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



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## Cast of Characters



**Dias**

Lord of the Nezrose Grasslands.



**Alna**

Onikin tribe member and Dias's wife.



**Klaus**

Ardent supporter of Dias and captain of the domain guard.



**Senai and Ayhan**

Twin sisters, forestkin.



**Eldan**

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



**Aymer**

Big-eared hopping mousekin woman and resident of Iluk Village.

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## Aymer's Report

## Residents: From 16 to 95!

Dias, who governs the Nezrose Grasslands, received a great deal of supplies from the lord of Kasdeks, Eldan, who has made it his life's work to provide the demi-human people with a bright future. These supplies included food, livestock, and construction materials.

The big-eared hopping mousekin, Aymer, became Iluk Village's resident education supervisor.

Dias successfully cultivated the grasslands and now has a field.

This is confidential, but Senai and Ayhan, forestkin twin sisters with mysterious powers, saved me when I was trapped in a box. The two confided in me that they wanted to help Dias in his efforts to farm, and so they uttered a special incantation over Dias's field. The Nezrose Grasslands, which are said to be impossible to cultivate, now have their first farming success.

Nezrose also received immigrants—the small but incredibly hardworking dogkin—from the neighboring Kasdeks. Thus, 23 mastis, 25 senjis, and 30 sheps became residents of Iluk Village.

Diane, Sanserife's third princess and a woman driven almost purely by her ambitions, commenced an invasion of Iluk Village. The villagers banded together and, together with Eldan's support, drove her away and took the spoils still left on the battlefield.

Dias continues to approach life in an easygoing manner, even when he finds himself embroiled in the political machinations of the nearby nobility.

His story continues to unfold...

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

Yurts, storehouses, privies, well, livestock pen, assembly hall, village square, stables, fields (vegetables and trees), reservoir, loot acquired in the war with Diane



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## As Summer Winds Sweep across the Plains—Francis and Francoise

While Dias and the others were facing off against Princess Diane and her forces, Francis and Francoise were on the outskirts of Iluk Village with Senai, Ayhan, and a number of the masti dogkin.

“We’re going to wait here,” they told the twins. “Straying too far from the village is a prospect that terrifies us.”

Once the baars had been left to their own devices, they went their own way, heading west from the village with a number of dogkin as protection. These dogkin, ever vigilant in their protection of the two baars, were astounded—Francis and Francoise, usually so cautious they could be called abject cowards, pushed on deeper and deeper to the west.

*Where are we going?* they wondered. *What are we doing out here?*

Onward they continued, until they arrived perhaps somewhere in the very center of the plains, where they were surrounded by nothing but grass. Then the two baars suddenly came to a halt and lifted their jaws to stare out...somewhere farther west.

“Baa baa, baaaa baa,” bleated one.

“Baa baaaa, baabaa,” added the other.

They continued to look westwards, their jaws raised as they spoke.

“Baa, baa! Baa.”

“Baa baa baa baa!”

It was like they were in conversation with somebody, but the dogkin could not understand what was being said. Though usually they understood the baars without any issue, here they could not comprehend even a single bleat.

“Baa! Baa baa baa!”



“Baaaa baaaa baaaa.”

Francis and Francoise sounded angry and frustrated. It was then, from the far west of the plains, that a wind blew towards them.

**“BAAAAAAH.”**

The dogkin were shocked. In the wind that blew and rustled through the grass, they heard a voice they could not believe. It was thick and heavy and seemed to reverberate from the depths of the earth as it spoke.

***“It is still too early. There is not enough.”***

That was what the voice seemed to say, and the dogkin looked at one another in confusion. What was too early? What was there not enough of?

**“BAAAAAH BAAAAAH,”** the strange voice continued. ***“Time to go home.”***

And when these words were spoken, Francis and Francoise stopped their bleating and turned to the dogkin.

“Let’s return to the village,” said Francis.

“Thank you for accompanying us,” said Francoise.

The dogkin were perplexed. *What was that voice just now?* they wondered. *What were Francis and Francoise doing out here?* But even with these questions in their minds, they were loyal guards and thus focused on the job at hand, and they escorted the baars back to the village.

Confusion swirled in the hearts of the dogkin, but upon their return to Iluk Village, they learned that Dias had emerged victorious and that not a single one of their forces was injured. As the joy of victory filled them and they celebrated, the dogkin completely forgot what had just occurred to the west of the village. Such was their happiness, in fact, that the voice from the west was wiped entirely from their memories.



## In Front of the Iluk Village Storehouse—Dias

It was noon, two days after the battle against Diane. I had been lying in the grass, my arms and legs sprawled out, basking in the joy of a job well done now that I'd finally finished tidying the storehouse. It had taken some time, but I'd stored away all of the spoils that the Wives' Club had picked up, as well as everything Eldan had given us as reparations. It was more stuff than I could count, so it had taken me two days. Even I was impressed by my own efforts.

The vast majority of the weapons that we had picked up were of poor quality; being that we wouldn't make any use of them here, I planned to give them to the onikin tribe. Their craftsmen could take steel weapons of any quality and transform them into worthwhile tools, which was so much better than letting it all simply go to waste.

The war bell we'd picked up seemed to be pretty pointless at first, but it rang so loud that we had put it in the village square and decided to use it as a way to gather everyone when necessary. So when meals were ready we'd ring the bell just once to call everyone to the square, and in times of emergency we had decided we'd ring it repeatedly.

As for Diane's personal steed, it detested the idea of anyone riding it, so we'd abandoned that idea and had taken to just looking after it. According to Alna, this was common for horses that were particularly close to their owners, so you couldn't force them. Instead, the best thing to do was wait until the horse was ready to accept its new circumstances. And even if Diane's horse decided it never wanted to warm up to us, it might still end up mating with one of the others. And more horses would make Alna happy, so it was fine by me.

Diane's horse had a unique coat the color of the moon in the night sky, so Alna decided to name it Aisha, which referred to steeds with such coats in the ancient tongue. Alna took great care of the horse, but we could both see that it was going to be some time before Aisha accepted its new name.

As for Eldan's reparation gifts, they were mostly food. I had put the longer-



lasting stuff at the back of the storehouse, and anything that had a shorter shelf life I kept up front so we could get to it more easily. Eldan had also given us cotton and silk fabric, which we'd put to use making clothing for everyone. The dogkin in particular didn't really have much in the way of clothing, so most of the fabric went to them. Eventually we'd have to make sure everyone had winter gear, but being that it was summer, it wasn't a pressing concern.

In any case, that's what I was musing about while I lay there, breathing in the gentle breeze, thick with the scent of the grass as it wrapped itself around me. Summers in the plains were nothing like the stifling humidity I'd experienced in the kingdom; thanks to the constant wind it was actually pretty pleasant. The sun was strong out in these parts, so we had to be careful about getting sunburned, but all the same I was glad for how nice the summer was out here. If it stayed like this, I figured I might not even need to use the mint oil that Alna had prepared to help ward off the heat.

The way the mint oil worked was you put it on your skin, and when the wind blew, you got this wonderful cooling sensation through your whole body. But at the moment, that oil didn't feel necessary at all. The pleasant breeze rolled over me and swept away my fatigue, leaving me relaxed from head to toe. It was so comfortable that I felt myself slipping into a world of dreams.

That was right when I felt rushed footsteps rumbling through the ground as they ran over to me. The reverberations were one thing, but the voice calling out got my attention.

"Lord Dias!"

I rose from the ground a little begrudgingly, wiping the sleep from my eyes with one hand and pushing to my feet with the other. I saw some senjis on their way over to me, and I remembered that they had been out patrolling the plains.

*Did something happen out there?*

"Lord Dias," said one of the dogkin, "a person is approaching the village!"

"They look all damp," added another. "They don't have any hair and they're shiny. Oh, and they have a big mouth!"

"They're coming from the west, in a caravan!"

The senjis were jumping up all around me and panting and talking so fast I could barely keep up. I knelt down and patted them to calm them down and I started putting everything they told me together.

*Damp and shiny, big mouth, coming in a caravan from the west...*

“I wonder if it’s Peijin?” I murmured.

Based on the senji group’s report, it sounded just like the merchant Peijin-Do, and he had said he’d return around this time. I stood up again and figured I should go out to meet him. That was when Alna showed up, her horn glowing green, which meant our visitors must have tripped her sensor magic.

“Looks like Peijin is back,” she said.

She went on to tell me that he always came by a different route and that this time he hadn’t stopped at the onikin village. I guessed it was because we’d put in a big order the last time we traded, and he probably wanted to bring all that to our village first. Whatever the case, Alna, the senjis, and I all headed out to the west to wait for Peijin’s arrival, and after a time we saw his caravan pop up on the horizon and draw closer.

As usual, the very frog-like Peijin was at the caravan’s reins, and the moment he saw us he started waving excitedly.

“Aha! You must be Sir Dias then, yeah?” he called out with a ribbit. “I’ve brought what you ordered, yep!”

His voice was unique to the frogkin, but the way he spoke struck me as different from the Peijin-Do I knew...and as soon as Alna and I heard it, we were both on guard.

*Who is this person?*

As soon as Peijin—or whoever it was—saw the caution on our faces, he flew into a panic.

“All right! Calm down, yeah? No need to be suspicious! The name’s Peijin-Re, and I’m a member of the Peijin family, yep! I’m Peijin-Do’s little brother! He’s on suspension and he can’t leave the country, y’see, so I’m here on his behalf with your order, Sir Dias!”



Alna and I looked at one another again and tilted our heads, confused.

*Little brother? Peijin family? What even is the Peijin family?*

We were still dumbly trying to process this new information when Peijin's caravan pulled into Iluk Village.

Once the caravan came to a stop, Peijin-Re hopped from the driver's seat and introduced himself. I asked him a couple of questions that were on my mind, and the frogkin jumped into an explanation.

"We Peijins are a merchant family who made our wealth by our ability to use both land and water, y'see. I'm one of seven brothers, all sons of Peijin-Octad, the eighth lord of the Peijin family! Something wrong? Oh, the family name, yeah? In the Beastkin Nation, it's always family name first, yep."

"As for my big brother, Do, he happened to lose something *mighty* important while he was out working, yep, and that got him put on suspension. Circumstances being what they are, I'm working on his behalf for now, yeah?"

"But don't worry, don't worry! No need to fret, yeah! I'm one of the best merchants in the nation, yep. I've been to countries at all points of the compass, y'see, and I guarantee you that the variety and quality of my goods can't be beat! I know you've got deep pockets since slaying that dragon, but I'm confident I can make you a good deal, Sir Dias, yep!"

"Now, as for your request to advertise that you're looking for residents, well, that's a bit complicated, y'see, so how about we start with this here bowl? Mother-of-pearl, yep! What's that? Not interested? Well then, how about this ornate wooden box? Look at the inlays, yeah?"

The frogkin merchant didn't let me get a word in edgewise...or at all, for that matter. His big mouth spilled words at me like a flood, and I wasn't sure if he had even paused at any point to breathe. He was holding some sparkly rainbow bowl in his right hand that he called mother-of-pearl, and a dark wooden box in his left, and he was pushing them right up into my face.

This was a pushy salesman if there ever was one, and while I felt myself wilting under the pressure, Peijin's guards were nonchalantly unloading all the

cargo he'd brought and putting it on top of sheets and boxes laid out near the cart. In the time Peijin took bombarding me with his products, his guards had finished setting up a stall that would have looked right at home in any marketplace.

I saw all the food and daily essentials that we'd ordered from Peijin-Do, but there was lots of other stuff too, including a whole range of handicrafts. I had to think that Peijin-Re wanted to sell it all on account of the fact that I had all those dragon materials.

There was cutlery and small boxes and vases and pots, and they were all very pretty. Some of the items were so rare and unfamiliar that I'd never seen their designs or heard of where they were from before. At the same time, none of them were really necessary for our daily life. They all looked mighty pricey, and I wasn't going to splurge to buy any of them given I didn't *need* any of them.

*Guess I'd best nip things in the bud and turn him down early...*

Before I could, however, Alna marched out with one of the bags of gold we'd picked up after our battle with Diane and thrust it towards Peijin. I had to assume she'd made a trip to the storehouse to grab it, then come straight over.

"We'll buy whatever this bag of gold will get us," she said. "Show me your finest wares."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I was still in shock as Peijin took the bag and confirmed the contents, and then his face split with a grin of the utmost joy. He whipped out his abacus and his list of wares, then knelt in front of his stall and started counting gold and flicking abacus beads. Alna just went on watching him, but I figured I should say something, and I was going to, but Alna spoke first.

"Holding on to gold isn't going to fill our stomachs," she said. "If we don't buy from our merchants, they'll stop selling to us. So instead of that, we help people like Peijin to profit, and in doing so we encourage him to keep coming back. We've saved up a lot of coin anyway, so what's the problem? The handicrafts that we don't use we can always sell to somebody else."

I thought about what she said and soon enough nodded in agreement. And it was true that we'd be all out of luck if merchants stopped visiting because we



were stingy. If that happened, it wouldn't even matter how much gold we had. In that sense, using the gold as a kind of merchant bait seemed like a good idea. In the end, it would benefit seller and buyer alike.

Alna read my thoughts in the look on my face and flashed a satisfied smile. Then without saying a word she gave the gently illuminated horn on her forehead a few taps. I got the message; she was telling me to relax because we had her soul appraisal magic to fall back on, and she wanted me to leave the negotiating to her.

"All right then," I said with another nod. "I'll leave it in your hands, Alna."

Alna's smile grew even wider, and Peijin must have heard us because he smiled too, and the two of them got right into talking sales. Alna immediately started haggling for a discount, saying that we wanted to buy a lot, that we had more gold to spend, and that we had close to a hundred dogkin with gold and silver of their own too. Peijin, being a merchant of course, took to introducing different wares and telling her how wonderful this or that would look on someone so beautiful and trying to keep her mood positive while he tried to pull more gold out of her.

But with every flowery utterance Peijin spoke, Alna was judging his honesty with her soul appraisal, and she could see through his lies. We were right to rely on her horn, because the negotiation slowly started tipping in her favor.

I watched them for a time, but I soon realized that they wouldn't need me for anything, so the loyal senjis—who'd been waiting by my side this whole time—and I took a look at all the stuff that Peijin had on sale. We took our time, checking out all the food and the crafts and such.

There was dried fish and produce, but there was also some blackish-brown stuff I couldn't make heads or tails of. There were dried fruits and big walnuts too, and it made me think of how happy Senai and Ayhan would be to have more of them.

That was right about the time I started hearing some squawking. It was kind of nostalgic, actually, but I couldn't help feeling a bit confused.

*But those birds couldn't possibly be out in these parts, could they?*

But the squawking kept on, so I looked around for the source of it. That was when I noticed the senjis staring intently at one part of the stall.

*I guess that must be where the noise is coming from.*

I followed the senjis' gazes, and behind some of the boxes was a wooden cage with a whole bunch of geese squeezed inside of it. The geese squawked and honked loudly and energetically, and I wondered if they were on sale like all the rest of the stuff here. All of them were big and healthy, and there was a nice sheen to their feathers, so I figured they'd be pretty expensive.

While I was standing there, one of the senjis got up close to the cage.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "What are you all doing trapped in that cage?"

The senji reached a paw in the cage and ruffled the geese's feathers, then with a high-pitched squawk one of them clamped its beak on the senji's paw. This scared the senji good and proper, so he screamed and yanked himself back, but in his panic, he hit the cage door and the impact unlatched it. The door flung open, and the geese flew out in a great big flurry, squawking at the top of their lungs. They flapped their wings excitedly and ran straight for the senji who'd opened the cage.

"Whoa! Whoa!" he screamed. "Why are you chasing me?! Don't bite me!"

He sped around the makeshift market with all the geese hot on his tail. The sight of it made me smile because it had been so long since I'd seen geese, but of course it was an entirely different story for the dogkin.

That was around the time that I saw Grandma Maya and her friends, who must have come to see what was going on when they heard all the racket. She ambled on over to us, and when she saw the geese, her eyes lit up.

"My oh my," she said. "Those geese sure are healthy, aren't they? All plump and with clean, healthy beaks and strong wings and legs."

All the other grannies were in agreement that they were mighty fine geese, and they started talking like they were already raising them. They started chattering about where to put their pen, what to do about water, and things like that. And well, they all looked so happy talking about it that I decided I ought to say a word to Alna, who was still in the midst of heated negotiations



with Peijin.

With geese, you could feed them vegetable scraps, and when you left them on their own, they picked at weeds, though they could go a few days without food. They grew quickly and were fully grown in only about six months. But they lived long lives too and often lived to twenty or thirty years of age. Some even lived as long as fifty.

Geese didn't get sick much, and they weren't prone to injury either. They clung to life with an admirable stubbornness and all the while they popped out eggs. They also grew real close with their owners but were nonetheless cautious and aggressive when it came to intruders. You could expect a lot of squawking in response to anyone suspicious, and geese would chase such people out and attack them with their beaks. They worked like guard dogs, really; they warned when robbers were coming and they chased off any field pests.

More than all of that though, they gave you a lot of blessings in the form of their eggs, their meat, and their feathers. In fact, that was why many called geese the "bird of blessings."

They were all still chasing that senji around, and I figured that with their big healthy bodies and the quality of their feathers, they'd be maybe three gold coins a goose, or maybe even five. Being that there were six of them, it was a bit of a big purchase, but we had a significant stockpile of gold, so I didn't mind.

"I want to buy those geese too," I said.

Alna and Peijin were in a battle of negotiations, and things got even more heated as they talked about the going price of the geese. That battle of theirs raged for quite a while, and when it finally ended, well... I guess I'd call the result a draw.

With her soul appraisal, Alna brought the prices down on whatever she could, and she was able to avoid anything of poor quality and any outrageous markups. For his part, Peijin-Re sold more than half of what he'd brought, and a lot of that was the expensive handicrafts to boot. I figured they were both winners, because both of them had come away better off.

Well, that's what I thought looking at it all, but as for Alna and Peijin themselves, they saw things differently. Alna had a victorious smile plastered to her face while Peijin's eyes and mouth were all wide open and twisted in a way that, well, looked to me like a very vexed frustration. He'd tried to pawn off his lesser-quality and overpriced items, but Alna had seen right through him.

It seemed Alna had won today's battle, but she hadn't held Peijin's tactics against him, hadn't used them to get a discount, and, as she'd said earlier, had helped him to profit. Alna looked at Peijin as if challenging him to try the same thing again, and Peijin stared back at her as if to say he was going to have his way next time. It certainly seemed to me that round two was going to be no less fierce than round one.

In any case, Alna gave Peijin-Re our bag of gold coins. In return we received food, daily essentials, six geese, a few barrels of wine, and handicrafts that mostly consisted of boxes and kitchen utensils.

While Peijin-Re's guards were organizing our purchases, the frogkin himself walked over to me, rubbing his sticky hands together.

"Well, I sure learned a lot today, yep," he said. "My brother Do told me not to underestimate this place, and now I know why he wouldn't shut up about it."

The frogkin let out a sigh before going on.

"Well then, Sir Dias, let's get to talking about your call for residents, yeah?"

I nodded, and Peijin-Re started looking every which way as he talked.

"Let me say it straight, yeah? As it stands, there aren't any beastkin in the Beastkin Nation that want to come here bad enough they'll leave home. If we're talking slaves, that's a different story, but I know you're not into that. My big brother did his utmost to look into it because he wants to keep good relations, y'see, and he thinks your best bet might be the lostblood, yep. But before we go bringing any lostblood over, we need to make sure you're happy to accept them, yeah?"





“Who exactly are these ‘lostblood’ you’re talking about?” I asked.

I’d never even heard the term before, and Peijin nodded, his eyes downcast as he replied.

“The lostblood are beastkin, y’see, but beastkin that have lost the animal side of their heritage. They look a lot like humans; some of them still have a bit of beast in them, but they don’t have any of that animal blood or power. They’ve lost every bit, and so in terms of physical abilities they’re no different from humans, yep.”

I couldn’t help but think of Eldan...though in his case he still had a whole lot of beastkin strength at his disposal, not to mention the ability to change forms.

“Nobody knows why it happens, y’see,” said Peijin, “but suddenly kids will just be born with less of their animal blood, and over generations it dissipates until it’s gone, yep. Things aren’t great for you in the Beastkin Kingdom when you’re a lostblood, and so a lot of them are keen to leave.”

“But it’s not like they can just go to the kingdom, yeah? That place has its own issues with discrimination against beastkin. But seeing as you’re married to a demi-human and you’ve accepted refugees, well...we think some of the lostblood would be optimistic about coming here, especially being that they could still return to the Beastkin Nation if need be.”

*We’ve also got Aymer and the dogkin here, so I’d like to think it really would be comfortable for the lostblood beastkin. But even Eldan would surely be happy to accept them.*

“Now, the current Beast King has a great love for the lostblood people, and he’s been nothing if not passionate about taking care of them as well as researching why the problem happens in the first place and how to treat it, yep. But the king before him, and the king before that, well, they held very different opinions, y’see, and their influence still holds sway over the Beastkin Nation. So how about it, Sir Dias? If some lostblood wanted to move, would you be happy to accept them?”

I spent a little time—actually, since he started talking—mulling it over. I wanted nothing more than to accept them all here, but I figured I should tell

him about Eldan's domain first.

I didn't give away Eldan's secret, but I did explain that he was the lord of the neighboring domain and that he had freed the local beastkin slaves and was working hard to create a region where demi-humans and humans could live together peacefully. I had to explain that I still hadn't seen it myself, but I knew from what they'd sent me that Kasdeks was a wealthy place and one that treated its citizens well. So I told Peijin that the lostblood were welcome here, but they might prefer Kasdeks. After all, I knew that Eldan would be warm and welcoming, and if the lostblood had really been through tough times, then they might find life with Eldan more fitting.

When Peijin heard me talk about Kasdeks, though, his mouth opened wide and his tongue rolled out of his mouth just like Do's had. He was silent for a few moments, but when he spoke again he nearly blew out my eardrums.

"Why wouldn't you tell me that sooner?! How was I to know that a lord would emerge who's welcoming of the beastkin?! In the kingdom, no less! And then you tell me the domain is wealthy and they've got lots to trade?! We're talking 'bout the potential for new trade routes, y'see?! Sir Dias, I'm begging you, let's build some roads and set up a base for trade, yeah?! Oh, what's that? You're lacking the materials and the manpower? But don't you have a carriage? How about trying the trade yourself, yeah? I'll be your point of contact at the Beastkin Nation, yep! So don't you worry! Huh? You've got the carriage but horses and workers are the problem? *Why I oughta*— Oh! I've got it, yep! We'll train up some lostblood to learn the ropes and use this village as a base, y'see? A base for trade between the Beastkin Nation and the Sanserife Kingdom!"

Peijin-Re was beyond excited by now, and I knew there was no calming him down. His head was filled with dreams of trade and new opportunities, and all talk of the lostblood was quickly lost to talk of new business. I could tell it was going to be a long, exhausting time before he cooled off and returned to normal.



## With Trading for the Day Complete

Somehow we'd managed to calm Peijin-Re and get our conversation back on track, at which point we'd agreed that if any of the lostblood showed an interest in trade, then Peijin would show them the ropes. We had horses and a carriage, and having a dedicated merchant around could only be a good thing.

In the midst of our conversation, I brought up conditions for residents.

"By the way, Peijin," I said. "This goes for all potential residents, not just the lostblood, but we don't accept criminals, or evil folk, or anyone who might bear us ill will. I'd like you to keep that in mind when people start applying to move here."

"Huh? Well, uh...of course that's what you'd want, yep," replied Peijin. "And it goes without saying, yeah? I'll make sure that we get a good look at everyone's past and their character before we make a decision."

"Well, I'm sure you got a sense of it yourself a little earlier, but Alna's got an eye for these things, particularly when it comes to a person's character. She's even better at that than she is at appraising the quality of goods. The last thing I want is for you to bring some people here only for us to have to turn them down and drive them away, so I just want to make sure that you're diligent about it."

"I hear you loud and clear, yep. I swear that I'll only bring over people that the two of you will be happy with."

With that, I left it to Peijin to bring us some decent folk. After all, we were planning on having some lostblood be the heart of trade in Iluk, and that would mean travel back and forth between here and the Beastkin Nation. We'd want to trust those folks with trading Iluk's specialty wares.

At the moment, all I could think of that was unique to Iluk was our baar wool, but given that our production of it was fairly limited, we were still a ways off from selling it in any real capacity. I knew we had to expand the number of

baars we had, but I hadn't met a single one in the wild yet, so it didn't seem like a particularly easy task.

In any case, I figured that it would take some time to train someone up as a merchant, and we still had a while before any lostblood actually arrived in earnest, so I decided that I could put more time into it later down the road.

Once Peijin and I had finished discussing the particulars with the lostblood, we got on to discussing what Iluk needed for his next visit. On this occasion, Peijin hadn't brought anything the dogkin would have wanted, so I asked him to bring some stuff for them when he next came. They had a lot of gold and silver of their own now, and Peijin didn't want to let an opportunity like that slip from his grasp, so he happily agreed. There were plenty of small-ilk dogkin in the Beastkin Nation, so he said he'd get some stuff together, and he looked confident about it to boot.

I also put in an order for some other daily essentials and asked him to prepare us another horse if he could, but that was about all we needed at the time. In terms of food, well, we actually had a little too much as it was, so we didn't need to put in an order for any more.

And so, with our trade done, Peijin and his guards packed up their stall and got ready to leave. They were keen to get going before sundown, so they got all their stuff together right quick.

"Got a good deal done and learned a good lesson, yep," said Peijin-Re. "I'll be back in the not too distant future, and I'll be looking forward to an even better trade than last time, yep! Well, I guess that's it then, so we'll be on our way."

And with a deep bow, the frogkin merchant hopped up into the driver's seat of the caravan, took the reins, and headed westwards with his guards. We watched him until he disappeared into the horizon, then I started swinging my arms and warming them up.

*Time to get busy.*

Now that we were looking after a flock of geese, there was a lot that had to be done. We needed a pen for them for starters, but I figured we could reuse some of the leftover materials from Francis and Francoise's pen for that. Still, we'd need to dig a little reservoir nearby for them too. You could raise geese

without a watering hole, but they were healthier when they had water nearby, so I thought it'd be a good idea to build one for them. And being that it didn't have to be too deep or too wide, we could do it without issue. We just had to make sure we had routes from the river to bring water in and take water out.

I had strolled on over to the livestock pen with that on my mind, and that was also when Grandma Maya and her friends walked over towards me looking like they were patting themselves on the back for a job well done. There were a lot of dogkin with them, and they were all muddy. As soon as they saw me they sped ahead of the grannies and dashed over, their tails wagging like crazy.

"Pat us! Pat us!" cried one.

"And praise us too! Go on!" cried another.

I didn't know what they wanted me to praise them for, and I was still trying to work it out when Grandma Maya finally caught up.

"We have to thank you, young Dias, for buying those geese. They're very healthy, and by the looks of things, we'll be welcoming little ones come winter. We've also got roast goose to look forward to!"

"Roast goose, huh? That does sound delicious," I said. "By the way, Grandma Maya, why are the dogkin so dirty? What have they been up to?"

"Well they've been working hard for the geese, of course," replied Grandma Maya. "We had some unused livestock pen materials, yes? We had the dogkin carry them over to the riverside and then dig us a little pond for the geese. We dug some trenches too, so if the geese poop in the pond or get it muddy then the water will drain back out into the river."

She took a moment to breathe before she continued, "Oh, and we want to put a fence around it all, so we sent a young senji to the onikin village to ask if they'll share some materials with us. We thought it was a good time to do it, seeing as we'd asked them for small privies for Aymer and the small-ilk. I know we did all of it without asking you first, but we needed it, so I hope you don't mind."

While I'd been talking to Peijin-Re, the grannies and the dogkin had been doing my job for me. They'd set the materials up and were checking on the

privies too. I didn't have any complaints whatsoever.

"I'd wanted to put up a fence for the geese before nightfall, so I don't mind at all. I'm grateful, if anything!" Then I knelt down and gave the dogkin all pats. "And thank you guys for all your hard work too!"

Patting all the dogkin reminded me that I still hadn't actually given them all their rewards for the war. The mastis had been out there on the battlefield with me, but even the dogkin who'd stayed and protected the village deserved their thanks. I'd wanted to give them all something for how we'd safely overcome the war...if you could call it that.

