” said Grandma Maya. “Why, we all feel like noble ladies and princesses. Coming here was very much the right decision.”

One of the grannies then commented that she’d never seen such wrinkly princesses before, and the lot of them burst into laughter. When I saw the pot of sugar by their side, I guessed that they were enjoying a little of it together with their tea.

Much like the black tea, sugar was a luxury that didn’t impress all of us. Yeah, it was mighty sweet, but I had a hard time calling it delicious. Most of us in Iluk preferred honey and dried fruits. And while sugar was supposed to be a good addition when cooking, none of it had made for very good flavoring in Alna’s dishes when she tried experimenting. Alna’s cooking already had a natural and refreshing sweetness to it thanks to the herbs she used, so sugar wasn’t necessary.

That’s why, in the end, we gave all the tea and sugar to the grannies to enjoy as their little luxuries. And to be honest, seeing them enjoy it so much was more than enough for me.

“By the way, young Dias,” said Grandma Maya, “when will you start on your fields? You have all the equipment now, yes?”

“Hm? Oh, I’m thinking I’ll start on it tomorrow. Why do you ask?”

“Chiruchi and Tara are both good farmhands, and they’d like to help you out. When you get started, would you let them know?”

Chiruchi and Tara both smiled. Chiruchi had a round, bubbly face, and Tara was the tallest of all the grannies.

“I’d be happy for the help, but farming is a very physical job,” I said. “I don’t want you two overdoing it, okay?”

“Nobody’s going to be overdoing it, young Dias,” replied Grandma Maya. “They just want to do what they can. Before we got here, farming was how we made our living, so I can assure you they won’t get in the way.”

Grandma Chiruchi and Grandma Tara both confidently nodded to attest.

I guess I can just leave the direction and the advice to them and handle the strenuous stuff myself.

“In that case, I’d be glad for the help. I’m thinking I’ll get started after breakfast, so come see me then.”

The two grannies then thumped their chests with their thin arms to show me they were up to the task. And with that done, the grannies decided to boost their morale with another round of tea, and they happily got back to their tea party. They all looked to be having a good time, but I was already preparing myself for tomorrow, knowing that it was going to be a busy day.

The Next Day, to the South of Iluk

The next day, after breakfast, I went out with Grandma Chiruchi and Grandma Tara, as well as the baars—who wanted to tag along and watch—and we all headed a little ways south of the village to start making our field.

“First up, young Dias,” said Grandma Chiruchi, standing off to the side, “make sure you’ve got a good, strong grip on the handles. Then you’re going to push to drive the blade into the earth. If the ground is tough, then you can step on the back of the blade to push it in further.”

I did exactly as I was told. I took the tool, which I wanted to call a bent and

useless hoe, and I drove it into the ground.

“That’s my boy. Very good. Make sure you give it enough power so the blade is in nice and deep. If you hit something in the soil, don’t panic. All you have to do is pull from the handles to get the blade back out. Now, once you’re ready, just tell the white ghee to start walking. They’re clearly used to this kind of work, so they’ll do most of the heavy lifting for you.”

“Uh, okay,” I said. “All right then, get to walking!”

I told the white ghee to get started, just like Grandma Chiruchi told me, then it let out a long, deep “moo” and slowly started trudging on forwards. It was attached to the plow by leather straps, and as it moved the plow cleanly dug up the earth at my feet.

The plow was basically two wheels attached to a wooden frame, with a kind of hoe-shaped blade at the front of it. Grandma Chiruchi had talked me through how to use it, and boy was it proving effective.

The white ghee pulled the plow along, and the earth was turned up as we moved. Because all the grass on the surface was buried back into the ground, we didn’t need to spend any time mowing it either. According to Grandma Chiruchi, if you watered the fields or spread fertilizer while you were plowing, the plow blade would mix all that into the soil for you.

I went up and down two or three times like that, sometimes tinkering with the depth of the plow’s blade, until Grandma Chiruchi told me it looked good. And let me tell you, it was so much faster than working with a simple hoe. I couldn’t believe how handy the plow was.

“Come on, come on now, nice and straight,” uttered Grandma Tara.

I looked over to the old woman, who was using our other plow and white ghee. Even someone as frail as Grandma Tara could work the equipment without a problem. Yep, it sure was a heck of a tool, that plow.

Given our work rate, it looked to me like our field would be done just a little before noon. I figured we might even be able to spread the seeds we had before the day was up.

“We’ll give it three days before we plant any seeds,” said Grandma Chiruchi,

noticing the look on my face. “You have to let freshly plowed soil sit for a few days, you see.”

I guess I’m in for a wait, then.

The plow had made things so easy that I was still brimming with energy. I figured that if seeds weren’t going to happen, then maybe I’d get to expanding the field we had.

“Now that we’re done with turning up the soil, I’d like you to get to digging a hole, young Dias,” said Grandma Chiruchi with a grin, once again reading the look on my face. “We’ll need a reservoir. We can look at expanding the field once we’ve finished all the prep work.”

She went on to explain to me that she was a little worried about the amount of river water that flowed to us from the northern mountains. It was possible that it might dry up over the summer, so with that in mind it was a good idea to have a reservoir in case that came to pass. We had well water for daily life, but that wouldn’t cover the sheer amount we’d need for farming.

So, we’d dig a hole, then a canal that linked it to the river. Water would slowly accumulate in our reservoir and help us prepare for summer. Actually, that was the whole reason that the grannies had said we should put our field downstream from the village; if we built it upstream we might dirty the water somewhat. I’d gone into this whole thing thinking we could put our fields wherever we wanted, but I understood now that finding a good location was important.

“Let’s get started digging up our reservoir while we let the soil in the fields sit,” said Grandma Chiruchi. “After we’ve planted our seeds, we can dig that reservoir a little deeper while we wait for them to sprout. That’s probably the best way to get everything set. We know everyone’s been saying farming is impossible in these parts, but for now let’s just give it our best shot and decide how to proceed once we see how it goes.”

She had the knowledge and experience I lacked when it came to farming, so I wasn’t about to object. I told her that was fine by me, then went back to focusing on the plow. And just as I thought, we were done a little before noon, thanks in large part to the plow itself and the efforts of the white ghee.

I'd hung pails filled with water and verdant leaf stone mix on the handles of the plow, so by the time I was done the fields were watered and fertilized. Grandma Tara had decided to use water and wood ash for the side of the field that she was plowing. That was the way that the grannies had done it back home, and they wanted the chance to try it out here too.

All right, that's the field done. Time to get to digging that reservoir. But maybe a short break is in order—I think it's about lunchtime.

Francis and Francoise, who had been a little ways from our farming, watching us and chewing on grass, ran over to join us, and we all headed back to the village. On the way, we stopped at our new stable, which was located between the field and the village, and put the ghee in their stands so they could rest. I knew we'd be using the plows again before long, so we put them next to the stable, where I wiped the dirt from their blades.

Right as I was finishing up, I heard footsteps approaching and noticed Senai and Ayhan running over and tugging at my pants with excitement and curiosity on their faces.

"Dias, are your fields ready?"

"Yeah, are you done?"

"Nope, we're still just preparing," I said, lifting the two of them up into my arms. "It'll be a few days before we're ready to start planting seeds. What brings the two of you out here, anyway? Did something happen?"

The twins pointed at the village yurts.

"Alna said to come back because lunch is ready," said Senai.

"Yeah, Alna was calling for you," added Ayhan.

"Ah, I see. And you two came out here to pass along her message, huh? Thanks."

I started walking back with the two of them still in my arms, but they whispered something to one another and then started wriggling in my grip. I looked at them to see what was going on, and for some reason Senai was looking down at the ground while Ayhan had her brow furrowed in thought. I

couldn't help wondering if they had something they wanted to tell me.

"Um, Dias?" said Ayhan. "Is it hard working on the fields? Are you tired?"

"Hm? Well, so far it hasn't been too bad at all. The work isn't that hard or tiring."

"If your fields don't go well, will that make you sad?" she asked next.

I could tell by her gaze that she was serious, so I gave her an honest answer.

"Uh, I don't think so. I just want to give it a try. If it doesn't work out, then that's that."

Usually the two twins both liked to talk over one another, but for some reason Senai stayed silent. I couldn't help wondering: what was Ayhan trying to ask me with these questions, anyway?

"Dias, if we were hiding something, would that make you sad?" asked Ayhan.

"Hm. Well, if it was something bad, then yeah, it might make me sad. But if it wasn't anything bad, well, everyone has a few things they keep to themselves, so I don't think I'd be sad, no."

Ayhan's question felt like it came completely out of nowhere, and I could feel the both of them squirming hesitantly in my arms. Did they hate being hugged, maybe? I put the twins gently on the ground, but neither spoke a word as they kept their eyes from meeting my own, and we walked on towards the village.

Francis and Francoise walked up alongside me, and they bleated at me as if asking what was going on. Grandmas Chiruchi and Tara had heard Ayhan's questions, and they seemed just as puzzled as I did. Still, I had no idea what was going on in the twins' minds, so all I could do was shrug when they looked over at me.

After that, I asked the twins what their questions meant whenever I had the chance, but neither would answer me. I asked Alna if she had any idea what was going on, but she didn't know either. She tried asking the girls too, but she had just as much luck as I did. No matter who asked or how, Senai and Ayhan just wouldn't speak about it.

I started worrying that maybe something had happened to them, but they were as happy and healthy as always, and the more I saw their bright, smiling faces just enjoying everyday life, the more I figured that their worries were just a part of growing up.

In the end, I completely forgot that the strange questions had even happened in the first place.

Inside a Wooden Box—a Very Small Creature

“Help! Somebody get me out of here, please!”

It had been about one week since I had gotten trapped in this place. I was on the brink, at my very limits, so I cried out desperately.

“Is anybody out there? Can someone please free me?!”

My race, the desert people, can go for quite some time without water, but it had been a whole week, and things weren’t looking good. Given the predicament I now found myself in, I realized that I might have been better off simply begging the dragon slayer, Dias, for help back when I had the chance.

“Anybody? Is anybody out there?”

Just as I started to think that I was perhaps doomed to perish in this box, I felt something—the presence of two small people approaching. I could hear them.

“Is somebody there?” I cried. “Please, help me! Get me out of here!”

I wasn’t just shouting anymore; I was also scratching at the walls, praying that it was enough for whoever was out there to notice me.

If this doesn’t work, I’m done for. I won’t be able to stand much more! So please, I beg of you! Please notice me!

“You heard it too, right?”

“Is there something in the storehouse?”

Yay! Success!

“I’m here! In this wooden box!” I cried. “Someone put something on top of the box and I can’t open the lid from inside!”

I scratched more fervently at the walls of the box, raising my voice as I cried out. The two people talking came closer and started working to free me.

“Ayhan, this is heavy. I can’t move it by myself,” said one.

“Wait, Senai,” said the other. “If we don’t move them in the right order...”

From the sounds of their voices, it seemed like they were both young girls. They were both doing their best to help me, but judging by their voices and the sound of them moving around, they weren't quite strong enough to get the job done.

"Um, please don't do anything rash," I said. "Perhaps it would be best to call an adult? Is Sir Dias nearby?"

"All the adults are busy! They can't help!" came the reply.

"Oh, I see. Well, it's no good if you get hurt, so wouldn't it be best to get an adult to help? I don't mind waiting until someone is available. Perhaps you could just go and tell somebody that I'm trapped in here?"

"We'll be done in a second!" cried one of the girls.

"Just a little more!" cried the other.

I could hear the two of them breathing a little heavier as they worked the best they could. Then I heard something sliding and falling to the ground in a rather rough fashion.

Oh dear, it sounds like the adults might be quite angry at the rough treatment later.

"Last one!" cried one of the girls.

"Ugh...it's so heavy!"

I heard something being pushed from the top of the box I was trapped in. Finally, I was free! I pushed against the lid with both hands and sucked in the crisp, refreshing fresh air of the outside world. I let my chest fill with the joy of release from that box full of beans, then took to thanking my two little saviors.

"Oh my, thank you ever so much," I said with a relieved sigh. "I've been stuck here for a week, and it was so very, very hard! You saved my life!"

The two girls, twins it would seem, looked at me, their eyes alight.

"I'm Senai," said one. "Who are you, with that little body and that tiny book of yours? Are you a beastkin? Are you a boy? Or a girl?"

"Hi, I'm Ayhan," said the other. "Nice to meet you. I really like your glasses."

“Oh, um, it’s nice to meet the two of you too,” I replied, brushing at my cloak, which was a little dirty given the fact I hadn’t been able to wash it in a while. “I’m a big-eared hopping mousekin by the name of Aymer Jerrybower. And I’m a woman. I know I look tiny, but I’m an adult. This book is for study, and I made it myself. The glasses too, actually.”

The girls’ eyes lit up even more at my reply, and they let out gasps of surprise and wonder. They seemed engrossed by my every word and gesture. Then they reached out timidly to touch my ears and tail. They were so full of innocent curiosity that it was almost comforting. I didn’t see the problem with indulging them since they weren’t being rough, and so they patted me to their hearts’ content. And when I finally thought they were satisfied, they started asking me questions.

They asked me about whatever came to mind: my home, my family, whether I was married, whether I had a boyfriend, all sorts of things. I answered them honestly—I called the desert my home, I didn’t have a family, I wasn’t married, and I didn’t have a boyfriend—and that started a new line of questions. They wanted to know more about the desert this time, and when I answered those questions, it only invited more.

“Hey Aymer, why were you trapped in this box?” asked Senai eventually.

“Was it punishment for doing something bad?” asked Ayhan.

They asked the questions very calmly and casually. The answers were rather embarrassing, but being that the two girls had saved my life, I was honest with them.

“Well, um, I didn’t do anything bad, and it wasn’t a punishment. It’s a little difficult to explain exactly *how* I was trapped, but basically, some mousekin I know were up to no good, and they were caught by Dias. Dias and the people he was with began a search in case there were other dangerous mousekin...”

I made the story as simple as I could so that Senai and Ayhan could understand how I’d parted with my brethren a week ago.

“I just happened to be with them,” I said, “but I promise you I didn’t do anything bad myself, and I was never intending anything of the sort either. The problem is that my fellow mousekin and I look exactly alike, and I was worried

that Dias and the others would think me one of them. I knew they'd punish me too if that were the case, and so I ran in terror. Or at least, I tried; because there was nowhere to run to, I ended up hiding in this box. And the moment I took refuge here, someone placed something heavy atop the lid of the box, and I couldn't escape. And...that's everything."

It was such a pitiful experience to have to share, but it was indeed how I had ended up in my predicament. Even after the official search had concluded, nobody put the object on my box back in its place, leaving me trapped. When Dias finally took to unloading everything from the carriages I thought I'd have my chance, but he unloaded the box I was in with the stuff on top of it, and so there was nothing I could do.

There was of course the option of calling out to Dias himself for help, but the mousekin had tried to take his life, and so I thought he'd be furious. This dampened my courage considerably. And though Dias and a few others had come by the box since, I just couldn't seem to muster the guts to call out. Time passed, and all of a sudden I'd been stuck in that box for a whole week. The only fortunate thing about it was that it was a box full of beans, which saved me from starvation.

In hindsight, I was overwhelmingly ashamed of myself for my indecision.

"Hm... So you're not Dias's friend?" asked Senai.

"You two don't get along?" asked Ayhan.

"Um, well, I suppose we're not. I've never even talked to the man, so I suppose that makes us essentially strangers."

The twins' questions had taken me quite by surprise, and I'd answered without thinking. Once they heard my answer, the two girls looked at each other, their faces in deep thought. Then they began whispering among themselves.

"I don't think Aymer is bad," said one.

"And I don't think she's lying either," said the other.

They fell into a discussion which I couldn't entirely follow, and finally they both nodded. I felt my ears twitch as they both turned to face me.

“Um, we want to discuss something with you,” said Senai.

“It’s a secret, and it’s something we can’t let Dias and the others know about,” said Ayhan.

“A secret? Hm, but why would you want to share that with me? We’ve only just met. Surely I’m not the right person to talk to.”

“You’re the *only* person we can talk to. We can’t talk to the other villagers.”

“It’s something we can’t tell humans. Demi-humans and others are okay, but we can’t tell Francis and Francoise because they love Dias, and they’d tell him right away.”

“Hm?” I murmured and tilted my head, befuddled. “I don’t really understand what you mean, but I at least know that you don’t have anyone else to confide in. So, what is it you’d like to discuss?”

The girls had clearly been aching for me to say as much, because they fired off into a high-speed explanation immediately.

“Dias is making a field, and every day he gets all sweaty trying to do his best, and he works hard all the time.”

“But everything gets sucked away, so it’s no good.”

“We can do something to fix it, but we’re not supposed to tell humans about it.”

“Mom and dad told us that if humans find out about our forest powers they’ll make us do bad things, so we can’t show them.”

“That was the last promise we made with our mom and dad.”

“We can’t tell humans about our powers, but we want to help Dias...”

“But you’re not a human, Aymer, so we can tell you about it. What do you think we should do?”

The girls were very desperate, and they did their utmost to try and explain things to me, but I didn’t have the whole picture, and so I couldn’t put it all together. I knew that Dias was making a field but it wasn’t going to work because something was...sucking away...something, and the girls weren’t

supposed to tell humans about their forest powers.

Huh?

“Senai, Ayhan,” I said, “I don’t really understand, so I’m going to need a little more detail. Will you tell me about these powers of yours, and Dias and his field?”

The twins nodded happily and explained to me the nature of their unique powers.

“Now do you get it?” asked Senai.

“Yeah, do you understand?” asked Ayhan.

The girls had just finished explaining their abilities to me, and I let out a deep sigh. I knew I shouldn’t have expected them to put together an orderly explanation of what I had asked, but what they gave me was—putting it bluntly—incredibly messy, and there was so much to take in that I couldn’t process it all.

“Give me a moment to internally organize what you’ve just told me, girls,” I said. “Uh, for starters, the two of you are of a race called forestkin, yes?”

“Yes, we lived in the forest!”

“The forestkin protect the forest!”

“So your people live in the forest and protect it,” I continued. “Hence the name. And helping the forest grow is very important to you, yes?”

“Yep. When forestkin are going to die, they put all they have in a seed,” replied Senai.

“Like all their knowledge and powers. It goes in a seed,” added Ayhan.

“And those seeds become the forest,” said Senai.

Those who were about to pass away entrusted the seed they became to their family, who raised and protected those seeds, which became part of the forest. When a fallen forestkin grew into a tree, other forestkin could feel their thoughts and emotions through the tree. In this sense, a tree became a

gravestone, a source of knowledge, and a family tree of sorts. Protecting all of these trees was why the forestkin lived in the forest.

Wow, that is quite the story.

Senai and Ayhan had two powers unique to the forestkin: they could help the forest to grow, and they could protect it.

“Now, your first power works by you sharing your magical energy with plants, thus helping them grow more quickly. Your second power is the ability to create barriers to protect plants from illness and miasma. Do I have things right so far?”

“That’s good! You got it!”

“Aymer, you’re such a good girl! You’re so smart!”

I had a feeling that the girls were praising me with the very compliments they were used to getting themselves, but I smiled and thanked them all the same. The girls’ ears twitched and they grinned happily. It was all very heartwarming.

Senai and Ayhan were still young, and so their powers were limited. At the moment, the most they could muster was helping seeds to sprout and casting small barriers. However, even with their limited abilities, the key was consistency. If they kept using them regularly, they could soon grow full trees in the blink of an eye and create a barrier that would protect against virtually any damage. They were truly impressive powers.

And if humans were to discover something so helpful and convenient... It’s no wonder that the girls’ parents made them promise to hide them.

“You’re not to tell a single human about your powers, and you’re not to show any humans your powers either. That’s what you promised your parents, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Yep!”

“But if that’s the case, why are you here living with Dias and other humans? Wouldn’t it be best to stay far away from them?”

“At first we were scared of Dias,” said Senai, “and we knew we had to keep

our promise so we were going to run away. But when Dias held us we could tell by his touch that he was a kind man.”

“His voice is kind too,” added Ayhan. “It’s like mom and dad’s.”

“He’s really nice...but he’s kind of stinky.”

“Yeah, he smells like sweat.”

“But he’s still really nice—way nicer than the frogman we were with. We want to live together with Dias.”

“And everyone else at the village is nice too, so we like it here. Even if Dias is stinky!”

The girls looked at each other and smiled. I could tell from what they’d told me that they liked life at the village, but now I could really feel it in them. I realized that perhaps this Dias character was not as scary as I had thought. In fact, he seemed like a gentle and kind man despite his looks, and those characteristics explained why Senai and Ayhan were so bright and bubbly.

“When we lived here for a while, and after we made friends with Dias and the others, we thought maybe it would be okay to tell them about our powers,” said Senai.

“We don’t think he’d ever do anything bad with them,” added Ayhan.

“But our dad told us not to tell humans *no matter what* and that we mustn’t show anyone.”

“And our mom said we absolutely mustn’t break our promise.”

“I understand,” I said. “You want to be true to the promise you made, but you also want to help Dias. That’s why you want to help him in such a way that you don’t break your promise, but you wanted to talk to someone about it, yes?”

I could see how earnest the girls were as they nodded silently in response.

Hm. So now it’s my turn to put some serious thought into this.

“Oh, now, what was it again? You said that Dias’s produce in the field won’t grow because everything gets drained by something, and he’ll need your powers to overcome that?”

“Yes. There’s no power in the soil here. It all gets sucked away,” said Senai.

“Even when we give it some of our own power, it disappears,” said Ayhan.

“We tried planting mom and dad’s seeds in the village square, but they didn’t grow. The soil has no power to give them.”

“We kept trying to give it some of our power, but it was no good.”

“We need a barrier to stop the power being sucked away.”

“The barrier will stop it.”

Hm. I don’t understand this at all. The power in the soil is being sucked away? What in the world could be doing that? Perhaps if I have a better idea of exactly what phenomenon is taking place, we can work out a countermeasure that doesn’t even need magic.

I asked Senai and Ayhan to tell me more about what was sucking away the power in the grasslands, but...

“We don’t know either!” cried Senai.

“We don’t know!” echoed Ayhan.

“We don’t know, but they don’t seem like they’re bad.”

“I think they’re kind.”

“If they sucked *everything* away, this place would just be sand. But they didn’t take everything.”

“Yeah, they left food for Francis and Francoise.”

What I gathered was that the girls could sense that the power was being sucked away, but they didn’t know anything beyond that. However, the way they talked made me think that *someone* was causing it to happen, even though, as far as I was aware, such a thing was utterly impossible.

Didn’t it make more sense that some kind of natural phenomenon had caused the ground to become infertile but not to the extent that it became a desert?

And given that the girls think a barrier is the answer, perhaps it’s a disease of some kind or the work of some monster’s miasma.

In any case, it was impossible for me to develop a countermeasure if the cause wasn't clear, so in the end we had to think of a way for the girls to use their barrier magic without Dias or the others noticing.

But how to do such a thing undetected...?

"Senai, Ayhan," I said. "Can you sneak over to the field while Dias is away?"

"No, because he's always there."

"He'll be there every day hoping for the field to grow."

"And when he finishes at the field, he's with us until we all go to sleep."

"So we're always with people."

"Oh, well then, how about doing it once everybody goes to sleep? You don't have to worry about anyone spotting you then."

The two girls' jaws dropped. It was like they'd never even considered the idea. But then they both seemed to realize something, and they suddenly looked troubled.

"No, that won't work," said Senai. "We sleep at night."

"We can't just wake up once we go to sleep," said Ayhan.

"What if I woke you?" I asked. "I don't need lots of sleep, and it won't be difficult for me to stay awake. I mean, all I've really been doing is sleeping since I found myself in this box, so rest won't be a problem for me. You might not think so to look at me, but I can also see well in the dark, so I can guide you. All you need to do is tell me where you sleep, and I'll sneak in and wake you."

The girls' expressions brightened in an instant. They finally had something like a solution, and they were overjoyed. Or rather, the idea of a sudden nighttime adventure had them holding hands and jumping up and down, shouting with delight.

"Erm, I'm going to stay hidden in here until evening," I said, "so you two just act as usual and make sure Dias doesn't think you're up to anything suspicious. Girls? Are you listening? If you go home looking so excited, Dias is going to know you're up to something."

I tried to make a proper plan with the girls regarding sneaking in and out in the evening, but they were so excited that I didn't get anywhere with them.

All they had to do was act normal so that Dias didn't suspect them of anything, but I was starting to worry. Could the girls even do that?

Iluk Village in the Dead of Night—Aymer

The sun set, night fell, and once I was certain that it was quiet in the vicinity, I left the storehouse. I headed to Senai and Ayhan's house so I could make good on my promise.

On the way, I stopped by a nearby river and drank my fill. It had been so long! Then I hopped through the grass until I arrived at a circular house made of white cloth. Now that I was here, I simply needed to muster the courage to enter, but...that courage was not particularly easy to find. After all, I knew that the dragon slayer himself, Dias, was also inside.

I worried that even though everyone was asleep, Dias might sense my movement and awaken, or that he had cottoned on to our plans already and was inside waiting for me. The working of my imagination kept my feet firmly planted to the ground, unable to move.

Oh...but Senai and Ayhan are expecting me, and they saved my life. I simply must do as I promised!

According to the twins, they had accidentally torn open a small hole near the house's front door. It did not take me long to find it. The hole was the perfect size for one as small as myself, and I peeked my head in to take a look around. Then, I mustered up as much courage as I could and took a step inside.

I had expected it to be very dark, but it was in fact quite bright, thanks to the skylight near the roof, which let in ample moonlight. I took a look around and headed for the shapes that looked like people in slumber.

Huh. No beds in this house.

A male was sprawled along the ground with his arms and legs out wide, and I assumed this to be Dias. Near him was a young girl wrapped in a white, woolen cloth.

Okay, so where are Senai and Ayhan then...? Ah, they're between Dias and the girl, sleeping with some soft toys. Oh. Those aren't soft toys, are they? I mean,

for one thing I can hear them breathing, which means they must be animals.

At this point, I found myself most sincerely wishing that the twins could have slept in a place where it would have been easier for me to wake them. I felt like I was going to have to navigate a series of traps to get to them.

Be that as it may, I had made a promise, and so I once more dug deep in search of the courage to go on. I knew I could leap straight over to them, but I didn't want Dias to wake to the noise, so I opted instead to move more cautiously and quietly. With my tail clasped in my hands to make sure it didn't brush against anything, I crept forwards little by little, slowly and carefully, in between the slumbering Dias and his partner.

As I crept forwards, I sniffed at the air and caught a whiff of the stinky sweat from Dias's body. It was exactly like the girls had told me. Still, I kept on moving, all the while ensuring nobody noticed me, until finally I reached Senai and Ayhan's pillows. Now all I had to do was wake them and hope nobody else could hear me.

"Good evening, girls," I whispered. "It's Aymer. I'm here as promised. Time to wake up."

They did not wake. Perhaps I should have known that it wasn't going to be so easy. I raised my voice just slightly and continued patiently talking to the girls, who were starting to twist and turn.

"It's Aymer. It's time to go to the field. Time to go and help Dias, remember? If you don't wake up soon it'll be morning, and you won't be able to help him anymore. Girls, it's nighttime. It's time to go out on our nighttime walk."

Perhaps thanks to my perseverance, or perhaps simply thanks to the words "nighttime walk," Senai gripped me tight and sat up, followed quickly by Ayhan. The two of them then marched towards the front door.

Wait! Girls! A little quiet, please?! You'll wake Dias with all this noise!

But for all my panicking, Dias and the others didn't budge at the sound of the girls' footsteps. I thought they were making quite the racket, but perhaps I was overly tense. When the girls reached the front door, they slipped out of the yurt. They took one step outside and into the light of the moon, but they moved

no farther. For some reason, they were frozen in place.

“Um, girls? Whatever is the matter?” I asked. “Are we not going to the field?”

“It’s dark...” uttered Senai.

“And scary...” added Ayhan.

What?! B-But the two of you were so excited earlier! Now all of a sudden you’re afraid?!

“Oh my,” I uttered. “What about when you need to go to the toilet in the evening? What do you usually do then?”

“Dias or Alna always go with us,” replied Senai.

“They hold our hands or carry us.”

Oh...

Right now *I* was the one being carried, and my tiny hands weren’t going to be particularly reassuring either.

What to do, what to do...

Just as I was trying to work out the best way to encourage the two girls, Ayhan’s face lit up. She remembered something and began ruffling through her clothes, looking for something in a pocket. Senai started doing the same and put me on her shoulder so she could search her own more thoroughly. Eventually, both pulled out two little earthenware pots with stoppers made from tree branches.

The girls pulled the stoppers from the pots, and the rich smell of tea drifted through the air. They must have put tea leaves in them. It was a scent I remembered well from my time at Eldan’s residence, and it was truly a wonderful aroma.

But what would the girls need with tea leaves?

I was puzzled, but the girls took something from inside of their pots: long, slender seeds that rested among the tea leaves.

Seeds? Oh, I see...

“Senai, Ayhan,” I said. “By any chance, are those seeds...?”

“Yes,” replied Senai. “They’re the seeds of our mom and dad.”

“Senai carries our dad, and I carry our mom,” said Ayhan.

They’d told me in the storehouse that they’d tried planting those seeds, so I had assumed they were already in the ground, but it seemed not.

“When we hold these seeds, mom and dad give us strength.”

“They liked tea a lot, so now they’re always with tea. But sometimes we hold them like this and talk to them.”

The two girls gripped the seeds in their hands and looked forwards into the night, drawing strength and courage from the seeds their parents had left them.

