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IV

THE FRUITS OF BONDS

ILLUSTRATOR
Kinta



The Frontier Lord Begins
with **Zero** Subjects

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"Even before you start
foraging, you've got to
be careful and aware
of your surroundings.
You have to follow the
rules...well, usually."



Two distinctly unique eyes sat on either side of its face, and its long jaw jutted forward. But it was the sharp horn upon the monster's nose that demanded attention.

“Oh, it’s just a giant lizard.”

Illustrator: Kinta

Cast of Characters



Dias

Lord of the Nezrose Grasslands.



Alna

Onikin tribe member
and Dias's wife.



Klaus

Captain of the domain guard,
married to the dogkin Canis.



Senai and Ayhan

Twin sisters and forestkin
with mysterious powers.



Eldan

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



Aymer

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



Ellie

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



Zorg

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



Juha

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

Aymer's Report

Residents: From 95 to 98!

Dias, who oversees the frontier domain and Iluk Village, found his lands under attack by the forces of third princess Diane, a woman driven by the fires of ambition. The residents of Iluk Village banded together and pushed back the invading forces. Not a single person was killed. In the aftermath, the village received plenty of loot.

Dias then purchased livestock, foodstuffs, and other items from the merchant Peijin of the Beastland Kingdom. As the village grew in terms of both residents and livestock, a kitchen range and stable were constructed. Dias also awarded all the residents of Iluk Village with handmade necklaces for their valor in battle.

Klaus, the captain of the guard, married Canis, and a banquet was held to celebrate the start of their new life together. (Dias hadn't even noticed when the first buds of romance bloomed between the two lovebirds! I couldn't believe it! All the same, Klaus and Canis looked so very happy together!)

Upon hearing news and rumors about Dias, a host of villagers were drawn to the village: the traveling priest Ben; Ely, Aisa, and Elly, who were all raised by Dias; and a herd of six baars, all of whom had fled their captors.

When a group of wind dragons threatened the lands, Dias fought them off with Zorg, Alna's older brother and member of the friendly onikin tribe.

Dias keeps finding ways to create new bonds throughout his life on the plains. And now, his story continues...

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

Yurts, storehouses, privies, well, livestock pens, assembly hall, village square, stables, fields (vegetables and trees), reservoir. A number of new facilities were built, and various new livestock acquired. The village also found itself with the mysterious sanjivani herb. Iluk Village's food stocks are slowly dwindling.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Characters and Aymer's Report](#)

[In Bed in the Yurt—Dias](#)

[The Next Day, in the Yurt](#)

[Dias, Trying to Get His Thoughts in Line](#)

[The Forest in Early Autumn](#)

[Upon Returning to Iluk Village](#)

[Kasdeks, in the Western City of Merangal—Narius](#)

[With Winter Preparations in Full Swing—Dias](#)

[Mahati \(Formerly Kasdeks\), in the Eastern City of Bangal—Meiser](#)

[As Fall Settles over Iluk Village—Dias](#)

[A Yurt on the Northern Plains—Klaus](#)

[Mahati, in the Western City of Merangal: The Domain Lord's Bedroom—Eldan](#)

[As the Setting Sun Dyes Merangal Red—Eldan](#)

[Early in Iluk Village, the Morning after Francoise Gave Birth—Dias](#)

[Extra Story: The Fruits of Bonds](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Bonus Short Story](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

In Bed in the Yurt—Dias

It was early in the morning the day after Zorg and I had slain those giant dragonflies...uh, I mean, wind dragons, and it was still dark out. I awoke with a start after a nightmare of endless, wandering darkness. It had been a long time since I'd had a nightmare, and I felt sweat beading on my forehead. But as I went to wipe it off, I found myself so weak that I could barely lift my own arm.

What is going on...?

I tried to sit up, but my body wouldn't listen to me. That was when I realized I was oddly hot. The summer nights and early mornings were cool and refreshing on the plains, yet I was sweating profusely. Then there was the pain racking me down to my bones and the rumbling from deep within my stomach. I'd definitely come down with something.