"It's time I rewarded you all and commemorated your efforts, especially now that Peijin is planning to come back with stuff for all of you," I said. "Everyone's going to get something, because it wasn't just those on the battlefield that protected Iluk but everyone. So let's gather in the village square. Oh, but wash all that mud off yourselves beforehand, okay?"

The dogkin's eyes all grew wide and they started howling with joy. While they were all cheering, another dogkin ran to the square and rang the bell.

*Oh, that's right. That's our sign for the village to gather...*

So with the howling and the bell ringing in my ears, and everyone heading for the square, I went off to the storehouse to get a bag of coins.

By the time I had the bag and was on my way towards the square, everyone was already there, neatly lined up. All the dogkin must have heard from the grannies what was going on, because their eyes were all alight with anticipation.

I took to passing out coins to each villager and thanking them for their efforts: two coins for those who fought, and one coin for those who didn't. I handed out coins to everyone, including Senai and Ayhan, the dogkin kids, the grannies, and Francis and Francoise too.

When I was all done and about to tell them all to go back and go about their day, a young shep came up to me holding their coin in both hands like it was something really precious. The little dogkin looked a bit nervous, but they



looked me straight in the eyes as they spoke.

“Lord Dias, is it okay to put a hole in the coin?” the dogkin asked.

I was surprised. I’d just given out the rewards, and now one of them wanted to put a hole in their coin. Why would they want to do that? I mean, gold was gold, so it wasn’t like it would be completely useless if you did something like that, but I didn’t think a merchant would be too happy to get a coin with a hole in it either.

I was struggling to find words for a reply, but then more dogkin came up to me and they started asking if they could do the same. I told them all to calm down and I knelt down, and when I could look them all in the eye, I spoke.

“Guys, why do you want to put a hole in your coins? I’m not saying you can’t do it, but I’d like to at least know why.”

The dogkin who’d plucked up the courage to ask answered first.

“If I put a hole in it, then I can put a string through it,” they said excitedly. “And if I can put a string through it, then I can wear it as a necklace! It’s a reward that came from you, Lord Dias, so I want to carry it with me all the time!”

“All the time?” I asked. “Guys, those are gold coins you’ve got there. Money, you know? I gave them to you so that when the merchant visits us, you can buy something you want, like food or toys and such.”

But the moment I said that, the dogkin hugged the coin tight to their chest and shook their head like that was the worst idea in the world. Their eyes started filling with tears, and they told me that they never wanted to use the coin and would never let it go. The others all showed similar reactions, and well, I didn’t really know what to do.

I’d given the dogkin coins for their work in the past, and they’d taken to decorating their yurts with them. I’d always thought it was because they were just happy to finally be rewarded for doing the work they’d been looking forward to for so long, but now I could see that I’d been way off base. The coins were precious to the dogkin—something more akin to a commemorative medal.

On the one hand, I could have let the dogkin do whatever they liked, but I'd already asked Peijin-Re to bring over items for them, and if the dogkin weren't using their money as *money*, then there'd be problems.

"Do you guys have a special attachment to gold and silver?" I asked.

"They're shiny and they're pretty, but other than that, not really," replied the dogkin.

"Which means you like the coins because they're rewards I gave you?"

"Yes! That! We love rewards! They make us happy!"

"So what if I gave you a nice reward in place of the coins? Would you use the coins as money then?"

The dogkin then looked at the coin in their hands very carefully and thought long and hard. Finally, they nodded and said that they would, if the reward was even better than a coin. That was a relief, but there was still a problem: what was I even going to give them all in place of coins? I just couldn't even think of anything that would be better than gold.

I was standing there wracking my brains when Alna, who'd been watching the whole thing, came up with something.

"I know how you guys feel," she said. "So how about this? What if Dias made you a necklace from an animal he'd hunted himself, like from its bones or teeth? Would that make you happy?"

The dogkin were ecstatic at the idea, and their tails started wagging like mad. I was glad to see them all overjoyed, but at the same time I wondered.

*Does Alna mean what I think she means?*

"All right, then it's settled. You can all get back to work, okay? Put your coins somewhere safe and make sure you don't lose them. When the necklaces are done, Dias will pass them out to you."

And so, with their tails still wagging happily, the dogkin ran off talking about how excited they were and got back to work. The grannies, Klaus, and Canis, who'd been watching it all, went back to work along with them, and that was when Senai, Ayhan, and Aymer—who was in Ayhan's hands—ran over to us.

“We want necklaces too!”

“Yeah! Us too!”

The twins jumped up and down as they spoke, and while I was happy to make them necklaces, I wasn’t sure that they *really* wanted them...

“When Alna said I’d make them out of bones,” I explained, “she meant black ghee. You know, the meat you’re always eating? The meat in your bowls of soup? Do you two want necklaces made out of that?”

Back when I had first arrived at the plains, I’d hunted a lot of black ghee, and we’d smoked and dried the meat at the onikin village. That meant I had a lot of bones to use for the necklaces. Alna had spoken about it to the dogkin like it was something special, but really the bones were not much different from trash, and usually we just buried them.

“I don’t think I want one...” surrendered Senai.

“Yeah, I don’t need one anymore,” added Ayhan.

The girls had only ever thrown the bones away when they were done with them, so their reactions weren’t a surprise. At the same time, I wasn’t sure if it was a good idea for me to make necklaces out of bones in the first place. The dogkin were really looking forward to them, and I didn’t want to disappoint them.

“Oh, come on,” said Alna, “as long as you put some heart and care into each necklace it’ll be fine. The dogkin don’t want anything of monetary value; they want something that expresses your feelings. That much is clear in how they feel about the coins. So put time and effort into each necklace, and if that alone doesn’t feel like enough, you can put a little jewel into each one. We’ve got heaps of gem fragments you can use.”

Alna had practically read my mind, and offered some support for my concerns. And she was right; if I did a good job and embedded a little jewel in each one, then they’d probably come out looking pretty dang nice. Then again, I wasn’t very good when it came to detailed work, and I was a bit on the clumsy side... Okay, more like *a lot* on the clumsy side. But if it was for the dogkin, then I’d give it my best shot.

“Relax, Dias,” said Alna, “I’m really good when it comes to handicrafts. I’ll make sure that even a klutz like you knows the ins and outs. You’ll be a pro in no time!”

Once again, she’d read my mind and spoken before I’d even opened my mouth.

“Thanks, Alna. I’m glad to know you’ll help me out. But something different is bugging me now. Am I really that easy to read? I never said a single word but you seemed to know exactly what I was thinking. Was it like with Peijin? Were you using your negotiating skills to read me?”

Alna replied with a gentle smile but didn’t say a word. Senai and Ayhan were covering their mouths to suppress their giggling. Even Aymer looked away from me, her shoulders shaking as she tried to hold it in.

*All right, all right, I get it. I really am easy to read after all.*

That was when everyone finally burst into laughter, and all I could do was stand there and take it.



## Early Afternoon, Three Days Later in Dias's Yurt

Crafting bone necklaces—the words conjured images of pretty rough and crude objects, but...after Alna taught me the ropes and I did exactly as she told me, the end result was surprisingly respectable. I borrowed some jewelry-crafting tools, and I filed a bone down into a fang-like shape that the dogkin liked. Then I put a hole in it to run string through, and then I sanded it down and polished it until it had a nice white sheen. It didn't even look like a bone anymore.

Once that was done, I carved a little pattern into it along with the words “for merit.” Then I carved a tiny hollow, put some glue in it, and added a jewel shard. Finally, I ran a nice red string through it that Alna had given me, and the necklace was done.

The only real problem to speak of was that it had taken me three days to make that one necklace. Dried bone wasn't quite as sturdy as I'd thought, and it crumbled away pretty easily, so I had to make sure I was careful or else I'd crush the bones in my grip. I'd put a whole lot of good bones to waste doing that...

Once I had learned how to handle the material properly and not break it, I could actually get started on the work, and three days later the first necklace was finally done.

*But I don't even want to think of how many days it'll take to make one for everybody...*

I was sitting there on the floor with my legs crossed when Alna entered the yurt.

“Dias, I wanted to talk to you about something,” she started, until she saw my progress. “Oh, you finally finished one.”

Alna took the necklace in her hands and took a good look at it. Then she made sure the string through it was the right length and tied it around her neck.

“Hm, I'd say that's a pretty good job,” she said with a brightness in her voice.

“I think the dogkin are going to be really pleased.”

“Yeah, but it took me three days,” I said. “That’s why the quality is what it is. How long is it going to take me to finish all of them?”

“When it comes to things like this, the first always takes the longest. It gets easier as you go. There’s no need to rush, anyway. Just focus on making sure that they’re all done right. They’ll be done before you know it.”

“Well, okay. I guess I’ll just focus on one at a time like you say,” I said, then tilted my head, puzzled. “Did something happen, Alna? You looked like there was something on your mind.”

“Hm? Oh, right! I almost forgot! While you’ve been here in the yurt making the necklaces, we’ve decided to keep on working on what we can outside. We figured we’d up the number of privies and build a proper kitchen range. What do you think?”

I was puzzled all over again. Grandma Maya had told me about the privies, but a kitchen range? What even was that? So I asked.

“At the moment, we’re doing all our cooking in our individual yurts,” explained Alna, “but it’s getting a bit cramped now that our village is growing, and it can be a pain chasing down utensils and ingredients. Aymer suggested that we build a dedicated kitchen range with several stoves all lined up so that everyone can cook together and help each other out.”

Alna did a lot of work drawing the kitchen range in the air with her gesturing, and she spoke with great excitement.



“And it won’t just be stoves,” she continued. “We’ll also make an oven for Klaus to bake bread, and steps so the dogkin can use everything more easily, and a dedicated place for firewood and fuel. It will have its own well, its own washbasin, and a roof to cover the whole thing too. With a kitchen range like that, we’ll be able to cook a whole lot more, and do it quicker and more easily! What do you think?”

I could hear in Alna’s voice that she was real excited about cooking with the new equipment. I thought about her request, and if they all wanted it, then I was fine with it.

“I’m happy for you to do it,” I said. “You know I’m not all that knowledgeable about cooking, so I’ll leave the particulars up to you and the others. You make that kitchen range the way you all like, okay? But what are we going to do about the materials for the stoves and the roof for the whole thing?”

“I thought we could ask Kamalotz about the roofing materials,” Alna replied. “One or two roofs like the ones for the stables would be good enough, and we were already going to ask for a stable extension since we’ve got an extra horse now.”

*Yeah, that makes sense. They’ve got the ready-made materials in Kasdeks, so it’s not like we’d have to buy timber and make the whole thing ourselves.*

“If that’s the case, then I’ll write up a letter the next time that Geraint comes around.”

“There’s no need to bother with that. Canis is heading home pretty soon, so I thought we could ask her to pass along the message for us.”

I nodded. Canis had only been staying here at Iluk to make sure that the dogkin got settled in, and I supposed she’d seen enough to be satisfied. Alna had a look on her face that said matters were settled, so she headed back to the door, waving goodbye and bringing things to a close.

“Once she returns here from her village,” she said, “we’ll need to build Klaus a bigger yurt, and there’ll be a lot of other work to be done, but I think we can have Klaus handle most of it. Well then, I’ll leave you to the rest of the necklaces.”



“All right, sounds good... Hang on, what? Hold on a second there, Alna. Canis is coming back? And what’s all this talk of Klaus needing a bigger yurt?”

Alna was just about out the door when she turned and took a good look at my bewildered face. An instant later, she looked just as confused as I did.

“Dias, Klaus and Canis are...” she started, and then she stopped.

Alna gave me a good long stare, then narrowed her eyes. When she spoke next, there was a certain mix of disbelief and exasperation in her tone.

“Are you telling me that you haven’t noticed at all, Dias? Those two have been lovebirds for a good long time now. That’s the whole reason that Canis is going back home: she’s going to inform her parents of her decision to be with Klaus.”

“What? *What?!?*” I cried, dropping the bone I’d been working on. “Klaus and Canis?! When did those two suddenly fall in love?!”

Alna heaved a great big sigh and shook her head.

“There’s nothing ‘sudden’ about it! Canis has been with Klaus and the dogkin since the day she got here. Every. Single. Day. And Klaus has been in charge of their training. He’s skilled, conscientious, well studied, and generous to top it off. It shouldn’t come as a surprise that Canis started to fall for him.”

As it so happened, one day in training a dogkin had been injured. Klaus had noticed it immediately and run over to the dogkin in a flash, treating the damage swiftly and with great care. He’d apologized for putting the dogkin in danger while they were under his watch, and seeing this honesty and care from Klaus had won Canis’s heart.

Well, according to Alna, anyway.

After that, Klaus and Canis grew more comfortable with each other and started talking. As Canis had started getting more serious about things, Klaus grew worried because he was a different race. But with time he opened his heart to Canis, and then...

“After the war, Klaus and Canis decided to get married. Canis fell in love all over again at Klaus’s bravery, and Klaus became aware of how important it was

to have someone at home waiting for his safe return. But anyway, Dias...you seriously didn't notice at all? What about during meals, when they couldn't stop staring into one another's eyes? They were even feeding each other. How could you miss that?"

I did my best to think back to our recent meals, but all that came to mind was how delicious the food had been. I didn't have a single memory of what Klaus and Canis might have been up to at the table. I couldn't even remember what Canis had been doing recently, but now I knew that she'd been with Klaus.

"So after all of that, Canis is going to live here? With Klaus?" I asked.

"That's their plan, yep. Canis is going to head home and tell her parents, and then she'll look for a good opportunity to introduce Klaus to them. Assuming they get permission from Canis's parents, they'll get married once all their preparations are complete. Given how in love those two are, I don't think it'll be long before they're blessed with a little one of their own."

Alna then said that if I wanted to know more than that, I'd just have to ask Klaus and Canis myself. And with that, she'd waved goodbye again and was out the door for real this time.

That left me sitting in the yurt all by myself in a bit of a daze. It was wonderful news, of course, and I was happy about it, but all of that was mostly drowned out by shock. I couldn't believe that those two had fallen for one another. I let out a deep breath, took a look around my yurt, and picked up the bone I'd dropped. That was when I realized that Alna had walked out with my first finished necklace.

*Well, I'd planned to make one for her anyway, so it's no big deal. I just didn't expect her to take the first one. I guess that means she liked it, which means I did a good job?*

Then I heard some excited voices outside the yurt. When I listened more closely, I could hear Senai and Ayhan and the dogkin, all of them telling Alna that her necklace looked really great and that they couldn't wait to get their own.

*Yep, looks like they'll be really happy to get one of these, so best get to work!*

## The Following Day, in the Yurt

There was an air of excitement all throughout Iluk Village. Klaus was out in the fields swinging his spear around, all worried about Canis having left that morning with a number of masti bodyguards and scared of whether or not Canis's parents would give their blessing to the couple's intended wedding.

Meanwhile, Grandma Maya and her friends were buzzing with enthusiasm as they chattered about the wedding and what the ceremony might look like.

That same day, Alna and the onikin got started on building the new privies and the kitchen range. And every time the dogkin saw the necklace hanging around her neck, they all got pumped up about wanting their own too.

The village was loud and lively, and everyone looked to be having a good day. I was struck by the urge to get out there and join them because I'd been cooped up in the yurt all day working on necklaces, but I kept focused and stayed on task. I filed the black ghee bones and I polished them and I filed them...and then I felt a couple of eyes looking at me from the doorway.

I lifted my head for a moment, wondering who it could be, and found Senai and Ayhan peeking in at me. They must have been trying to hide because I could only see a hint of their heads, but they stared at me without saying a word. Still, their fidgety expressions did all the speaking for them. I knew because I'd heard them talking outside of the yurt the previous day—the twins wanted necklaces of their own.

They'd told me that they *didn't* want them not long ago, so it must have been a bit awkward for them to tell me they'd changed their minds. But their gazes burned into me, making their message clear.

"Don't worry, girls," I started, stopping my work for a second. "I'll make necklaces for you too."

The twins smiled as soon as they heard me, then hopped away holding hands, and they left the door wide open as they went.

*If you open the door, at least close it when you go, girls...*

I hefted myself to my feet and walked over to the door to close it, but as I reached for it I saw Klaus coming over with a real stern expression.

“Lord Dias,” he said, “I wish to ask for your advice. Do you have a moment?”

I saw the look on his face, nodded, and let him inside.

Klaus had sat down in front of me and gone on about his worries for a while. It had been a long story, so when he finished I summarized everything he’d said.

“So in short, you don’t know what to get Canis’s parents as a betrothal gift?”

That was basically at the heart of what Klaus wanted advice for. To him, Canis was gentle, she was kindhearted, she was beautiful—he couldn’t find enough words to truly do her justice. He didn’t feel like he was worthy of her, and yet here she was agreeing to marry someone of an entirely different race. Klaus wanted to prepare a gift that equaled all of that, but he didn’t have the first clue what that might be.

“Yes,” answered Klaus, nodding slowly. “Canis said I didn’t need to worry about a gift at all, but...I still feel like it’s better if I give them *something*. I mean, you gave a betrothal gift to Lady Alna’s parents, right?”

“Well, in my case, it was less like I just gave them something and a bit more like I *had* to due to the circumstances. But yeah, I ended up giving them some earth dragon materials.”

“You gave them...earth dragon materials...? And how did they react?”

*Their reaction, huh?*

The truth of the matter was that everything had been so sudden at the time, and there’d been so much going on. In all the confusion, I didn’t remember their reaction very clearly outside of the fact that it had been favorable. I was a human from the kingdom, for starters, so I’d figured they would have been dead set against the idea of an engagement, but there hadn’t been any of that. They’d accepted the gift, and we’d rolled right into our wedding ceremony.

*But if everything went smoothly because of my gift, then I guess I see the point*

*in them after all.*

“They were really happy with the gift,” I said, “and things went smoothly from there. According to Moll, they would have been just as happy with thirty black ghee.”

“Thirty of those black oxen, huh? So perhaps I can hunt the same number then...”

“Hang on a second, Klaus,” I said. “I mean, you have to look at things from the point of view of the culture of the dogkin and Canis’s parents. We don’t even know if they’ll be happy to get all of them black ghee, so let’s not jump to conclusions. And anyway, didn’t I give you some gold coins? How about buying something appropriate?”

“The thing about that money is...I don’t feel like I earned it through my own work. Please don’t misunderstand. I’m glad to have received it, and it was an honor, but I just want to give Canis’s parents a gift that I worked for on my own and earned through my own efforts! And now that you told me of your own experience it makes me want to follow in your footsteps, which means displaying my hunting prowess. What do you think?”

*Hunting prowess, huh?*

I guess in my case, that was black ghee and an earth dragon. I was pretty certain that Canis’s parents would be happy to get some dragon materials, but they weren’t particularly common and, more importantly, they were a dangerous monster to go hunting for.

I didn’t think Klaus would have any trouble hunting black ghee, but they had plenty of food in the Kasdeks region, so I wasn’t sure if Canis’s parents would be happy to get black ghee meat. I was mulling it over when I heard the clip-clop of Francis’s hooves outside. Suddenly, I was hit by a bolt of inspiration.

“How about this then, Klaus? What if you hunt for black ghee, take them to the onikin village, trade for baar wool fabric, and give them that as your betrothal gift? I’m not sure if Canis’s parents would really enjoy getting meat, but there’s a whole host of different ways you can use high-quality fabric, and you can never have too much of it. Last time Kamalotz was here he marveled at the quality of the baar wool, so I think Canis’s parents will love it.”



Klaus nodded slowly, impressed, and his expression brightened.

“Yes, I think you’re right! While I won’t be able to display my skills directly, it will still be a part of the process, and it’s a specialty unique to our region. But do you think the onikin will be open to such a trade?”

“I think you’ll want to talk to them directly to hash out the details,” I replied. “But a bunch of the men are here to see about building some privies, right? You could go right ahead and ask them how much they’ll trade and how much meat they want, and I’ll bet they could give you some hunting tips while you’re at it. I’ll be honest—I don’t think my style is going to help you out much.”

Klaus hurriedly thanked me for my advice and then burst out the door like a flash. I’d hoped that our talk might have calmed him down some, but it looked like it had done the opposite. I just hoped he wouldn’t get himself injured by rushing the process. But I knew Klaus, and I knew he was capable. When he saw his prey, I was sure his head would clear just fine.

So I went back to my necklace making, and after a little while it had seemed Klaus had finished talking with the onikin, because I heard him running out of the village in a real hurry, letting loose a battle cry as left.

*Just make sure you don’t get injured out there, okay, Klaus?*

I knew it wasn’t going to be a laughing matter if he got himself hurt right before his wedding day...

## **Five Days Later**

It had been five days since Klaus started hunting black ghee, and in that time he’d only hunted two. Things weren’t going well. If he’d used matani dust, it would have been easy. With his skills, he would have had ten or twenty in no time. But Klaus was intent on doing it all on his own, and that’s why things had worked out the way they had.

He hadn’t used any matani dust, and he hadn’t asked for help from the dogkin. He’d just run through the plains in search of his quarry. In that respect, hunting a whole two black ghee without getting hurt was actually something of a triumph.

The dogkin had tried to help. The Wives' Club was rooting for Klaus and Canis, and the mastis trained with Klaus everyday, so they'd offered to go along with him, but he'd turned them down. He'd said that he had to do it on his own. He was stubborn about it too. He just wouldn't budge, so I didn't know what else there was to do.

I was thinking about it all in my yurt as I put another completed necklace in the little wooden box by my side. There were a lot in the box by then, and it looked like I'd be done in about two or three days. I'd gotten used to the work now, and I'd figured out the trick to it. It was just like Alna'd said: after the first one, things really did get easier.

I looked down into that box of necklaces, and it struck me that detailed work like this wasn't so bad after all. At the same time, I didn't like that I couldn't move much, and part of me just wanted an opportunity to get out there in the fields to do some work elsewhere.

In any case, I allowed myself a little break and stretched my back and swung my arms to loosen up my body.

"Dias, Canis is back," said Alna, entering the yurt with Canis in tow. "I know you're busy, but she's got some news to report."

Canis looked bright and happy, so I had to assume she had good news.

"My parents gave their blessing for our wedding, so as of today Klaus and I will work our very hardest as residents of Iluk Village! We'll do our best to support everyone!"

"I'm glad to hear it! I know there will be some hard times ahead, but I believe that you and Klaus can overcome it all together."

"Thanks!" answered the beaming Canis.

Our conversation petered out pretty quick from there. Alna'd said that Canis had news to report, so I wondered if I should push her about it, but right as I was about to do just that, Canis came to her senses and started waving her arms in a bit of a panic.

"Oh, right! I almost forgot my report!" she said. "Um, so regarding Lord Eldan, he wasn't in Kasdeks because he'd already left for the royal capital with

Kamalotz. With them gone, my father is currently the acting domain lord, and while we were visiting I asked him about the kitchen range, the roofing, and the privies. He said that he will send materials in the next few days together with some craftsmen. They'll handle all the construction."

*Oh yeah, Eldan did say he was going to the capital, didn't he? And if Canis's father was made the acting lord, then he must be a person of high standing.*

"Given the circumstances in Kasdeks, my father will not be able to attend our wedding in Iluk. Only my mother will attend. When Klaus and I visit Kasdeks together to meet my parents, my father intends to hold a banquet for us, so we'll be gone for a few days. And...I think that's everything I have to report!"

Canis counted a few things off on her furry fingers, then nodded and repeated, "Yep! That's everything!"

"All right then," I replied. "We'll get things ready here to give your mother a warm welcome. As for your visit to Kasdeks, you two are free to handle that however you like. When are you thinking of leaving?"

"I'd like to introduce Klaus to my parents as soon as possible!" Canis declared with a bright smile. "I like to strike while the iron's hot, so the sooner the better!"

Canis must have seen something in the look on my face, because her excitement died down. "Oh, is Klaus out somewhere at the moment?"

I told Canis about Klaus wanting to prepare a betrothal gift and how he was intent on hunting for it all on his own. I told her his hunt wasn't going so well and that even now he was out there tracking his prey. Canis's bright expression darkened as she listened, and she let out a little growl as her nose wrinkled.

"What does that man think he's doing?" she groaned. "I'm glad he's diligent about a gift, but why doesn't he accept any help? All of his relationships are things he earned on his own too!"

Canis started chopping the air with her hands as she spoke, and the movements started getting sharper and more powerful as she went on.

"Uh, Canis...?" I asked a little timidly. "What are you doing with your hands?"

“I’m picturing the cheek of a foolish husband, of course! These hands are going to slap some real sense into Klaus! I’m happy for the way he feels, but...what if his stubbornness gets him hurt out there? What if he dies? He doesn’t even know how devastated I’d be! My mom said that this is the best medicine for men like that! And you can bet my dad tasted it too!”

Canis was practicing her chops even as she excused herself and left the yurt to wait for Klaus’s return. I couldn’t help thinking that it sure was a powerful sight, but then all of a sudden I’d become aware of Alna, who had been staring at me silently. Well, actually, she was staring at my *cheek*.

“Is something wrong, Alna?” I asked.

“Nope,” she replied. “I was just thinking that maybe someday I’m going to have to dish out a little *medicine* of my own.”

“Well, if you have to, go easy, okay?” I said.

“You won’t tell me not to?”

“Well, I don’t condone slapping people. But I think that if you had to slap me, you’d have a good reason for it, so I guess I’d just take it on the chin.”

Alna giggled and rose to her feet with a satisfied smile. But as she was heading to the door, she remembered something and turned back.

“By the way, I’m asking just in case, but you’ve prepared a wedding gift for Klaus and Canis, right? The Wives’ Club and I have decided that our gift will be a huge feast, so we’ve been busy preparing that, but it looks like you haven’t had time with all those necklaces. Do you have it all under control?”

The moment I’d heard Alna’s words, my response had been written all over my face: I hadn’t even thought for one second about a wedding gift. Alna’s eyes narrowed, and without so much as a word she started cutting the air with her hands just like Canis.

“It’s fine!” I responded in a panic. “I’m just about done with all the necklaces, and we still have time before the wedding! I still haven’t thought about it, but I’ll have something ready in time!”

Alna’s gaze remained pointed on my cheek, but eventually she gave in and

heaved a great big sigh.

## Three Days Later

The same day that Canis returned to Iluk, Klaus got a good helping of *medicine* and decided he wasn't so stubborn about doing it all on his own anymore. He accepted the help of the dogkin and some matani dust from the onikin, and Canis even joined him for a few of his trips.

As a result of all of that, Klaus's hunting picked up like crazy, and in just three days he'd taken down all the black ghee he needed. He took them all to the onikin village and exchanged them for a mountain of baar wool fabric. Then he piled it all onto a cart and, with the help of some dogkin to pull it along, headed to Kasdeks with Canis.

I saw them off with a smile on my face and...a terrible panic in my heart. I'd been so focused on the necklaces that I hadn't thought of a wedding gift, and I'd figured that I'd have at least a week or two to come up with something. But Klaus and Canis were done in just three days and already off to Kasdeks!

Alna and the others were all preparing to hold the wedding ceremony as soon as Klaus and Canis returned, which meant I didn't have much time left at all. But even then, I still didn't know what to give them.

Alna, on the other hand, had things totally under control. All the luxurious food they were going to make had been decided, and she'd already sent the dogkin out to gather all the ingredients. The kitchen range was also coming along, and it wouldn't be long before the craftsmen arrived with the materials, so everyone would be able to put it to use straightaway.

I had been left straining my brain over what to give Klaus and Canis that would match such a feast. Usually I would have asked Alna for advice in a situation like this, but I'd already told her that I had things covered, which made it difficult to ask for her help.

When the worries got too much for me to handle on my own...

"So you came to me for advice, huh? I can't believe you," muttered Moll, the



chieftain of the onikin village.

We were in her yurt, where she was giving me an exasperated stare.

“I didn’t have anyone else to go to,” I admitted. “There are also some other things I’ve come to report, so I figured I’d ask about the gift while I was here.”

I started with my report of things in Iluk. I told her about the field and how it was going well but we still didn’t quite know why yet. I told her about the war against Diane, about trading with Peijin-Re, and how we might use Iluk as a hub for trade. Finally, I told her that we’d picked up a bunch of loot after the war and I’d brought it with me to give to the onikin. Moll nodded and the hint of a smile crept to her lips.