“Senai, Ayhan, I see well in the dark and my hearing is excellent,” I assured them. “I will make sure you get to the field safely.”

My words pushed the girls on, and they took timid steps towards the field. Our evening adventure had begun.

The path ahead of us held many foes: the sounds of the flowing river, the wind, and the rustling of the grass. Then there was the dripping of well water, the sneezes of old women inside their homes, the neighing of sleeping horses, and the quiet buzz of insects. All of these sounds attacked us—or more accurately, the twins—and the girls shivered as each one arose, our trek pausing every time. At times they considered heading back home. We did not make it easily to our destination.

And sounds alone were not the only foes we faced. When the clouds covered the moon and blocked its light, darkness reared its head. Senai and Ayhan were powerless before it, and they shivered in fear, cowering until moonlight once again broke through the clouds.

Strong gusts of wind, too, proved to be daunting foes. The girls froze whenever it blew, and when it carried strands of grass that brushed by the girls’ cheeks, they very nearly screamed in fright.

But they did not scream, and they did not cry. Senai and Ayhan were pushed onwards by their strong desire to help Dias. I too made an effort to help them. I

kept my ears open in case any animals lurked nearby, and I encouraged the girls when it seemed that fear might break them. There wasn't a single presence around us worth worrying about, though my words of encouragement seemed to fall on deaf ears. Nonetheless, I was doing the best I could.

And so, fighting against the many foes that faced them and against their fears along the way, the girls walked on, steadily overcoming every obstacle until we finally arrived at the field.

The field that Dias had worked to make was a rectangular plot lined with the soil ridges one expected of such fields. At a glance, nothing seemed out of order. Rather, it was a very well plowed field.

The girls quickly left me at the edge of the field as they put their seeds back in the pots, then walked to the center of it, careful not to disturb the ridges. Once there, they knelt facing one another and held their hands to their chests, chanting words of magic as they closed their eyes. I had never heard the strange language in which they spoke.

In quiet voices, they chanted in a way that resembled singing, and in response to their words, the pendants hanging from their necks and the jewels in their hair began to emit a white light. The beauty of their magic in action left me breathless. Even the girls themselves were surprised to see it, and their eyes briefly grew wide, but they continued to chant, and between them another beautiful light began to spread.



It was like they were creating moonlight, white and pretty and warm. That light expanded out from them, then gradually fell upon the earth, sunk beneath the soil, and disappeared. When the light was gone, the girls muttered in voices I could only barely pick up.

What I heard was “Hagoe, migoe, negoe,” and then the two of them saying that they thought things had gone well. Just when I thought that they were going to begin chanting again, the girls began to speak drowsily, their eyes drooping.

“I’m beat...and sleepy... Let’s go back to the yurt...”

“So sleepy...”

Senai once more picked me up in her grasp, and the girls ran back to their home as if all the fear they’d felt earlier meant nothing now.

Oh, um, huh?! If you’re going back home, then that means my job is done, so why are you still holding me?!

“Um, please...” I said. “Please let me go!”

I struggled to wriggle free as I spoke, but my words didn’t reach the girls, and Senai didn’t loosen her grip on me either. And so they carried me straight into their yurt, where Dias was still fast asleep. They nestled into their spots on the floor and went straight to sleep, with me stuck in between the two of them.

There wasn’t any room whatsoever for me to free myself and escape. I was completely, hopelessly trapped.

A Tavern in the City of Merangal, Kasdeks—Men Drunk and Chatting

The city of Merangal, located in western part of Kasdeks, was home to the domain lord's residence, which was constructed entirely of marble. Not far from it was the city's most popular tavern, and on this evening, as it was with many others, it had been positively bustling.

There was no shortage of bright and bubbly stories now that the domain lord had changed, and everyone with a drink in their hand always wore an open and genuine smile. Some were crowded around tables talking with their friends, others sitting at the counter chatting with the barkeep, and yet others wandered in search of chance encounters. Wherever one looked, conversation bloomed on all manner of topics.

"Hey, did you hear? Eldan is visiting the royal capital. He intends to be officially recognized as the new domain lord."

"Yeah, I heard all right. I heard he's bringing along a magic stone from an earth dragon that he got from the dragon slayer himself too. Those bigwigs are gonna lose their minds when they see that."

"The king'll look fondly on anyone who offers a magic stone as a gift, and that'll only make Kasdeks a more secure place to live."

The tavern was a place not just for humans but also for dogkin, sambarkin, lionkin, and all sorts of other races. There were just as many different conversations as there were races in the room, and the place grew more lively as more customers came in with their own stories to share.

"Rumor has it the dragon slayer is madly in love with his demi-human wife, and he's all about showing it too."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's true actually. My big brother works as one of Kamalotz's guards, and the dragon slayer couldn't keep his hands off his wife even though they were in front of the lot of them."

“No kidding? The dragon slayer sounds crazy.”

All of the men listening tensed up at the thought of the dragon slayer acting so brazenly in front of Kamalotz, and as they shared comments of disbelief, a man walked into the bar, cloaked in a black robe. For a moment, the patrons stopped chatting as they looked at him, his face and body completely hidden, but they just as soon lost interest and returned to their delicious drink and intriguing conversations.

“Uh...what were we talking about again?”

“You know, the dragon slayer and how crazy he is, getting all lovey-dovey with his wife in front of Kamalotz.”

“Oh, that. But they say that the dragon slayer is really something. My brother said that when he and his fellow guards were tired, the dragon slayer built them a cloth house all by himself and shared his food with them. He even treated them to fine wine.”

“He sure sounds impressive. And I guess the fact that he’s married to a demi-human proves that he’s not racist to our type either. Hard to believe he’s a human noble at all.”

“And if I’m not mistaken, the dragon slayer hails from the eastern region, right? They *hate* demi-humans over that way.”

“The way my brother tells it, the dragon slayer didn’t know anything about demi-humans until recently. Hadn’t heard or seen a thing about them. And then he goes and makes the first one he meets his wife. Love at first sight. That was enough for him to open his heart to all of them.”

“Ha ha ha! Even the dragon slayer is weak to the wiles of women! That would mean that we have the dragon slayer’s wife to thank for him forming a friendly alliance with Lord Eldan, huh? That means we gotta toast to her, ya hear? Cheers! To the wife of the dragon slayer and to love at first sight!”

The group of men held their wooden mugs up high, and even those who hadn’t heard a word of the conversation held up their own mugs until the whole bar was shouting cheers. Commotion rippled across the tavern, and when things calmed down, the men got back to their rumors.

“So what race is the dragon slayer’s wife, anyway? Is she a beastkin?”

“My brother says she’s got a horn growing from her head, but I didn’t hear the name of her race.”

“A horn? You don’t think she’s a rhinokin, do you? Could a human fall for a rhinokin? I gotta tell you, that dragon slayer really *is* something else.”

All of them thought of the rhinokin and imagined a tall woman with tough, thick skin—and lacking any hair, as was the norm for the race. The image sent a shiver down all of their spines.

“So he fell in love with a rhinokin? So what?” asked a rhinokin woman who happened to be passing by. “What’s wrong with a human-meets-rhinokin romance, huh? I sometimes consider love with another race myself, and I think the dragon slayer’s story is wonderful!”

The men cowered under the rhinokin’s gaze, and when she left them alone they quickly changed the subject.

“Anyway, speaking of the dragon slayer, have you guys seen that sign he made? It’s in front of Lord Eldan’s place, and it says he’s looking for residents for his domain.”

“Yeah, I saw it all right. Says he’ll take anybody long as they ain’t criminals, and he’s providing room and board.”

“Oh, that. One of the dragon slayer’s underlings made it and asked Kamalotz to put it where people would see it. But there’s not much to go on by that sign alone. Can’t imagine many will want to make the move to the neighboring domain. Room and board is one thing, but who knows what you’ll encounter out in those parts.”

“Well actually, I saw some of the small-ilk dogkin staring pretty intently at that sign. I don’t know what drew them in, but they looked pretty eager to me.”

“Man, I don’t understand those small-ilk types at all. Normally nobody would even think of leaving Lord Eldan’s side, right?”

Everyone around the table agreed with the comment, and with a shared nod, they all took another gulp from their mugs.

“I mean, it’s thanks to Lord Eldan that we can all drink our guts out! Speaking of small-ilk, I can’t help thinking about that hopping mousekin incident...”

“Hey, enough of that! Talking about idiots kicking mud on Lord Eldan’s name is only gonna spoil our drinks!”

“Yeah, but listen for a sec. They say that there was somebody behind that surprise attack on the dragon slayer.”

“Like a mastermind? Are you for real?”

“All the hopping mousekin said that some guy claiming to be a monkeykin put them up to it. At first Lord Eldan thought they were making excuses, but as it turns out, other people have mentioned being approached by a monkeykin too.”

“Hold up. I feel like we’re getting into dangerous territory here. A monkeykin? As far as I’m aware that race doesn’t even exist. I’ve never heard of one in real life.”

“Me neither. But there’s no doubt that there’s someone around town calling themselves that, a tall guy who keeps himself hidden in black robes. He told the hopping mousekin that if they killed the dragon slayer, they’d be renowned across the lands. He even convinced them that Lord Eldan actually wanted the dragon slayer dead and that killing him would earn them mountains of gold. That’s what this so-called monkeykin has been spreading.”

“And the mousekin actually believed him? I mean, come on. That’s about as sketchy a story as they come. Not to mention that the guy who’s telling it is covered in suspicious black robes. Hey, speaking of which, didn’t a guy in black robes just walk in a minute ago?”

The men snapped to their senses and looked around the bar for the figure cloaked in black. For all they knew, he was the guy behind the incident that had almost sullied Lord Eldan’s name and reputation. And if he was here in this tavern, then they were going to catch him, hurt him, and hand him in to the authorities. But wherever they looked, they found nothing, so the men’s intensity waned and eventually dissipated.

“I was so sure a guy like that came in here. Was I imagining it?”

“Probably too drunk and mistook a boarkin for the guy.”

“Nah, I’m not *that* drunk.”

“Should we inform the guards, just to be safe?”

Despite their misgivings, the men took their mugs in hand and drank them down. It wasn’t long before another spark of conversation had them all talking again, and in just a few minutes, they had completely forgotten about the man in black.

An Alleyway near the Tavern—a Mysterious Man

“Tch! ‘The beastkin are idiots,’ they said! ‘They’ll fall for anything,’ they said! But no matter what I said or how much money I flashed them, none would listen! The only ones who did were those mousekin, and they failed. I never put much faith in them to begin with, but still, the poison I gave them was completely wasted. I have money, so perhaps I can buy some slaves or vagrants... No. Mercenaries were no good, so they’d be useless too. Gah. First things first, I have to do something about these robes now that rumors are spreading...”

The man wandered deeper into the alleyway by the tavern, talking to himself the whole way. Then he stopped, and after ensuring there was nobody around he removed his black robes and threw them away. Then he took off walking again.

He trudged on through the darkness, wavering as he went, muttering to himself as thoughts and memories came to him. He soon found his gaze drawn to a brothel on the edge of the city. He stared at it for a time; then when he realized what it was his face scrunched up and stretched into something none would call human, and he spewed curses into the air.

He continued cursing until he had said everything at the very depths of his heart, and it seemed to soothe him, for his features calmed and returned to normal. He began walking once more, as if nothing had happened, and disappeared from the city.

The Royal Capital Knight Station—Royal Knights

Knight stations were built in the eastern region of the kingdom, where the royal capital was located, for the purpose of keeping peace and order. One only needed to glance at the exterior of the station to know that the brick building was incredibly sturdy, and it was packed with facilities. One such facility was a practice room where knights could build their bodies and train, but the knights in the room today showed no sign of doing any such thing. Instead they indulged in gossip.

“I hear another has defected from Princess Diane’s faction,” said one.

“Whoa! Again? Her faction already lacks power and money. You gotta feel like she doesn’t have all that much longer left.”

“Not sure what she’s up to, but she went out to the countryside saying that war is coming, and monsters are attacking, and stuff like that. They say the king’s going to reprimand her soon enough.”

Even from a distance one could see that the knights had been dressed in drab armor that wasn’t particularly well cared for, but they didn’t care much. They leaned against the wall and sat on the floor and continued their conversation.

“I heard that Prince Meiser just lost Duke Kasdeks, and he controlled trade in the west. I guess that makes Prince Richard next in line for the throne?”

“Who knows? Princess Isabelle and Princess Helena haven’t given up, so there’s still no telling how things will shake out.”

There were five players in the struggle for the royal throne: First Prince Richard, Second Prince Meiser, First Princess Isabelle, Second Princess Helena, and Third Princess Diane. The knights wrote the initials for each of their names on the floor of the training room. Around those names they then wrote the initials for the nobles and merchants who had sided with each and began discussing such things as military power and political authority.

“Prince Richard having the temple on his side is big.”

“But don’t count out Princess Isabelle. She has the support of Duke Sachusse.”

“Now that Kasdeks has split from Prince Meiser, where’s he going to go? To Prince Richard?”

“You’ve got it wrong. Kasdeks didn’t split from Prince Meiser; he died of illness. His second son took his place, and that son split from Prince Meiser.”

“The second son? What happened to the first?”

“Apparently he died of illness too. You know how it is with nobles and the uh...*illnesses* that take their lives.”

Everyone knew what he meant by his words, and all the knights sighed.

“So? Just what sort of guy is Kasdeks’s second son?”

“I was curious so I asked around with the merchants, but I wouldn’t put any stock in what they told me. It’s all so crazy that nobody would believe it.”

“You can’t just say that and leave it! Now you *have* to tell us what they said.”

“All right, but no complaining that I’m talking nonsense, all right?”

The knight who spoke cleared his throat and began talking about Kasdeks’s second son.

“They say that ever since he was young, the kid was really clever, and that he showed a knack for trading and the merchant business as early as ten years old. And not just that, but he had ideas nobody had ever thought of and developed all sorts of equipment. Even outside of trading, he’s apparently strong enough to lift a full-grown human with one hand, and he can move boulders blocking the roads with ease. In fact, one of those very boulders decorates his garden as a memento. Oh, then there’s the stories about his womanizing. They say he’s got upwards of ten or twenty wives.”

“I mean, everyone expects nobles to make up stuff about themselves, but isn’t that a bit much?”

“That’s what I thought too. But you know, all the merchants coming from the west, they *all* say the same thing.”

“Well if it’s true, it’s astounding, but even if they’re all lies, then it still means

that the second son of Kasdeks has the power and money to make those merchants say what he wants. And if that's the case, then the future might be decided based on which camp *he* decides to sit with."

One of the knights drew a circle separate from the diagram of initials.

"And then there's talk of how the second son of Kasdeks is friends with Dias. Their domains are right next to each other, and apparently they're already on friendly terms. I've heard that they felled a dragon together."

"Oh yeah... Dias was given the Nezrose Grasslands west of Kasdeks."

"Nezrose?! You mean the plains where the last domain lord died a cursed death within a week of his appointment?!"

"I heard that it was the lands that were cursed. You can't grow crops on the soil, and any houses or fortifications you try to build burn down in a couple days. Where the heck did you hear about cursed deaths?"

The knights then wrote Dias's initials next to the circle.

"But if that really is the case, then it means that Dias and Kasdeks might decide the future of the kingdom itself. I haven't met Dias, but I've heard rumors. Some say he's kindly; others say he's got no balls."

"Hey, wait a sec—"

But just as the knight was about to go on, another hurriedly burst into the training room. The chatting knights looked at the panicking knight with furrowed brows.

"Um, Princess Diane just left with a large group of soldiers!" the young, panicking knight exclaimed. "Did something happen?"

"Huh? Calm down. She's probably just off to visit the countryside again."

But the young knight shook his head.

"But she took close to two hundred men with her!" he said. "And at least twenty carriages filled with supplies! Has war broken out somewhere?!"

The knights suddenly grew tense and pale, but they soon realized that two hundred men weren't nearly enough to go to war with. On top of that, if

anything *had* happened, dealing with it would be the work of another station, so the knights relaxed and, ignoring their panicking compatriot, decided instead to return to their conversation.

The young knight was puzzled by their attitude, but he knew he could do nothing more on his own, so he simply stood speechless where he was.

Iluk Village—Dias

A number of incidents took place in the morning, and these filled Iluk Village with something of a turbulent, confused air.

Firstly, there were Senai and Ayhan, who at some point in the evening had brought a mouse with them to bed. Alna noticed it almost as soon as she woke up, and she flew into a rage, demanding that the girls explain to her why they had decided to sleep with a disease-carrying pest. As a result, Senai, Ayhan, and the mouse—or more accurately, the hopping mousekin who called herself Aymer—were summarily dragged off for a scolding and a full-body herbal cleansing.

“Hoh ho, so that explains the children’s screams that I heard earlier,” said Geraint. “I must admit it was quite the shock at first, but your explanation helps put things into perspective.”

I told him that at first, I was worried about the fact that Aymer was a hopping mousekin and feared another attack, but Alna told me not to worry. And if Alna said not to worry, then I wasn’t going to worry.

“Hoh ho, so you trust your wife implicitly, then,” commented Geraint.

Well, there was that, but there was also the fact that Aymer was a strong blue. But I wasn’t going to bore Geraint with an explanation of that just now.

Secondly, the seeds we’d planted the day before had sprouted. And, well, of course planted seeds usually sprout, which meant it was less an “incident” and more a natural phenomenon, but the problem was exactly *how* the seeds had sprouted. You see, the field we’d plowed was rectangular in shape and split in two—one side was my half, and one side was Grandma Chiruchi and Grandma Tara’s. We’d made ridges in the soil and planted our seeds accordingly. Now, what we should have ended up with was a rectangular field filled with sprouting produce. Instead, the sprouted produce was in the shape of a circle.

“Hoh ho, a circle, you say? Do you mean a perfect circle?”

Yep, it was a perfect circle. In the middle of the field, which was wider than it was tall, we had a perfect circle split smack-dab in between my side of the field and the grannies' side of the field. Only the seeds that were within the circle had sprouted. Nothing outside of it grew.

The other thing was that it wasn't only the seeds we'd planted that grew. Grass and weeds had also sprouted between the field's ridges. It left us with a perfect circle, filled with green. I couldn't work it out. Grandma Chiruchi and I had approached our sides of the field differently. Different amounts of water and different seeds...so why did this circle seem to just ignore all of that entirely?

Outside of the circle, nothing. Inside of it, sprouting produce. What was the difference? I had thought about it long and hard but I couldn't work it out, and Grandma Chiruchi and Grandma Tara were exactly the same. The two grannies were actually still at the fields even now, trying to get to the bottom of it, and they'd even dragged along their friends to get more opinions.

"Hoh ho, that is indeed a most perplexing tale. Oh, and I suppose that explains how excited the birds in the sky are, then; they have their eyes on your freshly sprouted produce."

Yeah, that sounded about right. But this made me wonder whether or not Geraint could understand what they were saying, so I asked him if that was the case.

"Coo hoo hoo hoo!" he laughed. "How absurd to think that I would be capable of such a thing. A most strange and perplexing question, Sir Dias."

Uh, okay...

As for the third incident—well, maybe calling it an *incident* was a bit much, but in any case—Senai and Ayhan had spilled stuff all over the storehouse when they rescued Aymer. They had turned boxes upside down, and their contents were everywhere, and while I was cleaning it all up I discovered the box that Aymer had been trapped in. I wasn't sure what to do with it, so I asked Klaus and Grandma Maya for their thoughts.

Nobody had really wanted to eat the beans in the box anymore, but just throwing them away felt like a waste.

“Hoh ho, and that would explain why you now carry that very box of beans in your arms, I presume. And I must say, it certainly would be a shame to just throw away such delicious-looking beans.”

Geraint focused his gaze on the beans and continued to stare at them as he talked. His very arrival was the fourth incident here at Iluk, and for me the most surprising of all of them. I’d been in the middle of cleaning up the storehouse and decided to put the box of beans outside. Regardless of whether or not we decided to eat them, they were still getting in the way. Afterwards, with the box of beans under my arm, I’d left the storehouse. At that very moment a white pigeon had descended from the skies and introduced himself as Geraint.

Actually, he was a dovekin, but until that moment I’d never imagined that there were bird demi-humans too.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Sir Dias,” he’d said. “My name is Geraint, and I am a dovekin working under Lord Eldan as an intelligence agent... Ahem, that is to say, a most *intelligent* carrier pigeon.”

The moment I realized that a bird was introducing himself to me in a thick, booming voice, I almost dropped the box of beans on the ground. Geraint didn’t look any different from the pigeons I’d seen in the royal capital, except that he had a white satchel hanging from his neck and was clad in a bowler hat and white vest with a black bow tie. I didn’t know why he’d come to Iluk, but before I could ask he heard all the commotion in the village and pestered me to explain what was going on. So that’s exactly what I did.

He now stood on the edge of the box I held, unable to pull his gaze away from the beans that filled it. Seeing him like that made me almost forget that he was actually a demi-human. After a while with him frozen like that, Geraint seemed to return to his senses.

“Oh, that won’t do at all,” he said. “I got so wrapped up in your story that I almost completely forgot about the most pressing business I came here for in the first place. Sir Dias, I bring you urgent letters from Lord Eldan.”

Geraint then poked his chest out and gestured to his satchel. I looked at Geraint, then the bag, and then realized that he wanted me to open it. So I put the box down on the floor and took some neatly folded papers from the bag.

“My apologies,” said Geraint. “I’d do it myself, but I can’t actually open the bag with these wings of mine.”

“Not at all,” I replied. “I’m sorry I didn’t realize sooner. Okay then, you said these were urgent, yeah? I’ll read them right away, so would you mind waiting a moment?”

Geraint deftly folded his wing and bowed, saying he didn’t mind at all, and I went about unfolding the letters, careful not to rip them. In total there were three. The script was extremely small and the contents extremely concise, and they lacked the flowery openings of Eldan’s previous letters.

The first letter was an apology for the big-eared hopping mousekin incident and a report about Kamalotz’s investigation. Eldan told me that someone was behind the hopping mousekin and that I should stay on guard.

The second letter detailed strange movements that had been noticed in the royal capital. Third Princess Diane had assembled troops and weapons and was leading them somewhere, but what she planned to do was still a question mark. However, being that she’d come this way once before, Eldan urged that I stay vigilantly on watch.

The third letter was about the “looking for residents” signboard that we’d asked Kamalotz to put up for us. A group of small-ilk dogkin had seen the sign and were very interested in moving over. There was quite a lot of them, and they were all very excited, so Eldan was asking me to reply as quickly as possible either accepting or denying their request.

The third letter was the only one that had a noticeable seal on it, and so it was likely the most pressing matter of the three letters. All I knew about the dogkin demi-humans was what I’d seen of Kamalotz’s guard, but the word “small-ilk” was new to me.

“Uh, Geraint?” I said. “Do you know anything about the small-ilk dogkin mentioned in this letter? I’ve met some dogkin since I moved here, but I don’t think anyone has said anything about small-ilk.”

Geraint nodded a few times at my question, then puffed his chest out and set to explaining it all for me.

“Among the dogkin race, there are those called the large-ilk and those called the small-ilk. The large-ilk are intelligent and strong, and the bigger they get, the more they resemble humans in form. Their hands are not unlike a human’s, which make them rather dexterous and able to work in a variety of industries. I assume that the dogkin you’ve met until now have all been large-ilk.”

“The small-ilk dogkin, on the other hand,” he continued, “are, as their name would suggest, smaller. They are much closer to ordinary dogs in terms of form, are weaker than their large-ilk brethren, and tend to run more on instinct. They are also at a disadvantage because they have paws, not hands.”

“While large-ilk dogkin live as families, small-ilk dogkin live in packs of their own kind and form clans, through which they support each other in their daily lives. Outside of that, small-ilk dogkin are known for maturing rapidly and having lots of children.”

Geraint stood on the edge of the box and explained it all to me, even gesturing with a wing when it was necessary. It reminded me very much of my instructor, back when I’d enlisted and still had to be taught the rules of the military.

“And now some of those small-ilk dogkin have decided they want to move here?” I muttered. “If I’m reading Eldan’s letter right, then they’re also chomping at the bit to do so?”

In answer to my questions, Geraint lifted a wing and offered an answer.

“I think they would have heard about this place from the large-ilk dogkin who stayed here a few days with Kamalotz. The idea of life here in the plains must have been very appealing to them. When they saw your sign posted in Kasdeks, that was likely all the push they needed. The small-ilk are often at a disadvantage because their paws don’t allow for delicate work, and perhaps the idea of room and board was yet another reason.”

I was puzzled, and my head tilted as I considered Geraint’s words. I didn’t think our life here on the plains was especially appealing, so what was it about life in Iluk that was so attractive to the small-ilk dogkin? I was pretty certain that things still would have been much better for them under Eldan’s care. But if they were like ordinary dogs in form and they were driven more by their

instincts, then maybe they just liked the idea of fields they could run around to their hearts' content?

I asked Geraint as much, but his answer was quite vague. "I dare say...that may very well be so."

Eldan, too, had been curious as to how the dogkin felt, so he'd asked them what it was that appealed to them. The dogkin had answered simply, plainly, and instinctively.

"Vast plains!" they said. "Looking after livestock! Being able to run!"

It was about as doglike as dogs could get, and it was pretty heartwarming. They didn't seem like they'd be a problem. And even if they *were* up to something, Alna's soul appraisal would let us know their true intentions right quick.

"All right then," I said. "I'll ask around the village, and if everyone agrees with the idea, then we'll accept the small-ilk dogkin. I'll get to it right away, so do you mind waiting a little?"

Geraint nodded his head a few times.

"Understood. Once you have talked with everyone and made a decision, please put it in writing so that I can deliver your reply to Lord Eldan. It is my responsibility to ensure that it arrives safely. Until then, I will wait here and rest my wings."

Geraint folded his wings, relaxed, and stared deeply into the box of beans once more. His gaze was so serious and intense that I felt the urge to speak.

"And uh, help yourself to the beans, if you like?"

"Are you most certain?!" asked the dovekin, unable to hide his joy.

Geraint must have been hungry, because he took to those beans with a ferocious speed. I figured he might get thirsty at that pace, so I pulled some well water and put it in a bucket for him, and he quickly moved to the edge of the bucket and started drinking. Eating beans, drinking water: he went back and forth between the two. I had to think that flying the skies brought on a mighty hunger. Given that Geraint also had to make a return trip once I'd written my

letter, I was happy for him to eat and drink his fill.

I figured it would have been easier for him to just spend the night at the village, but urgent meant urgent, so I got to work. I left Geraint to his feast and went around the village asking everyone for their thoughts on the dogkin.

I went to Klaus first, who had still been cleaning the storehouse, and when I told him his eyes lit up. He was more than happy to take them in because he expected they'd make great domain guards. Grandma Maya and her friends had also been happy to accept them, saying it would be a nice way to make the village a little livelier. Then I headed to the field where Grandma Chiruchi and Grandma Tara were, and while they were more concerned about the field—checking the soil, smelling it...licking it—they gave their approval.

Finally, I went inside of my yurt, where Alna was in the middle of scolding the girls while Francis and Francoise worriedly watched. I asked all of them what they thought, including the baars, and none had any objections. They all seemed pretty happy, in fact; and Senai and Ayhan, who'd made friends with Kamalotz's dogkin guards, were overjoyed at the prospect.

The dogkin they'd met were large-ilk, but this time it'd be small-ilk. I explained to them that the types were very different, but when the girls found out that the small-ilk were, well, small, they practically exploded, realizing they'd be able to play with them in all sorts of ways.

"Scolding isn't going to mean a thing when they're this happy," mused Alna, watching the girls jump and cheer.

In any case, the twins had apologized for going out in the middle of the night and bringing a mousekin to bed, but both stubbornly refused to tell Alna why they'd gone out in the first place. Alna had hoped she'd be able to pull something out of them in the midst of a scolding.

Truth be told, it was mostly because she was worried about them, but I didn't think she needed to be *that* worried. The girls knew that Alna loved them, and if they were hiding something from her, then...

"If the girls are being *that* stubborn about it," I said, "then I reckon they've got a pretty good reason for it. I don't know what it is, but I don't believe they're the type to get up to no good. I'm sure they'll open up to us in good time, so

how about we just wait until they're ready?"

"Well, if you say so," replied Alna, her face softening as she spoke.

I breathed a sigh of relief now that I had everyone's opinion on the small-ilk dogkin. Then I finally noticed the hopping mousekin at the twins' feet, drenched in herbal water, her ears and tail drooping just like her head. It was Aymer. She'd been with the hopping mousekin that attacked me, but unlike the others, she was blue.

All the other mousekin had been apprehended, so what had Aymer been doing in that box of beans? That was when I remembered the voice that had screamed out from inside the carriage, right before the mousekin had attacked me. It was a woman's voice, and it had tried to stop the others. Thinking back, Aymer's voice sounded really similar. If it *was* her, I could see why she was blue.

She'd tried to stop her fellow mousekin from committing a crime, and she'd also become fast friends with Senai and Ayhan. To top it off, she hadn't made any excuses when Alna got mad, accepting her scolding and her punishment.

But she looked like something completely different now, deflated and depressed on the floor, so I knelt down by her side and tried as best I could to get my eyeline closer to hers.

"Hey, Aymer," I started. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

Aymer slowly raised her head, and there was this look of surprise on her face like she'd never expected that out of me. Even so, little by little, she started to tell me her story.

A Little While Later, in Front of the Storehouse

I stood out the front of the storehouse and watched Geraint fly away, his unique pigeon-like call and the flapping of his wings dissipating into the air along with him. He packed his belly full of water and beans, and with his energy levels replenished, he was on his way back to Eldan.