I opened my mouth to speak up and let Alna know, but no words came. All I could manage was weakly moaning. And that's what I was doing when I noticed a shadow hovering over my field of vision. The shadow was trying to say something, and I knew it was Alna, but my head felt like it was full of thick mist and I couldn't understand a word of what she was saying. There were other shadows there with her, but I couldn't make out anything from them either.

From what I could see, all of them shadows looked to be in a right panic. They wiped the sweat off of my body, they changed my clothes, and they made me drink a warm herbal concoction of some sort. They took care of me, and after some time my vision cleared and I could form words again. I talked with Alna and the twins and asked about my condition.

Alna said that the fever was because of the wounds I'd suffered in my fight with the wind dragons, which had festered. As for why it had happened so quick, that was on account of the wind dragons' wings, which were coated with some kind of poison. I'd made sure to wash the wounds with well water, and then Alna had treated them with herbal medicine, but apparently that hadn't been enough.

I started thinking that maybe that talking baar I'd seen was a hallucination brought on by my fever, but I put it aside for the time being. I didn't think festering wounds were something that would heal easy, and I figured we'd be looking at a ten-or twenty-day recovery—maybe even a month.

It was a serious situation; wounds like mine were the type that sometimes took a person's life.

"I'm sorry," I rasped, "but I'll need a little time to recover."

My voice lacked its usual strength, and Alna and the girls all knew it. It was there in their tense expressions as they nodded. I looked at their pained faces and, honestly, I felt pretty dang pitiful. But a few moments later my sight went dark, and I slipped back into sleep.

When I next woke up, I could see by the position of the sun in the skylight that it was past noon. Somehow I was still kicking, and I took a look around the room. I could hear liquid sloshing around in a bowl that Senai was making real sure not to spill, and Ayhan was watching her to make sure she had it all under control.

"We brought you medicine, Dias," said Senai as they slowly walked over.

"You have to drink your medicine," added Ayhan.

They knelt down by my side, looking all anxious, and held the bowl out towards me.



I didn't want to make the two girls any more worried, so I hefted myself up with what little strength I had left and I took the bowl in hand. The liquid in it was a deep green, so I guessed that they'd brought me some more of Alna's curatives.

I didn't feel much like drinking anything at all at that point, not even a single drop, but I wanted to reassure the twins and let them know that everything would be all right, so I prepared myself to force their medicine down. I took a big old gulp and found myself caught off guard by the flavor.

"Huh? This is delicious."

The medicine that Alna made had a powerful scent, and it was mighty bitter to boot. But this stuff was sweet and refreshing, and in my weakened state it was a welcome pleasure. It was like a mix of honey and fresh fruits, except the sharper edges of the flavors had been smoothed out with warm water. Whatever it was that the twins had given me, it didn't taste like the usual medicine.

"This is so good," I said. "What is it? It doesn't taste anything like Alna's herbal stuff."

"Um, we made it from the leaves you got," said Senai.

"We used one of the three in the bag," added Ayhan. "Then we planted the seed in our field."

That was when I noticed the bag that the talking baar had given to me. It was hanging on Ayhan's belt. I was suddenly confused.

Wait a second, so that wasn't a dream or a hallucination, then? And how did Ayhan get a hold of it? And what compelled the twins to make it into a medicine? And just what kind of a plant did those leaves come from?

My addled mind raced with questions, but that was the most I could muster. Just thinking too much tired me out. I sank into bed and laid my weary head back on my pillow. I let my troubled thoughts fade away into the ether before turning to the twins.

"Thank you, girls," I said. "I think this medicine will work like a charm. It's

made me sleepy, so I think I'm gonna take a nap."

I'd only just drunk the stuff, so it wasn't *really* going to have any effect so soon, but my words brought bright smiles to Senai and Ayhan's faces, and they hopped back to their feet and ran out of the yurt. I watched them go, then closed my eyes; my wounds itched and I couldn't keep from moaning, but soon enough I faded back into slumber.

"...ey! ...ias!"

Someone was slapping me. They kept at it too. They were slapping my forehead.

"...you hear me?! Dias!"