“I see,” she sighed. “You never cease to amaze me, Dias. And you brought us loot to use as we see fit, so in return I will give you my advice.”

Moll paused for a moment and sat up a little straighter before going on. “It’s a wedding gift you’re looking for, yes? Something you can prepare quickly?”

“That’s right. Klaus and Canis won’t be back for a few days, but that still means I have to have something within that time.”

“In which case, we can give you some high-quality baar fabric bedding immediately. That would doubtlessly be a fitting gift from you.”

I tilted my head in confusion. I mean, I understood that bedding was something that was handy to have around, but I wondered if it wasn’t a bit too boring a gift for newlyweds. And why was it fitting? I thought about it really long and really hard, and Moll patiently watched me mull it over until finally it hit me.

“Ah, so *that’s* what you mean! And Klaus *is* a bit of a late bloomer in that department, so it might be just right!”

Moll let out a very big, very deliberate sigh before she replied.

“With that thick skull of yours, I really have no idea when you and Alna will ever have a child. But that is why the bedding makes a good gift. Other couples might see you and feel some reluctance to make children of their own. We’ll give you bedding embroidered with wards against illness and prayers for a

healthy newborn.”

I felt a huge weight off my shoulders, and I was glad that I’d asked Moll. I thanked her for her help, and then we went to where I’d left the cart full of war spoils. I passed it all to some onikin men that came with us, and in return I received a whole bedding set intricately embroidered with the moon, flowers, and patterns of birds. There were sheets and blankets as well as two pillows, which we loaded on my now-empty cart. Moll also tried to pawn off some baby-making herbs to me, but I politely and firmly declined the offer.

The cart was much lighter on the way back to Iluk, and when I got home I put all the bedding in the back of one of the storehouses so Klaus and Canis wouldn’t find it.

A few days later, the craftsmen arrived with a cart full of supplies to work on constructing the kitchen range and its roof.

The craftsmen went above and beyond for that range. We hadn’t planned for a rest area, but they built that too, and then they made an oven out of bricks especially for baking. The roof over the kitchen range had clasps for hanging cloth to keep the cold out in winter, and there were a whole lot of other things the craftsmen did after accounting for Alna’s suggestions.

Once they finished with the roof and the stable expansion, the craftsmen said they had some spare materials and time, so they put some work into the privies and the goose pen and made them even better. The onikin craftsmen had done a mighty fine job already, but the Kasdeks craftsmen were a touch more skillful, it seemed.

The craftsmen spent three days doing all the work, and as payment I gave them ten gold coins each. I didn’t know what the going rate was so I was a bit worried, but the craftsmen all looked pleased. I guessed I’d made the right decision. The craftsmen went home happy, and Alna and the others all got straight into preparations for the wedding day banquet. The very next day, Klaus and Canis returned from Kasdeks with a cart full of souvenirs.

# The Day of the Wedding

It was noon the day after Klaus and Canis returned from Kasdeks. The war bell...uh, that is to say, the village bell in the square, rang to mark the start of the wedding ceremony. All of the villagers and the white-furred Martel, Canis's mother, stood in a wide circle around the square. In the middle of that circle were the joyous bride and groom.

Klaus was dressed in a loose white outfit called a kurta, which he'd brought back from Kasdeks, and he was a ball of nerves, standing up straight and at attention. Canis, meanwhile, stood quietly by his side in a scarlet dress that her mother had made. Everyone couldn't help but grin and laugh at the sight of the two of them and the sheer contrast of Klaus's clenched teeth and tense posture against Canis's heartwarming smile.

The square really was just filled with a nice, warm atmosphere. Meanwhile, I was outside of the circle of villagers in a simple priest's gown that Alna had made from baar fabric. I was the master of ceremonies for the wedding, and I was waiting for the right time to kick things off.

*Well, here I am again...*

Klaus and Canis had insisted that I oversee their wedding, and naturally I couldn't refuse. You see, no wedding is complete without Saint Dia's blessed prayer of celebration, and my parents had hammered a great many prayers into me so insistently that I could recite all of them from memory.

Back during the war, I'd recited the prayer of passing when we lost someone in battle, the prayer of life when a new baby was born, and the prayer of celebration whenever a couple got married. Klaus still remembered it all, so that's why he'd asked me to be the master of ceremonies for him and Canis.

Klaus and Canis's wedding mostly followed the style of the kingdom. However, Klaus had wanted to add some dogkin traditions, and Canis had asked to add some onikin traditions too, so in the end we had a wedding completely unique to Iluk Village. The red makeup that Canis wore, too, was done in the

onikin style and was meant as a prayer to ward off evil and call upon blessings for future children.

Putting makeup on a furry face was a first for Alna, and it'd been a bit of a struggle which took a good deal of time, but it was worth it in the end. Canis looked stunning. But it wasn't just makeup; she'd rubbed an herb-soaked oil into her skin that left her glistening and ingested some shredded herbs for the day.

Before the wedding began, the bride had gotten together with the village women and they'd taken some time going through their preparations, and that was when all the herbs and the makeup had happened. When they were done, the bride had made her entrance and been met by the groom, and that was where they were now, standing together.

As for the groom, well, it turned out there was no need for any herbal preparation on his side. All the man had to do was wear his special outfit and stand tall from start to finish.

I'd let all of that run through my head until it was about time to get started, and then I cleared my voice loudly enough for everyone to hear and turn my way.





At the sound of my voice, the villagers calmed and quieted down, and after I looked out over all of them, I began to recite the prayer.

“No person can live in solitude, and so, people came to start families, and we came to love those around us. Our banquet today celebrates this. It is a celebration of two who stand ready to start their own family...”

The teachings of Saint Dia were simple, really. Love others, love yourself, and sing the praises of life. Don’t harm your fellow people, steal from them, or invade their lands. Do not persecute or discriminate against others for their upbringing or way of life. These basic and obvious lessons were what Saint Dia had spread. He had stood by the king’s side in the time of the Sanserife Kingdom’s founding, and he had supported the king’s efforts with wisdom that formed the basis of the world’s knowledge.

When the nation developed and life calmed, Saint Dia had built temples at which he taught the lessons of God, who was asleep in the holy lands. In particular, he had promoted marriage, adoption, and the making of families. The irony of it was that he had been so busy with his work that he’d never had any children of his own.

“...And so we gather here today to eat our fill, to sing, to dance, and to celebrate this bride and groom as they stand at the gates to a new life together!”

The long prayer closed with these words, and once I finished everyone cheered and the air turned celebratory. The dogkin took off running, bringing out tables and kitchenware, then getting everything set for the banquet. Then Alna and some others started bringing out all the food they’d made.

It had taken a long time to make it all, and they’d even made quick use of the ingredients that Klaus and Canis had brought back with them. There was bread, meat, nuts, vegetables, and fruit, and the tables were filled with all sorts of dishes made with all sorts of ingredients. The whole sight was really overwhelming.

Grandma Maya and her friends had made dishes popular in the kingdom, while Alna and the Wives’ Club had prepared onikin cuisine and the barbecued meat that the dogkin so loved.

It all looked amazing, and the smell got all of our stomachs rumbling. When we were all sitting down at our places we could barely wait to get started. Senai and Ayhan had walnut bread, stewed rice, and walnuts in front of them, along with fried bread topped with crushed walnuts and honey, and just looking at it left the girls drooling.

This was a completely different feel to our usual village celebrations, and really the key difference was that this was several times more extravagant. The looks on the villagers' faces said it all—they were ready to *eat*.

Everyone sat at the tables staring at me, and the pressure was coming down on me hard.

“Well then, it looks like the food is ready,” I started, pushing things along as fast as I could, “so let’s all enjoy this glorious feast!”

And with that, the banquet began.

The truth of the matter was, we’d all been so busy with preparations that none of us had even eaten breakfast. And given that the celebrations were set to run until sunset, we obviously hadn’t prepared any dinner either. So the food in front of all of us was our breakfast, our lunch, and our dinner all rolled into one, and there was more than enough for all of us.

Some of the villagers were so hungry from skipping breakfast that they practically shoveled food into their mouths, but most of us knew that we were looking at a whole day’s worth of food, so we savored each different flavor while we enjoyed ourselves.

A little ways from our table, Francis and Francoise had a big pile of grass to munch on, and we’d prepared a great heap of nuts for Aymer to feast on too. They, like the rest of us, took their time chomping and chewing at the luxury they’d been given.

As for the stars of the show, Klaus and Canis, they sat at a table of their own, decorated with jewels and a brightly embroidered tablecloth. Maybe they were a bit nervous about dirtying their wedding outfits, because they didn’t touch their food and instead just watched the rest of us dig into ours.

If you asked me, I didn't think they needed to sweat any small stuff like that, and in the end they couldn't resist anyway. After a little while, they gave in and started eating too. I watched everyone enjoying themselves and then decided that I'd have some food myself.

I reached out and took a sandwich with dried meat and pickled mustard leaf, then had some of the sausages and potatoes sprinkled with cheese. I'd made sure to sample the stewed meat and potatoes with herbal flowers that you could only eat in the early summer; and a porridge with dried grapes, dried apricots, onions, and carrots; and...a bread made with an exorbitant amount of walnuts...

*Oh, I get it. This is the bread that the girls made.*

I took a bite of the bread and felt the twins looking up at me, their eyes wide with expectation.

"It's good," I assured them through a stuffed mouth.

The girls burst into smiles and they were so happy that they bounced on their chairs.

"Mind your manners, please."

The girls sat up straight, quick as a flash, so I nodded my approval and gave them both a pat on the head.

"Boy," I continued, "this walnut bread is so good I can't wait to eat it again."

The girls were just as happy as they'd been with the first comment, but this time they'd responded with well-mannered grins.

The banquet went on, and after some time had passed and everyone had eaten their fill and was nice and relaxed, I made my move.

"Marf, Sedorio, Shev," I called out. "It's time. You know what to do."

The dogkin led a whole group of the dogkin men and they dashed over to Klaus and swarmed him, hefting the nervous-looking groom up into the air. They'd told me that this was dogkin tradition. The married man was paraded all over in a grand celebratory display. It was also a way of showing everyone that

the man was taken, and in that sense it was supposed to lessen cases of adultery.

There hadn't really been a need to do it, given that everyone in the village was here at the wedding, but it was tradition, so on it went. When I thought about how Klaus himself had said he'd wanted to do it, I guessed that was perhaps his way of telling Canis that he didn't ever intend to cheat on her.

The dogkin all carried Klaus on a lap around the village, and then all at once they gave a big heave and threw him on the ground. When he landed, a group of all the single dogkin leaped on him and took to playfully slapping him. This was considered a way for all the men to relieve the jealousy they felt for the new groom, but it was also meant as a way for all the single men to let prospective partners know that they were single. That was how the dogkin had explained it, but when I saw them and the fun they were having, I couldn't help wondering if they were just playing around.

These two dogkin traditions had helped to rid Klaus of his nervousness, and with a sudden shout and a hearty laugh he took the dogkin in his arms.

"Aw, you guys!" he cried as they all started playing together.

Klaus and the dogkin were like one big bundle of joy and play, and with two of the dogkin in his arms, Klaus rose to his feet and proclaimed at the top of his lungs, "Everyone! Thank you so much for celebrating the start of my new life with Canis! I promise that we're going to start a happy family right here in Iluk!"

Canis burst into a smile, and then she shouted in a voice even louder than Klaus.

"I'm going to do my best as well!" she declared. "I promise we'll live a happy life together!"

Their declarations spurred another round of liveliness through the celebrations. People were laughing, Grandma Maya and her friends were clapping and singing, and some dogkin grabbed partners and started dancing to the music. Although it was less dancing and more stepping randomly and running around and twisting their bodies. I didn't think it was a tradition of any sort; it looked more like they were just dancing all about without a care.

Then Senai, Ayhan, and Aymer took to the square just like they had at our last banquet, and they started dancing as they sang along with the grannies. The last time they'd looked like kids just enjoying themselves, but this time it was entirely different, and they were so good that they would have given any adult a run for their money. All their singing and dancing really brought the village to life, and the party got even livelier.

*But when did they practice...and when did they get so good?*

"Why do you look so surprised?" asked Alna, sitting by my side.

"Aren't you surprised at how good they are at singing?" I replied.

"Oh, that. The twins and Aymer all have an ear for it, so it's no wonder they improved so quickly."

"That's it? Good hearing means good singing?" I asked.

"Well, you hear the song to remember it, no? Isn't it obvious? They listen carefully to their own voices too, so it's not all that strange if you ask me."

Alna's explanation left me looking a bit dumb, and she watched me for a little while before rising to her feet and thrusting out a hand towards me. I looked at it, then I looked at Alna, and then I tilted my head because I didn't really understand.

"Stand up," she said.

The tilt of my head went nearly horizontal, but I did as Alna asked and took her hand. She started pulling me to the dancing dogkin, and then I finally understood what she was doing.

I tried to decline, saying, "Oh, I'm not very good at dancing."

"I'm not expecting much from you either," Alna bluntly replied. Then after a moment she added, "The onikin tribes don't have a culture of men and women dancing together, but the grannies taught me, and it would be a shame not to try. I heard that this is how you do it in the kingdom, so...indulge me."

Alna didn't wait for my answer. She'd just nodded while I'd repeated myself, but I did my best to move in a way that looked comparable to dancing while Senai and Ayhan sang.

When Alna and I finished our dance-like movements, we noticed everyone's gaze gathering on Klaus and Canis. Klaus had since finished playing with the boys and was back at his table, and he looked a little lost under the weight of so many eyes. But he just as quickly gathered his wits, stood up, and held out a hand to Canis.

Canis took it with no hesitation. Without a word she stepped away from the table with Klaus, and the two began to dance. It was soft, neat, and smooth—so much better than what I'd tried to do. And while it wasn't exactly elegant, it was just a good old dance. Everyone showered them with celebratory cheers, and the party picked up steam all over again.

Some had fun trying to outdo Klaus and Canis, and some had fun trying to outdo the twins, and when we'd all tired ourselves out, we went back to the tables to eat again and watched those still singing and dancing.

Everyone had their own ways of celebrating, and we'd all made the most of the banquet and celebrated Klaus and Canis's wedding as best we knew how.

More time passed, and when the dancing, singing, and eating calmed again, a serene silence fell over the square. It was that special time unique to giant celebrations like this. Everyone was warm, feeling lazy, and starting to get sleepy, and I took that opportunity to get up and go to my yurt.

I went inside, picked up a wooden box that I'd placed by the door for easy access, and brought it back to the square. In that box were all the necklaces that I'd made—enough for everyone. I'd wanted to give them out as soon as they were finished, but with all the preparations for the wedding there had just never been a good opportunity, and so Klaus and Canis had suggested I do it at their wedding.

I'd been worried, though—wasn't I going to be interrupting their big day by doing something like that? But Klaus had said that he didn't mind because it would brighten everyone up, and Canis had said the more good things in a day the better. They'd insisted that they wanted me to do it, so I'd taken them at their word.



When I got back to the square, I put the box on the table, and the dogkin knew from the sound what was inside of it. Their ears pricked up and they started getting all excited. I took out some necklaces and the dogkin went wild with joy and started jumping up and down and running over to me.

“Calm down,” I said. “There’s one for everybody, so get in a line and I’ll hand them out one at a time.”

The dogkin obediently lined up without fighting over their positions, and I started handing out necklaces nice and quick. The dogkin each took them a little differently, some holding them carefully, some hugging them, and some putting them on straightaway, but they all looked mighty happy with them.

Once I’d given out necklaces to the dogkin and the twins, who’d sneaked in line, I went over to Grandma Maya and her friends who were at their table and gave them their necklaces. Then I put one on Francis’s and Francoise’s horns, and I even gave one to Aymer, which I had made as small as I could. Still, there were limits to my abilities, and Aymer had to hold the necklace in both hands. I felt pretty bad about it at first, but Aymer looked very happy.

“Wow! You made one for me too!” she cried. “Thank you so much! My room is so plain that this will make a wonderful decoration!”

Aymer’s room was a wooden box that was placed in a corner of our yurt. It had a little panel that could be slid open and closed like a door, a window, a sunroof, tables and chairs made from bits of wood, and a little bed made from scraps of baar fabric. It was a little space for Aymer to comfortably have her own time. She’d actually asked the craftsmen to build it for her when they’d come to put the roof over the kitchen range, and they’d done it with leftover boxes from the storehouses.

The necklace was really small for me but still a bit too big for Aymer, so she accepted it as a wall ornament. That left me with just two more necklaces, and I took those over to Klaus and Canis.

Canis hadn’t officially been a village resident when we went to war, so she was shocked to see me offering her a necklace. But I now knew that she’d been supporting Klaus that whole time, so I felt she’d done more than enough to deserve one.

“Think of it as a way to commemorate you becoming a resident,” I said.

Canis gratefully took the necklace, and she even put it on right there. Klaus did likewise, and the two looked at one another lovingly. Once I saw the two of them lost in each other’s eyes I made to leave, and that was when we heard the little footsteps of Senai and Ayhan as they came running. They were each holding a piece of cloth, which they passed to the newlyweds.

“This is from us!”

“Congratulations!”

Klaus and Canis knew that they’d just received presents, so they thanked the girls and unfolded the cloth they’d received, and then they broke into the biggest smiles they’d smiled that day.

The pieces of cloth were about as big as a handkerchief, and both were embroidered. On one was a seed leaf and a crescent moon, and on the other was a seed leaf and a full moon. I knew at a glance that the girls had done it themselves, and worked their hardest at it too. I think if anyone was given something that had so much love in it, they would have smiled just the same.

Klaus’s and Canis’s smiles seemed to rouse all the villagers, who got up from their seats and started to bring out their gifts too. Alna, the Wives’ Club, and the grannies told the newlyweds that the feast was their gift, and some of the dogkin added that they’d run around gathering ingredients for that same banquet. Other dogkin presented the couple with beautiful stones they’d found in the plains, one of which was rock salt. Francis and Francoise presented Klaus and Canis with some valuable horn shards, and Aymer gave them a piece of paper on which she’d written a poem for their happiness.

While everyone was giving the newlyweds their presents, Alna and Grandma Maya shot me a look, their eyes narrowed and their gazes cold.

*Why are they looking at me like that?*

I was confused for a hot minute, but then it hit me.

*No, no, no, the necklaces weren’t everything! I got them a proper wedding gift! I swear!*

I promptly ran off to the storehouses, pulled out the bedding that I'd hidden deep inside of one, and returned with it on my shoulder. Alna saw me and noticed the embroidery on the bedding. She knew immediately what it meant, and she took to explaining it to Grandma Maya and her friends. Canis's mother, Martel, was with them too, and she nodded when she heard, looking very satisfied, and I could hear them saying that they saw me in a new light now.

I had some opinions about those words, but my first priority was Klaus and Canis, so I walked on over to their table.

"Congratulations, you two," I told them, taking the bedding from my shoulder to show it to them. "This bedding is a gift from me. The embroidery is meant to ward off evil and illness, so make sure you put it to use right away! It'll only get in the way if I give it to you here, so I'll go put it in your yurt, okay?"

After I got the okay I went over to Klaus's new yurt, which was bigger than his old one, to put away the bedding. Their table was already chock-full of gifts, so their yurt was the best place to put my gift to them.

When I returned to the village square, however, everyone was busy tidying the place up.

*But there's still much time before sundown... And from what we're used to here, the celebrations usually go on well after sunset. So what is everyone doing packing everything away so early?*

The leftover food was quickly split up and delivered to everyone's individual yurts, the plates and cutlery were cleaned, the rugs were put away...and from what I could tell, Alna was at the center of it with the Wives' Club, the grannies, and Martel. I looked around trying to work it all out and saw Klaus and Canis looking *really* awkward on one side of the square. Based on their expressions, I started to get a sense for what was going on.

*Ladies, just because I gave them bedding doesn't mean you have to push them into using it before the sun even sets...*

*And wait a second... Aren't I supposed to be the master of ceremonies here?*

But try as I might, Alna and the others had given no quarter. The village square was clean as a whistle in the blink of an eye, and the celebration came to

a much earlier end than first scheduled.

## The Royal Capital—Eldan

A little more than a month had passed since Diane's attempted uprising. Eldan's audience with the king had concluded on extremely favorable terms, and Eldan had stayed in the royal capital for the following ten days, where he was still.

Eldan had stayed because he claimed it was the height of rudeness to leave so soon. Or at least, this had been his reason to spend his days wandering the royal capital's shops, restaurants, and bars, playing the part of the friendly young man so as to gather information.

While Eldan had busied himself with the establishments, Geraint and others in the Kasdeks intelligence division were blending in with the people and environment to conduct reconnaissance. In this way, Eldan was able to acquire a lot of trustworthy information. This included the current state of the kingdom's economy; the movements of the king, First Prince Richard, Second Prince Meiser, and the first and second princesses; and the third princess Diane's current circumstances.

Now unwinding in the private room of a luxurious restaurant, Eldan leaned back in his chair. The establishment had been heralded as the capital's finest, and it had since become his location of choice. He took in the intelligence contained in the reports in front of him, all of them written in a unique cipher, and then he spoke.

"So Richard is focused on expanding his faction while proceeding with postwar restoration. Meiser, meanwhile, remains stuck gathering funds to try and rebuild his faction. The other factions are simply waiting in the wings and watching silently. Diane showed no signs of repentance and so was sent to a distant temple because nobody knows what she might do."

Eldan's expression was a touch vexed.

"I'd heard rumors of Richard and how highly regarded he was, and so I made clear my support for him after learning of his past with Dias, but I don't feel like

I had much other choice either...”

“While it’s true that Sir Richard opposed the tax exemption you were given, once it was final he did not push the king to have it revoked or do anything to impede us,” said Kamalotz, standing by his side. “Instead, he has put his efforts into investing in our domain and expanding trade routes, saying it will improve the economy.”

He continued, “While I’m sure he still harbors opinions of his own regarding your unexpected announcement of support, he’s at least taking a generous stance as a result of it. Given his personality and his tremendous skills, it seems he may well exceed our expectations.”

Eldan breathed a sigh of relief, knowing he had made the right decision. During his audience with the king, the subject had somehow turned to that of the king’s successor, and when asked for his thoughts, Eldan had raised Richard’s name and professed his support of the first prince. He had come to this conclusion based on having heard from Alna that Richard had some link to Dias. Word among the general public was also favorable.

“We are fortunate,” said Eldan, “that he surpasses our expectations and that his position grows stronger. We need things to cool down here and for him to become a valuable trade partner. Meiser’s movements are worrying, but I believe Richard is capable of handling him.”

Eldan flipped through a few pages, deciphering the code written on each of them. Kamalotz saw this as an opportunity to lean forwards and speak in a very specialized manner—his volume dropped so low that no ordinary ears could hear him.

“Our intelligence reports that Meiser may have connections to the empire. We still have yet to confirm this through our investigations, being that we are unused to working in the capital, and so the information was not included in your reports. That said, the chances of it being true are high.”

Eldan had paid good money to ensure privacy in the restaurant, and his operatives were keeping a careful watch nearby. It was therefore impossible for anyone to overhear what they were talking about, and yet, Kamalotz’s report being what it was, he opted for a method by which only Eldan could possibly



hear.

Eldan thought on this new information with intense concentration, then broke into a smile.

“I see,” he said brightly. “There’s no need to investigate that particular matter too deeply. Tell our men to proceed cautiously. We don’t want them getting hurt or losing their way.”

Kamalotz nodded, and when he spoke next he’d returned to his usual volume.

“Understood. Leave it to me,” he said, clearing his throat and standing up straight once more. “Regarding the magical stone you gave to the king, it would seem he is opting not to use it but instead to have it fashioned into a decorative item. This would appear to stem from the fact that he seems happier about it being a gift from Sir Dias than it being a magical stone from an earth dragon.”

“Those around him are well aware of the value of putting such a stone to use and are urging the king to reconsider. It’s causing some quarreling among them.”

Kamalotz had brought the topic up to change the subject of their conversation, and it shocked Eldan more than any other news had that whole day. He looked down and pressed his fingers to his eyelids as he thought. Finally, he lifted his head slowly and stared off somewhere beyond the walls of the restaurant.

“I simply cannot fathom the king’s ultimate plan,” he uttered. “So I suppose we’ll just have to leave that to him and his closest allies. I’d like to return home to my mother and wives before the nobles’ quarreling turns into an uproar.”

“As you wish,” replied Kamalotz with a nod.

Kamalotz then clapped his hands to give the signal, and rustling, rumbling, and clunks could be heard from the ceiling, the floorboards, and the rooms next door. Eldan packed his things that very day and left the royal capital to return to Kasdeks.

## In a Town Corner Somewhere—???

“Hey!” I called out. “Are you ready yet?”

We were preparing to leave for the far western plains, where big bro was. I was sitting in the driver’s seat of our carriage with my traveling outfit and my cloak, running a hand through my head of red hair. There was no reply from my wife, who was prepping all the luggage.

*I’m sure we both agreed that we’d leave at sunrise...*

“Hey!” I called out again. “Are. You. Ready? We need to make it to the inn by sundown, so we don’t have time to dillydally.”

I heard a clunk and then a sliding sound as something heavy was loaded into the back. Finally my wife, Aisa, answered me.

“There we go!” she said. “Phew! I’ll be done in just a bit, so give me another minute! I loaded all the stuff for papa but none of the stuff for his wife. How thoughtless of me! Oh, wait. I wonder, should I call her mama? What do you think, Ely?”



“How about deciding that after you actually meet? More importantly, you’ve been loading so much heavy stuff onto the carriage! Just how many souvenirs and presents do you intend to take?!”

“Isn’t it obvious?!” Aisa replied. “There’s the tailoring fabric, all the tools, then a full set of accessories and makeup! I’ll bet she’s having a rough time staying pretty out there on the frontier with a husband as dense as papa! So I have to help her out!”

Aisa then began loading the carriage with more luggage. We’d met each other back when we met the heroic savior of the nation, Dias—first as friends, then as family. I called him big bro, and the somewhat absent-minded Aisa called him papa. Dias had lost his parents to an epidemic and he himself was an orphan, but he did honest work and lived an honest life each and every day. We other orphans had been drawn to him because we wanted to be like him, so he’d led us all and taught us to live by helping one another out. We’d built ourselves something like an orphan’s guild.

The work we couldn’t do alone was easier when we helped each other out. We kept each other in line by making sure nobody slacked off or got up to mischief, and we all supported the kids who were sick or too young to work. That’s just the kind of guild it was. Our big bro was our leader, and he’d taken us away from days of pilfering rubbish, taught us to read and write, and imparted upon us the importance of integrity.

Thanks to the guild and thanks to big bro, less and less of us got into trouble, and when the townsfolk had noticed, they’d come to trust us and given us decent work. Because of that, we’d grown up to become upstanding citizens ourselves. We owed everything to Dias, so we looked up to him and adored him as a leader, a brother, and a father figure.

All of us had grown into a close-knit family of our own, and that’s how Aisa and I’d met. She’d been brought into the fold one day, and we’d become friends because we both had the same red hair and red eyes. We’d spent many months and years together, and once we’d grown up we got married. We had a family of our own, and we remained close to the guild.

Aisa finally finished loading the carriage while I was lost in thought. She

climbed up to the driver's seat, her dress and hair all waving about, and she sat down next to me.

"Phew! All done! We'll finally be able to see papa again!" she cheered. "Nobody knew anything about what happened to him after the war ended... Oh, speaking of which! You-know-who heard that papa was in the royal capital after the war, so he went straight there. When papa was nowhere in sight, it was straight to the nearest bar to start trouble!"

She was talking as bright and bubbly as ever, so I simply responded when I was meant to and got the horses moving. We were in the northern region of the kingdom, and while we *did* have the option of heading directly to the plains, that wasn't always safe, and we also had to think about inns to stay at. We opted instead to take the main roads.

The plan was to head south until we hit the high road, which ran from east to west. We'd take that west all the way to Kasdeks, then pass through into the plains and on to our destination. It used to be that Kasdeks wasn't a great place to visit because of its truly horrendous duke, but the new domain lord had a great reputation and we'd heard rumors that he and big bro got along like a house on fire. There was no way that big bro was going to be friends with anyone bad, and if he *were* neighbors with anyone evil, he would have done something about it. Point was, the rumors were probably reliable.

In any case, I'd wanted to confirm that for myself, because if Kasdeks really was as safe and friendly as they said, I could open up a shop there.