I'd put my letters into Geraint's bag along with a document signed to confirm that I'd received the ones that Eldan had sent me, and it was likely that they'd reach him by evening. In my letters I said that we would accept the dogkin

under a few minor conditions. I also wrote a report on Aymer and what she was doing from here on out. As you might have guessed, she was going to make Iluk Village her home.

“Here’s to a bright future, Sir Dias,” said the mousekin as she sat on my shoulder.

When I’d talked to her back at the yurt, Aymer had told me about her circumstances and how she had ended up with the other hopping mousekin, and then out of nowhere she’d told me that she wanted to live in Iluk Village. She wanted to stay here. I hadn’t seen that coming at all, so I’d asked her why.

“Well, erm, I want to stay with Senai and Ayhan,” she’d replied. “It’s their power—erm, I mean their future that I’m worried about. I’d like to keep watch over them as they mature. I know how to read and write, and I also know basic mathematics, so I’m certain I’ll be helpful! You could even make me their teacher! But I’m capable of so much more than just that, and I’ll do the best I can to support the village in my own way, so I do hope you’ll allow me to stay!”

Aymer had been all out of sorts and dejected when she’d first been discovered, but when she’d opened up to me about what she wanted, her ears and her tail had stood on end as if they were brimming with her ardent wish. She had been resolute, that much was for sure, but all the same I’d explained to her that Eldan was preparing to send the hopping mousekin back home, and that meant she’d be able to return with them. But even that hadn’t changed Aymer’s mind. She had been set on living in Iluk.

I had given it a good think. Her soul appraisal had come up blue, and she was already good friends with Senai and Ayhan. From the very start she hadn’t been a part of the attack on me. Rather, she’d tried to stop it. Then there was the fact that she was smart and she really wanted to stay here. I simply hadn’t had a reason to turn her down.

So, I’d taken Aymer around the village and introduced her to everyone. When I’d announced that she wanted to live with us, pretty much everyone had been happy to have her as part of the village. The only person who hadn’t been happy was Alna, who hated mice and rats and vermin of all sorts.

“You’re going to let a mouse live here?” she’d asked, a frown on her face.

“The hopping mousekin that live in the desert are very clean!” Aymer had replied. “We’re entirely different from the others!”

Alna had eventually relented, but only on the condition that Aymer always made sure to stay clean. If she didn’t, Alna was going to give her an herbal cleansing as punishment.

In any case, that was how the big-eared hopping mousekin, Aymer Jerrybower, became a member of Iluk Village and a citizen of the Nezrose domain.

After I saw Geraint off, I cleaned up the box of beans and the pail of water at my feet. I figured I could keep the beans to give to Geraint whenever he visited, so I didn’t have to throw them away anymore. After all, Geraint had said he would deliver letters whenever something of note happened, and that meant he could be around a lot. I thought it might be a good idea to have food at the ready, and maybe a little place where he could rest too.

I was thinking about that as I walked into the storehouse with Aymer still on my shoulder. I made sure the lid on the box was tight, and I put it in a corner together with the pail. Thanks to Klaus and Grandma Maya, the storehouse was looking a whole lot neater than earlier, now that they’d cleaned and dusted everything.

But then I got the funny feeling that there was less in the storehouse than I remembered. Was it just my imagination?

Nope, there’s definitely less here than before. The barrel of walnuts is gone, along with some of the food Eldan gave me as a sign of friendship. Oh, and the wine barrel I hid in the corner is gone.

I’d shared some of that wine with the dogkin when they’d come to build the stable, so it wasn’t full, but I knew there was still a good amount left in the barrel. Then I remembered that when we’d last held a little banquet, I’d said we could hold another one when something good happened.

Does that mean...?

“Dias? Is something the matter?” asked a worried Aymer. “You seem a little

lost in thought.”

“Uh, no, it’s okay,” I replied. “It’s just that some of the storehouse supplies have gone missing.”

“Oh, perhaps it has something to do with the assembly hall. Is that what you call it?” said Aymer, her ears suddenly pointing up into the air. “I can hear excited voices and cooking coming from over that way. Perhaps the supplies are being put to use over there? I can’t quite make out the voices, but they’re talking about a banquet? Drinks? Oh, is it a welcome party? Why, how delightful! Dias, let’s head to the assembly hall!”

I couldn’t hear what Aymer was hearing, but I could tell by the excitement in her eyes that if I didn’t take us there, she was ready to run off on her own. I figured it wasn’t going to do me much good standing here dwelling on it anyway, so we headed off for the assembly hall.

I flipped open the door to the hall, and all the villagers were already inside. And not just that, but the barrel of wine was plonked down right in the middle of the hall as if that were the main attraction tonight. Around it were a bunch of tables, stoves, and the bags of food and ingredients that we’d gotten from Eldan. Everyone was cooking or readying food, and it was pretty obvious what they were preparing.

Aymer’s tail wagged back and forth excitedly as she looked at it all and asked me question after question.

“Um, uh...that’s Klaus, isn’t it? What’s he doing with that pot over that stove?”

“Oh, he’s baking bread. He’ll heat the pot, then put the dough against the inner walls. Then he’ll put the lid back on and either let it bake as it is or perhaps bake it over the fire for some extra heat. He’ll decide when he sees how the bread looks. Klaus is mighty talented when it comes to baking bread.”

“Oh, and what about that pot that Alna has over the stove next to him?”

“She’s cooking up some rice.”

“Rice? I’ve had that a few times at Lord Eldan’s domain, but I’m not a big fan

of the spicy flavoring they use.”

“Ah, so that’s how they do it over there, is it? The onikin make it sweet, and sometimes, depending on the ingredients, it’s got a sweet and sour kick to it. The first time I ever had rice was at an onikin banquet, and that lingering sweetness really surprised me. You can fry it with onion or carrots, or add jerky or dried grapes, and tinker with the flavor with water, sweet herbs, and salt.”

The rice that Alna was boiling looked to me like the rice we’d received at the banquet celebrating our engagement. We’d had it a few times since then but there wasn’t much left, and...from what I could tell, she was using all of it.

Right at that moment, I heard the little footsteps of Senai and Ayhan as they came running in. They said something to Alna, who was stirring the pot with a big wooden spoon, and then the twins poured something into the pot.

“Oh my, it looks like Senai and Alna just poured walnuts into the pot,” said Aymer.

“Yeah, if you crush them down and add them to the rice, you get some walnut flavoring and texture in the mix. It’s good. But uh, good or not, those girls will put walnuts in anything.”

“I see. And those elderly women at the tables, what are they kneading?” asked Aymer.

“Hm? Good question. There’s a pot of sugar on the table, so I guess they’re making something sweet?”

One word in that sentence caught Aymer’s attention.

“Sugar!” she cried, leaping from my shoulder and running to the grannies.

As it turned out, Aymer was a big fan of sugar, and she asked Grandma Maya and her friends if she could have a little. Aymer was just another part of all the hustle and bustle in the assembly hall now, and I took another look around and scratched my head.

When did they start doing all of this? Did they come for all the ingredients while I went to Klaus’s yurt for a pen and paper? If they did, then that means that they must have started cooking while I was writing the letter and seeing

Geraint off. I mean, I don't mind that they decided to throw a party, but why'd they keep it a secret from me?

While I had been lost in thought, Alna finished up her rice. All she had to do now was leave it to simmer, so she left the wooden spoon at the edge of the pot and walked over to me. There was something of a mischievous smile on her face as she looked at me. It was like she'd successfully pulled off a prank.

"Well? Surprised?"

"Uh, yep," I replied. "When did you all get into these preparations?"

"Lots of good things have happened. We got some horses, our field has sprouted, and Aymer and the dogkin are joining us. Grandma Maya thought it was a great time to celebrate, but when she brought up the idea you were busy with other things, so I made the call and we got started. We did it all while you were writing your letters to Eldan."

Alna seemed intent on making it clear that she had made the call herself, and I wasn't immediately sure what to make of it. But Alna wasn't about to wait for me to find the right words, and she went on.

"Then again, you didn't confer with me either when you decided to *hide the wine*, right? Don't you think this makes us even?"

Alna said it all with a gleaming grin on her face. I couldn't reply with anything more than a low moan. As far as the kingdom's laws went, drinking wasn't allowed until you turned eighteen. Alcohol was addictive, and it could make you ill, so the general thinking was that it was best to fully develop your body so it could resist those dangers before you started drinking. Eighteen also happened to be the age when one was considered an adult, so there was a certain sense of responsibility that came with that. I didn't know what the rules were for the onikin, but Alna was still only fifteen years old.

Alna clearly had experience drinking based on how she liked to brag about it, but I still worried about the effect it would have on her body. I was worried that she might get sick, so I had hidden the wine we got, and I'd tried to get rid of it when the dogkin came. Unfortunately, doing that only seemed to irritate Alna.

I still wasn't sure what to say, but in the end I figured the only thing to do was

apologize, and that's what I decided to do. Before I could speak, however, Alna beat me to it.

"Don't give me that lost puppy dog look," she said with a gentle smile. "I'm not mad at you. I know how you think, and I know you were worried about me. You did what you did for my sake, right? We've been together long enough for me to get that. It's just, we're a couple now, and I want us to discuss things like this. Starting the banquet like this without your permission? It was a kind of revenge for me."

Lost puppy dog? Is that how I look?

I touched my face in the hopes I might get a feel for what I looked like, and Alna burst into laughter. I'd seen Alna smiling and laughing before, but I'd never seen her laugh quite like this, and it was captivating to watch her. Well, that is, until she blushed, at which point she put on a serious face again.

"Look, you came to me about the dogkin and Aymer, but why didn't you discuss the wine with me?" she asked. "That made me sad. If you're worried about me, I want you to tell me as much. We're together now, so we should talk things through."

I could see how serious she was, and I gave her a resolute nod in return.

"Yeah, I know. And that's what we'll do from here on out," I said. "I'm sorry, Alna. And uh, seeing as we're already preparing for a banquet, about that wine..."

I started telling Alna about the laws for drinking in the kingdom, but Alna's face soured when she heard about them.

"Bad for the body? You're talking nonsense, Dias. It's *good* for the body. In onikin families that own horses, children are brought up on mare milkwine once they're weaned off breast milk because it's nutritious and helps protect against illness."

"You feed children alcohol?!" I replied. "That can't be good for them! Aren't you just killing them?!"

"Of course not! If you *don't* feed them the wine they get sick and they can die! In my family we didn't have horses and all we had was herbal tea. My

brothers and I were always sick, and it was awful!”



Just as I was about to tell her that I'd literally seen people break their own bodies from drinking too much, I suddenly felt a sharp poke in the ribs. I turned away from Alna for a moment and saw Grandma Maya looking at me, a grin on her face and a wooden spoon in her hand.

"Look at you two lovebirds," she teased. "Now, quit your yapping and help the rest of us with the prep. You can talk about alcohol all you want once we've all had our fun at the banquet, yes?"

I took another look around the assembly hall. All of the preparations were just about done and everybody was watching me and Alna with a grin on their faces.

"Yeah, but Grandma Maya," I protested, "it's because we're holding this banquet that we *have* to talk about alcohol."

Before I could go on, Grandma Maya waved her spoon as if waving away my argument.

"It's no good, young Dias, and you know it. After all, when we found that barrel of wine, we thought it would be a good opportunity to hold a banquet when the dogkin arrived. We started getting excited about the prospect, and so we brought it up with Alna, and do you know what she said? She said that if we waited for the dogkin then there'd be less for her to drink, and so she started preparing for the banquet right then and there. Anybody who loves to drink that much isn't going to be swayed by any argument, young Dias, so don't even bother."

I quickly spun to look at Alna, but just as quickly, she twisted away from my gaze.

After all she told me about wanting to discuss things and wanting me to be open with her...

While I was sure she was serious about the topics she'd brought up, the truth of the matter was that she just wanted to drink some wine. But then again, the whole thing was my fault too. I knew we looked at things differently, but I'd never tried to properly talk to Alna about those differences, and that was on me, so I decided that I'd turn a blind eye, at least for today.

But when the banquet was over, I was going to make sure we had a good,

proper talk. We'd talk all about how we looked at alcohol, and our differences in terms of cultures and values.

As Iluk Village accepted new subjects, we would see more races and more cultures fill our land. With that in mind, I figured it was about time we came up with some rules unique to our home to make sure there wasn't any confusion.

Yep, when this banquet is over, we'll all have a good talk. Me, Alna, and all the others too.

We threw ourselves into the banquet preparations, and everything was ready before nightfall to celebrate all the good fortune we'd had at the village recently. It was a lively affair and a good chance to welcome our new villager, Aymer. There was lots of different and delicious food, and the wine put a smile on everybody's face. We ate, we drank, we sang, and we danced, and even Francis and Francoise danced in the middle of the assembly hall. Their horns bumped together, their hooves clacked rhythmically, and as they sang their bleating song we all cheered.

I don't know where the baars had learned to sing, but theirs was a fine song to listen to, their bleating wavering and shifting tone as they went. Klaus looked on a little sadly, because in the past he'd put on a dance together with the baars, but tonight it was just them. Then again, he'd been so busy with training recently that I guessed it just couldn't be helped.

Then Senai and Ayhan suddenly jumped up, unable to hold their excitement any longer, and joined the baars. The twins hadn't practiced at all, and they were making it up as they went along, but they filled the air with their singing too. Aymer was also pulled into the mix, and all five of them sang a song for the rest of us.

The sun set over our lively, fun banquet, which went on until the twins couldn't stay awake any longer.

The Next Day, in the Village Square

The entire evening had been spent fully indulging in our banquet. Francis and Francoise danced and sang, we drank our fill of wine, and we stuffed ourselves with Grandma Maya's sugary treats. Night fell, morning came, and a new day began.

Once I was up and fully dressed, I went to the square for breakfast and noticed that there was a white liquid poured into wooden cups and placed around the table. There was enough for everyone, but I didn't have the faintest idea what it was.

"It's mare milkwine," explained Alna.

After our banquet, which had featured a good amount of wine, Alna had gotten up especially early and had gone to the onikin village. She'd brought back some mare milkwine for all of us.

"Try it," she said.

I picked up my cup, and, with Alna watching with bated breath, I tried the mysterious white milkwine.

"Wait. Are you sure this is even alcoholic?" I asked.

Once I'd tasted it myself, I started to understand why you might feed a mouthful or two to a baby. It was alcoholic but by no means especially strong. I felt the hint of alcohol when I sipped it, but I wondered if you could even call something this weak a wine at all. If you drank a boatload of it, then *maybe* you'd get drunk, but it would take a concerted effort.

Klaus and Grandma Maya watched me curiously, then took a sip from their own cups. They felt the same about it as I did. Little Aymer had gotten completely drunk on just a single drop of the wine at the banquet, and though Alna had prepared a little spoon of milkwine for her, she still got a buzz from it.

I see, so for Alna, mare milkwine is still "wine," and that's why she said it was healthy. But for me, "wine" is something I think of as being several times

stronger than this. It was all a clash of perspective.

For Alna, milkwine was something that built strong bodies and bones, helped with digestion, and aided in warding off illness. It was amazing stuff.

I'd always wanted to talk more with Alna about all sorts of things, but learning about our differences when it came to our perception of wine really made me aware of how important communication was. Alna too had her own thoughts about things, and this marked a chance for her to open up to me more actively.

In this way, Alna and I came to talk more when we found some free time. We talked about our cultures and our pasts, and this attitude of ours spread across the village, so all of us were talking much more whenever the opportunity arose.

It was early afternoon about five days after our banquet. We'd just finished lunch and cleaned up all the utensils when one of the grannies who was usually shy and reserved, Grandma Celia, approached me timidly.

"Sir Dias," she started. "I, um... I've been thinking a lot these past few days, and something is worrying me. I've noticed something that just won't last over time."

"Huh? Sorry, but I'm going to need a little more information," I replied.

"Um, you see, when the topic arose about whether to accept Aymer and the dogkin, you came and asked all of us for our opinions, yes? That's what I'm talking about. It's unsustainable."

Grandma Celia crossed her arms over her chest and stood in front of me looking rather hesitant. She was a thin old woman of few words, with long, gray hair. It was rare for her to approach me like this. She was earnest and very serious, so something about the village must have been worrying her.

"You think so?" I asked. "I mean, I really think it's best to check with everyone before I go making decisions."

"And we're all very happy that you do, Sir Dias, but I just don't think you can keep it up. It's fine now because the village is so small, but will you be able to do the same thing when we have a hundred people? A thousand? It'll be

impossible. But it's also no good if everyone stops thinking about things and just lets you make the decisions; that's no different from not asking anyone at all. And have you thought of what to do if opinions on a topic are split? You'll need to prepare for such eventualities, as that's where conflict and fights start."

It was like everything Grandma Celia wanted to say just flooded out of her, and she was right about all of it. I didn't really know how to answer her.

"But I've been thinking," she continued. "What if we selected representatives for when you need to ask for everyone's opinion? So, you might have Grandma Maya act as the human representative, for example. If you have intermediaries, then you can still discuss important matters and gather opinions even as the village population grows."

"It's a position of responsibility, so I'm sure the people selected will think carefully when giving their opinions. That way you need only ask a few people to make the final call. I just can't help thinking that it would be most wise to set up a system like this before we run into any trouble."

She looked up at me, waiting for a reply, and I nodded. "You're right. Let's move in that direction. I'm sure there's a lot that I'm going to want to ask everyone about in the future, so let's set those rules up."

Once I had given her the affirmative, Grandma Celia flashed a bashful smile.

That evening, all of the village's adults gathered at the assembly hall to discuss Grandma Celia's suggestion and decide on representatives. Everyone agreed with Grandma Celia's idea and raised their own thoughts and ideas in turn. The discussion lasted late into the evening, and the rules we decided on were as follows.

In general, the domain lord has final authority over all decisions. When the domain lord decides that he or she wants the opinion of the villagers, they will hold a meeting of representatives. Representatives will discuss the topic with their groups in advance of said meeting, gather opinions, and share them with the domain lord.

In the event of an emergency, where the representative does not have time to discuss things with their people, they will offer their opinion on behalf of them. The domain lord will take these opinions on board, make a final decision,

and bear the responsibility for it.

In the kingdom, the stance and direction of the nation was decided by the king and his nobles. Asking the general public for their opinions was out of the question. But I thought we were on the right track with our village governance. We decided to write all our rules out and place them in the assembly hall, where everyone could see them.

As for selecting the representatives, that all happened much more quickly and smoothly than expected, and the three representatives were:

Alna, who spoke on behalf of our home and family since my own position was my priority as domain lord.

Klaus, who would weigh in as the person in charge of our military and defense as the captain of the domain guard.

Grandma Maya, who would be acting as the official human representative. She wasn't particularly excited about the job herself, but her friends all voted her in.

Some people, recognizing that Aymer was well educated, suggested that perhaps she could be the beastkin representative, but Aymer herself had declined the position outright and was adamant that she was far too inexperienced.

The rules we'd set would be followed in the event that we needed to increase our number of representatives too. We all knew that the dogkin would be arriving soon and that they would also need to decide on representatives.

The meeting had ended very late, and we all dragged ourselves to our yurts and into bed. I felt bad for keeping Alna up so long and told her that she could start breakfast late tomorrow if she wanted. Then I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep.

"Dias, wake up," said Alna. "We've got visitors."

I felt like I'd only just taken a few steps into the land of dreams, and suddenly I had been woken up. But as I looked at the dim light coming in from the roof, I

realized that I'd been asleep for some time.

"Who's here this early?" I asked.

I rubbed at my eyes and lazily stretched, but I kept my voice low so as not to wake the twins.

"It might be the dogkin," replied Alna. "I can make out one person clearly, and then a huge number of smaller creatures. I noticed them late because I was asleep, so they're already quite close to the village."

"Huh? You can't make out the smaller creatures very clearly?"

"Didn't I tell you? My sensor magic only picks up creatures of a set size. If I didn't set it that way, it would go crazy from all the bugs. So I'm not able to accurately pick up everything that's heading this way."

"I see," I uttered, as I tried to stir my groggy brain.

One person, and a whole lot of smaller creatures. Perhaps that one person is Kamalotz. He's bringing the dogkin here, but the dogkin are small-ilk, so they're hard for Alna to pick up.

I tried to get myself riled up and ready, but I was still drowsy. My body felt heavy as I clambered to my feet.

"It could be Kamalotz bringing the dogkin here," I said, "so I'll go check it out. Feel free to get some more rest if you like."

Then I stumbled out of the yurt. Alna showed no sign of going back to bed, though; instead she got herself ready and followed after me. It was still dark outside as the two of us walked to the east of the village. We stared out at the plains. It was quiet and cold, and the sun was still a ways from rising on the horizon. There was some light, but we were in a period between night and morning.

We squinted to look out at the horizon, but there was a mist in the air, and it was hard to focus that far with sleep still clouding our brains. I rubbed my eyes a few times, hoping that it might wake me up.

Finally, I noticed something in the distance. It was the sound of something coming through the plains. I listened carefully as to what exactly the sound was

and realized it was dogs, barking. I still couldn't see them, but I could hear them barking. Soon after, I heard all of their footsteps running this way, and then...

Was that a woman crying out?

I felt my body go tense and my senses sharpen. My sleepiness vanished and I readied myself for what was coming. Finally they had come into sight: a whole lot of dogs. No, not dogs. Dogkin. There was a group with black-and-white fur, a group that was completely black, and a group that was brown. They wore shabbily made cloaks and sprinted through the grass, some of them pulling along carts carrying luggage, but all of them in chaos.

Following behind the small-ilk dogkin was a white-furred large-ilk dogkin in a cloak and dressed in plain white clothing. She cried out as she ran.

"Wait! Wait! Wait!" she shouted, waving her arms as she went.

She had a face like a dog, and her ears swayed in the air, and Alna and I watched them all and wondered what in the world was going on.

The large-ilk dogkin wasn't as fast as the others, and she was falling behind as she struggled to keep up. She was desperately chasing the others, but then she tripped and fell in the grass. A few of the small-ilk noticed, and some that weren't pulling carts ran up to her, but it was only a few. The others continued to rush onwards without slowing a bit.

Alna and I still didn't know what to think about it, but we took off running to intercept them. We were set on bringing the running dogkin to a halt and helping out the large-ilk that had fallen.

We looked at the dogkin as we ran to them, and we could see that they'd been running for some time based on how exhausted they looked. Their breathing was ragged, and they were half staggering as they ran. If they kept up the way they were going, there was every chance they might fall and injure themselves. With that in mind, I figured that stopping them was our first order of business, so I headed in their direction first.

Alna seemed to understand what I had in mind, so she opted to head to the fallen dogkin. Based on the voice we'd heard, she was a woman, and I could leave Alna to take care of her.

“All right! Calm down!” I shouted as I closed the distance to the running dogkin. “Slow down or you’re going to hurt yourselves!”

After how much that large-ilk dogkin had cried out to no avail, I wasn’t expecting the small-ilk to respond, but I had to at least try. And I hoped they would listen. If I had to force them to stop, they might tumble and hurt themselves anyway, and the dogkin pulling carts might end up running themselves over.

But as I was thinking this, the running dogkin heard my voice and turned to me. Their faces lit up with smiles. And just like that, they did exactly as I said and calmed down, slowing little by little. I hadn’t expected that at all, but I stopped where I stood, and the dogkin slowly approached me.

The dogkin were all still panting, but they broke off into groups divided by their colors—or more likely, their races—and then they sat down in front of me. The black-furred group had big bodies and strong arms and legs, and their ears, eyes, and cheeks all drooped from their faces. They had thick fur, and lots of it, and it made them seem somewhat clumsy.

The next group was one with very short, brown fur. They had sleek bodies and big ears that stood up high and faced towards me. There was a courageous look to them.

The last group of dogkin had fur that was a mix of black and white, and they had loose, thin, and long hair over their small bodies. Their black backs peeked out from their cloaks, and their stomachs were white. From their foreheads down to their noses and mouths they were white, but the rest of their faces were black. Perhaps they weren’t used to keeping still, because their eyes and ears darted every which way.

All of the gathered dogkin watched me and...waited.

Uh, am I supposed to say something?

I was wondering exactly what to say when Alna arrived with the white-furred dogkin she’d helped. The dogkin was partially smeared with grassy dew, and her nose twitched as she came towards me with Alna.

“I don’t believe it. You don’t listen to a word I say but you’ll obey a complete

stranger? You guys... Just when I thought you were finally tired from having walked all night, you break out into a sprint. What am I going to do with you?"

I couldn't tell if the large-ilk dogkin was scolding them or lamenting what had happened, but none of the small-ilk dogkin replied, or even responded, for that matter. Instead, they continued to stare at me. The large-ilk woman followed their gaze, then realized that I was standing there.

"Um, Alna?" she asked, pointing to me with a hand that, besides the fur, looked very much like my own. "Who is that rather plain and unsophisticated man standing there? And why do all the dogkin love him so much?"

"That unsophisticated man is Dias, my husband and the domain lord," answered Alna as if I weren't being insulted. "As for why the dogkin love him, I think you're better off asking them directly."

The large-ilk dogkin's jaw fell open and she started trembling. "I'm so sorry I called you unsophisticated!" she cried apologetically.

"My name is Canis. I work for Eldan, taking care of the small-ilk. I came with them today as a guide."

The large-ilk dogkin woman, Canis, kept on apologizing, and I had to tell her a few times not to worry about it. When she finally calmed down, she nervously introduced herself and told us about the small-ilk that she'd brought to our domain.

Three different small-ilk races were keen to move in. Eldan and Kamalotz both vouched for them, saying they were earnest and good-hearted. The carts they had with them contained not just their belongings but also their elderly, their young, and the pregnant among them. Eldan had also prepared some food that they had brought with them.

While Canis went on with her explanation, Alna wandered around looking carefully at all of the dogkin. Her horn lit up as she did so, and I guessed that she was going through a soul appraisal for all of them, one by one. Canis didn't seem to pay her any mind.

"The black-furred dogkin are called Tibe Masti, but they usually just go by just masti. They are a brave clan that boasts great strength. The brown-furred

dogkin are called Bah Senji. The clan is said to be earnest to a fault. The black-and-white dogkin are Ausun Sheps. They have a very curious nature and hate staying still. Please make sure to remember their clan names, as they're very important to small-ilk dogkin."

Clan names for the dogkin were like family names for humans like me. For example, if Canis were one of the black dogkin, she would have gone by the name Canis Tibe Masti. It was also fine to shorten that down to Canis Masti or just Masti.

The small-ilk dogkin prided themselves on the familial connections in their clans, so being called by their clan names was something that made them happy. Clan members helped each other out, lived together at all times, and considered the whole clan their family. Their insistence on making their elderly and pregnant ride their carts was part of the values unique to the small-ilk dogkin.

I thought about Canis's explanation. I had expected the clans to help each other out, but I was surprised by just how much they supported one another.

"Uh, Canis," I said, "I have a question. When you say that the clans live together, exactly how does that work? What I mean is, when I heard that the small-ilk were coming I made some time to put up houses for them, but I think that given their number, the yurts the rest of us live in will be pretty cramped for these guys."

While Canis had been explaining the dogkin to me, the elderly, pregnant, and young had all gotten off of their carts and joined their clans. There must have been twenty or thirty dogkin in each clan. True to their name, they were small, but they stood as tall as my knees or waist depending on the clan. Sure, we'd be able to get thirty of them into a yurt, but I was certain it would be a tight squeeze.

A larger yurt like the assembly hall would provide a little more space, but even that would feel cramped. Yurts of that size also took a lot of supplies to build, and we just couldn't build too many of them. But in the face of my worry, Canis simply smiled and told me it was fine.

"I heard all about how you live from Kamalotz before we left. All of this

moving was undertaken under his watch, and the living spaces won't be an issue. You see, the small-ilk dogkin like to sleep in confined spaces, all squeezed together. So your...yurts? Is that what you call them? Anyway, Kamalotz said they'd be just fine!"

Canis smiled again, and at that moment Alna walked over, having finished her soul appraisal.

"Canis is a faint blue, but mostly white," she whispered. "But the small-ilk? I can't believe it. Every single one of them is shining blue."

I'd expected the results to be fine, but I certainly hadn't expected such a strong blue from all of them. Given that Eldan himself vouched for them, I was sure none of the small-ilk would be red, but I'd expected more white. All the same, blue for everyone was a good result and something to be happy about.

"Oh, I forgot to mention," said Canis, remembering something. "I have to tell you about work. About the small-ilk's jobs! The small-ilk *love* to work, and in fact, they get stressed when they don't have work to do. Homes are of course important, but so is working out what jobs are available for them. Will you have things for them to do, Sir Dias?"

I heard a tinge of worry in Canis's questions, and the small-ilk started to look a little anxious too. They all looked at me in silence. But I didn't see it as a big problem, because I'd done my best to think about that ahead of time. I mean, I had no intention of giving them room and board for nothing. I was fully intending to put them to work.

So, I met their worried looks and I gave them a nod to let them know I was prepared.

"In terms of work, I want the small-ilk helping me out to dig a reservoir, taking the horses and ghee their food, and working as part of the domain guard if there are any volunteers for that. The domain guard will train for battle with Klaus, occasionally work night shift guarding our village, and of course, fight our enemies if such a thing becomes unavoidable. Now, I don't mind you all deciding for yourselves what work you want to do, and I'm happy to listen to suggestions if you've got a job you're good at that you want to do here."