I pulled myself back into the world of the waking and stared up at the ceiling. The scarlet light overhead told me it was evening.

"Dias! Wake up!"

It was Alna. And she wasn't letting up.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Did something happen?"

Her face was a mix of shock and relief.

"*You're* what happened!" she cried. "You were running a nasty fever and now it's just gone!"

Well, that can't be right.

But when I started to take notice of my body, I realized that my fever had subsided, and the lethargy racking my body was gone, along with the dull pain and nausea I'd felt earlier. I sat up gingerly, took a deep breath, and shook my head to make sure I wasn't dreaming. I inspected my body again but nothing was out of the ordinary. Well, actually, if there was anything out of the ordinary, it was the fact I felt incredible.

"It's not just the fever," I said. "I don't feel nauseous or tired anymore either. It feels like I came out of a restful few days of sleep, but I know that's not the case...so what happened?"

“Let’s take a look at your wounds,” said Alna.

She undid the string holding my bandages in place, then slowly peeled them off. She looked closely at my wounds and discovered that all the swelling had subsided completely. Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully as she worked, putting the dirty bandages in a basket and wiping the blood and pus from my cuts with fresh pieces of cloth. When she was done, she got in super close to look real carefully at my wounds.

“The cuts still haven’t fully healed,” she said, “but they’re not festering anymore, and there’s no swelling. I think it’s safe to leave them uncovered; they’ll scab quickly and close on their own. But I have to ask: this isn’t because you have some kind of superhuman healing abilities, is it?”

Alna wiped the wounds again, then a third time, and then she took some of the medicinal herbs she’d squeezed into a bowl and rubbed that into and around my cuts.

“Of course not,” I said. “I’ve had festering wounds before, but this is the first time they’ve ever healed so quickly. Being that I was poisoned and the wounds were infected, I was ready for a few weeks in bed.”

Alna tilted her head to the side, puzzled by it all.

“Can you think of any reason it might have happened?” she asked finally. “Was there anything over the last few days that you might have picked up off the ground and eaten? Like herbs or something like that?”

“Picked up off the ground? I mean, come on, Alna, I... Oh, wait a second.”

I couldn’t believe she would have asked me something like that, but then I suddenly remembered the talking baar from the night before and the medicine that Senai and Ayhan had made me drink.

“What? What did you pick up off the ground and eat?!” demanded Alna. “Be honest!”

“Well, there was this talking baar that I met last night before I went to bed. It told me a bit of a tale, but I’d been drinking, so I didn’t really take it too seriously. I think we’re going to have to talk to the girls to—”

Before I could finish, however, Klaus rushed into the yurt.

“Excuse me, Lord Dias,” he said. “We’ve received word that the lord of Kasdeks is on his way here to Iluk. Given your condition, would it be best if we asked him to come back when you’re feeling... What?!”

Klaus was shocked at the sight of me.

“You’re okay?! Already?!” he exclaimed. “And your wounds! They’re already on the mend?!”

Alna and I shared a glance. As I looked into her eyes, I wondered what to do about Eldan. I thought about it a lot, and then I decided that the best thing to do before making a decision was to see how I really felt. I slowly lifted myself from my bed, swung my arms a few times, twisted and circled at the hips, and even hopped a little.

I was careful not to overexert myself and open up my cuts, but they didn’t hurt in the slightest. My fever was gone, and my breathing was all back to normal. Maybe it was because I’d slept so well, but I didn’t even feel any fatigue. In fact, I felt on top of the world.

“It’d be one thing if I wasn’t feeling well, but I feel great,” I said to Alna. “I’d love to see Eldan. What do you say?”

I mentally prepared myself for Alna getting mad at me for so much as suggesting the idea, especially after I’d just woken up from a potentially life-threatening fever, but instead she nodded thoughtfully.

“Eldan has done a lot for us, so we should make the effort, and besides, you won’t get any worse as long as you don’t push yourself too hard. I’d have some harsh words for you if you were leaving on an expedition somewhere, but as long as we’re around Iluk, you can come back and rest if you start feeling weak or tired. I don’t see any problems as long as we’re well prepared.”