We continued on our way south, stopping at a number of inns along the way, and we picked up more stuff to give to big bro. We got to the high road and stopped at a town with a lot of inns a little after noon. While looking for a place to stay we noticed that a crowd of people had gathered.

The crowd was a mix of townsfolk and travelers, and at the center of it was one of the kingdom's soldiers, clad in full armor. From the looks of things he was delivering some kind of address.

"...And then the great hero Dias cried out, 'We are all from the kingdom, and I don't want to kill any of you!' But Diane wouldn't listen to a word he said, and she gave the order for us to attack! And do you know what happened? Dias

held back his great power and spared our lives despite our orders to kill! It's thanks to his kindness that all of us soldiers lived to fight another day!"

"Dias had worked to the bone to build his little village and accommodate his few subjects, but there we were invading so as to tear it all down. And yet, like the great hero he is, Dias showed us mercy! All of us soldiers and the duke of Kasdeks—everyone except Diane, really—we all broke into tears, threw down our weapons, and surrendered!"

The audience listened with bated breath as the soldier's story went on. "But Diane hadn't learned her lesson yet, and so she raised her weapon high and..."

This had come as a surprise to me. I'd never expected that we'd run into rumors about Dias this far out from the plains.

"Hm..." muttered Aisa. Her sharp gaze was trained on the soldier, observing him carefully.

"...And so we spent some time in the region of Kasdeks," continued the soldier, "but the duke, too, was truly a great man. He set us all up with lavish rooms and served us the most delicious meals! The region is famous for its sugar and spices, and with its booming economy..."

He was getting really excited about every detail, but Aisa merely sat quietly, watching him carefully until she seemed to lose all interest in him and turned her gaze to the town we found ourselves in.

"Well," she said, "let's find ourselves a nice inn to stay at! While everyone is here listening to that speech, I'll bet all the inns are completely empty!"

I'd known Aisa a long time, and I knew that at times like this it was best to just do what she said. So I nodded and took the carriage to look at all the inns that were lined up along the road.

We parked the carriage and got ourselves a good room, then took our baths. When we sat down for dinner, I brought up the soldier we'd seen earlier.

"What was that all about?" I asked.

"What do you mean? Obviously it was propaganda spread by the duke of

Kasdeks, right?” replied Aisa, drawing in the air with her spoon as she talked. “You know as well as I do that the last duke was well-known for his infamy. So I think the new duke is using papa’s tales of heroism to improve Kasdeks’s reputation. If that soldier actually were part of Diane’s army, then he’d be guilty of plundering the old king’s tomb. There’s no way he’d be a free man traveling the lands. Even if the king pardons them all, it won’t be for some time. So I think that soldier was more likely an actor hired by the duke. I’ll bet there are others in other towns too—traveling bards, dancers, merchants, that kind of thing.”

“Wow,” I said. “But why bother bringing big bro into it all? Why not just promote his own domain?”

“Then it would be completely obvious, wouldn’t it? Nobody would care and nobody would listen. But everyone *loves* stories of heroic deeds. So you get better results if you add a little of your own propaganda to a tale of adventure. Papa is the man of the hour, after all. Kasdeks really was involved in it all, so adding some promotional flair to a story like that doesn’t feel out of place. It’s not a bad idea, I have to say. I mean, it’s a bit slipshod and there’s a bit of desperation to it, but I think it’s something they can do because of all the attention the merchants are giving Kasdeks now that it’s got that tax exemption.”

“I see. Well, I guess it’s a good thing for big bro’s neighbor to have a thriving economy.”

“And besides, they’re making papa sound totally cool while they’re at it, so I’m a fan.”

And with that, Aisa returned to her soup. I joined her, and not long after dinner we had an early night, hoping to sleep away the exhaustion of all that travel.

## One Week Later

We headed along the stone-paved highway and eventually came to another town of inns just a stone’s throw from Kasdeks. Aisa and I were looking around, wondering where to stay that night, when we saw a crowd gathered at a bar nearby.



It must have been an argument of some kind, because we could hear people shouting. Aisa and I both watched it for a little while, then nodded at one another. We were curious, so we brought the carriage a little closer.

We made sure we were close enough to see what was going on without being too close, and that was when we heard it.

“Ah! It’s you two! Ely and Aisa!” cried the voice. “Come here, right now! Help me! Do something about all of these people, please!”

The person at the center of the crowd—and the person who had turned out to have started the whole mess in the first place—screamed at us with a shrill shriek.

“I can’t believe you,” I said. “You drew us right into the middle of all of that!”

“What a shock...” muttered Aisa.

We’d finally made it to an inn and were settled into our room, together with one of the guild...or a family member, more accurately. It really was completely by coincidence.

She had a head of long, lustrous golden hair, a slender body, long eyelashes, stunning ash-gray eyes, and radiant skin. She wore a crimson dress ostentatiously decorated with a rose motif.

This was big bro’s self-proclaimed fiancée.

She puffed up her cheeks and pouted as she sat down in a chair and crossed her legs. She made it clear she wasn’t going to say anything...that is, until Aisa glared at her, at which point her stubborn defiance began to crumble.

“It wasn’t *my* fault!” she cried. “It was all of *them*. They started it! They shouldn’t have made fun of my darling! And how dare such a vulgar group think they have any chance against the great Ellie anyway?!”

That was her...Ellie’s...stance, so Aisa and I could do little more than exchange looks and sigh.

As for what had happened, the people who were there during the incident had told us it went something like this: Ellie was at the bar, drinking away her

exhaustion after a long trip, when a group of men arrived in search of female company and set their sights on...Ellie. She promptly turned them down. She wasn't interested. Her attitude, though, made the men angry, and they told her as much. Ellie ignored them, but the men got louder and louder, and that was when Ellie snapped and shouted back.

Somewhere in her shouting, Ellie happened to mention that her whole journey was about searching for a destined lover: our big bro, Dias. When the men heard that, they started making fun of the guy, which threw Ellie into a rage. She kicked the men around, sent them flying with punches, threw them this way and that, and basically went wild. Naturally, the local vigilance committee came in and grabbed hold of her. That was right around the time that Aisa and I rolled up and Ellie called out for us.

Lucky for us, the vigilance committee were patient people willing to hear us all out. They released Ellie when we apologized to the barkeep and paid some reparations for the damages. The three of us then went to an inn that we made sure was a good distance from the bar.

Now admittedly, I'd wanted nothing more than to throw Ellie out and leave her to her own devices, but who knew what she was going to do on her own? Then there was the fact that our journey was—at least in part—to stop her from doing anything stupid, so I had to face the facts: abandoning Ellie was out of the question.

Aisa and I sighed again, and when neither of us spoke, Ellie couldn't handle it and eventually broke the silence herself. "And anyway, why is it just the two of you here? What about your bubbly daughters?"

We'd written about that in a previous letter to Ellie, so I got fed up at this point.

"They're in the royal capital," replied Aisa. "They're doing social studies with Uncle Gol."

Uncle Gol, as Aisa called him, was short for Goldia. He managed the main orphan's guild branch in the royal capital. He was the same age as Dias and had been the guild's vice-leader until big bro went to war, after which he was put in charge. These days he put all of his efforts, day and night, into expanding the

guild and making sure that all of us members could live independently.

We looked up to Goldia as much as we did Dias. He'd made sure we all had jobs and shops of our own, and he'd expanded the guild throughout the kingdom's lands. We'd sent our daughters to study with him, and about two years had passed since we'd seen them off.

"In the kingdom? But they're still children," said Ellie. "Will they be all right?"

"They're very independent for their age," replied Aisa. "They're doing fine! And besides, things in the capital seem to have improved, and Uncle Gol is watching over them. There's nothing to worry about! If I'm worried about anything, it's a certain *someone* who abandoned their recently renovated drinking establishment and came running all the way here."

Ellie opened her mouth to say something, but no words came. There was only a low defeated moan.

"Look, I understand that you want to see papa, and that you're worried about him, and you can't stand people making fun of him. But you're a grown-up now, so you need to...well, act your age. If you can't do that, and you decide to be stubborn about it, then we'll have no choice but to tie you up nice and tight with rope and carry you to Uncle Gol's..."

Aisa took an upbeat but slightly chilling tone, and Ellie flew into a panic.

"O-Okay!" she cried, clinging to Aisa. "I'll do whatever you say! I'll be calm! I'll act my age! I won't do anything rash! Just don't drag me back! I've come all this way, and I can't go back without seeing daddy!"

Aisa looked down at Ellie and smiled.

"You promise?" she asked. "It goes without saying that you'll stay calm when you see papa *and* when you meet his wife. You'll be an adult about it, won't you? Because if you don't..."

Aisa then listed off a number of punishments. Ellie showed a flash of something stern when Dias's wife was mentioned but cowered under Aisa's threats and withered, her energy deserting her. I simply watched, knowing it was fine just to leave it all in Aisa's hands. When we'd all lived with big bro, she looked after all the youngest of us, making her like a mother and big sister.

Nobody would dare betray her. So as long as she was under Aisa's care, Ellie wasn't going to cause any problems. In that sense, meeting Ellie *before* we saw Dias was a stroke of good luck.

We could have done without the scuffle at the bar, but thankfully that was behind us.

We'd spent the night reminiscing and set out again early the next morning. The horses weren't too happy to have the extra weight of another passenger, but I pushed them along and we went on. The farther west we got, the more people we saw on the highway, and by noon the roads were packed with more people and carriages than we could count.

I couldn't work it out at first, but then I saw the city that marked the entrance to Kasdeks appear in the distance, and the sight left me speechless. The Kasdeks region was *the* center for trade in the west, with an economy that rivaled the rest of the kingdom combined, and this city alone made it hit home for me.

I'd assumed that a place like the entry to Kasdeks would have a giant fortress or even a castle for the taking of taxes or maybe bribes, but there wasn't so much as a gate or walls around the place—not even any barricades. I couldn't believe it. Small earthen houses dotted either side of the road, along with a number of wide-open markets that peddlers could peruse as they pleased.

There were of course soldiers posted around the area, keeping a lookout for anybody who might be up to no good, but there weren't *that* many. I had to wonder—could such a small number of soldiers protect a huge trade city like this?

The city proper was filled with all number of demi-humans, talking happily or otherwise trading. It was really nothing like I'd ever seen elsewhere in the kingdom, and I struggled to take it all in.

## Three Days Later

I'd found out that the new duke was the reason that the settlements of Kasdeks didn't have walls or gates. In fact, they'd all been taken down because

they got in the way of people and goods coming and going. Now that there was no tax to worry about, and the duke had ensured that anybody could trade freely, his policy had encouraged an economic boom.

As for the potential public safety issues that came as a result of taking down the walls, the new duke had his soldiers set up as patrolling squadrons. There were ten people per squadron, and they moved between forts set up in each region that were located on hills and mountains, as well as through the local towns along their paths. They were set up to respond to any trouble in the towns or fields at any time, be it rain or shine, day or night.

In the past, a group of some twenty bandits had attacked a town, and the emergency whistle had been blown. The nearest patrol had come running, and while they'd been holding the bandits back, more and more patrols had arrived, until there'd been some one hundred soldiers in the town. They'd pushed the bandits back without any serious damage to people or property.

The patrols also actively worked to hunt any monsters they came across, so monster attacks in Kasdeks had plummeted. On top of that, monster materials had begun to circulate through the markets, and that was helping the domain economy too. It was amazing.

It all sounded like nothing but positives, but as it turned out, maintaining good soldiers at those numbers cost a lot of money. And while tearing down the walls and increasing trade through monster materials was improving the flow of money, it would be a while before that led to secure income.

In which case, where did the money come from to keep the patrol squadrons running? According to the inn owner who'd told us all about the walls and the patrols, it was because of Kasdeks's farming in the south. He said it took a little time and money, but it was an area well worth checking out, so Aisa, Ellie, and I decided to break off from the high road and go see it for ourselves.

The sun really beat down upon us in the south, so we'd bought some straw hats at a stall to provide ourselves a little cover. Well, except for Ellie; she had a very expensive-looking red sun hat that she wore instead. When we reached the farms, we were unable to find words for the sight that met our eyes.

It was all fields upon fields of sugarcane reeds, stretching all the way to the horizon. I'd heard that sugar was a local specialty, but I'd never have expected them to be growing it on this scale.

We rode the carriage down a path between the fields, wondering just how far they stretched on. It seemed like the endlessness of the sky might have met its match. We sometimes saw workstations in between the fields and assumed they were for extracting sugar.

We'd kept on going, and kept on going, and eventually admitted to ourselves that getting to the end of the fields was an impossible task and gave up. We found a pond by a workstation and came to a stop there. The horses had a drink, and it was only then that Ellie seemed to awaken from her stupor and shrieked.

"Now. Hang. On. Just. A. Second!" she shouted. "What's with this scale?! How do you even harvest all these sugar reeds?! How do you even make so much into sugar?! How could you ever find enough people to do it?!"

"Look, I know there's a lot of fields, but is it worth all the shouting?" I replied. "Surely you could get enough people to work through it over a couple of weeks, right?"

"Yes, and given the kind of price sugar goes for, you'd have the money to hire people. Perhaps it would take about a month?"

Ellie nearly blew our ears out for that.

"Oh. You. *Fools!* Harvesting sugar reeds is no such simple task! You have to cut them down at a particular time when they're most full of sugar! Then you have to make sure you squeeze the sugar out before it goes bad! But sugar reeds are heavy! So carrying and squeezing them is tough work. That's why it's so expensive! Look at how many fields there are! *Help isn't something you can just gather willy-nilly!!!*"

Aisa and I listened and tilted our heads. We had the same question on our minds: how did they harvest so much sugar then? That was about when we heard a rustling in the fields and, soon after, saw someone walking our way through the reeds. They were wrapped in white cloth, with an impressive horn and thick skin—it was a rhinokin. Based on their slow gait and the wrinkles

around their mouth and eyes, I thought they must have been quite old.

“Sounds like someone knows a thing or two about sugarcane,” said the rhinokin. “And you’re right; making sugar sure is tough work.”

The old rhinokin man smiled and spoke in a gravelly voice. Aisa and I said hello and asked for some water, and he told us to help ourselves.

The old rhinokin explained that he was the owner of these parts. He took a seat near the pond and pulled a small, dark-brown clump about the size of a stone from a bag he had, then threw it in his mouth. He told us to stay and chat with him a bit and started to go into his history with sugar.

“Just like you said, making sugar is tough work, and you need manpower and strength alike in spades... The lord a few generations back captured the beastkin that were living in these parts and thought that making us slaves would secure that for him. We’re more powerful than humans and better at working in the heat. On top of that, we have more kids, which means more future help. You can see why the lord liked the idea.”

“It was a pretty horrible time for us... We worked surrounded by the sweetest scent, but we weren’t allowed to rest and we weren’t allowed to taste even a drop of the sugar. If we tried, we were punished in unspeakable ways.”

The old rhinokin threw another of the brown clumps into his mouth before he went on.

“It was Lord Eldan, the new duke, who saved us. He drove out the old farm owners with their whips and he made us free. On top of that, he told us that this land was ours, and now you find that guys like me are farm owners. We can sell and eat the sugar as we please, and we can grow stuff other than sugar reeds too. Lord Eldan even said we could sell the land and move elsewhere if we so wanted. He’s nothing if not a man with a heart of gold, I tell you.”

Ever since we’d entered Kasdeks we’d heard people talking about the duke, and he seemed like he really was as kind and generous as everyone said. I could see why our big bro would be friends with him.

“But Lord Eldan also took the sugar reeds we usually threw away as trash and came up with another way to make money. You see, if you dry the reeds you

can turn the material into paper. That keeps us busy even outside of the sugar-harvesting season.”

At that the old rhinokin let out a dry chuckle. We could read the message in his smile—the work was as never-ending as the reed fields, but it was nothing like the suffering they’d gone through as slaves.

When he’d caught his breath the old rhinokin got to his feet and said he had to get back to work. He thanked us for listening to an old man’s tales and handed us that bag of brown clumps he’d been gobbling on since we started talking.

“Take this with you,” he said. “Eating this gives you energy to beat the heat, so make sure to share some with your horses.”

The old rhinokin disappeared into the fields, and we watched him go. Then Aisa reached into the bag, pulled out a brown clump, and without even a hint of hesitation, put it in her mouth.

“Wow! What is this? It’s so sweet!” she cried. “It’s got to be sugar, but I always thought that sugar was a white powder?”

The sweetness of it brought a goofy smile to Aisa’s face. Ellie and I reached out for the bag and took a clump ourselves.

“Whoa,” I uttered after I tasted it. “It’s got a unique taste, but it’s sweet all right.”

Ellie, meanwhile, just stared at her clump for a while.

“I think this is brown sugar,” she said. “You make it by simmering sugar-reed syrup. From what I know, making white sugar is a lot harder than making this. Hm...so I guess all the fields in these parts are how that old rhinokin and the Kasdeks region turn a profit.”

I fed some of the brown sugar to the horses while Ellie kept talking.

“I’ve heard that Kasdeks is also known for its tea and spices, so I’ll bet a lot of money flows into Kasdeks from all around the kingdom.”

Ellie became absorbed in talking to herself while the rest of us let the sweet taste of that brown sugar soak all the way through to our cores. And it must



have been pretty intense for the horses, because they were raring to go and I had to calm them down when we headed back for the high road.

“Hey, Ely,” said Ellie from the back of the carriage, “there’s something odd about that shepherd. Looks like it could be a case of heatstroke. We should help him out.”

I looked over to where she was pointing and saw an old man in robes that made me think of a priest. He was surrounded by a group of white sheep covered in thick wool. He didn’t look like a demi-human. He was wobbling as he walked on his cane, and occasionally he would smile and talk to the sheep. Odd was definitely the word for it.

I glanced at Aisa, and she nodded back at me. We decided to ride on over and help the old man out.

We rode up by the old man and said hello, and after a few words we realized he wasn’t a shepherd at all—rather, he was a traveling priest. He said he had some personal reasons for wanting to get to the Nezrose domain and that the sheeplike animals he traveled with weren’t pets or livestock but companions that he’d met on his way.

We couldn’t quite wrap our heads around the idea of sheep as companions, but the old man explained that the animals could understand human speech, and they were so smart they were even capable of conversation. What we’d thought of as an old man going a little crazy from heatstroke was in fact just him and the sheeplike animals talking.

I tried talking to one of the animals myself, and it moved and bleated replies as if it understood each and every word. In its bleats and gestures, I slowly figured out how it expressed itself. Based on the sheep animals’ replies, we realized they were going to the grasslands too, so we decided that all of us could travel together.

Truth be told, past experiences had taught us to hate the priests and their temples, but the old man wasn’t like any of the other priests we’d known. He didn’t look down on us or despise us. He was gentle and kind with the sheeplike animals, he didn’t flaunt his priestliness over us, and instead of throwing money

around to get what he wanted, he undertook his journey on his own two feet. Most importantly, he didn't use his authority to take our carriage and all of our stuff.

There was something strangely nostalgic about the old man's face, and we couldn't bring ourselves to give him the cold shoulder we usually gave to priests or abandon him in the heat. So, because we all shared the same destination, we invited the old man and the sheeplike animals to join us.

The old man and the six sheep agreed to our offer to travel to the plains together. But before we took off, Ellie took a pair of barber's scissors from her luggage and started shearing the sheep.

"It can't be easy for all of you, with all that fur in this heat!" she said. "I'm going to shear it all for you before we get back on the road!"

We came to a stop at a tree by the road, and Ellie sheared the sheep in the shade. The sheep were all calm and happy to oblige; in fact, they looked like they enjoyed it.

"Oh my," uttered Ellie, "this wool is so soft and fluffy. It's divine. And it's so clean I can run my fingers through it without them catching. Wow! Just how do you take such good care of yourselves?"

"Baa baa."

The sheep and Ellie went on chatting as she swiftly and skillfully sheared them all.

"I swear! You're all so fluffy! You could put any price you wanted on clothing made with this wool!"

"Baabaa! Baa!"

Their conversation carried on, and Aisa stuffed the wool into a sack to pass the time. While that was going on, I picked up some wood and made a campfire, then boiled some water from a nearby pond and made tea. I'd figured the old man would be thirsty, and Aisa and Ellie would be when they finished.

The old man watched us all, stroking his beard and smiling.

“I can’t believe it,” he mused. “Not only did you stop for an old man to make sure he was okay, but you invited him to travel with you and even made him some tea to top it all off... You sure are a kind group of travelers.”

The old man had his long white hair tied behind his head in a ponytail, and his face filled with wrinkles as he smiled at us.

“Well, it’s all thanks to the man who raised us,” I said.

The old man’s face wrinkled with more joy, and he broke into laughter.

“But I have to say,” I added, “it’s really dangerous to travel on your own these days. Given that you’re a priest, I have to assume you’ve got money, so you could have hired some mercenaries or at least paid for a carriage to travel in, no?”

The old man eventually stopped laughing and, after neatening his beard, he replied.

“Yes, I suppose I could have hired someone, but plans don’t always come together like that. And besides, I wasn’t always alone. I was traveling with someone else for a time because we were going to the same place.”

“For a time? But you were going to the same place. What happened?”

“Well, it was all fine until we arrived in Kasdeks. We stopped at a bar to talk to people and gather some information, and just like that he didn’t feel like going anymore. He said he was going to tour the brothels and left me by my lonesome.”

According to the old man, his traveling partner was one of Dias’s former brothers-in-arms. He’d been on his way to Nezrose expecting the newly appointed Dias to have a surplus of wine and women, and he and the old man had traveled together. When the guy had learned more about what our big bro was up to, however, and realized he wasn’t going to find the women and wine he wanted, he’d decided to go to the brothel instead.

He might have been one of Dias’s old friends, but he sounded like a real piece of work to me...

Then again, the old man said that he’d been drinking pretty much the whole

time they traveled together, so maybe the alcohol had done his head in.

“And if I’d hired mercenaries, I never would have met my furry and friendly companions here,” the old man continued, “so I’d say everything worked out in the end.”

Then he looked over at the sheep and he started laughing again. I followed his gaze and found the sheep looking a lot lighter now that they’d been freshly sheared. Some might have called it something of a pitiful sight, but the old man couldn’t stop cackling and pointing at them.

The sheep saw him, and they ran over to him all furious, putting the old man on guard, but a moment later they were playing around with each other. It looked crazy to me to be doing that right at high noon when the heat was at its worst, but after a bit Aisa, Ellie, and I all started laughing too.

With our new companions, we made our way through Kasdeks gathering information and continuing westwards. We passed through the forest that separated Kasdeks from the grasslands, and on the other side we finally reached our destination.

But there was nothing there, and it left all of us at a loss. There were no trees, no roads, and not even a sign to point the way. It was nothing but wide grassy plains, sweeping grassy plains, and expansive grassy plains as far as the eye could see.

Where were we supposed to go from here? Where did our big bro live? We stood there like idiots, until suddenly we heard something rustling through the grass. A moment later the head of a dog poked its way into view. There were several dogs...or more accurately, small, four-legged *dogkin*. They were dressed in embroidered cloth with strange necklaces and watched us with great caution.

“Who are you?” one of them asked. “Are you visitors? If you’re bandits, then you better head back home because we *will* bite!”

The small dogkin *talked*, and I wondered if maybe the heat and long travels had finally gotten to us.

## As the Summer Sun Beats Down on Iluk—Dias

Some days had passed since Klaus and Canis's wedding. The sun sat high up in the sky, and the prickly heat of it on our skin told us all that summer had arrived. The produce in the fields continued to grow, the geese gave birth to a number of goslings, and the horses and white ghee munched happily on grass each and every day. Our days at the village passed without issue.

I'd been worried that some of our villagers would fall ill in the summer heat, but there had been no problems so far. Alna was always refreshing our water supply so we could replenish what we lost from sweating at work, and the grannies made us hats to protect us from the sun.

People sweat when they get hot, and when they sweat too much they lose the water in their bodies. If you're not careful, you can collapse due to dehydration. So rehydrating is essential in the summer. That said, water alone isn't the answer. You see, to replenish your lost energy, you also need a decent amount of salt and a little dash of honey. That's why Alna took everybody's water bottles each morning and put in them a mix of honey, rock salt gathered by the dogkin, and chopped herbs that had a cooling effect.

The water Alna prepared went down real easy, it was refreshing, and everybody loved it except for Senai and Ayhan. The twins were of the opinion that if we were going to use something as sweet and delicious as honey at all, it should be for something more delicious. So every day they were up and arguing with Alna about how much honey she used in the water bottles. It never did work out very well for them.

To make the hats we wore, the grannies cut the long grass and dried it in the sun, then wove it into shape. The hats were light and breezy, and they fit just right. It was easy to put holes in them too, which meant the dogkin could make room for their ears to poke through without any real issues. Everybody was a fan.

As the summer days continued, though, my daily life changed a little. I did my

daily training, and then after I'd done some work outside I pretty much stayed in the yurt the rest of the day. It wouldn't be long until Francoise gave birth, so I tried to be by her side as much as I could.

Francoise was due to give birth in the fall, and with her stomach getting quite big, she spent most of her day sleeping in the yurt. It wasn't that she was sick or suffering from heatstroke. In fact, she looked so happy slumbering there that I think it was just what she wanted to do. All the same, she looked even more at ease when I was there by her side, sometimes giving her pats, so that's why I tried not to leave her when I could help it.

Francis was busy and fidgety, running around the village to care for Francoise. He went out to the plains to look for soft grass, then filled his mouth with it and chewed it until it was softer still, then brought it back to the yurt to feed it to Francoise. Once he was done, he went off to do it all over again. He did it countless times throughout the day. Alna said it wasn't common baar behavior; it was just Francis's way of being considerate of Francoise. With that in mind, my job each day wasn't just patting Francoise but also patting Francis, because he was doing his best for his wife and his future family.

And so there I was in the yurt, patting Francoise after I'd finished training, work, and lunch, when a dogkin came running in.

"Lord Dias, we have visitors!" said the dogkin, a young senji standing straight at attention, their tail wagging rapidly. "They don't seem like bandits! They've come with a group of baars!"

I could tell by the senji's wagging tail that they wanted a pat, so I beckoned them over and gave them a pat on the head. Just as I was thinking about what to do about the visitors, Francoise spoke up.

"Baa, baa baa?" she bleated.

"Yep! There are six baars in total!" replied the senji. "No injuries or illnesses that we can see!"

"Baa baa, baa baa."

"Yes! They all look very friendly! They're all very comfortable around each other and they play with their companions too."

“Baa, baabaabaa, baa.”

“Understood! I’ll pass the message along!”

And at this, the young senji darted out the door. Then Francoise slowly got to her feet, gently clamped down on my pants, and pulled at me.

“You need the bathroom?” I asked.

Francoise’s eyes grew sharp and she butted my knee. I rubbed at it and realized that she must have wanted me to stand up, so I did. She led me outside, then across the square, and then to the east. When we were at the edge of the village, she stopped and sat down.

I didn’t really know what was going on but I stayed there alongside her, and eventually I saw the young senji and several other dogkin leading a carriage this way with a group of freshly sheared baars.

There was a man and a woman in the driver’s seat of the carriage, and I felt like I’d seen them somewhere before. The moment I saw their faces a nostalgic feeling tickled my nose, and it spread throughout my whole body.

*Oh, that couple, it’s...*

“Aisa! Ely!” I shouted.

The two riders waved and smiled at me, and I waved back just as much. Then a figure flew out of the carriage in a red dress and a red hat. They ran over half crying and half smiling, and when I saw their face I realized I knew them too.

“Wow! You’re here too, Eric! I’m so glad to see you looking well!”

Eric promptly fell to his knees and flopped forwards, his arms flailing at the grass. He was dressed strangely and had fallen over out of nowhere, so I was worried that he might be sick, but then he started beating the ground with his hands in frustration, and I realized he’d simply tripped over his own feet.

All the sheared baars ran over to him with worried looks and bleated consolingly. When I saw that, I understood what Francoise and the senji had been talking about earlier. Aisa, Ely, and Eric had traveled with the baars and were good to them, and they all got along. To Francoise, that made them good people who were safe to bring to the village. I already knew they were all

kindhearted people myself, so I'd say Francoise had made the right call.

I'd lived with all three of them when we were younger, and seeing them doing well made me so happy that...before I knew it, my eyes filled with tears.