In response, Canis had an astounded look on her face. She was flabbergasted,

I guess, but her expression also said, “What is this guy even saying?!” But just as she opened her mouth to say something, the small-ilk clans cheered, drowning out whatever it was she was trying to say. They howled to the sky, and among those howls I heard voices shouting things like “Awesome!” and “You can count on us!” and “When do we start?!” They were barking with joy and making a real racket.

After walking all through the night I’d expected them to be exhausted, but they were lively and energetic for a good long while.

I watched the small-ilk dogkin, all rambunctious and excited, and when I realized they weren’t going to stop, I told them to calm down and ease up, and I knelt down to meet them properly. This put me at a level where I could almost look the dogkin in the eyes, and they all quieted down for me. Just as before, when I had first met them, I was reminded that if I spoke clearly, the dogkin listened to me.

“My name’s Dias, and I’m the domain lord here. Nice to meet you all.”

For a moment there was a buzz among the dogkin, who weren’t sure how to respond, but then three dogkin emerged, one from each clan, and walked towards me. All three of them wore a necklace with a fang on it, and they lined up in front of me. Then the black masti reached out with a paw, which I took in my hand and shook.

“I am the clan leader of the masti,” the dogkin said. “My name is Marf Tibe Masti. It’s nice to meet ya...er, I mean, it is an honor to make your acquaintance, Sir Dias. Our clan’ll work our asses off...er, which is to say, we shall do our utmost as part of the domain guard.”

Marf was covered in the unique black fur of the masti race, and he spoke slowly, with a deep voice. It was obvious that he wasn’t used to speaking politely to superiors.

“Glad to have you, Marf,” I replied, “and don’t stand on ceremony. Speak to me as you would your own. You mentioned the domain guard. Should I assume that all of the mastis want to do this?”

Almost all of the masti clan behind Marf nodded. They all had thick legs and powerful bodies, and I wondered if they had experience with such work. I

nodded back at the masti dogkin.

“I’ll be counting on you.”

Next, the brown-furred senji stepped forwards and reached out a paw. We shook hands, and the senji spoke.

“I am the senji clan leader, Sedorio Bah Senji,” the dogkin calmly said. “We will help with the reservoir and any other miscellaneous work you may have. We wish to start immediately!”

Sedorio spoke with a high pitch, but there was a hardness to his voice that told me he was male. He stood straight and tall, his jaw raised, and he looked very distinguished.

“Glad to meet you, Sedorio,” I said. “For miscellaneous work, Grandma Maya—by which I mean the elderly in the village—will need assistance. I’m glad to have you helping with the reservoir too.”

Sedorio merely tilted his jaw up in response and said nothing, but judging by how rapidly his tail was wagging under his cloak, I could tell that he understood just fine.

As for the black-and-white shep, well, it wasn’t until I looked at him that he realized his turn was up, and what happened next was less of a handshake and more like the dogkin waving both of his paws in a panic. I took both of his paws in my two hands, and that set the shep off; he spoke quickly and with a boyish voice.

“I’m clan leader Rhinehartgodofnyahdishev Ausun Shep! I know it’s a long name so just call me Shev! We wanna help with the horses! Oh, do you have sheep? We’d love it if you did, but we’d be happy just taking care of the horses! You can leave your animals to us sheps!”

Of the three clans, Shev seemed the most eloquent but also the most hyperactive. It was a little overwhelming. His energy and emotion just leaped out at me.

“Oh, uh, nice to meet you, Shev. We don’t have sheep, but we do have baars. They’re pretty similar. But I’m looking after them myself, so I want you guys to handle the horses.”

Shev looked a touch disappointed to hear it, but it wasn't long before he was back to being a bundle of energy and loudly exclaimed that he was overjoyed.

After I'd introduced myself to all the clan leaders, I realized that Alna was right there kneeling alongside me, shaking hands with Marf and Sedorio. Alna introduced herself as my wife, and the dogs praised her as being young and pretty. When Shev joined in the three clan leaders all got more excited, and Alna burst into a great big smile.

I guess it's just good that they're all getting off on the right foot.

Introducing ourselves to all of the small-ilk dogkin this way was going to take a really long time, so I decided that I'd do it little by little, as the opportunities came up over the next few days and weeks.

The clan leaders reported on their total numbers, which made for twenty-three mastis, twenty-five senjis, and thirty sheps.

Shaking hands with all of them will leave us stuck here until well past noon, so...yep, I'll get to the rest of them later.

With greetings out of the way, it was time to show all the dogkin to Iluk Village. That was when Canis spoke. She'd been watching me shake hands with the clan leaders, and she looked a bit like she'd just chewed on a piece of bitter fruit.

That reminds me. Wasn't she trying to say something earlier? I wonder what that was about.

"Are you actually serious, Sir Dias?" she asked. "You're going to make the small-ilk into soldiers? I mean, I understand giving them simple jobs to do, but you realize that they're incapable of handling weapons, yes? What I mean to say is, they're not especially strong, nor are they particularly big. Regardless of how enthusiastic or passionate they might be, you must have some screws loose!"

She'd spoken with eloquence and grace while introducing the small-ilk, but now Canis's voice was dark and heavy. She was angry at me. But more than that, she was worried for the dogkin. Her feelings were natural, given she'd taken care of them for so long. I also remembered hearing from Geraint that

the small-ilk dogkin weren't as dexterous as their large-ilk counterparts, and I'd felt the size of the different dogs when I'd shaken each of their leaders' hands.

I fully understood what Canis was saying, but I still wanted to make the small-ilk my domain guard, and I wanted to see them trained to become our guardians and protectors. The question was: how was I going to explain that to Canis?

Iluk Village, Ten Days Later

Ten days had passed since the arrival of the dogkin, and in that short period of time, the small-ilk had made themselves right at home. This morning, as well, they were all happily at work.

“All right, here we go!” cried one.

“Bring up the water!” shouted another.

“The pail is tipping! Catch it!”

“Get a good grip! Don’t spill any!”

These were the first voices I heard, from the senjis at the village well. Two of them were working the rope to pull up a pail of water, and two more were there to catch it and transfer the water to separate buckets. The senjis then took those buckets to the yurts to fill up everyone’s water bottles, just as they now did every morning without fail.

“What are we going to do after breakfast?” asked a dogkin from elsewhere.

“Are we cutting grass? Doing embroidery?” asked another.

“Or maybe we’ll have tea?”

“I like our songs too!”

I turned to the village square, where Grandma Maya was preparing for breakfast. Helping her were some of the female dogkin, who liked to spend their days aiding the grannies when they needed it. The elderly in our village were sprightly, to be sure, but they were still the oldest people in the village, and even ordinary, everyday movements—like getting up, sitting down, picking things up, and carrying things around—put a strain on their bodies. So in all the things the grannies did, the dogkin were there, devoted to their new friends and ready to lend a hand or provide the weight of their own bodies as support.

When I noticed just how difficult everyday tasks were for the grannies, I felt mighty ashamed of myself. I hadn’t noticed one bit, and boy did it make me feel

awful. I scratched my head as I thought about it, then heard the white ghee mooing from the plains.

“You’re looking good today!”

“Eat up! Eat your fill!”

“You guys sure like that grass, huh? I tried it myself, but it’s just so bitter.”

I looked over at the new conversation that met my ears and saw a group of sheps leading a white ghee back to the village, pulling it along by its reins. Looked like the white ghee had finished breakfast before the rest of us. Behind the ghee were sheps pulling the horses along too, and by the looks on their faces the horses were no less well-fed.

The sheps always handled getting the ghee and horses fed, but they also cleaned the stables and groomed the animals regularly. They were really good at it, and they’d completely won the trust of the ghee and the horses. They followed the sheps’ instructions even better than my own.

“After breakfast, next up is brushing!”

“And *I’m* on brushing duty today!”

“What? I’m so jealous! *I* want to be on brush duty!”

The horses neighed a reply to the shep conversation as they all walked along to the stable. Right about then I heard Aymer with Senai and Ayhan. They must have come back from playing with the dogkin kids in the fields.

“Let’s play hide-and-seek until breakfast!”

“Yay! Hide-and-seek!”

Senai and Ayhan got along with the small-ilk like a house on fire, and in particular they played with the small-ilk kids every day. In fact, they were less like friends and more like siblings. But it wasn’t just the small-ilk kids; the adults often joined them on trips outside of the village grounds as bodyguards.

Senai and Ayhan would often leave the village to go looking for stones on the plains. They always came back with a whole heap of them, and with the help of the dogkin they used them as fertilizer for their own little field next to the village square.

According to the girls, the stones had powers similar to verdant leaf stones. Ayhan explained that the white ones were verdant *fruit* stones, and the brown ones were verdant *root* stones. She said that leaf stones helped herbs because they had the power to help them sprout, but without root stones, as the name implied, they wouldn't firmly take root. Then she told me that to get a really good harvest you had to use the fruit stones and that to grow a tree you needed all of them.

Well, I remembered it being something like that, anyway.

The girls dug up the stones from somewhere around the grasslands thanks to the dogkin's keen sense of smell, and they told me that their mother and father knew all about how to use them. The girls did their best to remember what they'd been taught as they worked on their own field.

Senai and Ayhan's field contained walnuts along with some other tree nuts that were very important to them, and then some seeds they'd taken from the dry fruit that Eldan had given us. I was doubtful that the girls would have much success with the dry fruit seeds, but it didn't matter. I was happy to let them do their own thing.

Klaus and I got together some wood we found out in the grasslands to build a fence and sign for the field that read "Senai and Ayhan's Garden." The dogkin sometimes liked to dig up soft soil on a whim, so the fence was to make sure they didn't do that to the fields.

Needless to say, the dogkin had all quickly become just another part of Iluk Village. They also helped Alna with cooking, setting the table, cleaning, and washing, and they also helped me with building the reservoir and working the fields. They were versatile, all right.

There had always been chores to do, what with the field and the livestock and such, but it had started feeling like there was more than I could handle on my own, so it was nice to have help right when I needed it. I was nothing but grateful for how trustworthy the dogkin were.

Still, I was worried about working them too hard, so I told them to make sure they took breaks when they needed them and played when they needed that too. I mean, I *tried* to tell them, but they just wouldn't sit still. Seemed to me

that they wanted to work more than they wanted to rest, and I got the sense that they just loved to stay busy.

I figured the least I could do was reward them for their hard work, so I gave them some of the silver and gold coins that we'd gotten when we sold dragon materials to Peijin. That way, the next time merchants visited, the dogkin could buy themselves whatever they wanted. Instead, however, the dogkin decorated their yurts with the coins and even seemed to worship them to some extent. I tried not to think about it too much; they could do what they wanted with the coins until they decided to use them.

But the more I saw the dogkin work, the more I thought about how Geraint and Canis were wrong about the dogkin being clumsy. I mean, sure enough, they had short digits and lacked opposable thumbs, but that didn't mean they couldn't hold or grip things. When I put some knots in the well rope, for example, they gripped it just fine. And by etching grooves into the sides of the buckets and pails, we could make them easier for the dogkin to hold and carry.

When it came to cutlery as well, the dogkin could hold it between their digits, and with a little tinkering there were no problems whatsoever. Same with the brushes for the horses and ghee; we just added a longer handle and made them easier for the dogkin to use.

Now, it wasn't like the dogkin could use every tool we had, but they could handle a spoon just fine if you helped them out a little bit, so I didn't think they were clumsy at all. I actually thought they were pretty dexterous. And being that they were able to handle tools and such, I couldn't work out why they couldn't get work back in Kasdeks. That had been a mystery to me this whole time.

I asked the dogkin about it, but they were evasive, and Canis wasn't any better. So all I had left was my imagination. I mean, they *did* look small and weak at a glance, so I figured people were just overprotective and didn't want to have the small-ilk do anything dangerous. This made sense to me; after all, Canis had been very worried about me making the small-ilk into part of the domain guard, and she had even chewed me out over it.

When Canis had told me that back when the dogkin had arrived, I hadn't been

sure how to explain myself. I wracked my brain over how to best convey my opinion to her, but in the end I thought that words weren't the best way to explain it at all. Instead it was best for her to see it with her own eyes.

I asked Canis to stay with us for a while to see how things would work out. And if she still couldn't understand where I was coming from, that's when I'd do my best to explain things. Canis agreed to the idea, so she spent ten days with the mastis training to be part of the domain guard. And I figured that today as well, she'd be out in the plains watching Klaus and the mastis as they got to training.

"All right, first squad! All of you! Attack at once!" barked Klaus.

I walked over just as the group was in the midst of a heated training session. It was Klaus versus a group of five mastis. Now let me tell you, Klaus was a real warrior. He was strong enough to survive the war, and he'd even earned the title of "Klaus, the Head Collector" because of the enemy generals he'd felled.

Klaus had a mock wooden spear in hand, which he swung at almost full strength to fend off his attackers, but he couldn't touch a single one of the mastis. Canis had said that the dogkin were small and weak, but in battle they put their size to great use as they dashed around Klaus, weaving out of the way of his strikes.

The mastis continued to evade Klaus's spear until he left the tiniest of openings. Then one of them quickly got inside and clamped down on Klaus's leg. The dogkin was wearing a mouth guard so their teeth wouldn't injure him, but that didn't stop them from pulling the man off his balance. That was all the opening the remaining dogkin needed, and they pounced on him in an instant.

The dogkin swarmed on Klaus, holding him down by the limbs while one went up to his neck and gently bit him to bring an end to the bout.

"Whoa, you got me good!" cheered Klaus. "You guys are getting sharper by the day!"

Klaus sat up and gave all the mastis pats and compliments for their hard work. I had to say, I was mighty impressed to see them beat Klaus after just ten days of training. They made for real good soldiers. They had heightened senses of smell and hearing, and their eyesight wasn't bad either.

The dogkin's sharpened senses meant that they could also dodge attacks instinctively. They didn't let an opening go to waste either—their powerful legs could drive them into strong counterattacks. And while it was true that they couldn't wield weapons in their paws and swing them around, they were just fine without them.

Back in the war, the enemy's attack dogs had been a real pain for our forces, and I figured that if ordinary dogs were a hassle, then dogkin—who were physically similar but had the benefit of speech—were going to be even more effective on the battlefield. The onikin craftsmen were even crafting up some specialty gear for them, which would further strengthen their abilities.

When Canis saw the fruits of the dogkin's training, she was stunned, and her reaction told me that I wouldn't have to do any explaining. When she saw me walking on over, she looked a little awkward. Maybe she was embarrassed about her outburst when I'd first mentioned the domain guard.

I didn't think she needed to worry about it, though. I wanted her to take it in stride and look towards the future. I mean, I'd said that they'd have to fight if it was unavoidable, but all the training they were doing and the equipment they'd be using was mostly to prepare for bandits and the like. It wasn't like Canis had to worry about me putting the dogkin in rough situations where they might get badly injured.

At the end of the day, nobody invaded the grasslands because, well, there was nothing here worth invading for. The idea of war breaking out was just plain silly. The worst we'd get was a few stray bandits, and they wouldn't put up much of a fight against talented dogkin like these.

So yep, I didn't think Canis needed to worry one bit.

In a Dusty Stone Tomb—Diane

It was a neatly kept stone room that made one think of a long forgotten era, and people flooded into it. At the front of the group were servants carrying torches, followed by two women in glimmering suits of armor, and behind them soldiers armed with torches in one hand and weapons in the other.

The servants entered the room and then, after receiving orders from one of the armored women—Third Princess Diane—they lit the candleholders along the walls of the stone room. Slowly the darkness lifted, and the soldiers let out gasps.

At the far end of the room was a stone coffin, and around it were three stone statues. One was a man holding the royal scepter, one was a man holding a book, and one was a woman with a strange scar across her forehead. Around these stone statues were altars, and on those altars were jewels and objects made of gold and silver. The soldiers paid little notice to the coffin and statues; they had eyes only for the valuables.

“Those treasures are funding our military, so don’t be *too* greedy about what you keep for yourselves,” said Diane. “And though it should go without saying, nobody is to lay a hand on the statues or the tomb.”

The soldiers listened in silence, and then, as the princess’s words sunk in, they scrambled for the altars. They carried out the valuables and occasionally took something of worth and stuffed it in their own pockets.

It was a frightening sight to behold, and as the looting continued, Diane and her armored companion, Prinessia, walked to the statue holding the royal scepter. Diane then took it in her own hands.

Unlike the statues and the tomb, which were old, weathered, and reeking of times long passed, the royal scepter looked confoundingly as though it were still brand-new. It was so beautiful that it looked completely out of place in the tomb. At the tip of the scepter was a jewel, deep red in color, and wrapped around it was a dragon whose tail reached the bottom of the scepter. It was

nothing if not an unusual design.

Diane lifted the scepter and let it shine in the light of the candles, the jewel within it glimmering crimson. The sight of it brought a grin to Diane's face.

"Er, Princess Diane," uttered Prinessia, "just what do you intend to do with that scepter?"

The woman looked uncertain as she stood beside the princess, who brought the scepter closer to them both as she replied.

"Well, now that I have it, I'm going to use it, of course," she answered simply. "The king who founded our nation used this to raze his many enemies to the ground, and now it is time for me to create my own legend. And I will start by killing that filthy liar, Dias. Then I will take his hidden riches and his dragon materials to build my forces, and with them I will kill the nuisances I call my siblings. And in the end, I alone will come to rule these lands."

Prinessia froze, her face tense as Diane's words pressed upon her.

It was said that the royal scepter, once wielded by the nation's founding king, had lost its power either at the end of the war or when the king who wielded it finally passed on. In any case, it was now considered an ancient relic by all who knew of its existence. But even then, nobody knew when the story started circulating, whether within the last few centuries or possibly decades... And while Prinessia had no way of knowing whether Diane now handled the genuine article, she was nonetheless frozen by the princess's words.

When Diane had announced that they would be looting the royal tomb, Miralda had fled together with some thirty or forty of her soldiers. Now Prinessia too finally felt the danger she might encounter if things continued this way, and so she made up her mind. She would abandon Diane and return to the lord she truly served.

"Prinessia," said Diane, "there's no need to look so worried. In addition to the royal scepter, I also have a secret ace up my sleeve. That said, I truly consider it a last resort."

The princess's statement roused Prinessia from her thoughts, and she watched as Diane brought out a small object. It was wrapped in fine silk, but in

the flickering candlelight Prinessia saw its golden shape. The blood drained from her face as she quickly realized what she was looking at.

With the scepter in one hand and the wrapped object in the other, Diane shot Prinessia a most satisfied smile. Then she put the object back in her pocket and spoke with great fury and barely controlled emotion.

“Dias put an end to the war in which *I* was destined to shine! The man refuses to know his place! They call him a hero, but I tell you here and now that he robbed that title from me! And yet he made no effort to return to *me* the money that *he* was rewarded with, and on top of that he had the gall to refuse my most generous offer. *He! Refused! Me!*”

“Then he goes and uses *my* rightful money to hunt a dragon for sport, and then he amasses a fortune in materials and has his eyes on even more. He deserves none of it! If the man is truly named after a saint then it is his duty to obey me unconditionally!”

“According to our *source*, Dias slaughtered innocents in the war, and his tyranny knows no bounds. They call him a savior, but his merits are lies! And so I will kill the traitorous liar, and justice will prevail!”



Diane had worked herself to a fever pitch, but none of her words reached Prinessia's ears. Prinessia was focused solely on how to escape as soon as possible. She was consumed by the need to report to her lord that Diane had stolen the king's seal and was most certainly planning something devious with it.

So while Diane lost herself in her speech, Prinessia fled. She had to get to her lord, First Prince Richard, as soon as she possibly could.

Watching Events Unfold from a Hill above the Royal Tomb—a Mysterious Man

"Heh... Ha ha... Are you for real? I never would've thought that royalty would be easier to fool than beastkin. Idiots in power and idiots who are quick to take action... Is there anything worse?"

"Still, what an unexpected opportunity that has just fallen straight into my lap. Diane kills Dias, and then I kill Diane... I will have my revenge for what he did to me, and then I will have the last laugh. You just wait, father. You will get yours for abandoning me."

"But if things play out in this way, that will make *me* the nation's new hero! Me? Ha! Ha ha ha ha! Unbelievable! And so there is nothing left but to march onwards!"

A Room in the Palace, at the Royal Capital—Richard

In the royal capital, there was a room in the palace known as “Prince Richard’s Ballroom.” Due to all of the intense dancing and the many instruments that played in the room, it was designed with sturdy walls that sound would not penetrate. The floors of the specially made room were covered in lavishly embroidered thick carpet, and wherever one looked, the walls were filled with luxurious jewels and other expensive decorations.

The ballroom was the very epitome of extravagance, and it had only one door so as to ensure that nobody uninvited could easily barge in. That door was watched over by guards who worked directly under Richard himself, and so it was that even among those in the royal palace, only a limited number ever got to see the ballroom with their own eyes.

Those who had never seen the ballroom, but had nonetheless heard of it, despised and looked down upon Richard for going there almost every day, but Richard never paid any of those people any mind. Today, like most days, he once again found himself heading to the ballroom.

Richard was a man who drew the eye with his good looks. His gray hair draped down to around his neck, and his silver eyes shone with a sharp yet cool gaze. He had pale white skin like marble, and today he entered the ballroom accompanied by a number of guards and servants. The moment he walked in, the chatter that had until then filled the room fell into silence.

Those in the ballroom were young men and women dressed in the gaudy style of the nobility. All of them were of course nobles and part of the first prince’s faction. They each clutched various documents in hand, and it was the contents of these documents that had everybody talking; they detailed the state of Sanserife Kingdom’s military, industry, and finances.

Fierce debates had filled the ballroom, and Richard could see in the eyes of the young nobility that they were determined to rebuild the nation—a nation that was crumbling under the rule of a kindhearted but stupid king and the

bureaucrats (consumed by their own greed) who surrounded him.

“The mole we placed in Diane’s faction has returned with news of her intentions,” said Richard. “It would seem that my idiot sister has decided to plunder the royal tomb.”

The ballroom immediately began to buzz. However, nobody spoke a single word—rather, the air crackled with the fury and bloodlust of the gathered nobles, so powerful as to give the impression that they were all whispering among themselves.

Richard raised a hand, and at this gesture one of his guards began a report, detailing the information that had been brought back by their mole, Prinessia. Diane’s actions were quickly made clear to everyone in attendance, and the buzz in the ballroom grew even more intense, to the point that some among them began to speak.

The nobles began to throw their opinions and thoughts around. They asked how best to respond to the situation and talked of how their faction should act. They talked of how to turn this state of affairs to their advantage and how to punish Diane for her crimes.

Richard did not respond to any of the chatter. He merely removed his cloak—a very particular article of clothing reserved only for members of the royal family—and passed it to a nearby servant. This revealed Richard to be wearing a white shirt, a black vest, and black pants. It was a simple outfit and one that did not fit the lavishness of the ballroom. Another servant then brought out a simple chair, and Richard sat down with something of a flourish. He let out a sigh before he opened his mouth to speak.

“Moving to address what has happened is pointless,” he said. “We will not make it to Diane in time if we attempt to retaliate. Even if we *were* to make it in time, we would still run the risk of crossing Dias’s path.”

The nobles all gathered around neatly, but they were confused and taken aback by the prince’s words. One among them looked at Richard and chose to speak up.

“Is this decision related to the order you gave us to avoid Dias?”

“Indeed it is. You may not know who he is, but Dias is comparable to a mad dog, and one who will bite no matter who it is that stands before him. If Diane decides to toy with that dog, then I have no doubt she will soon find herself at the end of its jaws and in no small amount of pain. I hope for her sake that’s all she suffers, but she may very well end up dead. In any case, only a fool would willingly put themselves so close to something so dangerous.”

The noble accepted Richard’s words, but it was clear by the look on his face that in his heart he did not agree. Richard watched him for a moment, at which point one of his aides, an elderly knight standing behind the prince, let out a sigh.

“Your Highness,” he said, “perhaps it would be best to tell them more clearly of Dias’s behavior. Those who do not know any better know him only as our nation’s heroic savior. It is difficult for them to accept an order to avoid him without sufficient reason.”

“Then talk to them,” replied Richard. “Be my guest. You know about it all, just as well as I do.”



The old knight nodded and shifted himself to a position next to Richard.

“Before I begin, let me ask you all: to what extent do you all know of the man called Dias?”

The nobles then began to answer. He was a hero who came from an orphanage. He was the man feared by his enemies as “the bloody axe.” He was praised for being a man of the common people. And for whatever reason, he was known as both “kindly Dias” and as a man who “had no balls.”

The gathered nobles had never spent any time on the battlefield, and so their knowledge of Dias stretched only as far as the rumors they had heard. The old knight kept his exasperated sigh to himself as he went on.

“I see. And do any of you know *why* Dias is known for being kindly?”

Not a single noble could answer, though any of them could have learned if they merely chose to do a little research. Nevertheless, the old knight explained it.

During the war, when the kingdom had occupied enemy territory, the order had been given by the king himself to slaughter all of the enemy’s people and plunder all of their lands. This was an order inspired by revenge; the enemy had done likewise to several of Sanserife’s own cities.

However, during his entire time at war, Dias had never once harmed a citizen of the enemy nation. Whether he was with the royal forces or working apart from them, and even when he rose to lead the volunteer forces, there had been no murder and there had been no plundering. Dias had not let the soldiers under his command do either.

As such, he came to be known as “kindly Dias.”

Upon hearing this from the old knight, however, the nobles had questions. Why was Dias not punished for disobeying the king’s command? Seeing as he did not consider strategy nor do as ordered, why was he called a savior and not a war criminal? And if Dias did not loot or plunder the areas in which he was stationed, how in the world was he able to feed the volunteer forces that he led?

“As for Dias disobeying the king,” replied the old knight, “it was by the king’s own generosity that Dias was not punished for his decision. And while some at the time believed Dias guilty of war crimes, he fought as part of forces made up of ordinary citizens, and it was not believed that their actions, including insubordination, would sway the greater strategies concocted by the nobility. So none paid his actions much mind. As for food, Dias gathered food by methods other than looting and plundering.”

During this war, the volunteer forces that Dias was a part of had received none of the rations provided by the kingdom. They were merely commoners who had received some weapons from the state and basic instruction regarding how to wield them. The general view on volunteer soldiers at the time was that they would simply fight and die for their country. All of this showed just how dire the situation was for Sanserife at the time; they had lacked even enough food to feed their volunteer forces.

It was under these conditions that Dias had found time during the war to hunt animals for their meat, track down monsters and bandits, or otherwise do labor such as farming. In return for such work, the citizens in the occupied cities had split some of their food with Dias and his men.

“Through this kind of work, Dias’s efforts were a boon to his own kingdom. The war dragged on far longer than any of the nobility expected... Twenty years, in fact. During that time, the cities and villages which Dias was stationed in did not suffer any harm, and so they were able to pay tax in the form of food and produce. At the end of the war, those same cities and villages saw Sanserife in a favorable light and were integrated into the kingdom. It is thanks to Dias’s efforts that governance in these parts was smooth and simple.”

The old knight paused for a moment while the nobles around him asked further questions and made many a surprised exclamation. The knight watched them in silence, and when he spoke again, it was over the voices of the buzzing nobility.

“As for why people say that Dias has ‘no balls,’ well, this is a matter that was kept largely quiet, and so I don’t imagine any of you would have heard about the incident. The truth is, when people say that Dias has no balls, they are mistaken, for it was not Dias whose balls were...lost.”

The old knight went on to explain that during the war there had existed a platoon known as the Young Lionhearts Squad. This squad was largely made up of young nobles who wanted to make a name for themselves through their war efforts or otherwise see the battlefield firsthand.

However, the Young Lionhearts Squad had, at one time, caused what was called a “minor issue.” To be more exact, they were committing acts of savagery upon young women in a village belonging to the kingdom and indulging in looting and plundering to boot.

The soldiers at the heart of all this were a group of young nobles who had wanted especially to experience this brutality, but they had run into Dias, who had happened to be nearby and rushed to the scene once he heard the news. He had beaten the soldiers from pillar to post for this “minor issue” and tied them up. When he asked them why they had done such a thing, the boys had simply said they had abused the girl because of her beauty.

And so Dias crushed...*them*...under his heel.

And this was when people began to speak of “no balls.”

Fortunately, there were a few medics capable of healing magic in the area, and the lives of the young nobles were spared. However, the treatment was not perfect, and each and every one of those nobles still felt the aftereffects of Dias’s punishment to this day.

“W-Wait. Hang on just a moment!” exclaimed a noble in sheer disbelief. “Pardon my rudeness, but *what the hell?* How in the world could Dias do such a thing and not be dragged to the palace court?! How did Dias escape the guillotine?!”

The old knight had expected just this reaction, and so he ignored the noble and continued his story.

“At the time of the incident, a group of investigators from the palace was dispatched immediately. Dias was summarily arrested and taken to the palace court. However, many who heard of the news, including the commander of the knight corps, moved in to protect Dias and object to his treatment. It was their belief that given the state of the war, they simply could not afford to lose someone so pivotal to their chances. The lords of other domains where such

‘minor issues’ had also taken place, such as Duke Sachusse, also voiced their support of Dias. These dukes testified that Dias had acted in the name of justice.”

The old knight’s words caused further uproar and confusion among the gathered nobility.

“The nobles from the Young Lionhearts Squad were at a disadvantage, and Dias’s words at the time of his interrogation were the decisive blow. He said that his parents had taught him that the nobility were special and that they existed to protect the nation and the people who resided within it. As such, Dias was adamant that the soldiers whose balls he had crushed under his heel were not nobles at all. He was quoted as saying that there was not a single noble among them. Upon hearing a report of this, the king himself showered praise upon Dias, and before the trial had a chance to take place, he made it known in a public announcement that Dias had, as a citizen of the kingdom, done the right thing.”