Alna then reached for a bag hanging on the yurt wall and began preparing immediately.

“I’ll let Eldan’s traveling party know!” said Klaus.

“Thanks,” I replied, although he was out the door so quickly I wasn’t sure he’d

heard me.

Well, better get dressed.

I reached for my clothes, which were folded up by my pillow, but Alna stopped me.

“Dias,” she told me, “there’s no need to rush. I told you that we have to be well prepared, remember? That means you’re going to drink a good helping of medicine, then we’re going to put some dried herbs on the insides of your cheeks, then you’re going to breathe in some incense, then you’re going to warm your body by the oven. You’ll get a really good sweat going, so you’ll get dressed *after* we’ve wiped you clean. You’ve only just recovered, and that means you could easily catch something else, so I’m going to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Alna showed me the bag that she’d taken from the wall with an ear-to-ear grin on her face. That smile of hers had a unique sort of pressure unlike when she was angry, so I just gulped nervously, nodded, and prepared myself for what was to come.

Alna and I waited at the eastern fringe of Iluk Village as the sun began to sink behind the horizon. The first people we noticed coming our way were Klaus and a group of dogkin. They were soon followed by Kamalotz and a number of guards, all on horseback, and then came the familiar bed-shaped carriage that Eldan traveled in.

“Sir Dias!” Eldan called out from his bed. “I meant to come so much earlier, but there was so much to do I was delayed. You have my humblest apologies!”

“Don’t sweat it, Eldan,” I answered, waving and smiling. “Welcome to Iluk!”

Maybe it was because I’d opened my mouth, or maybe because I was moving again, but I caught a strong whiff of herbs from my person and gagged slightly through my smile. Alna turned to me in a flash, worried it was my fever, but when she realized what it really was she giggled. We shared a somewhat pained (but gentle) smile.

Klaus stopped not far ahead of us after I recomposed myself. Then Kamalotz

and the guard regiment arrived, and when Eldan's carriage came to a halt his people moved around in a right hurry to do their jobs. They set stoppers to keep the carriage in place; then they took care of their horses and began unloading all sorts of stuff from the carriage.

"Be quick about it," ordered Kamalotz. "We'll want to have everything done before nightfall."

While Eldan's guards ran around handling all the preparations, Eldan himself said a few words to his wives, then leaped from his carriage and ran over to us, his belly bobbing up and down the whole way.

"I must apologize for coming so unexpectedly!" he cried. "I wanted to contact you before we came, but things were so hectic, and Geraint and all of our messengers had their hands full; we simply hadn't the time. I'm so very sorry!"

Seeing Eldan like this made me smile; the way he was all apologetic was no different from the first time we met.

"Think nothing of it," I said. "You're welcome here whenever you feel like coming."

Eldan broke into a big old smile and patted his chest in relief.

"It fills me with joy for you to say so! You wouldn't believe my mother! She went on and on, whining about how it's so unfair that only *we* get to go see you and how *she* wants to meet you! It wasn't easy to convince her that this trip was a business matter and not just some holiday in another domain!"

I'd gotten the impression that Eldan's mother was a strong woman, and I'd pictured her as the dignified, respectable sort, but it seemed she had something of a free-spirited side to her too.

"Well, I don't mind if your mother feels like coming along some time either," I said. "And I would like to at least make her acquaintance one of these days."

But in response, Eldan shook his head profusely.

"No! No, it just won't do!" he said. "She is a woman I respect, and she's filled with warmth, generosity, and deep kindness, but she has a wild and freewheeling side to her that just is not suited to work in the slightest! She's

free-spirited, exuberant to the point of being overbearing, and so flippant she's utterly brazen! That's my mother! I ask only that should the two of you meet, it be when we have a far greater surplus of time and energy."

"Well, all righty then," I said, suddenly overwhelmed. "I guess I'll leave that decision to you, then."

Eldan grinned, satisfied with my response.

"You mentioned you were here on business," I added, thinking it best to get to the matter at hand. "Did something happen?"