Aisa and Ely stopped the carriage near where I stood, and when they saw me all teary-eyed like that they started crying too. They hopped down from the carriage, and we got straight into the hugs and soaking each other's shoulders in tears. I was over the moon to see them again, happy and healthy, and it was clear they felt the very same.

When I asked them what they were both doing now, Eric finally got up, still crying, and joined us. It had been so long since we'd seen each other, so we had lots to talk about. I was relieved to hear that they were all doing well, and they each had shops and were helping each other get along. Goldia had gotten married, as well as most of the others after him, and when I heard that Aisa and Ely had children of their own, well, I was just overjoyed.

At some point in the conversation Eric shrieked and wouldn't speak clearly, and he talked in an oddly high pitch. I was just about to ask him about his clothes and voice when an old man with a head of white hair shambled out of the carriage.

I wondered who it could possibly be, but he held himself in a way that reminded me of someone else I'd known long ago. He gave all the baars a pat, and then he walked on over to us, leveling a stern glare at me. He didn't say a word, and he didn't break eye contact, but when I paid a little more attention to his bearing and body language, then took another look at his face, I finally realized who I was looking at.

And the words left my mouth before I could shut myself up. "Y-You're alive?! I thought you were dead!"

The old man turned furious, and he waved his cane and berated me in an old, gravelly voice.

"You don't get to just kill me off, you idiot! You were a foolish boy and it looks like all you've grown into is a foolish man! I swear there's no helping some of you!"



Aisa and the others—even the baars—all stared slack-jawed while the old man stormed over to me, shaking his cane overhead. When I was just a boy, this old man had been bigger and stronger than me, and a terrifying presence in my life. Now, however, he struck me as small and weak.

The two of us went back and forth, and while we were talking Alna appeared out of thin air. She must have been watching us from the cover of her concealment magic.

“Dias, is everything okay?” she asked. “I felt fine just watching you all because everyone here is blue, but I figured I’d lend a hand if things are going to get rough.”

Everyone except for me was flat-out stunned by Alna’s arrival. I merely scratched my head and waited for everyone to calm down a little.

“Nothing’s going to get out of hand,” I said. “This here is my Uncle Ben, my father’s older brother. Back when my father was still alive, Uncle Ben disappeared. Later my father told me that he had died. But as you can see here, he’s alive and well.”

I looked at Alna, then at Uncle Ben, and Uncle Ben’s eyes shot open. He shouted in such a rage I thought he’d hurt his own throat.

“Disappeared?! Dead?! They said I was *dead*?! I’m still kicking, thank you very much! Those idiots! What were they thinking, treating me like I was already dead?!”

Uncle Ben was so stark raving mad that his eyes started to roll into his head, and his whole body toppled over. I panicked and caught him in my arms, and it was like carrying a pile of thin tree branches.

I’d decided that whatever we were going to do next, we could do it in the yurts, where Uncle Ben could rest.

I had the dogkin look after Aisa and Ely’s horses, along with the baars who were bleating about their hunger, and took everyone else through the village to my yurt. I had them all take a seat, and set Uncle Ben down gently farther in the back. Alna and I sat close by with Francoise.

First off, I introduced everyone to Alna, then to Francoise...and then to the twins, Aymer, and Francis, who had probably peeked into the yurt because they'd heard all the commotion. Then I introduced Aisa, Ely, Eric, and finally Uncle Ben. I told them all he was my father's brother, that he was a temple priest, and that he was wise and strict. I also added that he'd taught me a lot when I was young.

My parents had of course taught me a lot themselves, but I wasn't very good at remembering things. At some point they'd had Uncle Ben come to give me lessons, and somehow we'd all ended up living together under the same roof. One day, Uncle Ben'd just vanished. He never came back, and some months later my parents told me he was dead. We even held a funeral and erected a tombstone for him.

*I never imagined he'd still be alive...*

"A funeral...? Tombstone...? Those idiot parents of yours..." muttered Uncle Ben.

His head drooped between his shoulders as he heard my introduction of him, which I guess for him was an explanation of how I thought things went. The yurt filled with a certain awkward air until the twins spoke up.

"Hey! What kind of people were your parents, Dias?" asked Senai.

"Were they like you? Or like your uncle?" asked Ayhan.

"Oh, I'm curious too!" added Aymer. "Who were they? What did they do?"

I thought about it for a moment and looked back on the past while I did.

"Well, they weren't very much like me," I said, "and I don't think they were much like Uncle Ben either. They were both kind and generous people, and they worked at one of the temples. They told me they did odd jobs and ran errands and such. That's why I remember real priests like Uncle Ben looking very admirable. I thought they were really cool."

At that, Uncle Ben heaved a great big sigh. Then he looked at me with something like an exasperated disappointment in his eyes.

"Well, I guess it was just like them not to properly explain it," he said slowly.

“Most people would have noticed it just by living with them, but you being you, Dias... Your parents were high priests at the great temple of the east. Only five people occupy that position, and your parents were the top two.”

Alna and the others who didn't know anything about Sanserife didn't know what that meant, but Aisa, Ely, and Eric couldn't even form a response. I couldn't believe it either, so my mouth was gaping too.

“Just what is this ‘temple’ you're talking about anyway?” asked Alna.

“Well, how best to put it...?” I murmured.

I felt Uncle Ben's gaze boring into me as I thought of an explanation, as if he were saying, *“Better make this good, and God help you if you mess up...”*

So I put my brain to work and did my best to explain the temples as such:

Saint Dia, who had visited the holy lands together with our nation's founding king, had met God and acquired the wisdom of the world's knowledge, along with a few sacred items. Armed with this knowledge and these items, the king had brought the lands of what was now the kingdom under his rule. Instead of continuing to serve the king, Saint Dia had built a temple from which he spread the Lord's knowledge.

After Saint Dia passed away, more temples were erected by his disciples, and the priests working there spent their days spreading the teachings of God, who had been asleep in the holy lands. In his teachings, Saint Dia had never said a word about what form God took, or any explicit details regarding their holy existence. There were also many teachings with unclear meanings, so the priests often spent their time researching so as to get to the heart of what these lessons really meant.

“I think that about covers it,” I said finally.

Alna nodded, and fortunately Uncle Ben did too.

“There are many temples throughout the kingdom,” he added, “and the temples found in the royal capital, as well as the north, east, south, and west, all have power and authority in accordance with their size. This idiot's parents, my idiot brother and his wife, were the high priest and high priestess of the largest temple in the east. But even then, this idiot Dias, well...”

At this point, Ely, who'd been looking rather awkward this whole time, spoke up.

"H-Hang on a second," he said hesitantly. "You're telling me that big bro's parents were in charge of a great temple? But...the great temples... That's practically the headquarters of all those dirty *bastards*!"

He was talking about either the priests or others who lived in the temples. But as far as I could remember, nobody had ever used to talk about the temples or priests in that way.

*Did something happen while I was at war?*

"Well, I'm not surprised that today's youth feel that way," said Uncle Ben in a soothing tone. "The temples today, and more importantly the priests...they've fallen about as far from grace as is possible."

Uncle Ben went on to explain that years before I was even born, there had been internal conflict within the temples. On one side were the fundamentalists, who believed in preserving Saint Dia's teachings to the letter. On the other were the modernists, who believed in more liberally interpreting those teachings however they were most convenient.

The temples were split between these two factions, and it became a long battle for majority control. Uncle Ben and my parents were fundamentalists. Over the years the conflict intensified, and the modernists saw increasing activity. The fundamentalists lost their influence, and the original teachings of Saint Dia slipped away. That was when Uncle Ben had made the decision to go to the holy lands himself and pray to God for a way to put an end to the infighting.

Uncle Ben had left everything to my parents and gone on his journey, but when he'd finally returned...

"My brother's house was gone, and the fundamentalists had disappeared along with him and his wife. The modernists had taken over and were doing whatever they pleased, and the temples had gone rotten. They were completely different," Uncle Ben explained.

"I had to know what happened to my brother and his family, but everyone I

spoke to told me they were dead or had been murdered. But even then I didn't give up. I kept gathering whatever information I could, and finally...*finally*, Dias, I heard word of your whereabouts. Imagine my shock when I heard that the son of the fundamentalists' high priest had run off to war to become a murderer. Do you know how that made me feel? Well I'll tell you; I felt that I had to track that boy down and give him one, two, maybe even a hundred smacks in the face before I'd be satisfied..."

Uncle Ben grew significantly more agitated as he went on, and he paused for a moment to look carefully at Alna before speaking again.

"But then I get here and I see you've got yourself a wife, and you're doing your best to live an honest life, so...I guess I'll spare you the lesson I had planned. From what I've seen, this isn't a bad place at all. And those sheep things, and the long-eared girls, and the puppy people, they're your family, aren't they? I can say with confidence now, my idiot brother and sister? They're happy for you too, even now that they've returned to the earth from whence they came."

Uncle Ben then turned to Alna with a reassuring smile. "I know it's going to be a struggle for you to have such an idiot for a husband, but take good care of him, okay?"

We were all still reeling after hearing the whole story—the temples now versus then, my parents, and Uncle Ben's hardships—and we didn't know how to respond. But Alna made eye contact with Uncle Ben, resolute, and replied.

"As his wife, I will not disappoint."

It seemed she still had more to say, but this was when Eric—who'd been silently staring down at the ground this whole time—suddenly lifted his head and shouted.

"Just. One. Second. *Please!* How dare you so smoothly play the role of the wife like that?! You?! My darling's wife?! You must be joking! That. Role. Is. Mine! *Mine!* We decided twenty years ago that we were getting married!"

"*Darling?*"

I had to speak up.

“Now hold on, Eric,” I said. “When did we ever decide that?”

“Wh-What are you saying?! You said it yourself! You said that when I grew up you’d buy me a ring!”

“Hmm... *Hmm*...? Are you talking about your birthday? Because if so, I do remember that we didn’t have any money, and I promised that I’d buy you a ring when you were older...”

I thought about those days with nostalgia, but Eric knocked me out of it with something unbelievable.

“Exactly! In other words, you proposed to me!”

“How is that a proposal?!” yelled me and Ely in unison.

“You call *that* a proposal?!” Ely added. “*That’s* your proof?!”

“What else would you call it?! It is what it is!” cried Eric in reply.

“Dias, that’s a man, right?” asked Uncle Ben. “I mean, the dress and the name... Ever since we met I haven’t been able to make heads or tails about ‘em.”

This was where Alna had cut in to clarify, “Dearest uncle, her soul is the shape of a woman’s, so she has a woman’s heart.”

“Huh? Oh, so it’s a matter of the heart and soul. Oh, and none of that ‘dearest uncle’ stuff, Alna. Just call me Uncle Ben like Dias does.”

The two of them were getting on surprisingly well.



“Hey, papa!” cried Aisa. “These two are my new little sisters, right? Your wife and kids are so adorable!”

Aisa used the chaos as an opening and dashed over to the twins and wrapped them in a hug, with Aymer trapped in the middle.

“We have a big sister?” asked Senai.

“A big sister?” parroted Ayhan.

“Oh, I should add that I’m not Dias’s daughter,” said Aymer.

Then Francis and Francois started bleating. It was like they were saying, “Sure is lively,” and, “Everyone looks like they’re having a good time.” And sure enough, we were all, in our own ways, enjoying the moment.



## Five Days Later

Five days had passed since Ely and the others had arrived in Iluk Village. Over that time, they'd slept in a yurt that Klaus and I'd put up, and they'd each enjoyed village life in their own separate ways.

Ely spent his time watching the workings of the village, talking to the villagers, and working out what people needed and wanted, as well as what they had but no longer needed. Basically, he wanted to understand how he could help and make a profit for the village. He'd told me he was a merchant, and now I could see he was every bit the part.

Aisa spent her days with Alna, Senai, Ayhan, Aymer, Grandma Maya, and Canis. Oh, and the baars too, because of how fluffy and adorable they all were. But she didn't just sit there doing nothing; she also used the sewing set she'd brought to make Alna and the twins dresses in the current styles of Sanserife. Then she got completely lost in dressing them up and showing them how makeup was applied in the kingdom.

Surprisingly, Eric had grown very close to Alna, and I often saw him helping her with chores and sometimes doing sewing work with her. Eric had changed his mind about Alna, because no matter how much he tried to assault her with anger and dirty language, Alna was always kind to him. She'd seen that he was blue with her magic, and more than that she understood his circumstances better than anyone else. They were practically best friends now, and sometimes it felt like Eric spent more time with Alna than I did.

As for Uncle Ben, well, he was content whiling his time away, relaxing in the shade and quietly watching over village life. Sometimes he offered a little advice. He hadn't had an easy time of it up until now, so I was happy for him just to do what he liked.

And about the baars that arrived, they'd had their own reasons for coming, and their explanation went something like this: "We were living peacefully on our own lands when some ruffians from the kingdom came and kidnapped us a

few months ago. They locked us up in the most awful place. We heard that we were going to be executed all because that's what those horrible ruffians wanted, so we made a plan to escape. We'd heard that a hero lived in the west with his own baars, so we made up our minds to head out that way when we were free. It wasn't easy breaking out, and we faced our share of challenges on our journey here, but we never gave up. We met a kindhearted traveler on our way, and with his help we made it here."

If the baars wanted to live in Iluk then I was happy to have them. In fact, given that they were going to provide us with even more baar wool, I welcomed them with open arms. When they decided to move in, however, their decision brought with it a unique problem all of its own. Namely, which baar would be the leader of the Iluk Village herd.

Until now, there'd only been Francis and Francoise, and though I'd never realized it, Francis occupied the position of herd leader. But there was a male in the new group who was bigger than the others, and now the baars had to decide which of the two was worthy of the title of Iluk's Boss Baar.

Now, the way I saw it, it seemed fine to me to have two herds in the village with their own individual leaders, but baars had particular rules about this kind of thing, so it wasn't that simple. I was mighty curious about how the baars decided on such a thing, but according to Alna they were peaceful animals with an equally peaceful way of deciding on their leaders. When she told me, I honestly thought she was joking, but there was no joke about it.

It was a little past noon at the village square. All the preparations were complete and it was time to decide who would become the Iluk Village herd leader. All the villagers had gathered along with Ely and the others to watch things unfold. Then Francis and Francoise walked slowly through the crowd to the square, and so did the new group of baars, led by the big guy on their side.

Francis and the big guy both separated from their respective partners and met to face each other in the center of the square.

"Baa."

"Baa."

The two male baars kicked their hooves into the ground a few times to settle into their positions and ready themselves. Then they raised their heads up, stuck their chests out, and got straight into deciding who would lead the herd.

*“Baa baaaa baabaabaaaaa baa.”*

*“Baabaabaaaaa baaaa baabaabaaaa.”*

Baars decided their leaders in a sing-off. And it wasn't like the fun and joyful songs we'd heard at our banquets. The songs that Francis and the big baar sang were more powerful and courageous; the two baars were aiming to prove themselves through song.

According to Alna, the singers put their hearts in their songs to express how they intended to lead the herd. In doing so, the other baars could see for themselves how serious and earnest their prospective leaders were. The baars that watched didn't decide on their leader based on who was the *better* singer but by getting a feel for who wanted it more and their goals as leader. This was how the pack made their decision.

Once the watching baars had decided on their preferred leader, they joined that singing baar and sang together with him, professing their vote by bolstering that song. Whoever had more baars on their side at the end became the herd leader.

When both sides ended in a draw, the sing-off started over, and they did it as many times as it took to decide on a leader. It was a long process, and I was so curious about something that I just had to ask about it.

*“Why doesn't Francois side with Francis right from the get-go?”*

At this point in time, none of the baars had sided with either of the two singers. The way I saw it, Francoise could make her support of Francis clear right away. But it wasn't Alna who answered my question—it was Uncle Ben, who had sneaked up behind me.

*“Just as stupid as always, I see,”* he said. *“You'd have an answer to your idiotic question if you put a little thought into it. The question of whether Francis is a good, loving husband is completely different from the one of whether he's a suitable leader. That Francoise is carrying a little one inside of her, isn't she?”*

Soon to be born, to boot, from what I've heard. That's all the more reason for both her and her husband to make sure they choose the best leader for the herd. Francoise understands that, so she's waiting and watching carefully."

Alna nodded in agreement with Uncle Ben's explanation, and it made sense to me. When I looked at the baars again, I could see the serious expressions etched into their faces. They were listening very intently, but also they were watching Francis and the big baar's expressions and movements. They were nothing if not earnest about selecting their new leader.

But no baar made a decision straightaway. None moved to sing with the two candidates. As I listened to the singing, I had a feeling that this boss baar battle of bars was bound to be a bit.

And just as I'd expected, it had gotten really drawn out.

*"Baabaabaabaaaaa baabaa."*

*"Baa baa baa baaaa baa."*

Neither Francis nor the big baar had budged from their spot. But I could see that neither of them had thought their sing-off would go so long. Both of them were exhausted, and it was getting harder for them to hold longer notes. Their voices were getting quieter, but even then they kept singing. All the while, Francoise and the other baars watched.

But the watching baars *still* couldn't decide on a leader.

*I wonder why...*

Whatever the reason, the light in their eyes shone clear as Francis and the big baar continued to face each other and sing. There was something about the two that caused the spectating baars to hesitate for so long.

The first baar to move and make their decision was one of the new arrivals. The baar looked over at the big baar a few times, and then, with an apologetic look, it sided with Francis. Seeing this, Francis dug deep and raised his voice, and the baar at his side sang along.

*"Baaaa baaaa baaaa baaaa,"* they sang.

*“Baaaa baabaa! Baaaa,”* replied the big baar, fighting back.

But he couldn't match the newly formed duet he faced, and it was all too clear that Francis's song had become the more powerful of the two. You could feel Francis getting stronger by the second. The battle quickly swung in his favor, and the baars in the big baar's group all moved over to Francis, one by one. Suddenly, the big baar was up against a chorus of five backing Francis, and that was when Francoise made her move.

Perhaps it was always her intent to move last. Perhaps she thought that if she'd sided with Francis immediately, as his wife, she would only have weakened his position in front of the others.

Francoise chose Francis, and this left the big baar entirely on his own. The battle was all but decided, and yet the big baar refused to give up. Even on his own, and even as he slowly lost his voice, he stood his ground and continued to sing. In response, Francis continued to face his rival and sing with all he had left.

The duel had reached a clear conclusion, but even then Francis sang, and the baars with him rang out in a chorus, voicing their support.

*“Baaaa baaaa baaaaaa!”*

*Whatever could they be saying in those songs?*

Then, the big baar's head drooped. He gave up on his song and joined everyone else. He sang Francis's song.

*“Baaaa baabaabaaaa!”*

As all the baars sang in unison, all of us watching erupted into cheers. Everyone praised Francis's victory, but me? I was proud of that big baar. He'd fought with all his heart until the end, and he'd never given up, but in the end he'd admitted defeat with honor and sung along with his opponent. It was awe-inspiring, and refreshing, and not something that just anyone could do. It took a lot of guts.

That big baar didn't show any hint of anger at the decisions of his friends. Rather, his body language seemed to speak of how green he felt he still was, and I thought that was mighty commendable.

With his victory sealed, Francis let out a triumphant bleat, and the battle for the Iluk Village herd leader was over. Senai and Ayhan immediately ran over to hug Francis as the baars bleated happily. Alna, Aisa, and the others soon joined them to commend Francis for a job well done, and while they did that I quietly left the group and walked over to the big baar, who stood apart from it all on his own.

“You did pretty dang good,” I said, giving his head a pat.

The big baar turned away from me and began to tremble.

“Come to think of it,” I said, “I still haven’t given you a name yet, have I? Hmm... How about Asim or Tammuz? They’re good, no?”

“Baa...”

“Now I don’t know baar speak all that well, but I can tell you don’t much like either of those. All right then, perhaps something with a bit more oomph... How about Ethelbald?”

The moment I spoke the name, the big baar turned to me, tears in his eyes, and bleated happily.

“Aha! So you like that, huh? It’s got a nice ring to it, doesn’t it? I picked Francis and Francoise because of the feel of their wool, but I think something stronger suits you much better. So as of today, you’re Ethelbald.”

I gave the big baar another pat on the head, and after he enjoyed that for a bit he shifted his head away as if to say, “That’s enough. Now go to Francis and the others.” I nodded in response and walked over to Francis. We all celebrated his victory and held a little celebratory banquet. Everyone was all smiles and having a great time, and I took it as a chance to name the rest of the new baars.

All of the other baars were females, and it turned out they were all Ethelbald’s wives. They asked me to give them names that linked them to their husband. As such, I got some help and input from Alna, the twins, and Aymer, and made sure that each baar was happy with their own name. In the end, we settled on Etheldia, Ethelgue, Ethelphana, Ethelmy, and Ethelrilla. They all bleated happily at their new names and joined Ethelbald, who’d been staying alone on the sidelines.

Ethelbald quietly snuggled a little closer to each of them, and they did the same. They'd all probably been a little afraid that their relationship might be impacted by the leadership battle, but that wasn't the case at all. Ethelbald really was a tolerant, generous sort, which made me wonder: did that make Francis even more so?

*I wonder just what it was that Francis bleated about while he was singing... I guess I'll ask Alna later.*

In any case, Iluk Village welcomed its new baars, which gave us eight of them in total, with Francis heading the pack.

The day after Francis became herd leader, I set about putting up a new yurt after breakfast. It was going to be for Ethelbald and his wives. I was putting it up right next to my own, and I was going to make a passage connecting the two yurts so you could easily travel from one to the other.

I could see by how close Ethelbald and his wives were that it wouldn't be long before they had little baars of their own, so I figured I could save us a lot of hassle later by putting up their yurt now. Passages and similar kinds of renovations were easy with yurts, and it was one of the best things about them.

I'd been quietly going about my work when Ely came up to me with a hesitant look on his face. He looked like he wanted to talk about something.

"Something on your mind?" I asked.

"Well, it's just...we're thinking about heading home soon," said Ely, scratching the back of his head. "We came to make sure you were doing well, and we've given you all the stuff we brought, so...I figure it's about time we headed home. If we stay too much longer, it's going to get to the point where Aisa's going to make a racket about not wanting to leave her little sisters..."

"Hmm... Well, okay then. I'll tell everyone."

Ely looked surprised at my reply and froze for a moment.

"I thought maybe you'd try and stop us," he muttered.

When I heard that, I put the yurt materials down, walked over to Ely, and gave

his hair a good proper ruffling.

“Ely,” I said. “You’ve got a home and a family of your own now. Of course you’re going to want to go back to them. You grew up to stand on your own two feet, and you’re a merchant in your own right. Why would I or any parent try to keep you from that? You’re your own man now, Ely, and listen: if you’d come here saying that you were going to throw it all away because you wanted to stay here, I would have given you a right scolding. I wouldn’t have held back in the slightest.”

I ruffled Ely’s hair a bit more.

“I thought you said I’m an adult!” he replied. “I hate it when you mess up my hair.”

“It doesn’t matter how old you get. I’ll always be your papa, and I’ll always be ready to scold you if you do something stupid, no matter what age you are. Got it?”

“Yeah, I guess we shouldn’t expect anything less.”

That was about the time I noticed someone quietly watching us from the shadows. I had a feeling I knew who it was too, so I made sure to speak more loudly this time.

“That’s why I’ll never be able to give Eric what he wants,” I said. “And it’s why I never intended to. I’m papa to you guys, and that’s how it’s going to stay. That goes for Eric, Aisa, and anybody else. If I give any one of you my heart, then I stop being a parent to all of you, and that’d be no different than somebody stealing me away. So I can’t do it. Not for you, not for Senai or Ayhan, and not for any of my kids.”

Ely looked up at me, probably to react like “What the heck?” But then we both heard someone sniffing in the shadows. Ely seemed to understand then, and his eyes narrowed slightly.

“Oh...”

A few moments later, and after some more audible sniffing, the person hiding in the shadows couldn’t bear it any longer and rushed out into the open, wailing as they came over.



“Papaaaa! Papaaaaa!”

It was Eric, and he wasn't talking in that high-pitched affectation he'd been using until now. It was fuller and deeper. It was his natural voice. He sobbed and wailed, and I ruffled his hair just like I had Ely's before.

“Alna told me that at the onikin village, people with souls like yours meet kindred spirits and live happily, and I hope you can do likewise, Eric. And you know you can always come and talk to me if you need to. That said, I can't help but think that maybe Alna or Grandma Maya will give you better advice.”

I continued to ruffle Eric's hair as I spoke, and realized he was finally back to just calling me “papa” like the others. Senai and Ayhan ran over then because they must have heard all the noise, and they pushed their heads towards me to let me know that they expected me to ruffle their hair too. Then Aisa came over and did exactly the same thing, and in the end, well, I was stuck just messing up everyone's hair and patting them on the head until they were all finally satisfied.

When everything settled, the kids gave me a hand, and we finished putting up the yurt in no time. We still had to construct a passageway to connect it to mine, which I'd never done before. We basically acted like the tunnel was another yurt and built it thinking that way, and it went up without issue. It didn't take any time at all, really. It was easy because of all the helping hands, and we were finished even quicker than I'd expected.

We all sat down by the side of the finished yurt to rest, and that was when Ethelbald walked on over with Uncle Ben.

“When did this gathering happen?” asked Uncle Ben.

“Well, we got to talking and it just happened,” I said.

I gave Uncle Ben the rundown of the events, and when Senai and Ayhan heard that Ely and Aisa were going to be leaving, their little faces scrunched up with tears creeping down their cheeks. Uncle Ben knelt down next to them and put his hands gently to their heads.

“Stop your crying now,” he said. “It's not like you're saying your last

goodbyes. I'll be staying here, and so will Ethelbald and his wives, so you won't be all alone."

He was placating the girls, but when I heard what he said, I had to say something.

"But whatever will you do about the temple...?" I asked, fumbling my words to find a polite tone.

"If you're going to mumble and bumble your way through sentences you may as well just talk to me like you do all the others," said Uncle Ben. "I'm not going back to the temple. The fundamentalists and everything I knew is gone. I've decided to spend the rest of my years looking after the baars. That, and I have to keep watch over you to make sure you don't do anything stupid, Dias."

I didn't really have the words for a reply, but in any case that was when Eric decided to enter our conversation.

"I'm going to stay too," he said. "I gave away my shop and my house, so I've got nothing to go back to anyway. And this village is totally lacking in smooth talkers, so I can't just leave you all like this. You can let me handle all future bargaining with merchants! I'll show you that these looks of mine aren't just for show!"

He spoke boldly and he looked to be enjoying it a lot, but the only thing on my mind was how best to give Eric a right scolding. But then Senai and Ayhan whooped excitedly to hear that Uncle Ben and Eric were going to stay, and when I saw how happy they were I gave up on scolding Eric—at least for the time being.

But all the same, I decided I was going to find the right time, and I was going to give Eric the scolding he deserved for his rash decision.

## At the Domain Lord's Residence, Kasdeks Domain— Eldan

Eldan had just returned that day from the royal capital and was on his way to one of the drawing rooms to meet with a man by the name of Juha.

Juha claimed to be the kingdom's finest military strategist, its sexiest man, and its most cultured individual. He had gone to Kasdeks's public brothel where he had indulged in its festivities to his heart's content, then eaten his fill and chased it all down with wine before revealing that he had not a coin to his name. The ill-mannered man had been promptly arrested on charges of defrauding a place of business.

Under ordinary circumstances, the very idea of Eldan himself meeting with such a person was unbelievable. However, when questioned, Juha had claimed he had fought alongside Dias during the war and that he had been the brains leading Dias's brawn. He'd said he was a hero lost in Dias's shadow. When Eldan heard this, he had thought it impossible but decided nonetheless to meet with Juha himself.

When he and Kamalotz entered the room, Juha was sitting cross-legged on the carpet. He was a criminal who had been arrested on detestable charges, and yet when he bid them welcome, his bearing and gestures were not those of Sanserife. Rather they followed the regional traditions of Kasdeks. His movements were smooth and graceful, and Eldan was caught by such surprise that he was momentarily at a loss for words. Juha took this in and rubbed his chin before speaking.

"My, my... I suppose it's this jaw you're marveling at?" he said. "But you must admit, the shape of it *is* amazing. The women love it. All of them. Their eyes light up when they see it, and they always praise the sheer manliness of it. These thick eyebrows, the jaw, the dark eyes, and the long, luscious black hair of a goddess... On anyone else you might doubt such a combination, but on me it all shimmers like gold."