Ordinarily, any major incident involving the nobility was judged at a trial held at the palace court. The court was where the nation made its judgment, under the name of the king himself. However, the king himself had proclaimed to all that Dias was just and decided that his actions were good.

Even noble heirs did not dare draw the ire of the king or the commander of the knight corps, but the culprits were not even that; they were fools who had engaged in delinquency. The culprits’ parents had been in a bind. The case had been decided before it even went to trial, and with the king on Dias’s side it was not just their sons whose positions were in danger.

As such, these parents had quickly decided to have the whole incident disappear as quickly as possible. So everything had been settled before anything ever made it to the courts, and the exact details were only ever known by a small number of people. That said, the sheer nature of the incident itself was such that rumors did indeed spread. Eventually, however, the rumors became more fiction than truth, and so people came to claim that Dias “had no balls.”

“However, this incident was yet another that boded well for the kingdom,” said Richard. “A group of foolish nobles received their just punishment, and the

families that raised them suffered their own just losses. These families belong to Prince Meiser's faction, so I'm sure you can imagine the kind of people they are."

The nobles went silent and nodded in response.

"However, that is not the problem," Richard continued. "Regardless of whether or not things worked out well for the kingdom, Dias is nonetheless a man who does not obey the orders of the king. He does not respect the nobility for their rank. *That* is the problem. Throughout the war, Dias caused a whole manner of problems, but the man has the devil's luck. He has never once been punished for his transgressions. No punishment, and no repentance. He will do what he wants when he wants, and that could well mean taking my head or even my father's. Like I said, he is a mad dog. You are not to get mixed up with him, not to get near him, and god help you if you dare attempt to lay a hand on him."

The nobles all looked at one another with a certain skepticism, which bubbled up as doubts they voiced among one another. Finally, one noble took it upon himself to timidly voice what they were all thinking.

"If I may, Your Highness, I realize that Dias is a man who does not work by logic, but from what we have heard so far, he does not seem like a bad man, per se. He was born a commoner, he is short-tempered, and he is a bit stupid, but surely he wouldn't raise his hand towards royalty. I insist that we move to intercept Diane and—"

"But Dias *has* harmed royalty in the past," replied Richard, cutting the man off. "And now that you know that, tell me: do you still feel the same way?"

The ballroom was silent. But this was no ordinary silence. It seemed to instantly chill the air as if they were suddenly in midwinter, and the color from all the nobles' faces drained away completely.

The nobles surrounding Prince Richard were no longer able to speak. Dias had, in some way, assaulted a member of the royal family. And once they heard this, the nobles began to change their tone. Yes, they agreed, Dias did seem to be far too troublesome to meddle with. And yes, they added, it would be best to avoid Diane too, who was heading straight for that trouble. With everyone in

agreement, the meeting in the ballroom drew to its end.

The room fell into silence as the nobles left, but Richard remained on his chair, and he let out a long sigh. It sounded tired or, perhaps, disgruntled. Around him were his personal servants and guards and another group of servants who had come once everyone else had left. Their job was supposedly that of cleaning, but they were clearly waiting for something, perhaps for Richard to speak, and they stood silently in the ballroom.

Unable to take the quiet any longer, one of Richard's servants spoke up. He was a young man with a strong build and there was a smug grin on his face as he walked towards the prince.

"Prince Richard," he said. "Mind if I ask a question before we get to talkin' business? I's a bit curious about somethin' after all the stories we just heard, y'see. Why would the king banish Dias to the frontiers? Sounds to me like he's a big fan of the guy, so why would he do somethin' like that?"

"How many times do I have to tell you to mind your manners?" said Richard, flashing the man a disgusted glare for an instant for how he talked. "How many times have I told you that the royal palace demands a certain level of decorum? And anyway, my father never *banished* Dias to anywhere. The very premise of your question is mistaken."

The servant was confused and tilted his head, unable to understand what the prince meant. Richard sighed again.

"My father did not *banish* Dias to the frontier. Rather, he *entrusted* him with the frontier because he believes Dias capable of success. Calling the location the frontier makes it sound insignificant, but look at it from another angle and you'll see that it's the front line of our national defense. And it only makes sense to leave such a place to one you trust, no? My father trusts Dias implicitly. After all, for all of my father's blunders, it was Dias who was there to pick his image off the floor and clean it up."

"Wait, Dias really did that? Are you f'real?"

"Let me assure you, it's very true. When diplomacy failed and the war began, our nation quickly found itself on the brink of destruction. My father's head should have rolled, but guess who appeared? Dias. Every time my father made a

misstep or bad decision, Dias was in the thick of it, and his rampaging righted the ship. His efforts in the war erased my father's failures and brought profit to our nation. This was how it was for twenty years. So for my father, Dias is a hero, his personal savior, and a friend of twenty years in whom he places great trust."

"Yeah, but the way I've been hearin' it recently, Dias was left to fend for himself in the plains without a single gold coin or helping hand."

"That was not my father's doing. Though I lack surefire proof, I'm certain that Meiser was behind it. When my father entrusted the plains to Dias, he knew that the former lords had died strange deaths, one after the other, and so he made certain to prepare adequate money and manpower for Dias. Meiser made sure it never reached him. It's likely that Meiser and his faction thought it a waste to give Dias such huge sums of money to simply die in a curse-infested land. This stupidity would have driven them to action."

Of the manpower Dias was supposed to have been given, Meiser made those who would obey into part of his faction and had the rest sent far from the royal capital. Then he and the nobles under his command took all the money that was meant for Dias.

Richard couldn't help but laugh. They had been stupid and had not considered the repercussions for their actions. If it was Dias's money they were after, they would have been better off killing Dias and all of the people who were meant to help him. That way there would have been no loose ends, and their tracks would have been easier to hide.

Stealing Dias's money and expecting a supposed curse to take care of the rest was nonsensical no matter how you thought about it. Then again, Richard himself had heard that Dias had escaped many attempts on his life by enemy assassins, and so perhaps Meiser had assumed any such further attempts would also fail.

Richard considered Meiser's plans while his servant mulled over his words and, eventually, accepted the prince's reasoning. But then he seemed struck by another question.

"But uh...doesn't that put Meiser in a real bind? If the king trusts Dias that

much, and he finds out that Meiser stole the man's money..."

"For now, my father believes the story that Meiser's people have told him: that Dias was so excited to start this new chapter in his life that he left for Nezrose before the victory celebrations had even finished. Sooner or later, however, he'll learn the truth, and his personal guard will begin an investigation. Meiser and his faction will suffer the consequences."

Richard did not know if the investigation would go as far as Meiser himself, but several within the second prince's faction would have their heads on the chopping block, and Meiser was sure to lose far more than he had taken. Meiser's entire faction was a blight upon the kingdom, and now what happened with Dias would be a chance to hit them with irreparable damage.

"Is this yet another boon that Dias has brought to our kingdom?" muttered Richard, so softly that none heard him.

The servant who had asked the question watched Richard carefully and opened his mouth to ask another question but was interrupted by a different servant: a girl with red hair.

"You ask too many questions!" she said. "Let me ask one for a change! Hey, Prince Richard! I've been really super curious about something! Who did Dias hurt in the royal family? I'm sure it wasn't the king or queen, and there's no way it was you, so..."

The girl was energetic, perhaps excessively so, and Richard responded with a grimace unlike any expression that had graced his face to this point. The old knight by his side looked suddenly awkward. Others who also knew the truth of the matter were suddenly unsure of what to do, and at this point the redheaded servant began to put the pieces together herself. She looked upon the grimacing prince, her face filled with utter shock.

Confronted with this gaze, Richard neither confirmed nor denied the silent question and instead remained on his chair in complete silence. Nobody spoke until a servant woman with a head of hair so black it seemed dyed began to tell a story, her hands gesturing as her voice adopted the tone of one telling a fairy tale.

"Once upon a time, there was a twisted and selfish young boy who was

spoiled rotten by his parents,” she began. “One day, that boy told his father that he wanted to see the war with his own eyes and bring glory to his family name through his efforts in the war. The father had always doted on his son, and so he did not think deeply about his son’s request and quickly gave him permission. This led to the formation of the kingdom’s first Young Lionhearts Squad.”

“The young boy’s wish was granted, and not only that, he was given command of his very own squad of soldiers. However, he lacked the ability to lead and had no experience whatsoever, and so he quickly found himself surrounded by enemy forces. He had no means of fighting back, and his squad and personal guards had all been killed.”

“Just when the boy believed that he was destined to be killed or taken prisoner, a rough, rabid man stormed in, and with monstrous power he fought off every single enemy soldier, saving the young boy from whatever fate the enemy had in mind.”

“The boy praised the man who saved him, and told him that he would be rewarded with whatever he desired, but the man ignored the boy’s words entirely and shouted at him. ‘Why would you do something so reckless and stupid?!’ he demanded and firmly punched the boy in the head.”

“And this, you see, is our story’s happy ending.”

The people in the ballroom who already knew the story stood around awkwardly, while those hearing it for the first time could not hide their surprise. They gaped at Richard, and with all their eyes on him, he let out a defeated groan.

“That was the first and last time anybody had ever hit me,” he said. “In the end, Dias didn’t even care when I told him I was a member of the royal family. He told me to save playing kings and queens for when I returned home. Can you believe it? A lecture right after battle. He said that it was all fine and good to look up to the king, but that doing something so reckless for nothing but merit was a fool’s errand. It was three months before I could return to the royal capital, and during that time Dias put me through the wringer.”

The faces of those listening were a mix of shock, fear, and joy at the prince’s

expense. The ballroom filled with chatter until the old knight by Richard's side spoke.

"Dias made sure that Prince Richard was forged into a fine, upstanding young man, and the man you all now see before you. He has grown into a hardworking man of integrity and one who does not judge others by their rank or upbringing. I suppose that this too is another blessing that Dias has brought upon us, ensuring that the young prince had a wonderful teacher."

"Even if I had never met him," interjected Richard, "I'm certain I would have changed for the better regardless. Once I saw those useless nobles running our country into the ground with my own eyes, I would have woken up."

The old knight shrugged and put a hand to his beard. Richard glanced at him, then turned his attention to the gathered servants.

"Though Dias extended the life of our nation through his efforts, we cannot expect it to last when idiots reign at its highest levels. Before we run the risk of destroying ourselves again, we need to purge these people from their positions. And so we will borrow the support of that wretched temple, play nice with the foolish nobles, and yes, enlist the aid of the Commoners' Guild. So let's get down to business."

And with that, Richard began issuing tasks to those who were gathered in the ballroom—his guards and servants, and the members of the Commoners' Guild disguised as such. As each directive was issued, the old knight passed the person entrusted a leather bag heavy with coin, which brought smiles to the guild members.

The young, well-built man who had asked Richard all those questions grinned at first when he was to learn of his own job, but he then looked somewhat uncomfortable when he understood what he was to do.

"Ah," he muttered, "so you *do* need me to hunt Diane then. How annoyin'. Couldn't you have made the other nobles handle that?"

"In the end they are not so different from Diane. They hunger for merit and praise, and there's no telling what they might do when faced with Dias himself. And I don't want the king's seal falling into the hands of anyone else as stupid as Diane. It will only cause trouble. Get to her before she makes contact with

Dias, and bring her back along with the king's seal. As for the royal scepter, we can easily make a replica, so don't bother yourself with its retrieval."

"Huh? Is the seal really that valuable? Aren't you worried I might sell it to the others...?"

"If you can find any other member of the royal family willing to pay a commoner, let alone do business with them, then be my guest."

"Oh. Right. I'll bring it right on back to you, Prince Richard. Apologies for the dumb question."

Richard sighed at the young man's brazen attitude, then gestured to the old knight, who passed the man two bags of gold coins. The young man took them, but he was puzzled.

"Huh? Ain't this too much?" he asked. "Are you giving me the second half of the payment before I even head off?"

"One of those bags is your down payment, as usual. The other is in case you run into Dias. I was not lying when I said he is a man best avoided, so do not get near him if you can help it. However, should you run into him, give him one of those bags. The curse of the grasslands may have been no threat to him, but it'll be no laughing matter if he's died of starvation."

The young man laughed, and the others in the ballroom laughed along with him. Even the old knight joined them, but Prince Richard's face scrunched up with a scowl of frustration.

A Room in an Expensive Inn—Diane

Why had this happened to me? Ever since my childhood nothing had gone my way. I lacked the natural talents of my siblings, and all I had ever done was fail. Everyone had looked down on me—my father, my brothers and sisters, the retainers...and now even Miralda and Prinessia had abandoned me after serving me for years.

The soldiers I had brought from the royal capital had continued to desert me, and now only fifty remained. I was able to hire a decent number of mercenaries thanks to selling the treasures in the royal tomb, but they were motivated only

by coin, and they were lacking compared to the loyal soldiers who served the crown.

I was well past the point of no return, and I could no longer afford to fail. So why did all of this have to happen now? I asked myself countless times, but I could not find an answer.

“I am not wrong,” I growled. “I have done the right thing!”

But there was nobody to answer me. I was alone in my room. I felt empty, and that murky emptiness enveloped me. I stood from my chair to rid myself of it, straightened my hair, and gathered my resolve. Then I turned my gaze to my bed, upon which lay two treasures: the royal scepter as used by the nation’s founding king, and the king’s seal, which had since times of old been used as proof of the king’s decisions.

There was a special power in both of the objects. There was the power to set fire to your enemies and the power to make stupid commoners obey your commands. I stared at them, and I came to believe that their power was *my* power. The gloom I’d felt mere moments ago had vanished, replaced by a brightening of my spirits and a strength that welled from within.

“Yes, it will be me,” I said. “I will rule this nation.”

There was power in my words, and it buoyed my spirits even further. My mind was made up. I had put words to my strength of will. All that was left now was to act on them.

I gripped the two treasures in my hands, and they gave me courage. I would rule this nation and all of those who looked down on me. I would begin the work that would have *me* looking down upon *them*.

By the Completed Reservoir—Dias

“All right, Sedorio, raise the weir board!” I shouted.

At my order, the senji clan leader, Sedorio, replied with a relaxed nod, clamped his jaws on the wooden weir board’s handle, and pulled it up. The handle was designed so the dogkin could easily use it with their mouths, and as the weir board was raised, river water streamed down the waterway.

I’d called on the onikin tribe for help with the construction. It had taken a few days and quite a bit of wood to finish, but it now connected the river to our reservoir. It was dug into the ground, and the water flowed through it into the reservoir that the senjis had worked to dig.

Under the watch of Grandma Chiruchi and Grandma Tara, we’d hardened the reservoir walls and floor with grass. This was to ensure that the walls wouldn’t crumble apart over time. Usually this kind of work was done with tree branches and tree leaves, but we couldn’t do that in the plains, so we did it with grass instead. We cut the grass and covered the reservoir walls with it, then put soil over that and hammered it flat. Then we did it again, and again, until the walls were hard and dense.

Now with it complete, the water was flowing into the reservoir slowly, but everything looked good. The senjis had been digging and working on the reservoir every day, and they peeked over the edge and watched with joy. They were all over the moon to see it finished, and their tails wagged like crazy. But even with their help, finishing the reservoir had taken a good few days.

It was hard to believe it was almost summer already. That we’d even managed to finish the reservoir before summer got here was largely thanks to the senjis, as well as the support of the sheps and the mastis. The dogkin’s timing couldn’t have been better; our village field was coming along nicely, and Senai and Ayhan’s field had started to sprout too. We’d need a lot of water to keep all of it going strong.

While I was thinking about all of that, a big old mouth came up behind me

and munched at the hair on the back of my head. It kept on doing that until I waved it away and turned around. It was Balers, the black horse that Alna had named, and it let out a dissatisfied snort and shook its head.

Somehow or another, Balers had ended up being my personal horse. I wasn't very good at riding horses, but Alna had forced Balers on me, saying that it was inconceivable that the lord of the plains couldn't ride a horse. He had thicker, more powerful legs than the other horses we'd received, and a strong body to boot. He was also smart, and I figured he'd be gentle with me, seeing as I was so bad at horse riding. All the same, he didn't like to stay still and he was a bit of a mischief-maker, and more than a few times he'd come up behind me and munched on my hair.

According to Alna, you built a relationship with horses by spending time with them and taking care of them. That was how they came to respect you, she'd said, so that's what I was doing today. I brought Balers with me to the reservoir, and I figured I could brush him afterwards. But Balers made it pretty clear that he was already bored of just standing around, and he was pushing me to get a move on.

"We finally finished the reservoir," I said, "so would it be okay to watch it a little longer?"

Balers flashed all his teeth at me, and his face said to me that no, it wasn't okay. So, with a little reluctance, I told the senjis that I had to get going to look after Balers, and they puffed up their chests proudly and told me that they had it all under control. They all saw me off when Balers and I left.

I held the reins lightly in my hand and let Balers choose whether he wanted to go to the stable to get brushed, walk the plains for a while, or play at the village. Balers ended up pulling me towards the village. On our way I saw that the stable was empty, which meant that the white ghee and our other horses were out somewhere.

Alna had named the other horses too. The red horse was Karberan, the white horse was Shiya, and the gray horse was Guri. Alna rode Karberan, Senai Shiya, and Ayhan Guri. The three of them were all much better riders than I was.

Alna didn't even need a saddle when she was on Karberan, and while she was

riding she could fire off arrows from her bow and even shoot down birds. She never ceased to amaze. Now Senai and Ayhan couldn't manage quite that, but they had good bonds of communication with their horses, which meant it wasn't hard for them to run around on Shiya and Guri. It was more than I could say for myself, given that I could barely stay atop Balers, and even then the horse was going easy on me.

Balers seemed to read what I was thinking, because he turned and stared at me with his big eyes. His gaze seemed to say, "If you know what the problem is, then do better, would you?" All I could do was let out something of a troubled grumble.

Balers and the other horses were all really smart. They couldn't understand language quite as well as Francis and Francoise, but even then they could read your intent and respond. According to Alna, they could detect the slight changes in our expressions to figure out what we were thinking.

With that in mind, I smiled at Balers like I was trying to say, "I'll get good before you know it, you just watch!" In response, however, Balers let out a long, neighing sigh and turned away from me.

Now, it might have seemed like Balers didn't like me all that much, but I knew better. I knew that when it was actually time to jump on Balers back and ride him, he'd do his best to help me out. I didn't feel a lick of hatred from him. In fact, I felt his attitude had made him pretty adorable, so I put a hand to his back and gave him a pat as we walked to the village.

Once we got to the village square, I was greeted by a sight I was getting very used to: Senai, Ayhan, Francis, Francoise, and a whole heap of dogkin all huddled up in a pile and taking a nap. Ever since the twins' field had started to show signs of success, the girls had started taking an afternoon nap nearby.

Summer was near and the sun was high in the sky, which made it pretty warm, and I had thought they might be uncomfortably hot, but they were all blissfully asleep curled up together.

A refreshing breeze blew through the village and rustled the tiny leaves of the girls' budding garden, and the girls muttered the words "dad" and "mom." It was such a peaceful, heartwarming sight that Balers must have started feeling

sleepy too, because he walked on over and started getting comfortable. I took the bit and reins from Balers's face so he could settle in with everyone else, and then I started feeling sleepy too.

I let out a great big yawn, stretching my arms up high to wave away the drowsiness, and looked up at the sky. I started thinking about maybe doing some chores around the village square until Balers woke up, but then I noticed a white shape flying towards me. It was flapping in desperation, and as it got closer I realized it was Geraint.

I could tell by the way the bird was flying that it was some kind of emergency, so I ran over to meet him. I was a few steps out of the square when Geraint came to rest on my arm, and he took a moment to catch his breath before he spoke.

"Sir Dias, I bring urgent news. I carry with me a letter from Lord Eldan. Please, read it and write a reply immediately!" Geraint thrust out his chest, and I took the letter from the bag he carried. I didn't like what it said very much at all, and I heaved a heavy sigh.

At the Domain Lord's Residence in Merangal, Kasdeks—Eldan

Eldan had gathered the leaders of the various races that served him for a meeting. The room was decorated in uniquely embroidered carpets and rugs that adorned the floor and walls, and everyone sat in a circle exchanging thoughts.

Their meeting concerned what to do about an order from Third Princess Diane, and opinions were split in half: on one side were those who agreed with Eldan, on the other were those who supported the princess. She had appeared without warning a few days earlier, together with fifty troops and some two hundred mercenaries.

Kasdeks's citizens were shocked and worried when the princess arrived, but Diane had only said that she wanted an audience with Eldan. Given that she was a member of the royal family, and Eldan had no reason to turn her away, they sat down to talk. It was then that Diane revealed why she had come: she planned to kill Dias and take everything he had, and she requested Eldan's support.

Eldan knew he was dealing with royalty, and so he kept his own feelings to himself, very carefully and indirectly attempting to refuse Diane's request. At this point, Diane, who saw right through Eldan, cut him off before he could do so.

"This is by order of the king!" she declared.

Diane then took a piece of paper from within her chest pocket and presented it to Eldan. It read as follows:

You are to provide your full support in the way of soldiers, money, and food to Princess Diane in her effort to kill the traitor Dias. You will relinquish all spoils to the princess.

Eldan knew immediately that these were not the words of the king, and it was

obvious that the paper was a forgery, but he held back the urge to laugh and made to give the paper back. That was when he noticed the mark of a particular seal at the end of the order. It was the king's seal, and he had seen it a number of times on documents for his father, Enkars.

Eldan knew that the seal was carried only by the king and was used to prove that a document had truly come from him. Diane had passed Eldan a royal decree. And while he was certain that the *paper* was a forgery, the king's seal made it genuine by law.

Given his position, Eldan knew he could not simply give the paper back and refuse the order. If his title as duke had already been officially recognized, he would have had a few countermeasures at his disposal, but at present he was just another citizen of Kasdeks. His father and brother were dead, and he had inherited the position of leader of Kasdeks, but his title of duke—and leadership of the domain—would not be considered official until he went to the royal capital for an audience with the king.

And yet, Diane had arrived now, just as Eldan had finished his preparations and was set to leave for the royal capital. It was horrible timing, and Eldan could do little more than grind his teeth in frustration.

In the end, he accepted the royal decree, but at the very least he was able to avoid giving Diane an answer on the spot. He requested an opportunity to meet with his retainers, given that he did not have the power to make a decision on his own with regards to the military, and Diane reluctantly agreed.

Eldan then had a luxurious dinner prepared for Diane, complete with singing and dancing, in order to buy himself time for a meeting with Kasdeks's leaders. The topic of the meeting was how to handle Diane, and Eldan made his thoughts clear.

"I refuse to cooperate with that stupid princess! Let it be known that anyone who does cooperate with her will be summarily dealt with!"

For Eldan, the idea of harming his good friend and hero Dias was simply out of the question. Then there was the matter of Dias having found success cultivating the plains, a task that many—including Eldan's own father—had tried and failed. Exactly how Dias had succeeded was not clear to Eldan, but if

Dias was to further cultivate his lands, Nezrose was very likely to become an agricultural wonderland of wheat and grain. After all, it was a wonderfully temperate area ripe for expansion if one could find a way to use it.

If Dias were to successfully expand his farming operation, Kasdeks would be in a prime position to benefit. It was the only royal domain neighboring Nezrose, and the even terrain that bordered their lands would make it all too easy to build trade routes.

All of this would mean vast profits and produce, and given that Dias was at the heart of it, Eldan could not abandon him even if he put aside their friendship. This meant that while he could not help Diane, he also could not let her attack Dias. In Eldan's mind, this left only one option: to take out Diane himself and discard the forged decree.

Those that opposed Eldan knew very well how their lord felt, but they also knew that it was a very precarious time for him and his domain, and they did not want him to do anything reckless. They urged him to be cautious.

No matter how they dispatched Diane, whether by making it look like illness or having her disappear, it would cause trouble further down the road. Everybody knew that Dias was important to Eldan and to the Kasdeks domain, but they saw Eldan's future as *the* top priority. Their opinion was that in order to protect his future, abandoning Dias might prove unavoidable.

Eldan wanted them all to come to a consensus before committing to any action, but both sides raised valid points, and so talks plateaued. Time passed, and passionate arguments were made. During all of this, the dogkin leader, who agreed with Eldan's opinion but had not weighed in on the matter yet, offered his thoughts.

"Lord Eldan," he started calmly, "I have one thing I would like to ask. Have you asked Sir Dias what he thinks about all of this? Perhaps before we come to a final decision on anything ourselves, we should ask his opinion."

The dogkin wore a loose-fitting kurta and was covered in white fur. His ears swayed as he spoke, and Eldan replied to him with a nod.

"I have already sent Geraint to inform Dias of Diane's arrival, her intent, and the size of her forces. Geraint should have already reached him. Assuming there

are no issues on Dias's side, I expect we'll see his reply before the end of the day."

"In that case, shall we put our meeting on hold until the reply arrives? It is in our best interests to know how he intends to act and what he expects of you. Geraint has been bringing me letters regularly from Canis—er, my daughter. If I might offer a humble opinion based on her judgment of his character, I expect..."

Before he could finish, Eldan and the other leaders with sensitive ears heard something and looked to the window. Then the other leaders heard it too. It was the flapping of wings, and a few moments later, Geraint came flying in through the window.

The dovekin was exhausted, and Eldan quickly ran over and picked him up.

"Geraint! You have done well," he said. "Your timing is impeccable. We were just talking about you. Now, what did Dias have to say in reply to my letter?"

"Dias wrote you a reply, and I have brought it for you."

The bird had clearly worn himself out traveling between the domains, and Eldan patted him gently as he took the letter from Geraint's bag. He then returned to his place at the meeting and placed Geraint gently down on a nearby cushion. He opened the letter, excitement filling his voice.

"Sir Dias has such neat handwriting!" he said. "And the way he writes is like poetry... Huh?!"

Eldan had looked incredibly thrilled for a moment, but the contents of the letter filled his face with confusion. Everyone in the meeting looked puzzled, desperate to know what was written in the letter, which Eldan read in complete silence.

When Eldan still did not speak, one of the leaders who could not bear to wait any longer, a lionkin, approached Geraint.

"What in the world is written in that letter?" he whispered. "You're in the intelligence division, so you had to have read it in advance, no? What's got Eldan looking so distraught?"

Geraint looked at the lionkin with something of a glare, then remembered that the man was the type who couldn't keep his curiosity to himself and, with some reluctance, replied. "Dias told Eldan that he should follow the royal decree and support Diane. That's the gist of it, and I think that's why Eldan has reacted as he has."

The lionkin and everyone within earshot was suddenly filled with the very same shock as Eldan, and cries of disbelief rang through the air.

On the Plains, Now Regretfully a Battlefield—Dias

The atmosphere was thick with the unique air that marked the start of war. Soldiers had gathered silently on either side of the battlefield, and while none spoke, they nonetheless knew that war was on the horizon. They quivered with nerves, their breathing anxious, and that buzz in the air got to all of us. There was nothing else quite like it; the strange excitement that hovered in the quiet.

“War, huh?” I uttered, knocking the butt of my battle-ax on the ground.

“War indeed,” replied Klaus.

I was equipped in my armor, and Klaus in his own dragon-material gear with his spear at the ready.

Eldan had sent us a letter, and we had replied, and over the following five days, we’d sent a few more letters. Now it was noon, and to the east were Diane’s forces, at the ready some distance from us. I’d brought our telescopes for the occasion, and at a glance, it looked like Eldan was exactly right about the number of soldiers we were looking at.



Diane's main force was fifty heavily armored troops, all with swords or spears. On the left wing were two hundred mercenaries with swords and bows, all in light armor. On the right wing were the one thousand soldiers led by Eldan. It had been an uneven placement of troops, to be sure.

As for Nezrose's forces, we had me and Klaus, and...

"Eldan's forces are overwhelming," remarked Aymer. "With that many soldiers, rations must be a real challenge."

The hopping mousekin Aymer sat on my head, gripping my hair. Nearby, ten mastis under Marf's command were hiding in the grass.

Aymer wasn't part of our fighting force. I'd brought her along because her sense of hearing was top-notch, and she'd be able to deliver messages fast thanks to how quick she was on her feet. So keeping her out of the count, that meant we had a total of...twelve.

Our main fighting force was Marf and the mastis. They were decked out in specially made mouthpieces and cloaks that Klaus had come up with and asked the onikin craftsmen to make. Klaus called the mouthpieces dragon fangs, and they were designed less for offense and more as a way to protect the mastis' mouths and teeth. The masks had space for the dogkin to breathe, but otherwise their muzzles were completely covered, and they were equipped with dragon claws and fangs to strengthen their bites. This allowed the mastis to injure the enemy without injuring themselves, and they were a very effective weapon.

The cloaks, which Klaus called dragon scale cloaks, were made by sewing dragon scale scraps into fabric. The end result looked a lot like fish scales. They weren't designed for taking direct hits but rather for deflection. And thanks to the dragon materials, they were both durable and lightweight. They even had hoods, which meant that together with their masks, the dogkin soldiers had protection for their whole heads if necessary.

The dogkin were naturally very quick, but now with proper training and equipment, they could easily bite through stone and deflect Klaus's spear even when he was trying to stab them at full speed. They were even stronger than I'd imagined.

Still, I believed in our dogkin, but we were up against a force of around 1,250.

“When you face them like this, you really feel the difference in numbers, huh?” said Klaus. “Maybe we should ask the onikin for backup or at least have Alna join us?”

“Well, the onikin have their own village to protect,” I said, “and Alna already has an important job: she’ll be the one hiding Iluk with her magic if that’s what it comes to. I’d like to have her here just as much as you, but it is what it is.”