Eldan gasped as he remembered why he was here. He straightened himself up and suddenly took on a slightly more pleading air.

"Before we get into the official matters of my visit, I have a few requests to ask of you, Sir Dias."

"Requests, you say?"

"First I would like to humbly ask your permission to stay in your domain for a few days. The business I am here for is a rather complicated matter and will take some time. I would like to make sure you are happy for us to set up camp in the area. We've brought everything we need in terms of food and supplies, so I can assure you that we will not be a burden."

"You want to stay here? Well, of course I don't mind," I said. "You do whatever you like with your camp, okay?"

Eldan nodded politely, but the deep, pleading aura emanating from him only seemed to grow heavier as he spoke again.

"I have one other, most important...so *very* important...request to beg of you, Sir Dias!"

I had to admit his attitude had really thrown me off, so I turned to Alna and she looked awful tense for some reason. Eldan looked from me to Alna, then took a deep breath, and the next thing he said he practically bellowed.

"Your village! I want so very badly to be able to see your village, Sir Dias! Kamalotz and the others didn't just get to *see* it, they got to *stay* with you! It made me so very, *very* jealous! It's outrageous to even think about! I prayed

and I prayed for the day that I might see your home with my own eyes, and I ached for the day to come...and now the day has arrived, but I just cannot bear the thought of being so close and spending the rest of my evening at camp! So! Before night falls completely, I beg of you: give me a guided tour!"

It was the most energetic and spirited that Eldan had looked since he arrived here.

Alna and I glanced at each other for a moment, then replied together, "Whatever you like."

We'd given Eldan pretty much free rein, but we weren't just going to leave him to his own devices and make him wander about without an escort. So while Eldan's guard set up camp, me and Alna decided to show Eldan around Iluk Village. We told Klaus and the dogkin to tell the villagers we were coming, and then we headed south, to show Eldan our fields.

The village square was of course closer than the fields, but given the time, we knew that everyone would be busy preparing dinner, so we figured we'd come back around to the square when things were a bit quieter and more relaxed.

Eldan was looking every which way, all excited about the village, and when we got to the fields, I pointed out all the produce and did my best to explain things.

"We made these fields with the tools you gave us," I said. "You can see our reservoir over there, but right now we've got enough river water that we don't need to rely on it. We planted the seeds you gave us, and thanks to all the summer sun they're coming along real nice."

Eldan looked closely at the fields while I spoke, and he squinted and made sure he was really seeing what he thought he was seeing before he replied.

"S-Sir Dias, that is all well and good, but...why in the world have these fields taken these shapes?"

"Oh, that," I said. "Everyone finds that the most interesting..."

The fields were all perfectly circular. When we'd made the fields and planted the seeds, we'd only had the one circle, but as we'd expanded that field we now had three circles, side by side. The circles ran from one end of the field to the

other, through both my fields and the ones that Grandma Chiruchi and Grandma Tara took care of.

No matter how much we'd all mulled it over, we didn't have any idea how to explain the circles, so we'd plain given up and accepted that things were going to just be the way they were. I told Eldan as much, and his brow got all furrowed with thought for a time until he decided that he wasn't going to think too hard about it either.

"Well, as long as all the produce is coming along well," he said, looking once more over the fields.

Alna and I thought it prudent to keep moving the tour along, so we headed to the stables, which were between the fields and the village square. The stables had been expanded recently, and the horses were resting after having just been fed. The white ghee had been sheared to help them in the summer heat, and they were fast asleep. Eldan made sure to have a good look at all of them, and he smiled as he went by.

"I'm so glad to see them all looking so healthy," he said with a relieved smile. "There's a healthy sheen to their coats, and they're eating well and looking plump; they all look very happy here."

Almost all of our livestock in the stables had come from Eldan, so he was happy to see them all in good condition. But when he turned his gaze to the newly expanded part of the stables, where Diane's horse, Aisha, was kept, his smile froze.

"Oh my," he uttered, his expression still unmoving. "This is one of the royal family's... Which means that during the battle, Diane was... But I can't just write up a report on it *now*... Oh! Right! Yes, it's all just my imagination! What a misunderstanding! The light of the setting sun had me so confused about the color of this horse's coat!"