Juha was dressed in finely tailored black clothing, and he ran his hands through his hair with a grand gesture. His words put Eldan on guard but also left him in shock. He let out a deep breath, then casually took a seat on the chair reserved for his use.



“I appreciate your polite greeting,” he said. “I am Eldan, the lord of this domain. Allow me to get straight to the point: Just who are you, Sir Juha? Is it true that you fought alongside Sir Dias during the war and that you worked as his strategist?”

“Unfortunate as it may be, it is indeed true. And you can confirm that with the fool himself if need be. We were friends, though we fought tooth and nail when it came to wine and women, so I don’t expect him to have much in the way of kind words for me. But if you tell him about this long, beautiful black hair and this chiseled jaw, and if you tell him that I think the idea of marriage before fornication is the worst military regulation in the whole history of military regulations, then he’ll know you’re asking about me.”

Eldan looked at Kamalotz.

“I’ll send Geraint posthaste,” said Kamalotz with a nod.

Eldan watched as Kamalotz left the room, then turned back to Juha.

“Let us presume for the time being that you are telling the truth,” he said. “Tell me, why did you come here? You partake of our brothel without even a coin to your name, and then when interrogated you bring up Sir Dias’s name. Clearly you are angling for something.”

Juha smiled, and with yet another grand gesture he clapped his hands.

“Aha!” he cried happily. “I see that unlike that fool Dias, you’re straight to the point! I actually came here because it was my intent to visit Dias, but I changed my mind once I saw this city. You have an abundance of fine food and drink, and the streets are filled with the smiling faces of beautiful women. But the deciding factor was what you have built in the center of this city. A park, was it? Is that what it is called?”

Juha observed, “It is no simple thing to spend such a grand sum of money for a place for your citizens to relax and their children to frolic freely. One does not simply think up such a place either. You see, culture is born in the midst of play, and as a cultured man myself, the value of your park did not escape my notice.”

“And so I thought that perhaps I could serve here. But I knew that I could not easily meet you face-to-face due to the fact that I have no connections. As such,

I took actions that you could not ignore, and here we are. Quite the bold idea, wouldn't you say?"

In response to Juha's gloating, however, Eldan's eyes narrowed.

"You could have simply approached us honestly and told us that you were an acquaintance of Sir Dias who wished to become an officer. When you consider that your crime could well have resulted in punishment without even catching a glimpse of me, then...I would say your plan puts you in a disadvantageous position."

Juha grunted in surprise and patted his hair to smooth it down.

"No ordinary domain lord in the kingdom would meet directly with the likes of me," he said. "But I suppose that's exactly why you came up with an idea like that park of yours. So, how about it? What's your price? Dias didn't pay me a cent. He was *awful*. Said we had to end the war. But you're different, aren't you? You've got authority and money...and you're a lady-killer with your own harem of beauties. You're flexible, not like that stubborn fool Dias, and I know you'll pay a fine price. So come on, make it good."

Juha opened his arms wide and raised his chin at Eldan, who mulled over his words. If he were telling the truth, he thought, then how best to evaluate his worth, and what price to put on it?

After much deliberation, Eldan explained that his decision was provisional, then paid a most extraordinary price to hire Juha.

## One Week after Ely and Aisa's Departure—Ellie

It had been seven days since Ely and Aisa left the village, and I hoped that my idea had reached the guild by then. It had started because papa had had an idea of his own: apparently some people called the lostblood were coming soon, and he was going to have some of them use the village's carriage to do some trading.

It wasn't a bad idea, but it was worrying all the same. Sending beastkin to the kingdom—where people weren't friendly to demi-humans—to do business was only going to invite trouble. That said, beastkin lived freely in the Kasdeks domain, so we'd have no issues sending the lostblood there.

That's where my idea came in. We could have the lostblood handle trade until Kasdeks, and then the guild could handle trade in the kingdom. We'd have to build a guild branch in Kasdeks for it to work, but this move would be profitable, and I was sure that Goldia would be quick to take action. Even putting the lostblood stuff aside, it was worth building a branch in Kasdeks just due to the scope of its economy and its recent economic policies.

In Iluk, we could buy produce from the frogkin's country in the far west, then add our own baar wool products and send it all to the Kasdeks branch to sell throughout the kingdom. I didn't think it was a bad idea at all. After all, by creating a flow of people and products, we'd deepen our ties with Kasdeks, so it was very much a two-birds-with-one-stone situation for us.

*But what is up with that dovekin from Kasdeks?*

Papa had said he'd ask Eldan about my idea, and so I'd seen him write a letter and give it over to a dovekin. But that felt totally against the rules. With someone like that on their side we didn't stand a chance against Kasdeks—in trade *or* in warfare! For starters, there's the sheer speed and accuracy of sending intelligence, but then you've also got literally a bird's eye view of whatever you want to look at and learn about!

Kasdeks had a huge number of such talented individuals, plus a gigantic



amount of land, *plus* a whole bunch of unique local produce! *And* it had a solid number of forts in its territory! Then there was the sheer number of armed forces they had on standby thanks to plentiful cash reserves. Kasdeks's soldiers were also strong and well trained because they were always on patrol through the lands.

*Boy oh boy, am I glad they're not our enemies...*

*So we'll be nice and friendly with them, and we'll build up our own stockpile of money and establish our own power. That's really all we can do.*

I had been hanging the laundry out under the sun as I'd thought about all of that. The grandmas were singing nearby as they worked at their looms. It was a song about how the baars had increased, and how happy they were that we had so much more wool to shear, but how busy it made them too.

Then I could hear the dogkin working at the kitchen range, singing about the delicious ingredients they were using and how they wanted them to turn into even more scrumptious meals. This must have set the kids off in the square, because then they started singing some meaningless little song of their own.

*Oh dear, this is such a wonderful village. It really is.*

It was so full of energy, and smiles, and songs; even ordinary days when nothing happened felt like festivals of a sort. It really was beautiful, and it made me think that even if papa weren't here, I'd probably still feel drawn to want to help everyone out.

*But then again, without papa, I wouldn't even be here like this in the first place.*

*Oh, what's this?*

"Alna? What's up?" I asked. "Those eggs, are they from the geese?"

Alna was walking over cradling three eggs in her arms. She flashed a great big smile and held them up to show me.

"No souls in any of today's eggs, so they're straight to dinner," she said. "I'm always putting them in our soup, but I bet they'd taste good boiled too. I might try that today."

*Come to think of it, Alna can see a creature's soul with her magic, can't she? That's how she saw through to the woman in me. I guess it also lets her determine the eggs that aren't going to hatch too...*

I was a bit jealous of her. Alna's magic meant she could accurately keep their flock of geese growing while still feasting on eggs.

"And the other eggs are going well? The ones with souls in them?" I asked.

"Yep. Two hatched just this morning in fact. They're already following their parents around and pecking at the ground and pieces of grass. Dias and the twins are fawning over them too. They can't stop talking about how cute they are. You should go take a look some time."

*Oh dear. Papa, what are you doing? I know it's just like you, but still...*

Alna took one look at my face and read the disappointment on it like an open book.

"I don't mind," she said. "Dias has his fun but he works hard for it. And looking after kids is a father's responsibility too. Too much work isn't good for the body or the mind."

Alna then walked off towards the kitchen range. I wanted to follow her so I hustled through the rest of the washing and ran after her with the washing basket under my arm. When I caught up with her, I stood by her side and met her eye. There was something I'd been wanting to ask her about for a while now, so I came straight out with it.

"Alna, ever since you told me about your way of thinking—or I guess you might call it your value system... You know, manliness? I've been wondering... I mean, aren't you a hard worker too? When women work as hard as you do, is that called manliness too?"

"We don't usually call it that, no," replied Alna. "Usually we just call women like that hard workers, or beautiful, or good women. And I think you hear it more often the more children a woman has looked after and raised or the more weaving she's done. Then again, I'm not your usual woman, so I *have* been called manly quite a few times."

"Oh? Oh my, oh my. I'm so *very* curious. Super curious. Tell me all about these

chapters of manliness in your life! Please, I'm begging you!"

"They're not particularly exciting. My family was a poor one, and as the eldest I had to work. That's about the long and the short of it, really. I did the sorts of things that women don't usually get involved in, like hunting and patrolling. People would usually say it in something of a demeaning tone when they called me manly. In any case, that work is how I met Dias, so I don't have any complaints."

"Oh my. It's straight out of a love story. And by the way, can I ask why your family isn't so well-off? Is that okay?"

"I don't mind. It happened a long time ago now, and it's all because of one good-for-nothing *deadbeat*."

*Deadbeat.*

Alna practically growled the word, and her brow furrowed.

"Deadbeat?" was all I could manage in response.

"My father was, all things considered, a man of ordinary manliness. He saved enough so his family wouldn't live poorly, but my elder brother, he...he's the worst. I'd argue even calling him a deadbeat is too polite."

Her tone worsened as she went on.

"He was in one of the onikin's expeditionary parties, which leave the village over long periods to work elsewhere and earn money. Well, they're *supposed* to earn money. My brother spent all of his on some random woman. Then he went as far as stealing the family's savings and still put himself deep in debt. He took the family's money like it was nothing and left my younger siblings starving."

I did my best to keep smiling and gently prodded Alna to let it all out. It's not good to keep those sorts of stories locked away and simmering inside of you. It's much better to let it all out.

"But let's not talk about him anymore," Alna said. "My family is doing well now thanks to Dias, and my siblings will never have to worry about not having enough food. I really can't thank Dias enough...or Moll. Both of them did so much to help us."

“Moll? I haven’t heard that name before.”

“Oh, really? She’s the onikin tribe’s chieftain. She was nothing but helpful when I had to go out and work. I think the reason she put me with Dias, and the reason she did what she did to support me, was that she felt some sympathy for my circumstances. I mean, baars are too precious to the onikin to entrust to just anybody, and she gave Dias two. That’s how we have Francis and Francoise. But I think Moll did that more for me than she did for Dias.”

Alna looked off into the distance for a time, and then we both stepped up onto the kitchen range. Alna was the woman who had stolen my position as Dias’s wife. But she had also accepted me as a woman with open arms. And no matter how many nasty things I said, her smile towards me had never wavered. I just couldn’t bring myself to hate her. Perhaps the hard times she’d once found herself in weren’t unlike those of us orphans. And just like us, Alna had been rescued by a dashing, handsome prince by the name of Dias.

*Oh my, oh my. Ellie, that’s enough!*

The more I heard about Alna, the more impossible it was to hate her. I followed her over to the stoves where she put the goose eggs in a pot and tried to boil them.

*Ugh, please, must I do everything?*

“No. Enough. Stop. Don’t you even know how to boil eggs?! Look here, I’m going to show you, so watch carefully!”

Thanks to that, I’d reminded myself what I was here for, and I got to work helping out Alna and the villagers.

Alna and I boiled the goose eggs and prepared for dinner. After that, we had a little time to rest. I watched the sunset and wondered what to do with the rest of my time. That was when I noticed Alna leaving her yurt with her bow and quiver. She planted a couple pieces of wood into the ground as makeshift targets for practice.

*She’s amazing. Even with all of her chores, she still finds time every day to get outside and practice with her bow.*

Smoothly and rhythmically, Alna shot arrow after arrow, each one hitting her desired target. It was so wonderful to watch. Her aim was always true, and her form was simply breathtaking.

*Alna's bow... Is it a shortbow?*

It was incredibly powerful for its size. Her targets were being decimated with each arrow. It was no ordinary shortbow, that much was certain.

"Hey, Alna," I called out, running over to her. "Why is your bow so strong?"

Alna shot one more arrow, then showed me her bow.

"You know, Dias and Klaus have both asked me the same thing. It's because of the make and the materials. Onikin bows are made completely different from those in the kingdom."

I listened to Alna carefully as I took a closer look at the bow and...

*What is this?*

"Is this...a bone? Wait, a horn?" I asked. "There's thin wood at the center, but you've attached bone and horns... Hm? Huh? Each part of the bow is made with different materials?"

"You've got good eyes," replied Alna, impressed.

She ran a finger along the length of the bow and explained it to me.

"From what I've heard, in the kingdom a bow is made from a single piece of wood. But for us onikin, wood is just the base from which we build the rest. We use pliable materials such as animal tendons to provide stretch, and glue bones and horns where necessary for the right contraction. Each family has their own traditional methods for shaping a bow, and materials are picked to strengthen the bow based on the individual archer. Doing so means that when the string is pulled and an arrow is loosed, each material supports the process, making for a more powerful shot."

"Sometimes a bow's shape or materials are changed to match the size or strength of the person firing it. Exactly how the bow changes and what materials are used depends on who makes it. We onikin shoot from our horses a lot of the time, so we often make our bows quite compact while still

maintaining power. I've heard that's why they've come to take this particular shape. Give it a shot."

Alna passed the bow to me. I was excited. After all the work that went into making a single bow, I wondered how it would feel to use. I immediately wanted to shoot an arrow, but...

"What the heck?!" I cried. "It's so stiff there's no way I could possibly draw an arrow!"

*Seriously, what?! How are you even supposed to pull on a string so taut?! I'm bigger than Alna and more muscular. But is it possible that...she's even stronger than I am?*

"Well, that's how it always is at the start," said Alna. "The only person I know who could fire an arrow from this bow on their first try is Dias. It's made with earth dragon materials, so you can't shoot it without first giving it a little magical energy."

"Every time you shoot?" I marveled. "That's...quite a unique weapon."

Alna went on to explain that high-level monsters like dragons boasted extraordinary toughness in all their materials, from their hide and their shells to their muscles and tendons. And if you wanted to move those muscles and tendons when they were put to use in weapons, the answer was magic. By letting a little magic in, those materials gave a little slack. In a bow, this meant using magic when you nocked an arrow, then letting it out when you fired. This was what made Alna's bow so powerful.

It wasn't just a matter of brute force. Rather, it was about knowing what materials were used and how to get the best out of them so as to maximize the bow's potential.

*Which is all well and good, but...I have a feeling it's not easy.*

So not only did the onikin fight on horseback with a steady aim *and* target weaknesses with pinpoint precision, but they had to keep track of their magic stores the whole time too?

"How is that even possible?!"

Alna giggled.

“Dias said exactly the same thing. It’s not as hard as it sounds, but you’ll never get there without practice. Senai and Ayhan have just started practicing on horseback, and in just five days they were shooting birds from the sky.”

“Look, those girls are special, you hear?” I retorted. “I’ve watched them practicing a few times, and it’s crazy! They change the arrow’s trajectory with the *wind* so they can drop arrows directly on their targets. They lack power since they’re still kids, but with those kinds of skills...they’re going to be terrifying.”

“It’s true. The twins have very special abilities. However, shooting from horseback is something most onikin children can do. It really isn’t very hard. You should try practicing. Get good at it and hunting becomes that much easier.”

“No, I think I’ll pass,” I said. “I know how to defend myself, but even in hand-to-hand combat I’m second-rate at best. I wouldn’t make much of an archer. I think I’d much prefer to work on using my brains and a smooth tongue to talk my way out of a fight before it has a chance to happen.”

“I made this bow as a prototype, and I liked it enough that I made a few others,” said Alna, looking terribly disheartened. “Now it’s not the lack of bows but the lack of potential archers that’s the problem.”

*Hang on a second, honey! That bow’s just a prototype?! But it’s so powerful!*

“So that bow you made,” I began, “you could make one even more powerful?”

I just had to ask. Alna replied with a big nod.

“Of course,” she replied. “Usually a bow takes about a year to make, when you consider preparing the materials and the shape, then gluing it all together. They’re crafted over time and with great care. This one I just threw together. It’s not even worth comparing to a real bow.”

*If Alna’s bow is considered weak, then just what kind of ungodly weapons are the onikin crafting?! Bows that can tear through steel armor like paper, and shot from horseback, no less. Ugh, how completely and utterly terrifying...*

My increasingly distraught train of thought was interrupted by a voice in the distance. It belonged to a man whose voice I'd never heard before.

"Alna! Where are you?!"

I tilted my head, confused.

*Could it be an outsider...? But that doesn't make sense. He didn't trip Alna's sensor magic, and the dogkin clearly never stopped him... And more than that, he knows Alna's name. So is he an onikin?*

"Alna! Get out here!" shouted the man.

When Alna heard the voice, her expression took me aback.

"Ugh," she groaned. "So he came back alive. I hoped he might have been slaughtered and eaten by wild animals..."

She spoke in a low voice that was new to me, and every word was filled with venom. But both of those changes in her gave me an idea of who it was that had arrived at our village. I didn't know how I knew, but I just *knew* it was the man Alna had told me about earlier: her brother.

*So how exactly are we supposed to handle him? My oh my, what in the world is going to happen now?*



## Around the Same Time, at the Storehouse—Dias

The twins and I had spent some time completely enamored by the new baby geese, and once we were done I left them and went to the storehouse. With Ely bringing all those gifts and then us having a little banquet for the baars after their leader was decided, we'd been using the storehouse a lot. It got dirty and damaged quickly, so we had to make sure we cleaned and repaired it regularly.

Eric—uh, that is to say, Ellie, said that given our growth and our future plans, we should look at building a more secure storehouse out of something like brick or stone, but we didn't even have timber around, let alone brick and stones. Getting that kind of heavy material over here wasn't going to be an easy task.

I knew I could ask Eldan and pay some gold coins for some help, but I wasn't sure I wanted to bother him that much. We'd already asked him for help with the kitchen range and the privies, and on top of that we'd approached him about setting up a guild branch in Kasdeks, so I was hesitant about leaning on him for too much more.

In any case, I went on cleaning and tidying the storehouse, and then Klaus arrived, full of life and with a big old grin on his face. Ever since his wedding, he couldn't stop smiling. Even when he was eating, that grin never left him. He was all smiles everywhere he went, and sometimes I even wondered if it was there when he slept too. He was so full of joy that just looking at him made me feel happy.

"Lord Dias, you shouldn't be cleaning all by yourself! I happen to be free, so allow me to help!"

And that's exactly what he went about doing. He wasn't just a bag full of smiles recently. Klaus was also overflowing with energy and motivation, and his work ethic sure was something to see in action. I was worried he was overworking himself, and while I hadn't expressly told him to take things easy, I also hadn't expected him to show up here offering a hand.

*I guess there's nothing else but to put in a little extra effort myself to make*

*sure Klaus doesn't overdo it.*

So I hustled around the storehouse while Klaus happily took a broom and swept, humming as he did so. It was a bright and upbeat little tune. Once we were pretty much done with things, Klaus spoke up again.

“By the way,” he said brightly, “now that we’ve had our wedding, I can’t help but be curious: what was your wedding to Alna like, Lord Dias? I heard that it was quite the event at the onikin tribe, but I can’t imagine you were married in the style of the kingdom. It must have been completely different, right?”

“Well, yeah, it really was quite impressive,” I replied. “The size of the wedding ceremony itself depends on the wealth of the families and the betrothal gifts, and because I’d given the gift of earth dragon materials, it was about as big a banquet as the onikin could hold. Alna’s dress, or I guess I should say her wedding outfit, was a thick, multilayered...*thing* with luxurious embroidery all over it, and she looked buried under it all. Then her horn was covered in a lavish cloth embroidered with gold thread. On top of it all, she was decorated with so many jewels it was hard for her to even sit down.”

I went on explaining it all to Klaus as best I could. The talk of marriage and engagement had all been very sudden for me at the time, and I had barely been able to follow it as the people and the things had gathered around us and huge cloths had been laid out in the village square. Tremendous amounts of food had been brought and displayed, and big chairs had been made for me and Alna to sit on.

I’d been dressed up for the occasion, but Alna had been completely decked out, and her parents and her three younger siblings had been right there by her side. Moll had sat in the middle of the square, and before I’d been able to get my bearings the whole village had gathered. Then the representative for Alna’s family, her youngest brother, ten-year-old Lufra, had brought me a cane into which was carved a pattern of potato vines, which was used to start the ceremony.

“Huh? So the family representative was the youngest child?” asked Klaus suddenly. “Not the father or the eldest?”

*Oh, right. Klaus doesn't know...*

“In the onikin tribes, the youngest inherits the family line. I mean, of course they don’t leave their homes in the hands of ten-year-olds, but for ceremonies including weddings, the youngest is the family representative. The way it works is the one with their future still ahead of them inherits the home, and their more experienced and knowledgeable older siblings look after them and support them. Those older siblings marry into other homes and thus form bonds to help increase their family’s wealth and well-being. That’s how the culture works.”

“I see!” said Klaus, nodding thoughtfully. “And it’s easy to see the logic in the thinking. Anyway, you were talking about a...a potato cane?”

“Oh, right, so potatoes...they just pop up one after the other on their roots, right? The cane represents the idea that you’ll have a lot of children, apparently. And it’s not like it’s easy to get a vine full of potatoes out here, so they express the idea through a cane. Anyway, I took the cane and I held it up for all to see, then passed it to Alna. That marked the start of the ceremony.”

“After that there was a lot of eating and drinking, a lot of singing and dancing, and just a lot of noise and celebration. There was even a performance reenacting my slaying of the earth dragon, and the celebrations continued well on into the evening. Then Alna and I went into a yurt especially put up for the newlywed couple, and that was it.”

Klaus took it all in and said, “Wow...so that was your wedding. It sounds fun. I think the performance was a great idea. I hope we can do something similar here if we get the chance.”

“Hey now, give me a break, would you?” I replied. “I was about to die from embarrassment when it happened. If we did the same thing here, well—”

But before I could finish, a young shep ran over to us.

“Lord Dias!” they cried, waving their hands around in a panic. “A strange horned man came to the village calling for Lady Alna, screaming about taking her back home, and...Lady Alna attacked him! She still hasn’t let up! He’s being battered! What do we do?!”

*A horned man? So an onikin? But who would want to take Alna home? Did something happen to her family?*

Whatever the case, I couldn't understand why Alna would attack another onikin tribe member.

*Hmm...*

"Lord Dias!" said Klaus, interrupting my thoughts. "Let's just go check things out! We can think about it all then!"

He had a point, so we took off with the young shep and went to see Alna.

The young shep led us to where everything was happening, and it was quite the sight. A big circle had gathered around, full of confused dogkin, and in the middle of them was Alna, mounted on top of an onikin man, slapping him.

The onikin man, for his part, was covering his face and just trying to defend himself.

"Stop!" he cried out. "Just listen for a minute! Please!"

Ellie was standing right next to Alna with a puzzled look on her face, but she just stood there. She didn't try to stop Alna, nor did she say anything.

*What in the world is going on...?*

"What is this?" I asked Ellie as Klaus and I pushed through the crowd. "And who is that guy?"

"Hmm..." uttered Ellie, her head shifting from right to left, still unsure of what to say. "I guess it's a fight between siblings? The man Alna is slapping is her elder brother. She says he's a useless good-for-nothing who wasted all his money on a woman. He turned up all of a sudden shouting this and that, and Alna got so enraged that she pounced on him. That's what happened."

Ellie pondered a little more, continuing, "But you know...from what little I've heard out of him, I don't think he's a bad guy. It sounds more like he's worried about his beloved little sister, so he came over here in a panic."

Ellie looked uncertain about the situation, and when I turned back to Alna, her slap assault was still ongoing.

"And uh, what did Alna's...brother say?" I asked Ellie.

“Oh, well, he said that Alna was fooled and taken advantage of, and he couldn’t stand the idea of her being married away to some old geezer because of their family’s poverty. He said he was here to protect her and take her back home, that kind of thing. He also said something along the lines of ‘How dare that evil domain lord get up to no good while I was away!’”

*I guess that old geezer, and that evil domain lord...is me.*

“Then Alna exploded,” said Ellie. “She told him that *he* was the reason they were poor, and that he was worthless and unfit to support the family, and that he shouldn’t dare insult her husband, and in the next instant she was on him. At first I thought I should back her up, but her brother hasn’t once tried to fight back. He could probably stand to be a little more polite, but he looks like he’s just worried about his sister. I didn’t have any idea what to do!”

“And so because I wasn’t sure of the circumstances, and because it looks like a thing between the two of them, I didn’t know if it was my place to say something or break them up.”

“All right,” I said. “But I never knew Alna had a big brother. That’s a shock...”

“Huh? You never heard anything about him? I thought she would have at least told you *something*.”

“Nope, this is the first I’ve heard of it,” I said. “He wasn’t at our wedding, so this whole time I thought it was just her parents and her three younger siblings.”

“Oh my. Perhaps it was so embarrassing for her that she even kept it from you. Or perhaps she thought that if she told you, then your marriage wouldn’t work out? Maybe it was both? This goes so much deeper than I first thought...”

All the while, Alna was still slapping her brother.

“Alna, please!” he said again. “Please! Listen to me!”

Alna didn’t listen, of course, and kept laying into him.

“Alna,” I said, nice and gently and quietly. “If he’s *that* insistent, then how about we give him a chance to talk?”

She was still lost to her rage, but she heard my words and started to slow

down.

“If you’re going to get mad and slap him, how about saving it until after he has a chance to speak?” I continued. “If you keep this up, what are Senai and Ayhan going to think?”

It had been a bit of a low blow to bring the twins into it, but it had the result I expected, and Alna calmed down. She let out her ragged breaths, and when her heart slowed a little, she stood up. She walked over to me and grabbed my shirt, and she used it to wipe away the tears that were welling in her eyes.

*If she’d wanted to wipe her face she could have told me. I’ve got that handkerchief she made me right here in my pocket...*

Alna let out a long, frustrated sigh, and then she nodded as if in reply to what I’d said. I was just relieved that she was listening to reason. Her brother, meanwhile, sat up and started barking angrily at me.

“You!” he roared. “So *you’re* the evil and despicable domain lord! It’s y-your fault that my gentle, kindly sister has become a...a violent and wild monster of a woman! You did this! It was you! It’s your fault! And I will not stand for it!”



I froze. I had no words for what I'd just heard.

*It was my fault that Alna turned into a violent and wild monster? Hold your horses, young man. Full stop. She kicked me when we first met!*

Alna must have read my thoughts in my expression, because she promptly kicked me in the shin. Gritting through the pain, I puzzled over exactly what I was going to do about Alna's brother.

Alna's brother Zorg was the eldest son in their family. He looked a lot like Alna. If Alna had been a male, I bet Zorg was exactly what she would have looked like. His long silver hair was tied into a ponytail, he had a stunning blue horn, and his eyes were red just like his sister's.

As for their relationship, well...how best to put it?

Zorg cared for Alna deeply, but Alna *despised* Zorg. Let's just say that theirs was a precarious case.

Alna's reason for hating her brother was crystal clear: he wasn't manly. Now, a simple lack of manliness was one thing, but Zorg had also taken the family savings and given it to some woman he was in love with, who wasn't even an onikin. His actions had made life incredibly hard for Alna and the rest of the family, so it was no surprise that she had some hard feelings about it.

You might think that just hating the guy was enough, but because it was a family matter Alna's rage had been multiplied. It made me think back to how harsh and strict she was when we'd first met, and her sudden change once she'd seen my manliness. Perhaps that wasn't just her onikin values; maybe it also had something to do with Zorg.

Zorg had come to our village to rescue his sister from the evil domain lord. In other words, me. He'd returned from his expedition to a home nothing like how he remembered it, with his beloved sister missing to boot. In a panic he'd asked his parents for an explanation and had been told that she'd married a lord old enough to be her father. On top of that, the lord hailed from the despised lands of Sanserife. Zorg had seen red and believed that Alna had essentially been sold off.

Now, Zorg had known that Alna herself was too smart to agree to a wedding



like that, so his assumption had been that she'd been tricked into it. That assumption had quickly taken root; Zorg had stopped listening to his parents, ignored the explanations of his siblings, and, with his anger at an all-time high, stormed towards Iluk. He'd asked the other onikin for our location, and then he was off.

"Alna!" he had cried the moment he saw his sister. "I'm here to save you! No, you don't have to say anything! It's okay now! Our family's poverty forced your hand, and you were tricked into marrying a despicable, evil man old enough to be your own father! You poor thing... But it's not your fault! The blame lies with the scum who tricked you! Rest easy now, my sister! I will protect you from that horrendous man who did as he pleased while I was away from home!"

But Zorg was not her father, nor even the head of the family, and he had no right to make any decisions on Alna's behalf. On top of that, Alna had felt humiliated by his words, and everything towards him she'd once kept simmering within her had suddenly boiled over, and she had no longer been able to contain her rage.