“Hm, good point. If only Eldan were to join our side...” Klaus muttered.

“Eldan’s got his own dream to strive for and his own people to protect. I can’t have him risking all of that just for us. That said, he’s sent us letters right up to this morning with inside information, and he even says he’s thinking about changing sides. He brought a thousand troops even though he didn’t even need nearly that many, so...I doubt that he’s actually our enemy in this battle.”

He’d told me about a royal decree that he believed was a fake, but in my letter to him I said that as long as it had the king’s seal on it, he had to consider it an order from the king himself. Thus he needed to obey. And yet, every single day Eldan sent me a letter via dovekin with inside information. He told me all he knew about Diane’s plans, the size of her forces, how they were equipped, and how well trained they were. I was worried; what was he going to do if Diane found out?

So every time I got a letter from Eldan I told him to quit putting himself in danger and to prioritize defending himself and his own people. But even then he just kept on sending his letters, right up until this morning, on the day of the battle itself.

He’d brought a thousand troops, which was far, *far* more than he’d ever need to take out our village. That’s why I didn’t think he’d brought them for that purpose. I felt more like he’d brought them to hold off Diane’s forces if he had to. I shook my head. Had Eldan even read what I’d written him in my letters?

“Well then, if we don’t have to deal with Eldan, then victory may yet be ours,” said Klaus. “That’s what I’m praying for, anyway. But regardless of how Eldan moves, I assume that our strategy remains unchanged?”

“Yep, we’re sticking with Aymer’s plan. We keep watch over the enemy movements and lead them through the plains to the pitfalls we prepared. By doing so, we’ll find a way to split Diane from Eldan’s forces, and launch a counterattack on Diane and Diane alone. Then we’ll deal with her.”

Aymer had thought up a number of good spots to put pitfalls, and the dogkin had dug them up over the last few days. They were hidden with grass, and the dogkin had marked them so they would know the locations by scent alone. We thought this would be particularly effective, seeing as we were up against humans. I had been a little worried as to whether the strategy would really go as we’d planned, but I didn’t have any better ideas, so that’s what we’d done.

That said, I *did* have Balers and Shev waiting for me a bit farther back and away from the battlefield. If Aymer’s strategy didn’t work out, then I was going to use Balers to charge at Diane and take her out on my own. I was keeping this a secret from the others. In any case, that was how we planned to break through and...*deal* with Diane, who was the source of it all.

Yep, deal with. Not kill...

I deliberately avoided using the word “kill,” but Klaus and the others never said anything about it. We were all citizens of the kingdom as far as I was concerned, and I really didn’t want us killing each other, so I tried not to use such words, but I didn’t know whether my feelings alone would be enough.

“We’re fighting for all of Iluk today, but we also have to do our best for Senai and Ayhan, right, Lord Dias?” said Klaus.

He must have noticed the sour look on my face, because he smiled at me when he spoke.

“You’re right, Klaus,” I replied. “Let’s do it for them.”

Diane had come here to attack us and plunder what we had, but we had a carriage and horses now, and our village was made up of yurts, so we could quickly move and relocate with relative ease. We could stuff our carriage with whatever we could, abandon our current village, and flee across the grasslands. That was one option, and yet I simply didn’t like it.

If we decided to pick up and run, we’d have to abandon the field that we’d

finally gotten to yield a harvest, and...the twins would have to abandon the field that they poured their hearts and souls into each and every day. I wanted to avoid that at any and all costs.

When I thought of us leaving our village, and of Diane or some wild animals wrecking our fields, and then of how sad Senai and Ayhan would be... Well, even just imagining it broke my heart.

Ever since the girls had started on their own field, they'd stopped crying at night when they thought about their parents. And as their new family, it was my job to protect them, so I gripped my axe tight in hand and readied myself. That was when Aymer gave me a few pats on the head.

"Dias, Dias!" she said. "What on earth is that thing the enemy is bringing out? It's very big and eye-catching."

I looked over at Diane's forces and saw them wheeling out a big frame about the size of a person with a silver bell hanging from it.

"Oh, that's a war bell," I answered. "In old times armies would ring it to give orders to their troops. That said, it fell out of use because sometimes the orders didn't get through, and also the enemy could hear those orders loud and clear, and sometimes if the bell was stolen it could cause havoc on the battlefield. That's why they're thought of pretty much as antiques now."

The war bell was positioned next to Diane, and I wondered: *What are they up to? What are they trying to do with that thing?* Right then, the soldiers started ringing the bell repeatedly, and the sound of it rang out across the plains. I looked through my telescope, waiting for enemy movement, but nobody was moving.

Diane's main force of fifty were all at the ready with their weapons, but they hadn't actually taken a step yet.

"Ringing the bell like that is the order for a full assault," I said. "As soon as the ringing stops, they'll come at us like a wave. But will they really do that at this distance? With such a difference in the number of troops? Maybe they're planning something else?"

"A full assault...?" uttered Klaus, who must have been looking through his

telescope at the same time. “What in the world are they thinking? They don’t have any mounted soldiers except for Diane herself, and given the heavy armor of her main forces, they’re going to collapse from exhaustion just running over here.”

While Klaus and I were watching for movement, the noise was getting too much for Aymer, and she ran from my head and took refuge in my chest piece, where she covered her ears.

You just wait there until all the ringing stops, Aymer.

The ringing went on for a little longer, and while it did Klaus and I discussed our options. If it was a full assault, we had to be on the same page when it came to how to react and where to run to.

Then the ringing suddenly came to an end. Klaus and I immediately stopped talking and readied our weapons, watching for enemy movement. We waited, and I shouted orders to Marf and the other dogkin in hiding.

“Stay right there! I can’t read the enemy’s movements yet! Let’s see what they do!”

It seemed to me that the ringing of the bell wasn’t the order of a *full* assault, because only Diane’s main force of fifty was charging in. The mercenaries on the left and Eldan’s forces on the right, meanwhile, hadn’t even unsheathed their weapons.

What is Diane planning? What in the world is this strategy? Why are only fifty of her men charging in? Aren’t they all her forces?

As for the enemy base camp, it was just Diane, her white horse, a few servants, and the war bell. She’d left herself completely defenseless. All the same, I watched with my axe at the ready, my thoughts racing as I tried to make sense of what I was seeing. Suddenly, the fifty charging soldiers began to slow, and their battle cries stopped. They looked around, puzzled, and finally stopped in place.

For some reason, Diane’s foot soldiers just stood there, looking around and not taking another step forwards. The left wing and right wing remained completely silent. The battlefield was frozen in place. Similarly, my party stood

with puzzled looks on our faces, trying to work out what was going on.

The war bell had rung, the charge had started, then it had stopped, and now time was passing without any further movement. I looked through my telescope at each enemy squad. The main force of fifty was still looking around at the others. They weren't making their way towards us anymore, but they weren't retreating either.

The mercenaries on the left hadn't even drawn their weapons. They were discussing something with each other, and it looked like an argument was taking place. As for Eldan, he'd seemingly had the bright idea to bring out a white table and some chairs from his carriages. A tablecloth was placed on the table, which was then decorated with flowers, and his people set up a small oven by its side.

What in the world...?

"Lord Dias!" said Klaus. "There's movement near Diane. She's sent out two servants. One is heading to the left wing, one to the right. Perhaps they're messengers? But if that's the case, why did she bother using the bell first?"

I turned to get a better look and, just like Klaus had reported, two servants were sprinting desperately to Eldan and the mercenaries. But they looked far too slow to be messengers, and I wondered if something unexpected had occurred. Perhaps the men had had no choice but to become messengers? I couldn't make heads or tails of it.

"We wait until we see movement from the enemy," I ordered.

I wanted to know what was going on and what they wanted to do. I didn't have any idea what was happening right now, but I was going to wait until I had a clearer picture.

Diane's Forces, the Right Wing—Eldan

When the simple utility oven was constructed, a fire was started and a slender kettle was placed on it to boil water. Kamalotz stood next to the kettle, preparing tea leaves and a teapot.

This was the sight that met Diane's servant—a chubby, middle-aged man

dressed in a silk bliaut—when he arrived at Eldan’s table.

“Sir Eldan!” he exclaimed. “What is the meaning of this? Why did your forces not charge when the assault order was given?!”

In contrast to the servant, whose voice was stressed and exhausted, Eldan lounged back in his chair like he had all the time in the world. He looked at the servant but gave no answer.

Eldan was dressed the way he always was. He held no weapon and wore no armor. With a silent, elegant gesture, he offered Diane’s servant a seat at the other side of the table—an offer the servant accepted with some confusion. It was only then that Eldan spoke.

“It’s time for tea,” he began.

“What?”

“Teatime is so very, very important,” Eldan said. “Before my father passed away, he left me these words: ‘One must never forget to indulge in teatime as only nobles can, regardless of the circumstances.’ That’s why I deem enjoying a cup of tea more important than ordering my forces to attack.”

The servant had never imagined that this would be Eldan’s reasoning, and he lost the ability to speak. His mouth opened and closed in an effort to say something, but no words came, and all the while Kamalotz continued preparing the tea. A simple but extremely well-made white teacup was placed in front of Eldan, after which Kamalotz poured into it an amber tea.

“You intend to use such nonsense excuses to disobey an order of the king?!” asked the servant, finally able to form words again. “What on earth do you think a royal decree even is?!”

In the face of these words, Eldan remained the very picture of serenity. He seemed to enjoy the color of the tea for a moment before replying.

“I daresay that *you’re* the one talking nonsense,” he said, his tone flat. “I have done *exactly* as ordered. Please do not forget that everything you asked for is here: support in the form of food, money, and soldiers.”

“You call this support?! Your men haven’t taken even a single step! Order

them to attack the enemy this instant!”

“The enemy? And exactly where are these enemies you speak of? Surely you don’t mean Dias and his friend over there, do you? Are you telling me that those two brave men, standing courageously alone against overwhelming numbers, are our enemies?”

Eldan paused for a moment and pierced the servant with a sharp glare.

“I don’t see any enemies to speak of,” continued Eldan, his voice now taking on a cold edge. “All I see is the upstanding lord of these lands, formally dressed to greet our arrival with a single servant in tow. And let me be clear: if those two *are* our enemies, then I don’t see the need to launch a thousand troops at them. I think the elite soldiers that Diane has brought with her should be more than enough. Look across the plains! It’s just two men! Mobilizing a thousand troops to take on but two men is the very height of stupidity.”

“It also bears mentioning that the king’s order, which did not even have a name written on it, asked only for my support—which, as you can see, I have provided far more than enough of. If Diane wants to do something more here, then she can do it herself. But if you insist that my forces mobilize, then you can wait for me to finish teatime. I believe that’s only fair and polite, seeing as *you* requested *my* support.”

The servant made to retort, but Eldan held up a hand to silence him, then took his teacup in his other hand and indulged in the scent of the blend. The servant tried to speak to Eldan, but he was completely ignored. Eldan lifted the cup slowly to his lips and sipped from it tenderly, taking his time to truly enjoy the flavor of the tea. When it looked as though the teacup had finally been emptied, Eldan turned to Kamalotz.

“Another, if I may,” he said.



In the end, however, the servant was left with absolutely no idea as to when Eldan's teatime would possibly end. And when Eldan began drinking his third cup, the man walked away with no words but with steam escaping his ears.

Diane's Forces, the Left Wing—Mercenary Captain Gordon

"I *thought* somethin' was weird about all of this. I wondered why the client was payin' all that money but nobody else was takin' the job. They said we were bandit huntin' but we just kept on going farther west. It didn't make any sense; the *east* is where all the bandits are."

"Never would've thought the target would be Dias though. Never would've even believed that Princess Diane was out to kill him. And look, I know work doesn't come as easy these days, but let's not go gettin' too desperate..."

The very moment that the leader of the mercenaries on the left wing—Captain Gordon—had recognized Dias, he'd started mumbling to himself. No matter how much his men tried to talk to him, he didn't respond, and even when they pushed him or grabbed him it was no use. Gordon was a man with a graying beard and a head of messy gray hair, and he held that head in his hands as he went on mumbling.

The war bell rang, and the order to charge was given, but even then Gordon didn't move from his place, and some of his men were certain he had lost the plot. It was only when one of them grabbed the sword at his waist that Gordon finally looked up and gave an order.

"We're retreatin'," he announced. "Don't even bother unsheathin' that rusty thing; just hurry up and start gettin' ready to go. We're leavin' before Dias sets his sights on us."

Gordon didn't even glance in the direction of the man with his hand on his sword as he spoke. The mercenaries surrounding him couldn't believe what they'd just been told.

"Look, you don't get to the position of captain without bein' able to read a battlefield. So quit your worryin' already. I'm not outta my mind, if that's what you're thinkin'. Now hurry up and start preparations; we don't have much

time.”

Some of the mercenaries began to prepare for the retreat immediately. After all, it was a direct order. Others, however, did not follow the captain’s order and stood around talking it over instead. As the chatter grew louder, one lower-ranking mercenary reluctantly approached the captain.

“Er, um, captain?” he asked, reluctantly. “Wh-Why are you talking about a retreat all of a sudden? Our target might be the heroic savior, but it’s just him and one other guy, right? The reward we’ll be paid for the job is phenomenal, so why don’t we just go ahead and do the job as usual? We’ll take those two down easy!”

Gordon knew that the man had been sent on behalf of those who didn’t want to follow his orders. The poor guy was shaking in his boots. Gordon let out a long sigh at the sight of the mercenary and spoke loud enough so that all of his men could hear.

“What do you mean ‘easy,’ you bunch of idiots! The man standin’ on the other side of the battlefield is the bloody axe himself! The berserker they call Dias! And in case you didn’t notice, the man by his side is Klaus, a daredevil who’s always fought by Dias’s side no matter the odds! None of you lot stand a chance against them, and if you think you do, you’re dreamin’!”

The lower-ranking mercenary who’d spoken to Gordon shrunk back, unable to speak, so another stood up to take over for him.

“Yeah, but there’s two hundred of us, ain’t there? How the heck does two hundred lose to two? That’s crazy...”

“Yeah, we’ve got two hundred men, and eventually we’ll beat Dias and Klaus, but how many will we lose in the process?” asked Gordon. “Thirty? Forty? We might even lose fifty. And here’s the bigger problem: this is their turf. They know the lay of the land. If they’ve got traps waitin’ for us, or men ready to ambush us, then we are in for a world of hurt. We might end up losing half our men or worse.”

“I don’t know what happened to Kasdeks’s army, but they haven’t moved either. But look, if you want a piece of the action then be my guest. Just do it after I’m outta here. You can have the down payment and the reward money. I

don't care."

With that, Gordon took a bag from his person, heavy with coins, and threw it towards the still-dissatisfied soldiers around him. But not a single one of them moved to pick up the bag, and instead they all took a few steps away from it, as though it were toxic. Such was the weight of Gordon's words.

"Smart move," he said. "Even if we were to succeed in killin' Dias, as soon as news of that spread, we wouldn't have a home here anymore. If we laid even a finger on Dias, we'd have all the mercenaries in the nation on our tails. Back in the war, Dias saved the lives of a whole lot of mercenaries. And let's not forget that he defended our homes and our country, all right?"

"The mercs in charge are all old men now, and you lot all know how much they still believe in honor and duty. Our top priorities right now are gettin' outta this place, headin' over to them to grovel, and trying to explain ourselves and all this. The only mercs who would dare point a blade at Dias now are either idiots like you lot who weren't in the war or bandits."

It was here that another mercenary chose to speak up. Gordon didn't recognize his face and couldn't remember his name. "Yeah, but won't we be in all sorts of trouble for backing out of a deal with Princess Diane?" he asked.

"Yeah, probably," replied Gordon, "but I'll take that over makin' a whole nation of mercs into my enemies. And besides, if that princess dies then we don't have any problem, do we? Now would you quit it with all the stupid questions and start preparin' for our retreat already?!"

The plan for the mercenaries was decided: retreat, make it back to town before the princess, and depending on how things went, do something about her. Though Gordon didn't say as much directly, everyone understood the message, and once everyone had weighed the pros and cons of staying or going, they started preparing to retreat.

So the mercenaries put away their weapons, put on their cloaks, and discarded whatever was too bulky to take with them. In the midst of all of this, Diane's messenger arrived, pleading for the mercenaries to obey the command. Gordon largely ignored the messenger, merely gave him the bag of coins and told him to return to the princess.

Observing the Enemy's Movements—Dias

The messengers had returned to Princess Diane, but still there was no movement. Well, actually, Eldan *was* enjoying some tea, and the mercenaries *had* started to retreat. So even though nothing was actually happening in terms of the battlefield, things didn't look like they were going well.

As for why Eldan was indulging in luxuries, I had a feeling I knew the answer to that, but the retreating mercenaries had me scratching my head. All the mercenaries I'd known back in the war would never have fled from their enemies, no matter the circumstances. They even had overwhelming numbers, so they didn't even have a reason to retreat.

I was mulling this over when I noticed movement from Diane's troops. The servants who had returned from delivering their messages were given swords along with the other nearby servants, and they all joined the rest of her army. They trudged over looking pretty grim, I had to say.

Behind them all, Princess Diane sat on horseback waving a stave around wildly and banging on the war bell with it. She was screaming something, looking decidedly unfit for command, and it pushed her soldiers and servants forwards even though they had pretty much no morale to speak of.

Oh, give it a rest, would you? Eldan's not moving, you've lost your mercenaries... Isn't it better to fall back and come up with a different plan of attack? Why force your men so recklessly into something like this?

I couldn't believe it—not Diane, and not any of her men. I felt pretty sorry for all of them. That was when I noticed Klaus, Marf, and Aymer all looking at me.

Oh, right. I guess I shouldn't be worried for our attackers. Not when they're coming right this way.

"We're looking at an attack force of fifty," I said. "Their spirit is broken, and they don't look well prepared. If we work together, this battle is ours."

Klaus grinned at my words, and the mastis all started wagging their tails excitedly.

"So here's the new plan," I continued. "We'll meet the enemy right here, head-on. We'll hit them hard, take their weapons, and render them powerless."

Then when we've got them under control we'll go and crack Diane too. Hopefully we can knock some sense into all of them."

Klaus looked momentarily shocked, but then he broke into a bigger smile. Marf and his fellow dogkin woofed and wagged their tails with even more fervor.

"What?! Why are you doing this?! Don't hold back against fifty soldiers! That's too dangerous! That's not a plan at all!" cried Aymer.

She was the only one who disagreed with my new plan, and she banged on my chest piece from inside to let me know all about her discontent. While she did so, I got into the nitty-gritty of our new strategy with Klaus and the dogkin.

After some waiting, the enemy reached us, and I let out a battle cry with everything I had, to intimidate our foes and bolster our fighting spirits. My shout was our order to attack, and Klaus ran out along with the dogkin. The battle had begun.

Somewhere Within Earshot of Dias's Battle Cry—????

"Now *that's* what I call a battle cry. And we're not going to lose *our* battle either. So, if Dias isn't going to take *her* out, then the job falls to us. After all, it's the job of all wives to support their husbands on the battlefield!"

"Roger! The Wives' Club will do our utmost!"

Iluk Village, at the Grandmas' Yurt—Maya

Yarn and almost-finished knitting projects covered the floor of the yurt in which Grandma Maya sat, surrounded by a number of dogkin. She held a handful of colorful stones, which she threw upon a round cloth mat, with radial lines drawn out from the bottom stretching up.

The stones had landed at the top of the mat, then hit one another and jumped around unnaturally, sliding to and fro as if guided to the location they were destined for, until finally coming to a stop.

Grandma Maya looked at the collection of stones and where they had all fallen, carefully considering the section of the mat and the color of the stones. She looked it all over several times before finally speaking.

“Safety, treasure, good news, great feat, and reverberation. The reverberation result is curious, to be sure, but these results are all reassuring. We can rest at ease.”

All the watching dogkin wagged their tails with relief. Grandma Maya gave each of them a pat, and they helped her to her feet. Then they headed outside, where the rest of Maya's friends were waiting. Grandma Maya smiled as she shared the results of her divination—the ladies were all very happy.

“Oh, thank goodness.”

“I'm so glad for such good results.”

“Now we can rest easy.”

“You've never once been wrong, Maya.”

“Thank you so much, Maya.”

Then the ladies all split up to get back to their work and their chores. Grandma Maya watched them all get back to it, then looked around the yurt, thinking about what to do next. That was when she noticed the dogkin glaring at one of the tree saplings in Senai and Ayhan's field, and with her dogkin

friends in tow she approached, curious.

“What are you doing, glaring at that sapling so hard?” she asked.

“Ma’am! I’m keeping an eye on a bug to ensure it doesn’t get up to anything bad!” replied the dogkin. “If it decides to eat the leaves on this most precious plant, I will punish it immediately!”

The young black-and-white shep kept their attention fully on the sapling as they spoke, their nose and eyes pointed directly at this potential foe. Realizing that the dogkin had their eyes on a bug and not the sapling itself, Grandma Maya took a closer look and realized that it was nothing to be worried about.

“My dear, that’s just a ladybug,” she giggled. “Such bugs are good, as they eat the pests that intend to do harm to trees and their leaves. It is merely taking a moment to rest upon that sapling, so let it be.”

With its red wings and its black spots, the bug looked like it might be poisonous, and so the dogkin turned to Grandma Maya, puzzled.

“Are you sure? It’s not going to cause any harm?”

“Oh, I’m quite sure, yes. When I was growing roses I saw them very often. I’m certain it’s safe.”

The dogkin looked relieved to hear it. They sat down in place and shook their head from left to right as they began to hum. Grandma looked down at them, then looked around and realized something.

“Senai and Ayhan would usually be here around this time taking care of the plants here. Where are they?”

“Ma’am!” replied the dogkin. “The twins have gone out with the others! They asked me to look after the field while they were gone, so here I am, on guard duty!”

“They went out? But where would they go at a time like this?”

“They went out on their horses with Francis and Francoise and some of the mastis to patrol the area around the village! With Lord Dias and Lady Alna gone, they say it is their duty to protect us! Lady Alna took my wife and others to go to the battlefield! Something about using her hide-and-seek magic and

surprising the others... They definitely said something to that effect!"

Grandma Maya sighed.

"First Senai and Ayhan, now Alna. What in the world is she up to? Young Dias asked her to look after the village. My oh my..."

The dogkin let out an instinctive snort to let Maya know it wasn't an issue.

"Don't worry in the slightest! With Lady Alna gone I will protect the field *and* the village! I won't let anyone harm what Lord Dias has built!"

Grandma Maya nodded and chuckled.

"It is a relief indeed to have you here protecting us all," she said. "I think I might join you on guard duty."

Grandma Maya then gently lowered herself to the ground, and she patted all the dogkin who were with her.

At the Start of Battle—Dias

I saw the enemy freeze at my battle cry, and then I dashed into the fray behind Klaus. I wanted to take some of them out while they were still caught off guard, so I set my sights on an enemy soldier and hit him in the gut with the butt end of my battle-axe.

The enemies were all wearing armor, of course, but I smacked him all the same, forcing him back with shock and pain, and then with the handle of my axe I knocked the spear from his hands. I readied myself in case he was going to come at me bare-handed, but with his weapon gone, the soldier crumpled to the floor in defeat, his fighting spirit even more thoroughly extinguished than when the charge began. So I kicked the man's spear far out of reach and went looking for a new enemy.

I did not use the blade of my axe, and instead I hit the enemy with the lion that decorated its face, the handle, and the butt. Sometimes I kicked and other times I tackled, and just like the first soldier I always made sure to disarm my targets.

The enemy soldiers were steadily falling, but they weren't all about to go

down without a fight, and those who were left settled themselves into smaller squads to prepare for another attack. It wasn't going to be easy, and I wondered how long my strength would hold as I raised my axe once more.

Diane's Forces, the Right Wing—Eldan

Eldan was sitting up and leaning forwards in his chair, staring through an elaborately decorated telescope.

"Kamalotz, what's your take on Sir Dias's and Sir Klaus's skills in battle?" he asked.

"My take? If you'd like, I am more than happy to call our commander to give you a more professional appraisal," replied Kamalotz.

Kamalotz was staring through a telescope of his own, one of a much simpler make, and he paused for a moment to glance at his lord for a response.

"No, it's your take I'm interested in," replied Eldan, still watching the battle.

Kamalotz straightened up and nodded. After looking through the telescope a little longer, he answered.

"Watching Sir Dias, what surprises me most is his endless stamina and preposterous strength. His movements haven't slowed or weakened since the battle started, and even though he's holding back, each attack is incredibly ferocious. Occasionally when I see an enemy soldier hurtling through the air I think it must be some kind of joke. But if Dias were to fight without holding back...now *that* would be a truly terrifying sight."

The moment Kamalotz finished speaking, a soldier who tried to resist Dias ate a blow and flew through the air, colliding with his fellow soldiers. Eldan nodded as he watched. It was exactly as Kamalotz had described.

"Whenever Sir Dias finishes swinging his axe and leaves the tiniest of openings, Sir Klaus is right there to fill it," continued Kamalotz. "Truly impressive. He won't let a single enemy get anywhere near Sir Dias's back or side, and he deftly leads anyone larger than himself right into Dias's path. His power and technique are still somewhat unrefined when he is fighting alone, and I'd place him above average in terms of martial prowess, but he does a

wonderful job of supporting the simple and straightforward style of Sir Dias, which allows him to surpass his own natural abilities.”

As Kamalotz described his style, Klaus was quickly weaving through the battlefield, cracking enemies with the butt of his spear and otherwise keeping them at a distance. His maneuvers were like a dance, guiding his enemies as his partners around Dias’s stage. At the same time, Klaus was never in a position where he got in Dias’s way, and he never did anything to interfere with what Dias was doing. The two worked masterfully in combination.

Eldan thus couldn’t help but feel his lips crease with disagreement as he heard Kamalotz’s appraisal.

“I daresay you’re being a little too harsh, Kamalotz,” he said, a hint of dissatisfaction in his voice. “I think he’s more than strong enough as a lone soldier. There’s also the fact that he can read Dias’s next movements without fail, which allows him to choose the best course of action. Remarkable. If he weren’t one of Dias’s own personal troops, I’d want to poach him for our own.”

“Indeed,” replied Kamalotz, “you may very well be right.”

The man was not about to argue with his lord, so he agreed as was his usual fashion, and for a time there was silence between the two.

“Lord Eldan,” said Kamalotz eventually, “I must say that the most surprising thing of all for me is not Sir Dias or Sir Klaus but rather the small-ilk dogkin.”

“Their efforts and valor in battle are indeed impressive.”

Through their telescopes, Eldan and Kamalotz could see the dogkin dashing through the battlefield. Five of them attacked a single soldier at once and had him under their control in an instant. Many had their jaws clamped down on enemy soldiers’ feet or weapons to make things easier for Dias and Klaus, and others were keeping enemies at bay with their fierce barking. It was a marvelous display of their unique abilities.

The cloaks the dogkin wore deflected attacks, and their masks allowed them to bite through steel armor. On top of that, they hid in the grass so as to launch surprise attacks, and the enemy was unable to get a clear read on exactly how many dogkin they had to worry about at a given time. The dogkin were like

dogs, but they were not *just* dogs, and because the enemy soldiers were unable to properly grasp what they were dealing with, even simple barking elicited fear and confusion.

“We underestimated them,” said Eldan. “We called them small, powerless, clumsy, and driven by instinct. I’m terribly ashamed of myself.”

“I must admit that my eyes too were clouded in their judgment. Who would have thought that they were capable of such prowess? Having said that, the small-ilk are known to rampage when they let their instincts get the better of them. How is Dias able to rein them in like that? Perhaps there is some secret to it that we are unaware of?”

“Hm, I’m curious about that too. There may not even be such a secret, but if there is, how is he able to maintain such control over them? We must ask him about it when we next have the chance.”

With that said, the two men stopped talking and once again put their focus on watching the battle in the distance. Eldan grew so mesmerized by it that he continued to lean further and further forwards with each passing moment. Kamalotz made sure to put a gentle hand to his lord’s shoulder to ensure he did not fall over completely, but he too maintained an unbreaking watch over the battle.

The enemy soldiers were beaten by Dias’s axe, poked by Klaus’s spear, or tackled by the dogkin. All of this served to sap at their strength, and eventually they all lost their weapons and their will.

“And so the battle comes to an end,” whispered Eldan.

Diane’s Forces, the Central Squad—Diane

Diane was alone, watching the forces she had left being decimated before her eyes. Kasdeks had not moved his army even a single step, and the mercenaries had retreated. Diane was enraged, and she swung the royal scepter around, her feet kicking out wildly as she did so.

Why did this happen?! Why don’t they ever obey me?! Why has the world gone so insane?!

The fiery emotions that burst from Diane's heart were now visible in her every action. However, there was nobody there to receive any of it nor anybody to put her in her place, and so her anger and her dissatisfaction only grew. The feelings grew until they overflowed, and finally something inside of her, inside of her mind, simply broke, and all of it spilled from her mouth.

"You call this a royal scepter?! Wielded by our founding king?! There is no legendary power! This doesn't burn at all! Not a flame, not even a flicker! Do it, you damned scepter! Burn them all! Dias, Kasdeks, those dumb soldiers and those filthy mercenaries, burn all of them and the grasslands they stand upon!"

Diane waved the scepter as she screamed and wailed, spewing forth her frustrations. This was a battle she had been destined to win—a battle she *had* to win. After everything that she had done to get here, she could not afford to stumble and fall now.

There had been only one possible option open to her—the one where everything went according to plan and exactly as she needed it to. And yet, here and now, of all times, she faced defeat. She knew enough to know that much was true, and her psyche was being battered for it.