I was about to ask Eldan if something was wrong, but before I could he spun to me and with a truly intimidating strength in his gaze, he pleaded, "Please! Do not! Say! A *word* of any of this to me!"

All I could do was nod.

“Great! What’s next?!” said Eldan, urging our tour onward and stomping off towards the village square.

“Over this way, Eldan,” I said, leading our little tour group over to the pen by the stream with its little reservoir.

The geese and their little ones were behind their fence, resting in the comfort of their pen. Eldan took a long hard look at them too, and he let out a relieved sigh.

“I’m so glad to see that they look just like ordinary, everyday geese,” he said, his thoughts perhaps still on the horse from earlier. “I feared you might have fallen into owning some kind of golden-feathered goose... Wait! Don’t tell me! Does one of these geese lay golden eggs?!”

Just when we thought Eldan had calmed down, he was at it again, looking mighty anxious.

“A goose would just be a pain if it didn’t give us goslings or eggs we could eat,” said Alna, a little exasperated. “All our female geese lay eggs that are either delicious or hatch into healthy little goslings.”

Eldan let out another relieved sigh. He watched the geese, who had decided it was bedtime and were now heading into their pen. We watched them all get ready for bed, then headed for the Iluk Village square. As we plodded along, I pointed out whatever came into view and explained what it was.

“The yurts closest to us are our storehouses, and that big ol’ rooftop you see over there covers our kitchen range,” I said, pointing. “That big yurt over yonder is our assembly hall, and the space in between them all acts as our village square. As you can see from all the preparations, we all gather and eat here when the weather is nice. We used to eat in the assembly hall when the weather was bad, but we’ve got far too many people for that now, so on days like that we all eat in our own yurts.”

There was a big rug covering the ground in the square with tables over the top of it. I could tell by all the food that dinner was ready.

“Oh, you see that bell over there? We use that to call everyone to gather,” I continued. “The fields you see next to it are Senai and Ayhan’s. It used to be

just one, but before we knew it there were more. I'll be honest with you, I don't know exactly what they're growing, but whatever it is, it looks to be coming along nicely, so we just let the girls do what they like."

Klaus, the grandmas, and all the dogkin were already in the square, and all the dogkin ran up to Eldan and talked to him with even more excitement than usual. They called out his name and thanked him, and it seemed they all wanted him to know that they were having a great time here and that it was on account of his generosity. Then Aymer and Canis appeared, and they both told Eldan that they were doing well and living happily in Iluk too.

Around that time, Kamalotz arrived to let Eldan know that their camp was set up and dinner was ready. Of course, everybody was excited to see Kamalotz too. Alna and I didn't want to get in the way, so we decided to quietly give them all a little space. But right around then, I felt my knees go a bit weak, and I stumbled on my feet. I didn't fall over, and I was back up in no time, but I took a quick look at myself all the same. I didn't notice anything out of the ordinary, so I figured it was just that I was still on the mend.

I've been laid up in bed most of the day, after all.

Alna looked way more worried than I was, and she put a hand to my face to make sure I really was okay.

She let me off with a sigh, saying, "You don't have a fever, and your wounds haven't swollen up again. Your heartbeat is normal too, so I don't think it's anything to worry about."

I was just about to tell her how sorry I was for always making her worry, but then something caught her eye that made her gasp. I followed her gaze and saw the twins handing bowls over to Eldan and Kamalotz.

"Ah!"

There was no chance of stopping them. Eldan and Kamalotz were already drinking from the bowls, which I could see were filled with a deep green liquid.

"This doesn't taste anything like the herbal tea that Kamalotz told me about," remarked Eldan. "It's so refreshing, and so very sweet! It's like you've condensed the best parts of tea into its own beverage."

“I’ve never tasted this either,” admitted Kamalotz. “Just how did you make this drink?”

Based on the two men’s comments, I gathered that they’d both consumed the same medicine that Senai and Ayhan had given me during my fever. Kamalotz must have drunk it thinking it was the same herbal tea he’d received last time, and Eldan had assumed the same.