Zorg had believed himself to be rescuing his younger sister from the very pits of despair, and never in a million years would he have expected anger in response. Subsequently, he was left screaming desperately for Alna to listen while she attacked him.

Once I'd calmed Alna, and once we were able to quiet Zorg down too, I listened to what they had to say. It sounded to me like Ellie had been right about it all. It was a fight between family. I liked to think this made things a little simpler. Everything would settle down once Zorg understood how we actually lived here and the fact that Alna had chosen this life of her own volition.

That said, I didn't think that Zorg was going to believe me if I told him, so I asked Alna to do it herself. But Zorg only sat on the ground sulking, and he turned away from her as she tried to explain. It didn't look like he didn't trust her testimony, so I wasn't sure what was going on. That was when Ellie jumped in.

"Oh, I don't believe this," she said suddenly, putting a hand to my shoulder. "Are you *jealous*? Of our papa?"

I didn't believe that for a second. Alna looked disgusted. Zorg panicked at Ellie's question and immediately shouted back.

"Don't be ridiculous!" he growled. "Jealous of the man who married my sister?! Don't be stupid! I-I was just taken by surprise! I was shocked that...Alna found someone she loves! That's all! I came back after a long expedition and my sister was gone... I always thought that I would be the one to find her a husband...and then I hear that she's married to a foreigner...?"

At the end of his outburst, Zorg dropped into near silence, and his words muddled. Alna and I were both left speechless at the sight of him.

"Look, I understand how much you care about your sister," said Ellie, "but you went and took your family's savings, didn't you? If you'd never done that, Alna might never have gotten married to papa at all. And. One. More. *Thing!* After all the suffering you put your younger siblings through, did you really think you could just barge in here and talk a big game like you'd done no wrong?"

There was a real sharp edge to Ellie's voice, and the dogkin saw fit to throw in their support.

"Yeah!" they cried. "What she said!"

For the dogkin, the bonds of family were the most important of all, and to them what Zorg had done was nigh unforgivable.

"I know," he said, "and I'm nothing but sorry for that. And I know it's already too late for apologies, but...Alna, I'm so sorry."

It was a real surprise to see the man suddenly so remorseful, but Alna's face filled with anger.

"You're damn right it's too late!" she shouted. "Mom and dad and I, we all told you to stop, but you wouldn't even listen to the chieftain when *she* tried to stop you! And *now* you apologize?!"

Zorg immediately jumped to his feet.

"She told me she was sick!" he shouted back. "She told me she needed the money! She promised to pay me back! She was blue... She was blue...so I don't know why..."

Alna was left stunned for an instant, but just as quickly her face hardened.

“So she left you in the end, huh? So she cheated you out of the money! Is that it?! How dare you come here saying what you did after *you’re* the one who was tricked?!”

“She was blue!” cried Zorg. “I swear it! She was blue!”

I listened to their back-and-forth and something nagged at me so I decided to ask about it. I knew it was probably best not to stick my nose into a family scuffle, but I thought it was important.

“Alna, is it even possible to be tricked by someone who comes up blue on a soul appraisal?” I asked. “If the person has ill intent, they’ll come up red, won’t they?”

“Dias, soul appraisal is just magic,” explained Alna. “And there are ways to block and deflect magic. You can block some spells with cursed items, and if the person is more well-versed in magic than you, then it’s only natural that they can block or muddy the results of a soul appraisal. You have to be aware of this whenever you use the spell or you’ll end up like Zorg did. He doesn’t have much magical power to begin with, and look what happened...”

“Ah, so that’s how it works.”

“For people like you, Klaus, the dogkin, and the Peijins, who either don’t have magic at all or aren’t versed in it, the results are always correct. When facing a powerful or experienced person, it’s best to use the soul appraisal spell from the safety of concealment magic or when your target’s guard is down. However, there’s no need to worry about them blocking or deflecting the spell if they don’t know about it being used in the first place. Soul appraisal is best used after you’ve had a chance to properly observe who you’re going to use it on.”

Alna continued, “But sometimes, people who are more experienced with magic than you will understand your intent and won’t resist. That’s what happened with Aisa. She let me cast my spell freely. It’s not common, but it does happen. She was blue, by the way. A surprisingly pure blue.”

It took me by surprise for Alna to suddenly bring up Aisa like that, but before I could say or do anything Ellie jumped in.

“So in other words, your brother was tricked by someone who knows about onikin magic and likely has magic of their own. Is that it? Are there many people like that?”

“I’m not sure,” replied Alna. “I don’t know where the expeditionary parties go and what they get up to. However, given the amount of trade we do with others, it wouldn’t surprise me if some have come to understand and see through our magic. And that’s *exactly* why we’re supposed to be careful when we use it. Unlike Zorg...”

Alna shot her brother a glare as she finished, and everyone turned their gaze to him. Zorg shrank under all the eyes and only let out a low, pained groan in response.

Alna and Zorg didn’t speak a word to one another after that. Zorg finally understood that he’d gotten things wrong about me, but I wasn’t sure what to say to the guy. He’d stayed there by himself moaning and groaning, and no matter what anyone said he wouldn’t answer. Alna decided there was only so long she could stand seeing him like that, and so she said she was going to prepare dinner. At that, everyone else dispersed along with her.

“It’s gotten late,” I said when it was just me and Zorg left. “Stay here for the night.”

Alna and Ellie didn’t like the idea, and Zorg himself said that he was used to traveling at night, but the sun was already setting. I couldn’t just throw him out with nighttime coming right up on us. No matter how used to the plains he was, they were dangerous at night. Wild animals, monsters—if he were attacked it could mean his life.

After some insisting, Zorg stayed the night in Iluk. We’d put him up in the big yurt that we had erected for Uncle Ben.

Early the next morning, I had my battle-ax across my shoulder (just in case we ran into danger) and I walked after Zorg as we headed through the morning fog to the onikin village. There wasn’t really any need for me to go with him, but I just wanted to make sure that he got back safe.

That, and I'd had strange dreams that night, so I'd woken with a weird feeling in the pit of my stomach. It gave me an odd sense of foreboding, even though the peace and quiet of the plains stretched out before us and showed no signs of anything harmful on the horizon. Still, there was something refreshing about the plains that morning, and it seemed to help rid me of my anxiety. I felt my chest fill with a nice, bright feeling.

I felt so good that I started to hum. When he heard me Zorg spun to stare at me, and his horn glowed blue.

"Ugh, you don't have a hint of ill will in ya," he muttered, then slowed down a bit and added, "What is it with you, anyway? The way you let me stay... You could have just thrown me out if you wanted."

I glanced down at the two wrapped objects Zorg had cradled under his arm.

"Well, if you had absolutely no connection to our village, I might have done exactly that," I admitted. "But you're Alna's family. I couldn't bring myself to treat you that way. And for all her talk, Alna is worried about you too."

That much was clear in the objects Zorg held: a bow and a quiver carrying some twenty or so arrows, all crafted by Alna herself. She'd thrown them at him as he was on his way out. She'd said that it was a test bow—and a failed effort at that—but the bow was made to Zorg's height and build, and the quiver even had his name carved into it. When I thought about how kind she was about wrapping all of it in baar wool too, well...I just felt there was more feeling in all of it than Alna was willing to let on.

Alna was still furious with her brother, but she'd been worried about him out there on his expedition, so she'd made a whole host of equipment just for him. Even when she'd pounced on him and given him a piece of her mind, it was never with a closed fist. That looked to me something like a certain kind of care—familial love. And if Alna still had some kindness in her heart for Zorg, then I was going to have some kindness for him too.

I wasn't intent on reconciling things between them or anything so grand, but I guessed walking with him was just the way I did things.

"So what if she's worried about me!" shouted Zorg. "Damn it! Why do you have to be so blue?! And yeah, I heard that you don't have any magical power.

But even still, how?! You're not even using magic to mess with my appraisal?! It's so annoying!"

Zorg didn't look like he liked what I'd said very much, and he shot me a fierce glare. He stayed that way for a while, then heaved a great sigh.

"Were you born without magic?" he asked quietly.

That sigh seemed to have calmed Zorg a little. I thought about his question for a moment.

"I think so," I said. "As far back as I can remember, that's how it's always been."

"Makes sense. When it comes to magic, you hornless are simply born with what you've got. But that didn't bother you at all? Not having magic? It didn't get to you when people pointed it out?"

Zorg's face scrunched up as he asked his question, and it didn't look like it was all that easy for him to ask. I thought back on the past, and then I replied.

"Well, I thought all sorts of things about it when I was a kid, sure. The kids around me were learning spells, and they looked to be having a great time playing with magic, and there I was with no magic at all. I went crying to my parents and had my tantrums, but...they were warm and kindhearted about it, and thanks to my strict Uncle Ben, I came to accept it. That, or I suppose because I've always been a bit of a fool, I decided it was fine. I just put my focus on what I *could* do, and not what I couldn't."

Zorg seemed to be listening, so I kept going. "I'm not a very smart man, and I didn't think it was good to spend time on the impossible or being jealous of others. I figured I'd do what I was able to instead, and that meant using my body. That's what got me to where I am today."

Well, Zorg listened, but he looked a little nonplussed at my reply and let out a huff.

"I guess that's one way of dealing with a complete lack of magic. My whole life, people have always looked down on me, no matter how hard I worked. Even now it's no better. The only person who never made fun of me about it was Alna..."

Zorg then looked out far into the horizon. I was just about to tell him that he at least had people around him, family who cared about him, but that was when Zorg suddenly frowned.

“Wind dragons?!” he shouted. “But what the heck?! Five of them?! Not good... Even one is hard enough to handle on its own!”

Zorg was still staring off into the distance, so I looked too but...all I could see was a quiet blue sky.

“Hey! You!” Zorg said. “What’s your name again? Ugh! It doesn’t even matter right now! You have to go back to the village! You have to protect your people! Alna, the baars and the horses, everyone! Go keep them safe!”

Zorg then unwrapped the cloth he held. He strapped the quiver and arrows to his waist and readied Alna’s handmade bow in one hand, testing the strength of its bowstring with the other. He kept shouting at me to run but I could tell that *he* wasn’t going anywhere. Zorg was going to fight. I didn’t know where those wind dragons were, but I widened my stance a little and readied my axe for battle.

That’s when Zorg noticed I wasn’t running and looked like he wanted to say something, but he didn’t really have time with whatever was up there in the sky. Instead, he reached for an arrow from his own quiver, which had the arrows he always used, and nocked it in his bow.

For a few moments, we waited. Then, a few objects entered my gaze, floating in the sky. I stared at them, unsure of what they were but ready to fight all the same, clenching my battle-ax until my knuckles turned white.

“When a wind dragon settles on its prey, they aim straight for the eyes and ears!” barked Zorg, turning briefly to look at me. “Once they take them, they’ll target your arms and legs. They torture you while they hunt you! But that’s because they don’t have the power to take down their prey in a single strike! Their fangs and wings are razor-sharp, but they aren’t especially strong because of their light weight!”

“So they have fangs and wings, huh?” I remarked. “From here, all I can see are small flying shapes...”

I stared harder to get a better look.

“They’re already *this* close and you still can’t see them?!” said an incredulous Zorg. “I should have known! You don’t even use a bow! Use your eyes! Look! Those cruel faces, those sharp fangs, their bladelike wings! Those are wind dragons!”

I squinted real hard, and when my eyes started to feel the strain, the wind dragons finally started to come into focus. They had big rounded eyes, fangs that looked just as sharp as Zorg said, and four wings on each of their backs that moved at a furious speed. Their long bodies were covered in purple scales. They were monsters, but they also looked a lot like...

“Dragonflies?” I uttered.

Even from this distance, I could see that they were gigantic compared to an ordinary dragonfly. I thought they might even be bigger than the twins. They were small compared to the earth dragon, but however else you looked at them they were just big insects, and they didn’t look all that tough to me. But the way Zorg was going on about them, they were clearly quite the threat.

The monsters paused, hovering in the air just like dragonflies, and zipped quickly in whatever direction they wanted. Just as I was thinking about how I was going to fight them, an arrow from Zorg’s bow screamed through the air. It flew at incredible speed, cutting through the sky and hitting one of the dragonflies directly in the eye...and then the arrow just bounced off it.

“Dammit!” spat Zorg. “Even a bow *this* powerful is useless?! What the heck did Alna make this from, anyway?! It’s like trying to tame a wild horse!”

By the sounds of things, Zorg was struggling with the bow Alna had made him. His horn glowed with magical energy and he gritted his teeth as he fired another three arrows, but all of them bounced off the dragonflies, all of which hovered calmly in the air, completely unhurt. Given their speed, they could have easily dodged his attacks, but it looked to me like they were making a point of staying still. It was like they were mocking Zorg’s attempts to hurt them.

“Zorg, that bow is made from an earth dragon,” I said. “The arrows Alna gave you were also made from its fangs and claws, so use those, not your own



arrows.”

Zorg froze for a moment, then turned to me with a shocked look on his face and screamed, “Earth dragon materials?! And not just the bow but the arrows too?! How the heck did you even...? No. Wait. Let’s save that for later. I’ll try these arrows out!”

Zorg let out a battle cry and hurriedly reached for Alna’s quiver, taking out an arrow and nocking it. Still, the dragonflies didn’t move, happy to wait and laugh at Zorg’s pointless attempts to injure them. But this time, Zorg’s arrow pierced the air with a high-pitched ring and buried itself into one of the monsters’ faces.

“Yes! That’s one down!” cried Zorg.

The dead dragonfly’s wings stopped flapping, and the monster plummeted to the ground. The remaining four saw this and began to move around erratically, much faster than they had until now...and straight for us.

Zorg let out a few more arrows but the dragonflies zipped around them, closing the distance between us with every moment.

*Zorg said they don’t have enough power to land a killing blow with a single strike...*

If that were the case, then I wasn’t going to worry about defense; I’d put my focus on my own attacks. I raised my axe up high and ran forwards to get in striking range. The dragonflies had swooped low to better hunt us, and I let my axe down on one of them with everything I had. Unfortunately, my axe plowed straight into the ground. The dragonfly had easily swooped out of danger.

Suddenly, I was stuck out of position, my axe buried in the ground and a dragonfly looking straight at me, its fangs chittering in its mouth as though it were laughing at me. The monster launched forwards as if to bite me, and without thinking I released my battle-axe, clenched my fists, and punched that dragonfly straight in the eye.

Clearly the monster hadn’t been expecting that, because it flinched slightly, and I used that opening to grab it by the head with both hands. But then, for a moment, I hesitated, wondering what to do, and then...

“You damned fool!” shouted Zorg from behind me. “What are you doing?!”

There's more than one of them, you idiot!"

I heard the other dragonflies around me and the sound of Zorg's arrows keeping them at bay.

*He's right. I can't waste too much time on just one of these things.*

With the dragonfly's head still in my hands, I slammed it into the ground with everything I had and stomped on its neck. Then I pulled my axe from the ground, lifted it above my head, and brought it down on the monster's neck. It was tougher than I'd expected, so I put more power in and swung again; this time I felt the axe pass straight through the dragonfly's neck and behead it.

"Don't just stand there!" shouted Zorg, right that instant. "Jump back!"

I kicked off the ground and made some distance, just like Zorg said, just as the remaining three dragonflies pounced on my position. Having lost two of their crew, the dragonflies seemed mighty enraged now, their movements faster and sharper as they prioritized me.

I swung my battle-ax to meet their attacks while Zorg fired at them from behind me. The dragonflies easily evaded my slice and flew by, opening wounds along my arms and ribs before taking to the skies and lining up, readying for another strike.

The wounds weren't fatal, but they sure stung, and the blood that poured from them stained my clothes.

"Ugh..." I moaned.

*I went into this assuming I'd take some minor bumps and bruises, but look at what I've done to the clothes Alna made me. I don't even want to imagine the look on her face or the words she'll have for me when I get home. Oh no. And there go my pants...*

Zorg ran over to me while those thoughts ran through my mind. There was a worried look on his face. I stood to my feet and glared at the dragonflies with a fierce rage and readied my battle-ax for the next round.

They would ruin my clothes no further.

"Why don't those dragonflies launch any follow-up attacks?" I mused aloud,

watching as the remaining three dragonflies circled above us. “If they hit me with another two or three cuts, I’d be in serious trouble.”

“Even a dragon would be wary of getting punched in the face the way you cracked that last one,” said Zorg, shaking his head in disbelief. “They’re smart enough to know that if they make a wrong move, they’re dead. That’s why they’re keeping their distance.”

“Hmm... I see. In that case why don’t they stay up there and spit fire at us? They look like insects to me, but they’re bona fide dragons, right?”

While I spoke, Zorg aimed his bow at the sky and pulled on its string but ultimately didn’t let fly. There was no point to it when they were circling us like that. He lowered his bow but stayed ready to shoot in an instant, staring up at the sky while he answered me.

“Yeah, they’re dragons, and like dragons they can breathe fire, but it’s nothing to brag about. Wind dragons are made to zip through the skies, and so I don’t think they can muster up big amounts of magical energy. So we don’t have to worry about long-distance attacks. They’ll get in close, just like I told you earlier.”

“So all they have are close-quarters attacks, but they’re keeping their distance to stay safe. In which case, why don’t they just flee? Wouldn’t that be their best course of action?”

“You’d think so, right? I don’t know exactly. I’ve heard that they like human blood, so perhaps those wounds of yours are too tempting for them to resist. Whatever the case, it’s clear they’re focused on us, and for the sake of Alna and our villages we should finish them off before they lose interest.”

There was a resolve in Zorg’s voice as he spoke. And he was right. If those dragonflies got to either of our villages... Well, I didn’t even want to entertain the idea. There’d be far too many hurt and dead. In that sense, we’d been lucky to catch the monsters here, where it was just us and the open plains.

*But Zorg is right. We can’t let them escape.*

“I agree with you,” I said, staring up at our foes, “but how are we going to fight them? We don’t have any options if they don’t come down to attack us.”

“You think I don’t know that?! We were lucky to catch the first two off guard. They assumed they had the upper hand. But I don’t think the others will be so stupid.”

“Off guard...” I muttered. “Give them the upper hand... So if we lose our weapons or something like that, we might be able to tempt them into attacking us again?”

“Who knows? I’m no mind reader, especially not when it comes to dragons. And losing our weapons? What the heck are you even talking about?”

“I was just thinking that I might try launching my axe at them,” I said.

“The heck?!” screamed Zorg, his gaze still on the dragonflies. “Throwing a damned axe is crazy enough, but look at how far away they are! Just the idea of it is stupid, let alone actually doing it! Are you out of your damned mind?!”

“Well you know, I’ve actually played around with axe throwing as part of my training. Mostly for fun, mind you. This seems doable to me. And even if I don’t hit any, it might tempt the monsters into attacking us again, right? I figure that makes it worth trying.”

“Well, you just go and do whatever you damned well like, how about that?” said Zorg, his eyes narrowed and his voice laced with disbelief. “But don’t come crying to me when you lose your axe, you hear?”

“All righty,” I said.

Zorg gave me a bit of space and I nodded at him. Then I held the axe by the butt and got myself ready to throw it.

## **Zorg**

There was an idiot standing in front of me. A hapless fool. He held the butt of his battle-axe in both hands, the blade resting horizontally on the ground, and he stood with his legs slightly apart. It was the stupidest thing I’d ever seen.

He took a few breaths, then lifted the axe up slightly and began to spin. He used his body as an axis and he went around twice, then three times, and each time he got faster. When he got to the third spin I started to realize that he

might actually be serious about tossing his battle-ax, and then when he got to the fourth and fifth spins his battle cry echoed across the plains.

Then a sound rang out like something splitting the heavens. The idiot suddenly stopped spinning and his axe had vanished. I looked up at the sky in a panic, and I don't know how to explain it, but there was a battle-ax spinning in a beautiful arc through the sky, the lion's eyes at the center of the two blades glimmering in the sunlight.



It was unbelievable. Unfathomable. And it looked like I wasn't the only one who was surprised. Even the wind dragons were stunned by the sight of the axe, glaring at it and the light it emitted. It took them so by surprise that they didn't even move, and one of them was summarily cut entirely in half.

The battle-axe then slowed down and then fell back to the earth, which rumbled at the heavy impact. The sound seemed to set the last two dragonflies off, and instead of fleeing, they flew straight towards that axe-throwing idiot in what looked to me like a crazed rage. The idiot, for his part, clenched his fists, ready for the fight to continue, so I readied my bow.

The enraged wind dragons were on a collision course with the big oaf, and he caught one of them dead-on with a thunderous punch. His right hand swung around with the first punch to the eyes, then his left hand came down on the dragon's head while it was flinching. The next dragon flew in and he hit the thing with a freaking roundhouse kick before bringing both hands down on it like a hammer.

Both of the dragons squirmed on the ground from the damage, and I wasn't going to let the opportunity slip. I fired two killing shots. One dragonfly died instantly, while the other tried still to fly and attack the idiot with its last dying breath. I wasn't going to allow that, so I fired one last arrow, slicing through the air by the oaf and slaying the last of the five wind dragons.

I looked up at the sky just in case any other monsters were waiting in the wings, but I saw not even a bird in the skies above. Finally, our battle had come to an end.

I couldn't believe it. Wind dragons were monsters you saw perhaps once a year, and even then they were usually alone. Yet we'd been attacked by *five* of them.

But there was another way to look at it. I had just hunted and killed *five* wind dragons. Onikin men dreamed of such achievements, but never in my life had I imagined I might do so in this fashion.

*Perhaps now Alna and the others might look at me a little differently...*

*No. No, no, no. This is wrong! It's all wrong! This was not how I was destined*

*to slay a dragon! Not in such a ridiculous, outrageously stupid way...*

*Who the hell even is this oaf?!*

He was Alna's husband, and lord of the grassy plains, and it felt like some horrible joke. He still hadn't even gone to pick up his axe. Instead he was collecting the wind dragons and stacking their carcasses atop one another.

*UGH! That idiot! He's only going to ruin all of those valuable materials if he does it like that!*

"Hey! Be a little more careful with those corpses!" I barked. "Do you have any idea how much even a single one of them is worth?!"

But the oaf merely looked at me with cluelessness written all over his face. So I strapped my bow over my shoulder and ran over to the idiot, shouting at him gruffly to stop him before there was nothing left to salvage.



## After the Battle with the Dragonflies—Dias

Zorg and I gathered up all the dragonfly corpses, as well as my axe and all the stray arrows, and made our way back to Iluk. Iluk was closer, for one thing, but more importantly Zorg was adamant about going there before heading back to the onikin village. It seemed like slaying dragonflies was quite the achievement, and he was certain that Alna would finally look at him in a different light.

We'd chopped the dragonflies into smaller individual pieces and tied them into bundles so they'd be easier to carry. Zorg marched back to the village carrying one such bundle, a great big smile on his face. His doom and gloom from earlier that morning had vanished entirely. I followed after him with my axe on my shoulder, but I wore a much graver expression.

*Darn it, Dias...why'd you have to go and throw a spinning kick, of all things?*

I'd done it on a whim, but if I'd put just a little more thought into what I'd been doing, I would have realized what those sharp wings would do to my pants. And now there I was, with not just my shirt but now my pants torn to shreds, and it was all too easy to imagine how angry the sight of it would make Alna. I heaved a great big sigh. That was when I noticed Zorg slowing down to walk alongside me.

"You're a weird one, aren't you?" he said.

It was so direct a statement that for a moment I was confused about what he even meant. "Huh?" I replied.

"You're one of the kingdom's domain lords, and you're all scared over some ripped clothes? Are you really *that* indebted to your wi—to *Alna*? Because there's only one word for that, and it's weird."

*Is it?* I wondered.

"Well, I'm where I am today because of Alna," I answered honestly. "Everything good that happened to me here happened because we met. On top of that, she handles chores and looks after me each and every day. Of course

I'm indebted to her. I saw all the effort she put in to make me this shirt and these pants. I'm nothing but grateful."

"Huh, so that's it," muttered Zorg. "You're not like others from the kingdom. What was your name again? Dias? You're just a weirdo all around, huh? Your name, your looks, the way you think—the whole package."

Zorg grinned and hefted his bundle to make it a little more comfortable to carry, and then he took off again for Iluk. I guessed he really wanted to see Alna, because I had to pick up the pace to keep up with him.

When we finally arrived back at Iluk Village, Alna came to greet us, and her reaction at the sight of me was the complete opposite of what I'd expected. She wasn't angry in the slightest. Instead, she was worried about all the cuts I came back with.

"We can make new clothes, so don't worry about them," she assured me when she realized none of my wounds were particularly deep. "You were lucky to get out of things so unscathed, considering what you were up against."

When it came to Zorg though, Alna's opinion hadn't changed, and all she had for him was a cold shoulder. She thanked him for seeing me back to the village, and also gave him half the dragonfly materials because we'd fought them together, but once she'd said her piece, she told him to run on back to the onikin village.

Zorg was shocked and discouraged by her attitude, but Alna didn't pay his expression any mind, and in fact when she saw it she stayed as cold as ice.

"What?" she said, her voice devoid of emotion. "Do you still need something?"

Zorg was sent packing, and while I felt that Alna was maybe too harsh on her brother, she had her own reasons for treating him the way she did. She was a resident of Iluk Village now, and her family was here; she was telling Zorg that if he was looking for people to praise his manliness, this wasn't the place for it.

That's why Alna gave him the attitude she did. He'd come straight to Iluk, and straight to *her*, but for what? If Zorg wanted to show off his manliness for

slaying wind dragons, his first stop should have been the onikin village. If he was looking for someone to lean on for that kind of thing, it shouldn't have been his sister but his future wife. And when it came to family, Alna wanted Zorg to put his siblings like Lufra first, as their little brother would grow up to lead the family. She thought that was more important than Zorg, his future wife, or even Alna herself.

Wind dragons were smaller and weaker than earth dragons, but they were dragons all the same. With materials from two and a half of them, Zorg could build himself a big yurt, take on some livestock, give away a bunch for a betrothal gift, and still have a whole lot left over. That's how manly his feat was, and Alna really was happy for him. That might have been why she was so gentle with me upon my return.

In any case, those were the deeper reasons for Alna's sending him back home, and that was the reason for her sigh just now, which was filled with mixed emotions. But as soon as she let that sigh out, she shouted in a cheerful voice loud enough for the whole village to hear.

"Dias! Time for a banquet!"

That night the villagers continued to celebrate my successful hunt even when the moon hit its peak. At the heart of it all was Alna, as bright and energetic as always. She was there for all the singing and dancing, and everyone seemed to forget the summer heat and just lose themselves to their smiles.

I think it was less a hunting celebration and more just a celebration of how healthy and happy Alna was, and the thought of it had me grinning from ear to ear myself. At some point I decided to give myself a little moment away from the noise, so I lifted myself up from my spot and went for a little walk around the village.

There was a nice cool breeze now that night had fallen, and I had a relaxed stroll through the empty parts of the village. That was when I noticed a baar on the outskirts all by itself. I knew that all the baars were back at the square partying with the villagers, and as I got closer to the new baar it noticed me. Its face filled with uncertainty and it looked very nervous and fidgety, but it let out

a few hesitant bleats.

“Hm, haven’t seen you around here before,” I said. “Did you get lost somewhere? Or do you want to live here with us? If so, you’re more than welcome to move in.”

I had knelt down as I got closer to the baar, and it seemed to get even more nervous as I neared it. It bleated like it was trying to tell me something, but I couldn’t figure out if it was scared or just trying to shrug me off.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t really understand baar speak,” I said. “I know you’re trying to explain something to me, but...how about this? Why don’t we go back to the square where all the others are?”

I reached out a hand to give the baar a pat, but it deftly dodged me and stepped back at a speed that seemed decidedly unlike any baar I’d ever seen.

“You are so incredibly annoying!” it suddenly yelled. “Yeah, you can’t understand the words, but you could have read my face! You could have felt the aura I was projecting! Useless, you are! Utterly useless! I was using the cover of your party to sneak in and then *this* had to happen...”

“Y-You’re talking?!”

I tried to stand back up, but in my shock I slipped and landed flat on my butt; the baar looked decidedly unimpressed and let out a sigh. It reached its face into its wool and retrieved a little bag of some kind, which it threw at my feet.