The image of Dias flashed across her eyes for just a brief moment. He was the source of all the evils that plagued her, and he was crushing her. Inside of her bubbled more than anger and hatred; it was something so much *more* that she could not describe it with words, and it swirled and swelled until it burst.

"Burn it all! Burn it all! Burn it all and slaughter everyone!" she wailed. "These damned grassy plains! Anything and everything, and by the power of this scepter, Dias too! I will burn you alive!"

Diane held the scepter tight and dug her spurs into her horse, preparing to charge, and that was when it happened.

It was the sound of something slicing through the air, and just as Diane became aware that it was near her hands, something hit the scepter and knocked it clean from her grasp with tremendous force. For an instant, Diane came back to her senses, and she tried to work out what had just happened. The scepter that had once been in her hand was suddenly gone. Something had sent it flying. But what? What was that sound? And where had the scepter

gotten to?

She looked all around the immediate vicinity, trying to find answers to her questions, but found nothing. She looked farther out but nothing caught her eye. It was just grass as far as she could see. Diane could not understand it, and her heart began to fill with fear and confusion.

On the Battlefield at the Grassy Plains, Hidden by Magic—Alna

“Hmph. All she needed to do was be a good girl and get off the horse and start running...” muttered Alna.

She had just released an arrow, hidden by her concealment magic, and knocked the royal scepter from Diane’s hands. Then she turned to the excited dogkin with her, each of them shouting at her.

“Lady Alna! Lady Alna! What are we doing now?”

“The Iluk Wives’ Club is ready and raring to go!”

“Is that woman the boss of the baddies? Should we bite her? Should we bark at her?”

“She looks nasty! Should we drag her back to the village?”

The dogkin were buzzing with energy, but Alna spoke to them in a low, toneless voice.

“I’m going to fire more arrows. I’ll either hit her clean or merely scratch her, but I’m definitely going to knock her off that horse. I want you to get her horse for me. Also, grab that weird-looking wand she was waving around. I felt a little power in it. Then, let’s get to gathering any loot left on the battlefield. My magic won’t hide you while we’re separated, so be careful not to go near the enemy.”

Alna then took an arrow from her quiver and notched it before going on.

“I am going to drive that woman from the grasslands. My arrows will push her into the eastern forest. Then I am going to make her run until I’ve carved my message into that thick skull of hers. I will make her suffer so deeply that she will fear even the *thought* of trying something like this again.”

With that, Alna released her arrow, and it promptly knocked Diane off her horse. She followed this with a second and third arrow, which grazed Diane and sent terror through her. Along the eastern border where Nezrose met Kasdeks, the grasslands gave way to woods and the trees grew thick—that was where Alna was herding Diane.

Once Diane was on the move, the dogkin who called themselves the Iluk Wives' Club left Alna's side and dashed away to do exactly as they'd been ordered.

Running through the Forest—Alna

There was no wind here, and the sun did not shine. There was a heavy humidity in the air, and the forest smelled like the damp of the leaves that covered its floor. Alna, decked out in her battle makeup, nocked another arrow as she ran.

She was hidden by her concealment magic, but she didn't like it here nearly as much as in the grasslands. She launched herself from the roots of trees as she moved, occasionally bringing her bow up and firing another arrow at the panicked Princess Diane, each one grazing her arm or shoulder as it whizzed by.

Alna chased Diane, drove her onwards, and filled her with dread, all to keep her away from the grasslands and to make her never want to attack Dias ever again. Alna was going to make sure that her demands were etched into Diane's very soul.

Alna didn't need to go this far. It would have been so much easier, and so much more decisive, to simply kill Diane, and yet Dias was against the very idea of killing others. So Alna had nothing left but this.

She had thought it unbelievable that a man who had spent many long years at war, a man who was considered a war hero, would be so against the deaths of others. But when a group of bandits had threatened their village in the past, and when angry mice had launched an assault directly on him, and even now with war on his very doorstep, Dias had not killed a single foe. Avoiding it was part of his very nature.

Alna did not know why Dias was this way or what feelings had driven his thoughts on the matter, but he was her husband, and if that was how he wanted to live then she would abide by his ways. With that in mind she let loose yet another arrow and readied the next.

Just as Alna was thinking she would say something to Diane and finish things with one last arrow, she noticed three figures appear in the distance in front of her target.

“Wow! Who’d’ve thunk we’d run into our target right here in the middle of the forest? Talk about luck!”

The person that led the three figures, a man with black hair and black eyes, jumped on Diane, and the others followed suit. They held her down, tied her arms and legs, and gagged her. Then the black-haired man fished around in her pockets. Meanwhile, Alna watched it all in silence, hidden by her magic with her bow at the ready.

With Diane Captured—Narius

“I know he told us to capture her *before* she ran into Dias, but there’s no helping that now.”

The young man, Narius, who had been dressed like a servant during his time in Richard’s ballroom, now found himself looking at Princess Diane covered in mud and scars. He fished around in her pockets, looking for something.

Narius had tied his hair back neatly at the ballroom, but now it was all over the place. He also had a face full of stubble, though most of it was hidden beneath his leather cloak.

When he looked at the princess, he had a pretty good idea of what had happened to her. She’d met Dias on the battlefield, been injured, lost control during his counterattack, and then fled here, fearing for her life.

“I guess we’re just lucky that she’s still alive, huh?” he said. “If we’d’ve brought back a dead body there’d’ve been hell to pay.”

As he spoke, Narius had felt something wrapped in cloth and pulled it out of Diane’s pocket. Inside of it was the king’s seal, and he grinned.

“Yes! And we’ve got the seal too! This’ll definitely please the prince! I’m certain he’ll forgive us for being a little tardy!”

Narius shoved the seal into his own pocket with a casual grin.

“We wouldn’t have been late in the first place if you hadn’t been so obsessed with all those restaurants,” said one of the men with Narius, clearly frustrated. “Did you forget that we were doing great on time until then? It’s just food, but

you had to go and spend all of our money, day after day...”

“Seriously though,” said Narius, “who *wouldn’t* get a little obsessed, surrounded by all them delicacies? All those unique Kasdeks sugars and spices, all used for wonderfully sweet and spicy dishes, and sometimes even sour dishes, and then the complex flavors they make by combining their spices? It depresses me just to think that we have to return to the royal capital, I tell you...”

Narius let out a dejected sigh, and that was when it happened. Suddenly, something flew by their ears, slicing through the air. It echoed as it went, and Narius and his two companions all dropped low, looking out for danger. Then they heard that same sound again, followed quickly by a sharp crack. The men turned to the sound and found an arrow stuck deep in a tree trunk. That was when they realized that they were being attacked.

“Who the hell’s there?!” cried Narius, drawing his short sword.

His companions followed suit, and their eyes traced the periphery of the forest, looking for enemies. They found nothing. However, they felt a certain bloodlust drifting from the direction that the arrows had come from, and Narius was sure that somewhere between the trees was their attacker. Yet he saw nothing, and this confused him.

In the midst of this, he realized that it was no good looking for something they couldn’t see, and he changed his train of thought. He started thinking about who it could be and why they might be attacking them. What reason could they have for doing this? And who would do it? Who else was here with them?

The thoughts raced through Narius’s head, and then he remembered the fear radiating from Diane when they’d found her. A possible answer struck him: perhaps it was not that Diane was fleeing from Dias but that even now she was being hunted by him? If that were the case, then that would mean that Dias himself, or his friends, were here in this forest too. It was just his instincts, but Narius believed in them.

“Hang on a second please!” he shouted in a loud voice. “We’re not your enemies! We’re on Dias’s side! We’re allies! We’re here by order of Richard, Dias’s student...I think? Maybe his disciple? Anyway, Dias practically raised the

guy!”

Narius’s two companions looked at Narius with suspicion in their eyes as he took one of the bags that Richard had given him and held it up high.

“Look, here’s the proof!” he shouted. “Richard is so worried about Dias that he wanted us to bring a bag of gold coins for him! I’m going to give it to you, so please don’t shoot at us anymore!”

Narius felt the pressure in the distance relax just a touch, and then he knew he’d made the right call.

“Look, I know how much you must hate Diane! I do! But please leave her with Richard and trust him! He’ll decide what to do about her for all of this. Leaving the judgment with him is sure to be good for Dias, I’m certain! Me, Richard, neither of us means Dias any harm whatsoever! I beg of you, please believe me!”

The unplaceable bloodlust seemed to relax further, and it was only now that Narius’s companions realized what he was doing. Narius gestured to them quietly, and all of them slowly, cautiously sheathed their weapons. Finally, the pressure in the air dissipated completely.

None of them could see the enemy, and they still hadn’t spoken a single word, but Narius felt they were through the worst of it, and he breathed a sigh of relief. He placed the bag of gold coins on the ground while one of his companions hefted Diane upon his shoulder.

Once she was secured another arrow sliced the air nearby, and Narius began to panic. It grazed Diane’s side and sunk into the ground. A moment later, the two bags hanging from Diane’s waist hit the ground with a clink. Narius saw what was inside of them, and he knew what the shooter was after: gold coins, and far more than what Richard had prepared for Dias.

Take the woman, leave the gold.

The archer made their message plain as day.

“We hear you! Loud and clear!” shouted Narius, a slight squeal of fear in his voice. “The bags are all yours! Do whatever you like with them!”

He did not wait for a reply. Instead he turned and ran, eager to leave the place. He was followed by his two companions, one still carrying Diane, and the three of them started on the road for home, their mission a success.

Alone in the Forest—Alna

“Hm...”

Alna picked up the bags of coins with a low murmur, feeling their weight in her hands as she pondered how to report these events to Dias.

She’d cast a soul appraisal on all three of the men she’d encountered, and they were all white with faint hints of red. When they’d tied the woman up and groped her, Alna had assumed it would be fine to push them around and punish them a little, especially if they had come from the kingdom’s capital. But then it turned out that the men were connected to Dias’s past—presumably the orphanage that he’d told her about, given the way the man had said it.

The color of the men had never changed from the time she saw them to the time they left, meaning that they were telling the truth. They had meant it when they said that they weren’t Dias’s enemies. Still, Alna let out an unsatisfied groan as she looked up at the hint of the sky through the trees. What was she to make of those hints of red?

She had spent some time in thought, finding no answer to her problem, and knew she would get no further on her own. She quit worrying and broke into a jog as she headed back to her husband.

Once she found him, she’d tell him that a boy from the orphanage, Richard, had prepared some money for him and was prepared to deal with Diane’s punishment. Then, when they all returned to Iluk Village, she would cook up something delicious for Dias, who she was sure would be physically and mentally exhausted after the battle. Perhaps she might also play him a song on the fiddle, or even...

Alna’s imagination swirled with what she might do later that evening, and the gold coins she carried seemed to grow wonderfully light in her hands as she sped through the woods and back to the grasslands.

The End of the Battle—Dias

I scanned the immediate area and let out a relieved sigh. The enemy troops were defeated, their weapons confiscated. I drove my axe into the ground, let go of it, and felt all the tension in my body drain away.

Funny enough though, something didn't quite feel right. I'd gotten rowdy and fought pretty hard in the battle, which had really put a strain on my body, but...I wasn't exhausted in the slightest. In fact, I was brimming with energy. Klaus and the mastis looked more energetic than usual too.

What in the world...?

I tilted my head, puzzled, but then I realized I had more important things to think about, and I scanned the battlefield, taking it all in. All of the mercenaries had retreated, and not a single one of them remained. Eldan's forces were all present, but even now they had yet to move from where they were stationed. Diane's main force was defeated, so I felt it fair to say that we had emerged victorious.

Unfortunately, Diane herself was nowhere to be found. Perhaps she'd fled during the battle. I had admittedly been a little disappointed that I hadn't been able to give her a good smack and a proper lecture, so I wasn't totally satisfied, but everything had gone pretty well. The battle had come to an end without any major injuries, and I felt like that wasn't a bad result at all.

In terms of damages, well, my armor had some new bumps where I'd taken a few hits, and it was all too easy to see just how shabby it was getting, but that was a small price to pay, all things considered. The armor hadn't been of the highest quality to begin with, and it'd been with me through most of the war, so if anything it was a small miracle that it was protecting me even now. I had really loved that armor, and while I knew I could repair it, I figured maybe it was time that I bought something new or had something made.

When I took those dents to my armor I'd been a little worried about Aymer in my chest piece, but she was a quick one. She moved from my stomach to my

back, to my neck, and to my head, running around as she needed to. She didn't get hurt at all, and in fact there wasn't a hair out of place on her furry little head.

She was so full of energy that she hopped atop my head, then cried out in the biggest voice her little body could muster...right before chomping on me. She was holding back a bit to not injure me, but I had to admit, her teeth were still sharp.

"I don't believe you!" she screamed. "If you didn't *want* to kill the enemy you didn't *have* to, but you could have at least stuck to the plan! *The pitfalls!* Lead the enemy into the pitfalls! Why did you insist on fighting them all head-on?! Do you have any idea how heartbroken Senai and Ayhan would be if anything happened to you?!"

Klaus and the mastis had rounded all the enemy forces up and were keeping a close watch on them while Aymer kept biting and screaming at me. I had figured she was angry because I'd dragged her into battle and frightened her, but that wasn't really it at all.

"And another thing!" shouted Aymer, still digging her teeth into my head. "You're the commander of the Nezrose forces! If you get too caught up in the battle yourself, who's going to give orders to your troops?! I realize that you're quite the strong individual and that you were able to align yourselves via shouts, but that's not what commanding and directing an army is about! It's a miracle you made it through the war fighting so recklessly!"

"Oh, well, back then we had a friend of mine leading our forces, and he did all the commanding," I clarified. "They called him the kingdom's finest strategist, and I left all the finer details to him."

That strategist had been the one to take care of all the prebattle preparations, so whenever the battles started Klaus and I just went straight towards the enemy. While we were fighting, my friend read the flow of the battle and directed our other squads to help finish off the weakened enemies and such.

I left all the complicated stuff to him and focused purely on the enemies in front of me. That's why he led the bigger and badder enemies straight to me. That was how we fought, and that was how we started seeing positive results

for our nation.

I tried to explain as much to Aymer, and in return she bit into my head with more ferocity.

“You had a wonderfully talented friend like that, and you understand the importance of strategy and leadership, but still you decided to charge headlong into battle?! Unbelievable! I learned some things about strategy when I secretly read some of the books at Eldan’s house, so as of tomorrow I am going to teach it to you all over again! And from now on, we’re not focusing on fighting and winning, and we’re not focusing on beating our enemy down. We’re going to focus on bringing everyone home safe! You’re the lord of these lands, and the village chieftain, and Alna’s husband, and Senai and Ayhan’s new family!”

“Um, if you know battle strategy, then how about you lead our forces instead? I’m not good at studying and all of that, so I reckon that’d be a much better idea.”

“But I only just got here! I’m still new! You’re going to just give me that authority?! Don’t just give something like that away, you idiot!”

I honestly thought it was a pretty good idea, but Aymer wasn’t having it, and so she just went on gnawing at the top of my head. The pain was starting to show on my face, and my cringing stuck when Eldan arrived with Kamalotz, some servants, and his bodyguards. They had a number of carts with them, with Eldan himself on a palomino horse that glimmered like velvet.

“Sir Dias! Sir Dias!” sang Eldan. “I’ve come to negotiate the terms for surrender and the release of your prisoners!”

The horse neared us at a most elegant trot, upon which Eldan bobbed up and down, a blinding smile on his face. But I just stared at him and tilted my head in confusion while Aymer continued giving me a bald spot.

What is he talking about?

Eldan’s grin never left his face as Kamalotz helped him off his horse and he went on talking.

“We’ll prepare chairs and a table for negotiations immediately. Just a moment, please!”

Eldan's servants flew into action, deftly preparing a white table with two chairs, complete with red cushions and an intricately embroidered tablecloth. They then placed on it a ceramic vase decorated in gold and silver and filled with seasonal flowers. It didn't look like the kind of setting for war negotiations to me—more like the setting I'd seen Eldan relaxing in as the battle was about to begin.

Once everything was ready, Eldan gestured for me to take a seat, and Aymer remained on my head, saying she was my acting assistant. I didn't see this as a problem, seeing as Eldan had Kamalotz by his side as well.

"Look, about this prisoner release and surrender stuff," I started. "What are you talking about?"

"Our forces marched into your domain without notice," answered Eldan, his mischievous grin replaced by a respectful smile, matched with a similarly reverent tone of voice. "According to the law, that constitutes border transgression and invasion. The reason for that was the royal decree, but with Diane now missing, the veracity of her orders are now in question. As such, I want nothing more than to surrender immediately and begin reconciliation proceedings!"

As far as I was concerned, however, Eldan had done no such thing. If anything, his forces were there to help us. He'd obeyed Diane's orders, sure, but he would have moved to support us if it had come to that. That much had clearly been his intention, so the way I figured it, there wasn't any point to him surrendering or making amends. At the end of the day, I'd told Eldan to do as Diane ordered, so I didn't really think Eldan was right when he said he'd marched on into the grasslands without notice.

"Dias," said Aymer, rousing me from my thoughts, "I think Eldan is asking that you accept his surrender and reconciliation in an official capacity. I don't know exactly why, but there's no harm in it, so why don't we just go along with things?"

I looked over at Eldan, and the look on his face said that Aymer was right.

"Well, if that's the case," I said, nodding in agreement, "then I accept your surrender. Let's get to reconciling. I'll release the prisoners immediately so you

can take them with you. I don't know if this is going to be any help, but you were nothing but supportive of us through all of this, Eldan, so I don't mind going along with whatever you've got in mind."

Eldan and Kamalotz both smiled at each other, and then Eldan cleared his throat.

"I am very grateful for your generosity," he said. "Thank you! Things are mostly as Miss Aymer just said. I am scheduled to leave for the royal capital after this for an audience with the king. I want to gather whatever I can to negotiate with."

"Negotiating with the king? That's really something," I said. "But how does this give you something to negotiate with?"

"Well, I don't actually know whether it will even come up at this point. Our discussions may go in that direction, or they may not. However, no matter where our discussions go, I want to make sure I have a few aces up my sleeve. With that in mind, I set up this meeting with you."

Eldan went on to explain that this whole thing with Diane was also partially the responsibility of the king himself. After all, the king was supposed to keep the king's seal on his person at all times. He had let it fall into Diane's hands, and she had used it to create forged orders.

Losing the king's seal was one problem, but so was the fact that the king couldn't stop Diane from her little rampage. That meant that me and Eldan were victims in the king's slipup—me because I was attacked, and Eldan because he was roped into Diane's scheme.

Eldan intended to use this as much as he could to his advantage. He would meet with the king as the poor victim of misuse of royal authority and have the king pay some form of reparations. To that extent, he needed things to aid him here. I couldn't help wondering if it was okay to do this kind of thing to the king. Wasn't it disrespectful? I asked Eldan as much, but he said that everything would be fine and that he'd negotiate based on the king's manner and response to their discussions.

"Well, it's all a bit complicated for the likes of me," I said once Eldan had finished explaining things for me, "but if that's what you believe, Eldan, then

you can use my name as much as you see fit. And if there's anything else I can do to help you out, you just say the word."

Eldan's face lit up at my words.

"Thank you so much! However, all I need now is for you to accept our surrender, sign a settlement document, release your prisoners, and accept our reparation payments. That's it!"

Two words among those that Eldan spoke caught my ear, and I had to ask about them.

"Huh? Reparation payments? You mean for what happened?"

Eldan had expected this reaction from me, and he laughed. Kamalotz then passed him a list, which he gave to me.

"According to royal law, I must pay you reparations for crossing your borders and attempting an invasion. But as you can see from the list, everything I'm giving you is what I had promised you much earlier: gifts for accepting the dogkin clans and extra food supplies. Nothing much more than that. I knew that you wouldn't accept monetary gifts, so instead I'm giving you what you are already owed in the form of a reparation payment."

I scanned the list, and Eldan was right. It really was mostly foodstuffs. The silk and cotton fabrics were likely the gifts he'd mentioned.

Eldan talks about it all like it's nothing, but he's giving us a lot of silk, and if I recall, that's worth a lot of money.

"I intend to ask the king to repay me for the cost of deploying my army and the reparations I'm paying you, so please don't worry. You didn't kill a single soldier through all of this, and that's going to make negotiations all the more smooth. If there's anything else you want, please don't hesitate to let me know at once!"

Eldan had probably been trying to reassure me because I was still staring down at the list. Something bothered me about the idea of having the king repay him though. It didn't feel right for him to be jumping to give me whatever I wanted. It all worried me a little, and I felt I should tell him.

Before I could, however, Eldan noticed something and looked out into the distance. Aymer seemed to notice something too, and she crawled around on my head. A little after the two of them, Kamalotz noticed as well, so I followed all their gazes out to where Alna soon appeared before us. When she stopped casting her concealment magic, it was like watching the color pour in to fill the outline of her body.

What's Alna doing here? And what are those bags she's carrying?

"I see you won, Dias, and not a scratch on you to boot," she said. "Such manliness. I slipped a stimulant into your breakfast this morning, and it looks like it did what it was supposed to."

Did she really just say that? And when she says stimulant, does she mean...that? The stuff that Moll mentioned when I went to ask her about cultivating herbs—the one for making children? Is that why I have so much energy?

I didn't know how to respond to Alna's revelation, so I said nothing. Alna smiled and raised the bags she held up so I could see them clearly.

"Oh yeah," she continued. "When I was chasing Diane around, I ran into some people who worked for a kid you raised named Richard. They said that they'd handle Diane and that Richard would take care of her punishment. One of these bags is from Richard himself; apparently he's worried about you. Those orphanage kids sure look up to you."

Again, Alna left me speechless before I could even open my mouth. I had asked her to protect the village. What had she been doing? Also, I didn't remember any kids at the orphanage by the name of Richard. When Eldan and Kamalotz heard what she said, they looked just as shocked as I did.

I wanted to sit Alna down and ask her right away why she was here, what she'd been doing, and who she'd met, but it was late, and the sun was already beginning to turn the grasslands red. Everyone was waiting for us back at Iluk, and I couldn't keep Eldan and his thousand troops here all night. I figured this was enough for one day.

I still felt a bit anxious about Eldan's trip to the royal capital, and I wanted to talk to him about my concerns. At the same time I figured it probably wasn't

right of me as an outsider to question his decisions.

And anyway, he's got Kamalotz and all sorts of allies around him, so surely he'll be fine.

So we finished up our meeting, I handed our prisoners over to Eldan, and I accepted his reparations. The carts were stacked high, so it took all of us—Alna, Klaus, and the mastis—to pull them along. On the way, we eventually met with Shev and Balers. With all of us together, we made the trek back to the village, where Senai, Ayhan, and all the others were waiting for us.

On the Way Back to Iluk Village—Dias

The wheels of the carts trundled along as we pulled them, all of us walking back to Iluk Village. The stimulant that Alna had slipped into our breakfast had taken effect in the midst of battle, but there hadn't been any real side effects after it had worn off. My body felt a little heavy now, and a weariness swirled within me, but I could move just fine. In fact, after having fought so hard, I was surprised I wasn't flat on my face.

I couldn't help thinking that those stimulant herbs were actually pretty well suited to battle, but when I thought about their purpose, there wasn't a single part of me that wanted to use them more proactively. After all, they were meant to stimulate procreation, so I asked Alna why she'd used them when she did. What it came down to was the way Moll had explained it to her.

Moll had told Alna to give me the herbs because they made people especially energetic, and I think she'd phrased it that way on purpose. Moll had pushed Alna on me as my caretaker, and it seemed like she was pushing for things to happen in our relationship too. The herbs were just another part of Moll poking her nose into things.

I couldn't really get mad at Alna for any of it, so I kept my thoughts about it to myself. Next time I saw Moll though, I was going to give her an earful, that was for sure.

I was mulling all of that over, pulling the cart, and then I noticed one of the dogkin trotting past me, heading for Iluk Village. It was a lady shep, but...what was she doing out here? Just as I was trying to work it out, another dogkin ran past me, and then more of them—all of them women heading towards Iluk Village.

When I looked more closely, I saw that they were carrying weapons and things that had been strewn across the battlefield. Swords, spears, bows and quivers, shields, gauntlets, boots: they were carrying all sorts of equipment.

But why are they all here doing this?

“They’re the Iluk Wives’ Club,” said Alna, noticing the confusion on my face. “They came out here with me, and when they saw that the battle was over they started gathering what was left on the plains.”

The *Iluk Wives’ Club*. I remembered the name, because it was a club the female dogkin had started centered around helping Alna with her chores. I figured it was just a social club of sorts, so I’d never even imagined they’d be active on the battlefield.

When I’d asked Alna to tell me more, it turned out all of them had trained for battle with Alna, believing it to be their duty as women of the plains. So they had some practical skills, and that gave them confidence, so they came in to battle for the sake of their husbands by cover of Alna’s magic, watching over us in case we needed their support.

Alna and I had decided that we were going to be more open about discussing the things we did, but here she was just doing this stuff without so much as a word to the rest of us. I couldn’t help but make my thoughts heard, and that was when Alna told me that the reason she’d done what she did with the Wives’ Club was because when she’d tried to tell me I hadn’t listened. So, well, I guess I was guilty too, and I felt mighty bad about it.

In any case, that was why the Iluk Wives’ Club had come out to the battlefield. As it turned out, it wasn’t just swords and shields that they’d found out there. They’d also gathered food supplies that belonged to Diane’s troops and Diane’s own horse. A bunch of the dogkin were even pulling the war bell back to the village. I didn’t know what we were going to do with it, and it left me flabbergasted until my eyes were drawn to a stave that one of the dogkin was carrying. It had a big red jewel at the end of it, and something about it really grabbed me.

“Mind if I take a look at that?” I asked, and the dogkin carrying it happily ran over to me.

I stopped pulling my cart and took the stave from the dogkin’s mouth. I looked at the jewel, and the dragon swirling around the handle; I waved it around a bit, but there wasn’t anything particularly special about it.

“I felt a strange power from it,” said Alna, “like traces of past magic. Dias, let

me try and imbue it with magical energy.”

Alna was standing next to me as she spoke, and I guess she must have been drawn to it just like I was. But what did she mean by traces of magic? I gave her the go-ahead and handed it over. She closed her eyes, and her horn and the jewels in her hair lit up while she chanted something, followed by light glimmering at the tip of the stave as magic gathered there.

When she was done, Alna felt like the stave was supposed to do something, so she held it up and she started waving it around. She was sure *something* was supposed to happen, but the stave didn't do anything, and Alna was left disappointed.

“What? I put magic into it and nothing happened,” she complained, tossing the stave away like it was nothing.

“Hey,” I said, scrambling to catch the stave before it fell. “It's a waste to throw away a jewel like this, no?”

But the moment I held the stave in my hands again, I felt something strange. It was exactly the same as the feeling I got when I held my battle-axe. So, I focused my energy into the stave the way I did when I wanted to mend my axe.

In that next instant, a red stream of flame poured out of the stave like a dragon's fiery breath, spiraling up towards the sky.

Boy, am I glad I wasn't aiming this at anyone!

The pillar of flame didn't burn anything, and nobody was hurt by it, but it kept climbing upwards until the stave was out of energy. Once the stave ran out, the flame grew weaker and, finally, disappeared on the breeze passing through the plains.

When the flames vanished, there was a moment of stunned silence, and then everyone started raising their voices in surprise. They were all talking over each other, and it was so loud I wanted to cover my ears.

“Lord Dias! What in the world *was* that?!” asked Klaus.

“A p-p-pillar of f-flame?!” stammered Aymer.

“Dias, is that the same power as your axe?” asked Alna.

The Wives' Club joined in with them too.

"That's our Dias!"

"He wields the power of fire!"

"We could tell by the scent of him that he was special!"

Then everyone started talking about the stave's power, and my power, and how to use the stave, and well, it was a long while before everyone calmed down.

In the end, and after lots of experimentation, we worked out that only I could use the power of the stave. I could get it to breathe fire by feeding it the same kind of power I fed my axe when I wanted to mend it, but I couldn't quite explain how to do that to the others.

What we knew for certain was that once Alna had imbued it with magic, I could make it shoot fire. It was a mighty strange stave all right, and as for how we ended up putting it to use...

"That wand is amazing, Dias!" cried Senai. "Now we can light the wood for the stove in no time!"

"So much easier than flint!" added Ayhan.

And the twins were right. It really was a whole lot easier than flint. We could just light things up, just like that, so we called it our fire starter. I was the only one who could use it, but it was still handy. When you wanted a fire, *boom*, there it was. Alna, Grandma Maya, and the Wives' Club were all overjoyed to have it.

Senai and Ayhan just loved watching it too, and every morning they'd follow me around from stove to stove as I lit them up. I could see from the way they looked at me that they dreamed of someday being able to use the stave themselves, and while I hoped I could let them try it when they were old enough to safely be around a fire, I was actually more worried that I wouldn't know how to teach them to use it when the time finally came.



The Royal Capital, One Month Later

Summer had arrived, and the sunlight streamed into the royal capital, which had, recently, been strangely abuzz with chatter. One reason for this was the now-criminal Diane, who had stolen the king's seal, plundered the royal tomb, and planned an uprising. Thanks to the efforts of First Prince Richard, who had cottoned on to Diane's plan and moved in secret, Diane had been apprehended and the king's seal returned to its rightful owner.

Not long after this news, the successor to the Kasdeks region, Eldan, had visited the royal capital from the west. He reported to the king that someone had stolen the money reserved for the nation's heroic savior, and the king's private guard launched an investigation. The culprits were found in Second Prince Meiser's faction.

All of these events, and the people at the center of them, were the reason for all the chatter that filled the royal capital with rumors.

Diane was done for. Having incurred the wrath of the king, she was stripped of her title and imprisoned in the temple. While she had been lucky to avoid execution, she would now spend the rest of her life in quiet boredom.

Meiser as well was in trouble. While not quite as ruined as his sister, he would not easily be able to regain the authority he had previously enjoyed. His supporters had been punished as criminals or had abandoned him. All he really had now was what wealth he still had left.

Richard, however, had used his two siblings as stepping stones. He had not just earned the gratitude and trust of his father, the king, but he had also been able to recruit the dregs of Diane's people along with those who had deserted Meiser, making his own faction the largest in the kingdom.

In visiting the royal capital, Eldan had impressed the strength of his character upon both the king and the capital's citizens. Thanks to his report on the actions of Diane and the gifts of unique western wares that he'd presented, he had succeeded in earning the king's favor. As such, his dukeship and inheritance of

the Kasdeks region were recognized, and he was allowed to take on a new family name. As an apology for the actions of his daughter, the king also granted the Kasdeks region a three-year tax exemption.

But it was not just these four people around whom rumors spread. The people were also talking just as much about Dias, the nation's heroic savior.

According to some, he had been abandoned in cursed lands without a single coin or loaf of bread, yet he had defeated the curse with naught but his axe. Others said that Dias's holy power had been enough to slay a dragon, and he had proved it by defeating an earth dragon, the materials of which he had presented to the king through Eldan.

One rumor declared that Dias had built a well, planted fields, and hunted animals all on his own, and he lived with strange sheeplike animals together with a hundred ardent supporters. They were in the process of building a city that would rival even the royal capital. Some said that he was married to an unparalleled beauty, who spent her days devoted to supporting him.

There was also talk of how Diane had been so jealous of Dias's success that she had marched upon his lands with an army one thousand strong to take everything he had and had been driven back by just Dias and one other. It was said that in that same battle, Dias had emerged completely unscathed and claimed victory without taking a single life. He had declared that they were all citizens of the kingdom, and so in his great generosity he had forgiven Diane and her men and released them.

Then there were of course the stories of how the king, in praise of Dias's countless efforts, had granted the man status and a new family name, along with the same tax exemption as Eldan and numerous gifts.

The rumors never seemed to end.

Nobody knew where exactly the rumors had started, and they were so preposterous that when they first began to spread, many had simply thought them stories in the realm of fairy tales. But when Eldan himself talked to the capital's people, he attested that the rumors were not all that far from the truth, and so the rumors flew from the capital and spread throughout the kingdom and to all its lands.

The rumors reached far and wide, causing a number of reverberations in a few different places.

A Tavern in a Mining Town in the Kingdom's North—A Man and a Woman

"Whoa! Did you hear those rumors about Papa?"

"Yeah, and I'm sick of them. Everyone and his brother can't stop talking about them, and they're all ridiculous. I mean, they're not even funny anymore. But one of those rumors is a bit worrying. You know, the one that says Big Bro got married to a beautiful woman?"

"Oh. I couldn't believe that Papa got married either."

"That's not what I'm talking about. If Big Bro really got married, I know one person who's going to go crazy. Remember all that talk of getting engaged to him?"

"Oh. Oh... Yeah, but five-year-olds say that stuff all the time. And we all forget about it when we grow up, right?"

"I don't think so. Some people *never* forget."

"In which case, Dias is going to get a new visitor soon. And *that* means...it could be a problem, right?"

"I'd put good money on it."

"So, uh, should we go too, then? To put a stop to things?"

"I think it's best that we do. For Big Bro, and for his wife. I mean, I always meant to go when I could find some time, so I guess this is as good a reason as any. But we've got to get ready as soon as we can. I'll prepare food and a carriage."

"Okay, and I'll start packing."

????—A Shop Owner

"That's what I said. This shop is closed as of today! It's over! I'm already too

late! I don't have any more time to waste in a place like this!"

"Wait! Wait wait wait! Please, calm down. Look at how far we've come! You can't possibly be serious. You can't just take some rumor at face value and close everything down! That's crazy! Right? Are you even listening? So let's just take a deep breath and give this all a little more thought."

"Calm down?! How could anyone calm down?! I'm the one that's going to marry him! It was decided more than twenty years ago! And now some woman from who knows where has come out and nabbed him from me!"

"Wait, but that wasn't how it went. In your case it was like when a daughter says that she's going to marry her dad, right? It was like that, right?"

"You shut up! My feelings are not, and were not, some mere child's play! They're different at their very core! I've had enough! I'm going to see him, and you can do whatever you want with this place!"

????—A Man

"...and they say that's what happened. Wild story, don't you think?"

"Pwah, that idiot. He ignores people's warnings, and just when I wonder where he's gone off to, that happens. He's as interesting as he's always been, that's for sure. But wow, he's a domain lord now, huh? I guess if an idiot walks in a straight line for long enough, they'll eventually walk themselves into good luck, riches, and lordships. He might be on the frontier, but I'll bet now that he's a domain lord he's got a good woman and maybe some good alcohol too. Kind of makes me want to see him again. Right this instant, in fact."

"What? You're leaving? You're going to leave me?"

"You have plenty of customers besides me, so it's not like you'll be in any trouble, right? And I'll make sure we both have a great time today, so let me off the hook, would you?"

A City Temple—A Priest

"Some people are so ungrateful to those who raised them. I wondered where

you were hiding, but to think it was the far west... I got back and they were all dead, their homes gone. Does that fool have any idea how worried I was? I won't be able to go quietly to my grave until I give him a good solid punch in the face!"

"Hey, you! I'm going out, business to attend to, so tell you-know-who that they're in charge!"

????—Unnamed Baars

"Baa, baa."

"Baa, baa?"

"Baa, baba."

"Baa..."

"Baa baa!"

"Ba-Baa."

"Baa, baa baaa!"

"Baa!"

"Hey! Those sheep things are gone! Damn it! They broke the fence down and made a break for it!"

"What?! Well, what the heck do we do now?! The buyer said they're coming today for the meat!"

"Grab the horses! We've gotta get them back before the end of the day!"

A Room in the Royal Palace—Meiser

It was dim inside thanks to the thick curtains over the windows. A faint rotten odor drifted in the air around a silver-haired man who was muttering to himself. He sat with his elbows on a desk stacked with books, his head in his hands. The tone with which Sanserife Kingdom's Second Prince Meiser spoke made the

words sound like a curse.

“Well, now I know for certain who my real enemy is. It wasn’t just everything he did to get in my way during the war, but now this too. That idiot said he could handle my revenge, but now that it’s come to this I have no choice but to do it myself.”

Meiser raised a sluggish right hand and took a pen, then began writing on a piece of paper.

“But I need money. Everything needs money. I can rebuild as long as I have money, and I just need more of it to regain my power, my authority. I don’t want to ask *them* if I can help it, but they’ll give me money if they know it’s to kill Dias, so it’s not like I have a choice.”

When he finished writing, Meiser folded the piece of paper and put it in a breast pocket. Then he let out a sigh and stood from his chair.

Prince Richard’s Ballroom in the Royal Palace—Narius

With minor matters discussed and out of the way, Richard stormed out of the ballroom, the air filling with a heavy gloom as he roughly slammed the doors open and walked down the corridor. He was followed by a few bodyguards and servants, and the last one to follow gently closed the door as they went.

When Richard’s presence faded, Narius felt the heavy air in the room dissipate, and he breathed a sigh of relief. The others that remained in the ballroom were no different, except for the old knight, Gareth, who was Richard’s aide. His stoic expression remained unchanged. Narius glanced in his direction before sliding over to where he stood.

“Why’s the prince in another mood?” he asked. “Isn’t he the biggest winner in all of this?”

Gareth’s brow furrowed for a moment.

“Prince Richard says that the biggest victor in all of this is Duke Kasdeks. Though it may look like the prince reaps the benefits, according to the prince himself that too was just part of the duke’s plan. He cannot forgive himself for so easily playing into Kasdeks’s hands.”

“You mean that boy, Eldan? He’s the biggest victor? I’ll be honest, I’m not really seeing it. He’s just a country bumpkin who came for some big-city sightseeing, no? I bumped into him at a tavern and he bought me some drinks while we talked. He struck me as the kind of amiable young man you’ll find anywhere. Can’t see him being the scheming political type.”

Gareth looked shocked.

“So he didn’t go home immediately,” he muttered under his breath. “What in the world was he up to? Perhaps that is why the prince’s mood only grows worse...”

“So anyway, what did this Eldan guy do, exactly?”

“During his audience with the king, Duke Kasdeks requested a number of rewards for his service. He wanted his domain and noble ranking formally recognized, the right to take a new family name, improved support for Dias, and the official instatement of Dias’s noble rank. Along with this, a three-year tax exemption for the Kasdeks and Nezrose domains.”

“Wow, so he wasn’t just looking out for himself but Dias too. Mighty kind of him. But wait, none of that sounds like a problem to me. What’s the deal?”

“You’re right, for the most part. None of it *is* a problem except for the tax exemption. Kasdeks called the tax exemption compensation for the trouble that Diane caused. However, this means the kingdom will not collect tax from the very domain that controls trade in the west. That is a significant sum.”

“Those losses are not the only issue, however; there is also the fact that Kasdeks may well amass too much power during that exemption period. Under ordinary circumstances, people from Meiser’s faction would have moved in to put a stop to such discussions, but they were in no position to worry about anything outside of themselves. So in the end, the king simply accepted Kasdeks’s requests without negotiation. On top of that...”

Gareth dropped into silence.

“On top of that...what?” asked Narius, curious. “What else?”

Gareth let out a long sigh.

“At his audience with the king, Kasdeks announced his support of Prince Richard as the king’s heir. This puts the prince in a position where he cannot simply strike out against Kasdeks. A person in his position cannot attack his own supporters without good cause. Kasdeks has made it difficult for the prince to approach the king about revoking the tax exemption.”

“While the fact of the matter is that Kasdeks is not a member of Prince Richard’s faction, that is nonetheless how he made it appear, and it frustrates Richard to have his hands tied in such a manner. This is all very, very troublesome.”

“I see...”

Now that he understood the situation, Narius felt his thoughts wandering. He couldn’t help thinking that as a prince, it would be fine for Richard to openly attack Eldan, or to have the tax exemption revoked, or to officially announce that Eldan was in fact not a member of his faction. He said none of this aloud, however. He didn’t want to worsen his position by speaking out of line, and he knew that if he himself had considered these things, then Richard and Gareth had already thought about them too.

So, as Narius’s thoughts swirled in his mind, he found himself smiling. He didn’t know what Richard would do in the future, or what Eldan would do either, but he *did* know that it meant he would have more work. And when he thought about how much he might earn with his next job, his smile only widened.

A Street Corner in a City Somewhere—A Mysterious Man

The man was after vengeance.

He had met Dias during the war. Dias had summarily beaten him, then crushed his balls beneath his foot. The man had lost much, and so he demanded vengeance.

His father had cut ties with him and abandoned him completely, but the old man’s connection to Meiser’s faction had allowed him a chance to reach Meiser himself. With financial support, the man had attempted a number of plans

through which to enact his revenge, but all of them had ended in failure.

According to the rumors, the poison known as Dias had even reached Meiser himself, and the prince had lost much of his authority in one fell swoop. The man let out a frustrated groan. Why had this happened?

The man's desire for vengeance only grew with the rage that bubbled inside of him, but now he had no funds with which to make it happen. He had not a single copper coin to his name. He had spent everything he'd had left in preparation for the battle between Dias and Diane. He had planned to eliminate whoever emerged victorious, but the battle had gone in a way he never could have imagined. His preparations were all for nothing the moment that Dias had a force of one thousand on his side.

The moment the man saw Dias and Eldan sipping tea together on the battlefield, he felt his sanity giving way, and he could not stand to watch any of it any longer. He left the plains, and in doing so he lost everything: his money, his link to Meiser, and his chance at vengeance. Now, here in this city, he lived the days like a vagrant.

And yet, the man still refused to give up on his vengeance. He couldn't. He struggled through each and every day and muttered his curses at Dias, and he knew that the flow of curses would never cease until he tasted the revenge he sought.

With so many mouths speaking it, news of Dias reverberated through the lands of the Sanserife Kingdom and headed west, towards the Nezrose domain. They spread as they went, impacting countless people and places along the way.

To be continued...

Extra Story: The Twins' Prayer

As a Gentle Breeze Drifted across the Plains—Senai and Ayhan

While Dias and the others were locked in battle with Diane's forces, Senai and Ayhan rode through the plains on their horses, Shiya and Guri, their dogkin friends with them.

Riding through the grasslands with their friends was something the girls loved very much, but today they tucked those feelings away and focused on what they thought of as their duty: protecting the village they loved, Iluk.

They loved the big and kindly Dias, the generous Alna, the warm Francis and Francoise, the grannies who taught them all sorts of things, all of the dogkin... They loved even Klaus, if they had to say. They loved Aymer, whom they'd recently grown close to, they loved the white ghee, and they loved their horses too.

But Iluk was now home to the saplings that would grow into the trees of their mother and father, and so their desire to protect their home was greater than ever.

"If we had bows we could fight!" shouted Senai.

"Then even we could fight too!" echoed Ayhan.

Recently, Alna had been teaching them how to use a bow and arrow. She had praised them for their efforts and said that once they got a little better, she'd make them their very own bows. If they'd had those bows now then they'd have been able to go into battle...or so they thought, and it was these frustrations that empowered their shouts.

The twins wanted to fight alongside Dias and Alna, but if they couldn't, then they would patrol the village outskirts and make sure no enemies or threats got anywhere near them. The girls held the reins and clenched their legs tight, and their bodies sent their feelings through to their horses, both of whom neighed in response and sped up. Shiya and Guri too kept their eyes peeled for enemies.

In this way, the girls became one with the wind, and one with their horses, and as they felt the heartbeat of their horses pulsing they kept a lookout over the lands outside of their village. Their goal was protection, of course, and so they did not leave the village proper, and instead ran in circles around it. But even then, they felt as if they could travel to a far-off world or that they had already arrived in one.

After a time, the twins forgot about their guard duty, filled with the feeling that they could go anywhere they wanted. They dreamed of going to wherever their parents were, and their fervent desires reached their horses too. The sprinting Shiya and Guri began to slow and eventually came to a halt.

Senai and Ayhan were about to ask the horses what was wrong when the latter turned their heads to look at the twins. The twins, drawn by those gazes, turned around and saw the dogkin doing their utmost to chase after them. Even from a distance, the girls could see their mouths wide and panting, tongues dangling about. Senai and Ayhan blushed, ashamed of how their feelings had gotten the better of them.

They couldn't believe that they had forgotten about their friends and not even considered them, so they got off their horses and ran to meet the dogkin on their own feet. They apologized to each of them, patted them all, and wrapped them in hugs, then lifted them up and put them on their horses so they could take a break. Then, they walked along leading the horses by their reins.

The twins loved Iluk. They loved it so much that they wanted to protect it, and so they couldn't believe what they'd done and felt ashamed of themselves.

"We're Dias's daughters, but look what we did," muttered Senai.

"We need to live up to our parents," muttered Ayhan.

The girls plodded along for a little while, and after some time had passed, the weight of the words they'd spoken dawned on them. Somewhere inside of themselves, they'd known it already. Dias and Alna both loved them like their own children, and everyone else treated them like they were Dias and Alna's daughters too.

Senai and Ayhan had always known in their hearts that they were Dias and

Alna's family, but they had always avoided voicing the words and had never once spoken such a thing aloud... Until now.

They had spoken the words clearly, and with the words came a strange warmth and a nostalgic feeling spreading from their hearts. They were wrapped in happiness.

Dias had always told them that they never needed to forget their parents. "You can always keep your mother and father in your hearts and love them deeply," he'd said. "And if you can keep us in your hearts and minds too, that'd be swell."

Senai and Ayhan had their parents, and they also had Dias and Alna. They were daughters to both of the couples. Dias had promised they'd be way more happy than any normal person, and now that they finally understood what he meant they looked at each other with grins on their faces.

Afterwards, the girls continued to patrol the village without a single complaint. Even when they grew tired and wanted to stop they kept going, resting only when there were dogkin to cover for them, and sometimes letting the horses take breaks too. They wanted to keep going, because if Dias was out there doing his best to protect Iluk, then they wanted to do theirs too.

So the girls prayed. They prayed with all their heart, and to their parents, that Dias and the others would win and all return home safely. Dias had told them that prayers were important. They were for everyone you knew, they were for yourself, and they were for your heart and mind.

As the day wound down the sun set, and as evening fell, the twins spotted the Iluk Wives' Club returning from the east, carrying loot from the battlefield. The moment they set eyes on them all, Senai and Ayhan forgot all about their exhaustion and flew over, jumping from their horses and wrapping all the women in hugs.

"Welcome home!" said Senai. "Is anyone injured? Are you all okay?"

"Are Dias and the others okay?" asked Ayhan.

The Wives' Club dogkin all smiled and gave the girls a brief report. Dias had

won, and not a single person was hurt. Naturally this meant that nobody had died and everybody was safe. Dias would be back home soon with other supplies they'd received.

The girls were overjoyed to hear the news and were just about to run to meet Dias when they remembered that they had to update all the grannies first. Not only that; they had to protect the village until Dias and Alna returned. So together with Shiya, Guri, and the dogkin, they headed for Iluk Village.

"They won!" shouted Senai. "Dias won! They're all coming home!"

"Everyone is safe!" added Ayhan.

The twins ran through the village shouting the news and telling everyone, and they were bouncing up and down until Dias got back from battle, as though their exhaustion from earlier was nothing more than a dream.

Afterword

Here we are at the afterword, so I'd like to start with thanks.

To everyone who bought volume one, everyone who still supports me on Shosetsuka ni Naro, those of you who wrote me letters, my editors, Kinta for all the wonderful, adorable, and cool illustrations, and the designer who makes the book look lovely: it's because of all of you that we've reached volume two.

I want to make sure you all know I'm even more grateful than I was for volume one! Thank you!

Okay, on to what's coming up on the horizon. Actually, when I drew up the plans for this story's plot, before I even started writing it, the story up to volume two was the prologue. I figured, mistakenly, that I could write all that up in about fifty thousand Japanese characters. But when I started actually writing, well, let's just say I never thought the prologue would stretch into two full volumes.

The prologue was supposed to work like this: We got a chance to see the pasts of the main characters and their circumstances. The characters were set up along with the balance of power and influence, and we got our first battle. I imagined it like reaching the end of the tutorial so you could jump into the game proper.

How did I end up writing so many more pages than that...?

There's a whole lot more that I have planned for the future. Lots of things are going to begin, we'll learn new things about the characters, and we'll get new stuff about the country and the world they exist in. I don't know if all of it will be written, or if all of it will end up published, but now that I have all this support, I just have to do it, so I'm going to give it everything I have!

Some of you might already know this, but this story is getting a manga adaptation! Yumbo will be handling it! They draw great manga, and some of it is already out there in the public. It's funny; even though I'm the original author,

it's done so well I feel like I'm just another reader enjoying it.

The light novel is written largely from Dias's perspective, but the manga is told from a broader point of view, which gives you insight into things you can't see in the novel. I think there's lots in there that even people who have read the novels can still enjoy, so if you're interested or curious, please give it a look!

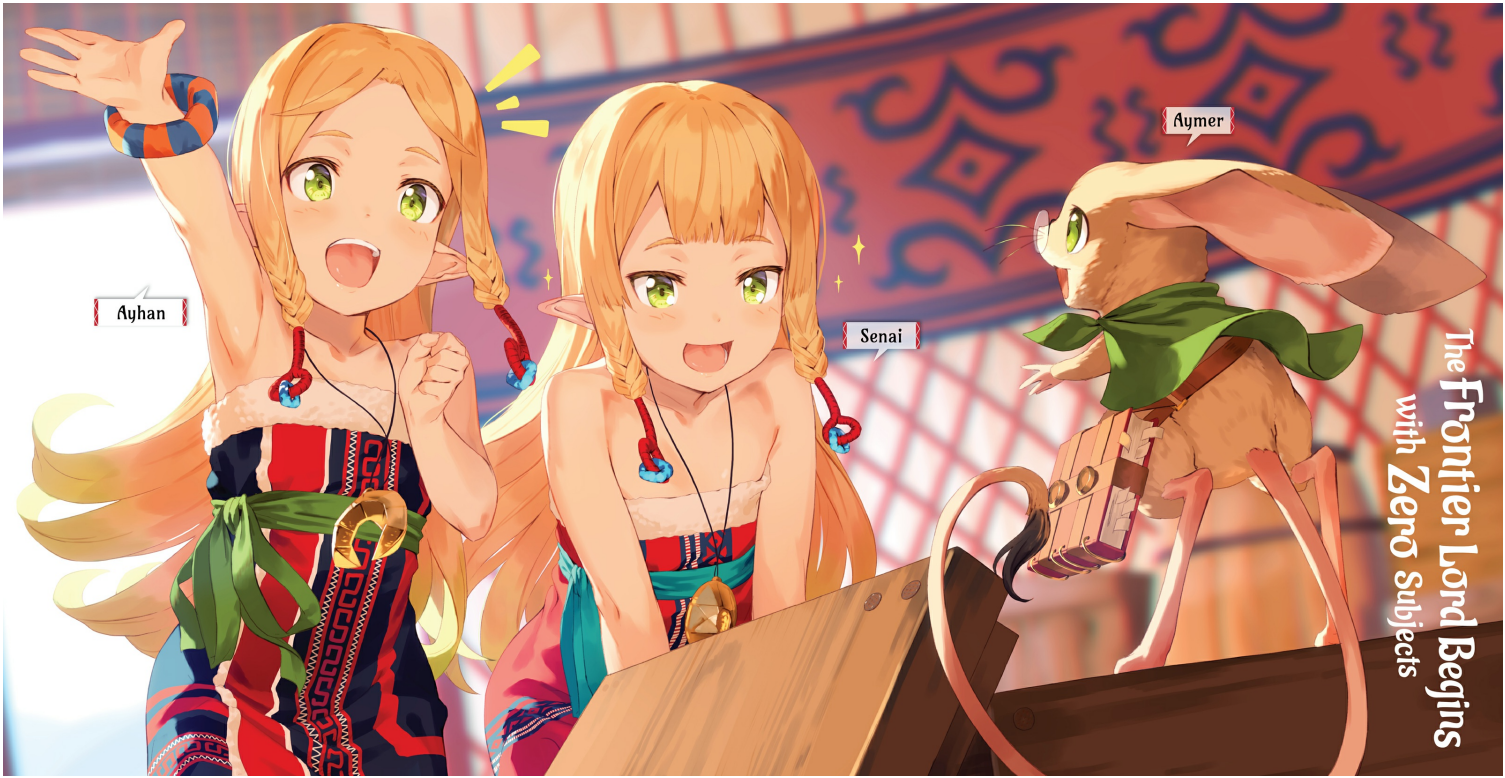
I hope that with Kinta and me working on the novel and Yumbo working on the manga that the story can grow even more popular.

In the next volume, we get to see some of the characters that briefly appeared here in volume two. Certain family members are going to turn up, there will be problems and challenges, and it's going to make Dias's life all the more lively. So look forward to the energetic everyday life of Dias and Iluk Village in volume three!

I look forward to writing you again then!

Fuurou, February 2019





The Frontier Lord Begins
with Zero Subjects



Bonus Short Stories

Such Enticing Honey

By the Storehouse—Senai and Ayhan

Two figures were crouched by the side of the storehouse, their blonde hair swaying and their green eyes alight as they moved silently. It was Senai and Ayhan. They moved around not unlike thieves, and they stealthily slipped around to the door of the storehouse so as not to be seen.

When they finally reached the entrance of the storehouse, a sweet scent tickled their noses. It was the aroma of honey, so mouthwateringly sweet that the moment it touched their tongues they compared it to the scent of flowers. Eldan had given it to the village, and for Senai and Ayhan, it was even better than walnuts.

But Dias had told them that it was bad to eat too much—even though they'd only had the tiniest sliver and there was still *so much* of it left—and he had taken the honey-filled pot and put it in the back of the storehouse.

Though they did not speak their feelings aloud, the pouts on their faces spoke their hearts for them: *How dare he!*

Their goal, then, was clear: they wanted that honey. They were going to steal it and indulge in it...together with everyone else, of course. That was their logic as they proceeded farther into the storehouse. As long as they shared and enjoyed the honey with the others, then it wasn't a bad thing they were doing.

They grew ever closer to the pot of honey with its enchanting scent, and when they were but one step from reaching it, a shadow fell across the twins, and the owner of it placed their hands on the girls' heads.

"Didn't I tell you two that it was dangerous to go into the storehouse alone?"

The voice was kind, however, and they felt her hands ruffle their hair. They knew it was Alna, and they knew then that they would not escape their

punishment.

Alna had caught the twins because she happened to be cleaning the storehouse when they entered. She asked them why they'd snuck in, and they answered honestly. Alna's brow furrowed sharply and she launched into a scolding.

She told them that it was bad enough that they had entered the storehouse unsupervised, but scheming to steal honey was on another level entirely. The girls hung their heads apologetically and told Alna they were sorry. They hadn't intended to do anything bad, but they'd earned a scolding from Alna regardless, so they had to accept it.

When Alna saw the earnest postures of the twins, she shook her head, chuckled, and rubbed their heads.

"Look, I know how you feel," she said. "That's honey; when it's there you just can't help but want a little more of it. When I was a kid, I did something pretty similar."

The girls raised their heads in surprise. Alna grinned and put a finger to her lips, gesturing for the girls to be quiet. They nodded, and Alna reached slowly for the pot of honey. With it in her arms, she headed out, careful not to make a sound.

When the girls saw this, they exploded into silent grins and mimicked Alna's movements, following her every step.

Dinner that evening was a luxurious feast. There were fried honey walnuts, freshly baked bread kneaded with honey, black ghee meat seasoned with honey, and a little plate for everyone that contained a mouthful of honey all by itself.

It was all delicious and sweet, the aroma of flowers filled the air, and it brought smiles to everybody's faces. Even Dias, who had put the honey in the storehouse and had an inkling of what had happened earlier, wore a bright grin.

But among all the smiling faces at the dinner table, none were as big as those

of Senai, Ayhan, and Alna. It was as if their smiles would never fade.

One Day, in the Corner of a Yurt—Aymer

On a clear day in the early afternoon, Aymer was busy writing in the book she always carried with her. It was open on the ground, and in her hands was a small pot of ink that Grandma Maya had given her. She twisted her tail and dipped the tip of it in the pot, and she used this to write.

While Aymer was writing everything that she had learned while living in Iluk Village, a shadow appeared from behind her, as if swallowing her whole. Aymer had been using the skylight as her source of light, and she frowned at the obstruction. She paused her writing and looked up to see who it was.

It was Alna, sporting a look of keen interest as she watched Aymer with her book. Aymer was shocked. Since becoming a villager here at Iluk, she had talked often with Dias, the twins, and the grandmas, but she hadn't had much of an opportunity to talk with Alna, Dias's wife. She was also rather uncomfortable around Alna ever since her herbal bath experience.

Aymer fidgeted in place, wondering what Alna wanted as she stared at the book.

"So this is a book, huh?" she said, sounding both curious and excited. "I've heard about them before, but this is the first time I've seen inside one."

Aymer felt relief wash over her at the realization that Alna was not mad at her for something, and her expression brightened.

"Are you interested in books?" she asked.

"Yeah. Dias and the others say that books are really helpful, and that you can learn a lot from them, so I've always wondered what they are. Looks like it's more than just words though, huh? There are pictures too. So that's how you learn from them. We onikin mostly learn through telling stories and sharing experiences, but this method seems pretty good too."

Direct storytelling definitely had its advantages, but of course it had its disadvantages too. Details could be left out or shared incorrectly, the people listening might not listen or remember properly, and when that happened, the

knowledge could be lost. Alna had experienced such things, and so she liked the idea of writing and drawing to record knowledge.

“Erm, um, books can be for more than just the transfer of knowledge,” said Aymer. “Some people like to simply write or read stories, for example, and they can also be bought and sold rather easily. They say that learning to read and write improves one’s memory and imagination too. Thanks to books, I was able to think outside the box and come up with ideas different from other desert people.”

Alna was curious about books, and Aymer couldn’t stop talking about them. While it was common for people to get sick of Aymer when she got too talkative and excited, Alna only seemed to grow more and more intrigued, and even asked some questions. Aymer was overjoyed to find that the more she talked, the more Alna responded, and so her fervor only grew.

A Few Days Later at the Village Square—Dias

I just finished working the field and was heading back to the yurt when I heard Alna and Aymer talking excitedly at the village square. It wasn’t common to see those two together, so I looked over and saw Alna sat down in the square with Aymer on her shoulder. Aymer had her book open while the two were chatting.

When did those two get so friendly?

Aymer turned the pages and spoke with the utmost glee, and Alna replied in kind. They were having a blast. I was really curious as to what they were having so much fun talking about, so I walked up a little closer.

“Since ancient times, herbs and alcohol have been used so women can nab the man they’re after, you see,” said Aymer.

“Wow, so they really *are* one way of getting what you want...” murmured Alna.

I suddenly started feeling uneasy.

I mean, I thought it was great that the two women were getting along now, but, well, I really hoped they’d be discussing something a little more mundane and less threatening. Then again, it wasn’t very nice of me to eavesdrop either,

and I figured that if they were having a good time then I might as well just let them be.



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The Frontier Lord Begins with Zero Subjects: Volume 2

by Fuurou

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