“You’re just a man, but that’s two times you’ve slain dragons now. Commendable indeed. My master sees fit to bequeath you with three sanjivani leaves and one sanjivani seed. Continue to slay the dragons that seek to harm my lord, and continue to care for their children. Thanks to your efforts, the day will soon arrive when my lord’s wounds are fully healed. You have done well.”

For some reason it was praising me, and I’d have been lying if I said I understood it all.

“However, should you look to sell the sanjivani for profit or use it for evil purposes, the leaves and the seed will shrivel and die. Tread carefully.”

I looked down at the bag, thinking that it must be where the sanjivani was.

But right at that moment I got real dizzy, and when I came back to my senses, the baar had disappeared without so much as a sound. All that was left was the bag it had given me.

I jumped to my feet and rubbed my eyes, and I looked every which way for a trace, but that baar was gone. I hadn't been drinking at all but still I wondered if I was somehow drunk. I gave myself a couple of slaps on the jaw to wake myself up and tried searching again, but still I couldn't find hide or hair of it. There was only the bag.

So I stood there dumbfounded for a time, wondering what had just happened.

# As for What's Next

## An Imperial Court Conference

The conference room for the Imperial Court had a dark and gloomy air. In the center of it was a long, rectangular table, around which sat men and women in the midst of discussion. All of them were draped in expensive, high-quality clothing. The topic of their discussion was the war and their unexpected, impossible defeat.

The empire was still reeling as it looked to rebuild, burdened and bogged down by unforeseen issues, and many a depressed sigh could be heard among the empire's courtiers.

"Is that all for today's agenda, then?" asked the meeting's chairman.

This was usually where their meetings came to an end, but on this occasion a courtier spoke up.

"I have one item to report," said the chief of counterintelligence. "Our insiders in the Sanserife Kingdom appear unusually worried. Particularly Meiser's faction. They're asking us for money, and they're quite insistent. Apparently Dias put them in a bad spot, and they want revenge. What would you all suggest?"

Sighs once again filled the room.

"If they make too much noise and it's discovered that we have people inside the kingdom," answered one, "we may find ourselves facing Sanserife's wrath a second time. We should get rid of them immediately."

"That is an option," replied the chief of counterintelligence, "but we might also use their rage to bring some harm to Dias. We could always get rid of them after that; it wouldn't be too late. Dias ruined us in the war just as he ruined us in its aftermath, so...how about it?"

"Oh, I get it," said another courtier. "You're talking about your failed attempt to stage a civil war, aren't you? You had former imperial citizens there who not

only ignored your plans but also actively sought to sabotage them. That's what you're talking about, yes? Ridiculous. All of you in counterintelligence are just looking to restore your honor by bringing more harm to the empire."

"Yes, I heard about that," said the chief of domestic affairs. "I believe the whole reason the plan failed was because those former citizens no longer held any loyalty for their former leaders, yes? The kingdom did not plunder or loot, they governed fairly, and they encouraged citizens to wed with Sanserife soldiers. That was how it was for ten years, so I suppose it's no wonder. I must say, as one who governs others I feel like praising Dias for his efforts."

The statement took almost everyone by surprise, and many made their disagreement known loudly. Some then spoke up in opposition, and the conference room filled with infighting until a woman spoke up. Her voice had a sharpness to it, and she had barely spoken since the start of the meeting.

"I see," she said. "I had wondered why you asked me to this meeting, and I see it was to have me agree to your mediocre suggestions. You expect me to go along with you just because you wish to bring harm to Sir Dias?"

"Well now, this is a surprise," said the chief of counterintelligence. "Was Dias not the shogun's, your *father's*, rival?"

A cold smile curled on the lips of the woman.

"Yes, that is what Sir Dias was," she said, a certain joy in her tone of voice. "But while he was our greatest adversary, at the same time, both my father and I are indebted to him."

Shock rang out through the room, and the woman smiled as she saw the faces around the table squirm with discomfort.

"The schemes of your so-called 'governance' and your spies were not at all what my father wanted or desired. He was a warrior. And yet you forced him into a corner, where he had nothing else to use but disgusting, demeaning traps. He writhed in a poisoned swamp of your making, and he even considered taking his own life once the fighting was over. In the end, however, the one who saved my father and pulled him from that swamp was Sir Dias."

All eyes in the room locked onto the chiefs of counterintelligence and

domestic affairs. The woman went on.

“He broke through our schemes and fought us head-on, stepping directly into our traps as if to declare that a warrior needs no such things. He charged ever forwards until he reached my father. He did not blame the man or speak any words of enmity. They faced each other as warriors, and in doing so Sir Dias allowed my father the honorable death he deserved.”

“My father’s face was beautiful in its passing—satisfied—and I will never forget Sir Dias’s face, and his eyes, when he was entrusted with my father’s battle-ax. All I have in my heart for that man is gratitude. The idea of harming him merely for the sake of revenge... How utterly ridiculous.”

The woman put a hand to the dagger by her side. It had been gifted to her by her father as a sign of her inheritance of the rank of shogun, and her succession had been blessed by the emperor directly. And with ice in her eyes and a biting chill in her tone she kept speaking.

“Insiders among the Meiser faction, you say? If they were punished by Sir Dias it was because they are stupid. Useless. They serve us no benefit alive, so I say kill them and be done with it. As general of our armies, I give this my strongest recommendation.”

The chairman of the meeting gestured to the clerk recording the contents of the meeting, wordlessly ordering that these particular comments be struck from the record. The clerk did as directed.

A silence then descended upon the room, until finally another courtier spoke.

“As far as diplomacy goes, you can do whatever you want for all I care. What we’re looking at most carefully is exactly who looks to inherit the throne: that means First Prince Richard, as well as First Princess Isabel, who now has her hands on former imperial territory. Then there’s Second Princess Helena, who seems not to be doing a thing, and Third Princess Diane, who has lost her royal rank. As for Meiser, who cares? It would be a simple matter to deal with him. No hassle, no cost. Ha ha ha.”

“Don’t be daft. Killing off one or two insiders is one thing, but a member of the royal family? Impossible. Even if we did succeed, who knows to what extent that would fire up Sanserife? How can you even speak of diplomacy in the same



breath?”

These words sparked a round of discussion between various courtiers at the table, which quickly turned to arguments. The meeting, which should have been coming to a close, was suddenly enveloped in chaos. No conclusion was reached, and so the topic was shelved until the next meeting.

## **A Few Days Later—????**

“That woman has made things infinitely more difficult. If we can’t get the motion passed in the meeting, we’re left with a meager budget, and that’s going to cause problems.”

“Now, now. It’s not so bad. There’s at least a preliminary amount to work with, and that’s a start. It’ll be enough to satisfy Meiser and his cronies, which is enough to rest easy for the time being.”

“All he needs to do is focus his efforts on attaining the crown, but look at him, lost in all manner of other schemes. As a result, he and his underlings are making and following their own plans without any coordination. It’s chaos. What if the kingdom catches wind of what’s going on? Then what? The others may think it impossible to assassinate a member of the royal family, but at this point, we may well be forced to seriously consider it.”

“Now, now. Let’s just see how things play out, shall we? We may not even need to raise a finger ourselves. Someone among the royalty might even do that particular job for us.”

“I’m not going to put my faith in miracles, if that’s what you’re saying.”

“Now, now. Settle down. All I’m asking is that you just sit back and, for the time being, see how things play out.”

## **The Kingdom of Sanserife—Meiser**

“The damned empire finally hands over some money, and this is it? After all I did during the war... Those ungrateful swine! Hmph. Fine. This will be enough to get things moving, and as long as we’re moving we can take what else we need

along the way.”

“And first we’ll aim for the old duke’s son, that pig in Kasdeks. He visits the kingdom and he doesn’t even say a word to *me*? Well, he will pay for that attitude...”

## Prince Richard’s Ballroom—Narius

“In short, that’s what the empire and Meiser are up to. And that’s why I’m putting you on another job, Narius,” said Prince Richard.

The ballroom was empty save for Narius and the prince, and the former wasn’t sure his jaw was still attached.

“Huh? Wait? Are you for real? You’ve even got eyes on the *empire*? But wait. Let me get this straight. Meiser is in cahoots with them?! That’s catastrophic, ain’t it?!”

Narius was practically shouting, he was so surprised. Richard winced at the volume.

“If he were truly acting behind our backs, indeed it would be,” said the prince, “but it’s nothing we can’t handle so long as we know what they’re up to. We can counter if necessary, but we can also use them to our own ends, which is what I intend in this particular instance.”

Richard spoke with an eerie, unbreaking calm.

“If Meiser has his sights set on the west, and not us, then let’s make sure he keeps on in that direction. It doesn’t do us any harm at all to have imperial gold flowing into Sanserife. Ideally, Meiser never fails and he never succeeds; he simply continues pushing westwards and wasting all his funds.”

“That’s where you come in, Narius. You’re going west to keep watch over Meiser. I want you both aiding him and sabotaging him, depending on the circumstances.”

Narius responded with a put-on humility, his eyebrows drooping as he spoke.

“While I’m glad for the opportunity to make a fortune, our guild has been *very* busy recently. Why, one of our leaders recently went to the frontier on a trip

and decided to set up a new branch there. We need all the help we can get, and money to fund what we're doing, so if you're asking for long-term work I'm afraid I'll need the appropriate financial compensation..."

Richard saw right through the act, naturally, and nodded.

"I'm well aware of what your guild is up to. Setting up a branch in Kasdeks for new business and trade routes, yes? And the timing is perfect. You can work at that branch *while* you're working for me. Which means you won't even have to worry about your accommodation expenses. Aren't you lucky?"

There was no change in his expression, but the change in Richard's tone made Narius freeze.

"In any case, it would seem from your last job that you're a big fan of Kasdeks's local cuisine. If you enjoy the place so much, I can't imagine long-term work being too much of a problem for you."

He'd never imagined that Prince Richard would know *that* much, and it gave him goose bumps. Had he been too greedy? Was this where he was going to pay for it?

Richard, however, merely chuckled at the silent Narius.

"Take the bag on the chair over there."

Narius checked its contents and found exactly the amount of gold he'd hoped for. Richard's foresight caused another flood of barely suppressed chills across his body. Narius knew now that he had no choice but to accept the job, and so when their discussion came to a close, he took the bag in both hands and left the ballroom as though he were fleeing it.

## **In the Office of the Domain Lord's Residence, Kasdeks— Kamalotz**

Eldan, lord of Kasdeks, sat at his marble desk, reading through a near literal mountain of paperwork at a furious pace. There were reports that had come in while he was away in the royal capital, planning documents regarding postwar recovery, proposals for new projects and businesses, and also letters. Eldan

looked through each and every one of them, signed or stamped them with a wax seal when necessary, and filed them appropriately.

Around Eldan, his wives watched on with worry. They didn't want him to push himself too hard. Eldan felt their concern but showed no signs of stopping. Kamalotz, too, standing nearby, wanted only for his master to take a break, but Eldan only ever met Kamalotz's worried expression with a fierce gaze and continued on.

So Eldan worked, swiftly handling all his paperwork until, late into the afternoon, he was finally done.

"I'm finished!" he cried, letting out a deep and relieved sigh before lying down in a bed of cushions that had been prepared next to his desk.

In the very next instant, Eldan's wives appeared with pitchers of herbal water, crowding around him to wipe the sweat from his tired brow. They worked as though they were trying to match Eldan's own earlier enthusiasm, and so he made sure to take each of their hands and thank them for their support.

"Now we can head for Sir Dias's village early tomorrow morning, just as planned," Eldan said to Kamalotz.

"Surely we don't have to move at such a rushed pace," said Kamalotz, his face urging his master to take things a little easier. "We could take a day, even a few, before leaving so you can properly rest."

"As much as I would like to, I simply cannot wait. I must report to Dias in person, to let him know about the tax exemption and his new name. I've spent days catching up on all the work here in Kasdeks, but it's nothing to praise me for. In any case, I want nothing more than to see Sir Dias's village with my own eyes! As soon as possible!"

Eldan's smile boasted of boundless energy, but he looked terribly pale, and Kamalotz hesitated for a moment before responding.

"Understood," he said finally, before respectfully excusing himself.

Seeing his master so sickly and yet still smiling left Kamalotz feeling powerless. His heart was on the verge of breaking. He hated that he could do nothing, and these feelings made themselves evident even in his stride. He

proceeded down a corridor until he noticed the sun setting and stopped at the window to watch it.

“They say that sanjivani, in the mountain of the gods, is said to cure all illnesses,” he muttered to himself. “So why don’t the gods bless Eldan with such a plant?”

The words were a complaint, spat from the pit of Kamalotz’s heart as though he bore a grudge against the very deities themselves.

## **In the Chieftain’s Yurt, at the Onikin Village—Zorg**

Zorg had slain wind dragons, and yet he’d been met only by the cold gaze of his younger sister. She’d driven him away from Iluk Village, and he had returned to the onikin village in low spirits. Moll, who had learned of what happened, ordered Zorg to her yurt.

*After all I’ve been through, now I get summoned to the chieftain’s yurt? What is going on?*

Zorg sat in the yurt now, still dejected, and the more he thought about it all, the lower his spirits fell. Moll, meanwhile, searched through the shelves of her yurt and then grabbed a bag before walking over to him.

“You slew three wind dragons,” she said. “Which, for you, is a tremendous feat. Considering your mistakes, praise for you is a difficult thing to hand out freely, but with this you show yourself in a slightly different light. Take the bag.”

Moll held it out to Zorg, whose head tilted quizzically. But when he heard the unique rattle from within, he rushed to undo the bag’s drawstring and reach inside of it. He pulled from it a blue horn, in which there were a number of holes filled with jewels and rings. The sight of the ornament was enough to turn Zorg white. It had been made with the horn of the village’s former chieftain and was passed only to the person who would be next in line. No treasure among the tribe was more precious.

“What...? Huh...? M-M-Me?! Nominated for the next chieftain?!”

Zorg was so confused he could barely do more than stammer his question, but Moll merely responded with a stern glare.

“You would already *be* chieftain had you not been so stupid. For your past actions, you are at present little more than nominated. As you can see from the rings in the horn, you are the third.”

Moll then hit the ground with her cane and brought her face closer to the seated Zorg, her eyes boring into him as she went on.

“Our neighbor is a dragon slayer. We can use that, lean on it, or work with it, but now we can make it clear to all in the tribe and outside of it that we have a dragon slayer of our own. That is an advantage. And your sister happens to be married to our neighboring lord. From what I have heard, you fought valiantly by his side. The rest comes down to you. With the appropriate experience and resolve, you will make a good chieftain.”

Moll’s gaze remained unwavering.

“In any case, quit your work with the expeditionary party. You will now study under me, and I will teach you the leadership skills you will need. I will also find you a wife. Rest assured, I will make sure you have a fine partner.”

Her bearing and aura left Zorg unable to do anything save for nodding profusely and accepting everything she had demanded.

# Aymer's Diary

## Midsummer, Third Day of the Half-Moon

It was another incredibly tiring day. Senai and Ayhan are nothing if not bursting with energy and filled with enthusiasm, and they give all of life their everything, whether in study or in play. Keeping up with them is no easy task, I must say. It's of course wonderful to see children of their age so immersed in learning and exploration, but there are limits to my physical endurance, and I do sometimes wish they'd relax a touch.

On top of all that, the twins are still intent on doing what they call "their work." Naturally, they do it away from prying eyes and at times when they won't be seen, but dear me, it makes things that much harder for this little mousekin.

As far as "their work" is concerned, the twins are intent on increasing the number of circles they cast for Dias's field and maintaining one for the new field they made themselves. The twins' field is in the square where everyone can see it, which makes everything so much more difficult.

That said, the results have truly spoken for themselves, and while it is indeed exhausting, seeing the fields grow in such a healthy manner is very much a reward all of its own.

The twins' field contains a number of different seeds. There are the seeds of their parents, some of Alna's medicinal herbs, and a selection of the girls' favorite fruits. All of them have since sprouted and are looking healthy. Each and every day, the twins check on them all, and they truly seem to enjoy it. Naturally it brightens them to see the seeds of their parents growing and maturing, but the sight of delicious fruits maturing before their eyes also fills them with joy.

It also means a lot to the girls to see the progress of the medicinal herbs. The twins lost their parents to illness, and so the theme of health and sickness has come to mean a lot to them. It's only natural that they're overjoyed to see their

own efforts growing medicinal herbs meet with success. The herbs cure ailments, after all.

Each and every day, the twins take care of their herbs and do their utmost to learn from Alna more about how to handle them. From the look in their eyes, it seems clear to me that both are resolute when it comes to ensuring that they never lose another family member to illness ever again. That means Dias, Alna, the grandmas, me, the dogkin...everyone who calls Iluk home. The girls see all the residents as their family, and they're working hard to protect all of them.

Senai and Ayhan sometimes touch their parents' saplings and talk to them. Perhaps "talk" is not the right word. Perhaps "communicate" is more apt. In any case, it is an exchange unique to the forestkin. As they are still saplings, the twins say they still can't truly talk with their parents, but even then they are able to draw wisdom from them.

One such piece of wisdom is that there exists an herb called the sanjivani, which is capable of curing any and all illnesses. It is a herb of such legend that even the forestkin, experts in all things related to plants, have never laid eyes on it themselves. I must admit it is strange to me that they know the name of a plant that none have ever witnessed before, but perhaps that is simply the nature of legend and mythology.

In any case, the twins have made it their mission to discover the sanjivani herb. They must keep the herb a secret, as talking about it would reveal their forestkin origins. And while I fear it is reckless to go looking for an herb of undetermined origin, I know far too well that the twins will not give up their search, no matter what.

I find myself, however inconceivable it may be, wishing that perhaps through some coincidence, or perhaps even the whims of God, such an herb might drop into our laps. However, such wishes are the realm of that which is too good to be true.

To be continued...



# Extra Story: The Bonds of Family

## To the Lake! A Picnic!

### A Summer Day—Dias

We had a number of searing hot summer days. The sun beat down upon the plains, there was no wind to offer any respite, and the rain we'd thought might come to save us only brought about a stifling humidity and a more suffocating heat. A single breeze would have blown it all away and brought us back our pleasant and relaxed summer, but such a thing never came.

One day of this stretched into two, then three, and on the morning of the fourth Alna could no longer stand it. She ran to the center of the village and shouted for all the village to hear:

“We’re going to the lake for a swim!”

And with that, it was decided. The villagers grew excited, and we prepared to visit the lake, located northwest of Iluk Village.

Grandma Maya and her friends opted to stay in Iluk and relax along with Ethelbald, his wives, and some of the dogkin. The beach-going party thus consisted of me, Alna, the twins and Aymer, Francis and Francoise, Klaus and Canis, Ellie and Ben, and the rest of the dogkin.

Once we knew who was going to the lake, everyone started preparing to leave, the twins shouting at us to hurry as we did so. We readied a change of clothes and towels and wrapped up food to eat for lunch. We'd heard that delicious fish could be found in the lake too, so we borrowed some fishing gear from the onikin village and dug up some earthworms to use as bait.

With our preparations done, we all headed northwest with a new spring in our steps, chatting as we went. We weren't in any hurry, but the twins still tried to rush us along. Still, we knew that running would only leave us all drenched in

sweat, so it was more of an amble, and we took in the scenery along the way.

After a time we began to feel the air change into something cooler and more pleasant, and as soon as the girls felt the cool breeze on their skin their patience ran thin and they took off running. They started crying out excitedly mere moments later, and when we caught up with them we could all see why: taking up most of the view before us was a big old lake.

It was a beautiful clear blue in color, and apparently the water flowed down here from the northern mountains. The area shared the same sort of weather, so sometimes the weather was wild and the lake flooded. That meant the area wasn't a great place to live, but on days like today, when it was quiet and the water was calm, it was a nice place to visit.

Given the state of the water, we felt the shallows were safe, so I went over to the twins.

"Go play in the water if you like, but only as high as your stomachs, okay?" I said.

The twins had been aching for that permission. In seconds they'd undone their bileschas and thrown them off and were sprinting to the water so they could dive right in. The dogkin soon followed suit, and then Aymer, who had the hood of her cloak up around her head. Francis and Francoise took to munching on the grass that grew by the water, and Klaus and Canis readied themselves for some fishing. Everyone was getting ready for a good old time.

Uncle Ben laid out a blanket some ways from the water and sat down to relax. Ellie had picked up the bileschas that the twins had thrown on the ground and taken a seat at the blanket to fold them up all nice and neat. I watched her doing it, and something struck me.

*Why did she fold up three bileschas...?*

I looked more closely and realized that one of them was Alna's, and when I turned back to the lake, I saw Alna sitting down in the water. She let her hair down, ran her fingers through it with lake water, and let it rest. I remembered then that going to the lake was all Alna's idea, so maybe it wasn't about the twins at all. Maybe Alna just wanted to enjoy the lake herself. My face broke into a smile watching her.

I stayed like that for a while. Then I decided it was about time I had my fun too, so I started getting ready to do some fishing of my own.

“I did it! I made a horn just like Alna’s!”

“Wow! It looks just like it!”

Senai and Ayhan had splashed some mud onto their faces to mimic Alna’s makeup, and one of them fashioned their hair into a hornlike shape. They were having a great time.

“Ah... It’s nice bathing in sand cooled by the evening wind, but sometimes soaking in cold water isn’t so bad either...” said Aymer, clutching a piece of floating driftwood as she lazed in the lake.

“Here we go! She’s a big one!”

“Go, Klaus! Go!”

“Baa! Baabaabaaaa!”

“Baa! Baa!”

By my side, Klaus was caught up in a fierce battle with the other end of his fishing rod while Canis and the two baars cheered him on.

“Heh. Looks like fishing isn’t so easy for a fidgety domain lord,” said Uncle Ben.

“Oh, but he’s only just gotten started, hasn’t he?” asked Ellie.

Meanwhile, those two had been sipping tea and commentating from the comfort of their blanket.

In the distance, I could hear the splashing of dogkin racing against one another in the water, while Alna sat quietly, relaxing by herself.

It was a quiet, peaceful, and, above all, cool and calm day. We had some lunch, and kept on enjoying ourselves until late afternoon, when the twins had finally worn themselves out. The day left everyone refreshed, so we got changed and tidied up as a cool wind blew from the northern mountains and flowed through the entirety of the plains.

It was a funny thing, to think that such a cool wind would blow after we were done refreshing ourselves at the lake. The timing was such that we all burst out laughing as we picked up the sleeping twins and Klaus's fishing spoils and lazily made our way back to Iluk Village.

## Afterword

Well, it's the afterword again, so I'll start off with a round of thanks.

Big thanks to everyone who purchased volumes one and two, to everyone who supports me on Shosetsuka ni Naro, to the editing staff, to Kinta for the illustration that inspired this volume's extra story, to the designers who make the books look great, and to Yumbo for drawing the manga! It's thanks to all of you that volume three was confirmed in the first place!

And of course I want to thank all of you who purchased this volume!

Now let's talk about the story. In this volume I talked a bit about Dias and Alna's wedding, which I'd deliberately put off until now, and touched on the topic of Dias's family. Volume three is a volume in which much becomes clear. We also had the appearance of Alna's family.

The story is all set to get even bigger now. In terms of the kishotenketsu writing structure, the story has cleared the "ki" prologue section and is about to start on the "sho" arc.

That said, Iluk is barely even a proper village, let alone a full-grown domain. There's still a lot of story to be told in terms of Dias and his responsibilities as a domain lord. He's got a mountain to climb to get where he's going. But there's a lot going on. There's a lot on the horizon, including Dias's growth as a domain lord, so I hope you'll keep on supporting his journey.

The extra story for this volume actually came about in a very unique way. Kinta, the series illustrator, came up with a great illustration of everyone at a lake, and when I saw it my imagination just took off and I wrote about it, and that became the extra story you read at the end of the book. It's different from what I wrote for the first two volumes, but I hope I managed to capture some of the same feel as the illustration. Did you like it?

In other good news, volume one of the Frontier Lord manga, drawn by Yumbo, has received great reviews. People are saying it's got lots of brawn and

lots of beauty, and above all, it's funny! Thanks to everyone following it!

When I think about it, I wonder if it's right to consider myself the sole creator of the *Frontier Lord* series. Kinta, Yumbo, and many others have brought this story to life. And not just them, but also you who read and support the books. There's no doubt in my mind that this is fact. The story is going to get even more interesting and exciting from here on out, so please keep on reading!

In volume four, Dias will have lots to think about when he sees the work of Eldan, his lovable neighbor and friend and an excellent lord in his own right. We'll see Dias grow into his role, and start to get a glimpse of the sort of domain the grasslands will become. Please look forward to it.

I hope to see you all again in the afterword of the next volume.

Fuurou, August 2019



Are those...  
dragonflies...?

Zorg

No, look closely!

They're **wind dragons!**

Dias

The Frontier Lord Begins  
with Zepo Subjects





## Bonus Short Story

### Sunscreen—Dias

One summer morning, while I was washing my face at the well, I heard a commotion coming from the nearby stream. I wondered what was going on so early in the morning, so I listened more closely and made out Alna and Ellie's voices.

I finished up at the well and walked on over to the stream, where Alna had some waterweed in her hands and was trying to approach Ellie with it.

"No, I can't do it! I just can't! It stinks!" cried Ellie as she backed away for every step Alna moved towards her.

*What in the world is going on here?*

"What's all this racket so early in the morning?" I asked.

Alna paused to look at me and respond. "The sun's going to be really bearing down on us today, so I'm trying to provide Ellie with some sunscreen."

"B-But is that *actually* sunscreen?" replied a disgusted Ellie. "I mean, you're calling it that, but it just looks like raw waterweed and all the slime that comes with it!"

I sighed. It was odd to me to make a commotion over something so silly. Then I looked up and squinted in the light of the sun, and I figured that I could probably do with some sunscreen too. I walked on over to the stream, grabbed a clump of waterweed, and pulled it from the ground. Then I squeezed and crushed it in my hands until a clear, sticky liquid came out, which I rubbed on my face and arms.

"Oh my. You're really doing it, aren't you? Papa, does that weed slime actually work?"

"Yep. And it's not just me who uses it. Klaus, the twins, and even the grandmas use it. The grandmas put it on every day because their skin is so

sensitive to the sunlight. It's as simple as rubbing it on. You really don't get sunburn. As for the smell, well...that takes a little getting used to, but it's not so bad."

Ellie timidly took some of the waterweed from Alna and brought it closer to her skin, but the unique smell of the stuff proved too strong and she couldn't bring herself to actually do it. Alna gave up on the waterweed and dropped into thought. A moment later, her face lit up with inspiration.

"I just remembered there's another thing we can do besides waterweed," she said. "Wait here and I'll get it ready."

Alna then dashed off to the storehouse and soon came back with some pottery and dried medicinal herbs. She used the pot to scoop up some mud from the bottom of the stream, then picked all the stones and grass out of it and put the herbs in. Then she kneaded it all together.

"This mud is infused with the herbs now, so you can rub this into your skin and it'll work just fine. You're protected from the sun, and on top of that, your skin is left all nice and smooth when you brush the dried mud off. A lot of people actually rub this onto their whole bodies because of it."

Ellie's eyes immediately lit up and sparkled, even as Alna continued. "Unfortunately, you can't really avoid covering yourself in mud. It's quite the sight, especially when the mud dries. It changes color and you get all these cracks; it's like looking at some kind of muddy earth monster."

Ellie was all about health and beauty, so she was sold the moment she'd heard the words "nice and smooth" and ignored the rest. She took the mud from Alna and coated everything that wasn't clothed: her face, her arms, her hands, and her legs.

Unlike the waterweed sunscreen, which was transparent, the mud left a heck of an impression. It was like a prank some nasty kids might play, and I didn't really know what to make of it.

Either way, the sunscreen problem had been solved, and Ellie looked like she was on cloud nine trotting back to the village square covered in mud.

"I can't help thinking that she's going to get a mouthful of mud when we eat,"

I said.

“Oh, that reminds me,” added Alna. “It’s good for your skin, but swallow it and it’ll make you sick. You can’t eat while you’re wearing it.”

It was probably the worst timing she could have said that, because breakfast was minutes away.

But the next thing we knew, screams and shrieks of shock and surprise from the twins and dogkin echoed their way to us from the square, and all Alna and I could do was share a sigh and head over to explain the story of the Iluk Mud Monster.



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The Frontier Lord Begins with Zero Subjects: Volume 3

by Fuurou

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