As for the two girls at the heart of it—our culprits, so to speak—they watched the two men drink up the liquid and smiled brighter with every gulp they took. Then the twins took the empty bowls and happily skipped off elsewhere. Alna sped off to catch them while I took a moment to explain things to Eldan and Kamalotz. I told them that I’d received what I thought might be sanjivani leaves and that I’d taken some myself while I was in the midst of my fever.

“I’m so sorry that the girls made you drink something so strange,” I added. “As I said, I drank it myself, so you don’t have to worry about it being toxic or anything like that.”

Eldan and Kamalotz looked at each other and shared a smile.

“As I might have told you before, I’ve got a very sensitive nose,” Eldan assured me. “And that’s especially true when it comes to plant life! I can tell if something is poisonous or edible just by the scent of it! The drink that the twins brought us has a similar scent to tea and vegetables, so there’s no need for concern.”

“Eldan has sniffed out poisons on many occasions, so his judgment is almost certainly correct,” added Kamalotz. “I’m aware that the girls are very kind as well; last time I was here they were very thoughtful and caring when it came to my physical condition. I accepted their drink as just another kindly gesture from the two of them.”

Having said as much, Kamalotz and Eldan looked mighty pleased.

“Sanjivani is a name given to an herb of legend, stretching back to ancient mythology,” said Eldan, taking on a joking tone. “If we really did just drink actual sanjivani leaves and word gets out, the news could well turn these lands upside down! But we’re all adults here, and we know that such miracle plants do not exist. That herb is probably called the same thing because of its truly

delicious flavor, but I'd wager that it's just another herb."

Even though he said that, he gave the notion a good think. "But given your swift recovery, perhaps it has medicinal qualities when it comes to fevers and swelling?"

Eldan saw how confused I was, and so he went on to explain to me just what the "real" sanjivani plant was. He told me it was a plant that had been talked about since the age of mythology. It was capable of curing any illness and could even bring one back from the brink of death. The plant was said to grow on the mountain upon which the gods themselves lived, and it was the gods who bestowed the plant upon those who were worthy. There was even a tale in which Saint Dia himself begged the gods for the plant when the founding king of Sanserife fell ill, and in acquiring the sanjivani the king was cured.

Many generations ago, the lord of Kasdeks had been ordered by the king of the time to find the sanjivani plant, and had been given vast sums of wealth and an excess of manpower to bring it home, but the plant had never been found. And so the sanjivani went down through the years as the subject of legend, rumor, jokes, and bedtime stories. That was just the nature of its past.

"I have prayed on a number of occasions for the sanjivani to come into our possession," said Kamalotz. "It is a plant so unbelievable that one can't help but want to believe in it. It's a gift from the gods we so badly want to be a reality. And so perhaps the person who gave these herbs to you did so with those feelings in mind."

Eldan chuckled at Kamalotz's words, and in a panic Kamalotz whispered something quietly into Eldan's ear. By the time they were done, though, night had fallen over the village. Alna had come back, having gotten a hold of the twins, and because it was already well past dinnertime, we decided to call it a day. Eldan and Kamalotz headed back to their camp, and then the rest of us settled down for dinner. We decided to head to Eldan's tent first thing after breakfast.

During dinner, I waited for my opportunity and asked the twins why they had been so irresponsible and fed me, Eldan, and Kamalotz those herbs without

saying anything to anyone else.

“It wasn’t irresponsible!” they replied, adamant.

According to the girls, they’d seen how much pain I was in from my fever and wanted to help me. They’d asked me if it was okay to use the plant to make medicine, and apparently I had given them the go-ahead. So they’d gotten some help from Aymer and Grandma Maya, and they’d used one of the sanjivani leaves to make a drink for me. The other two leaves they’d used for Eldan and Kamalotz.

I guess I must have moaned some kind of a yes while I was in a fever dream...?

The girls had gotten the permission of an adult and they’d consulted with Aymer and Grandma Maya about their plans, so I couldn’t really say they’d done anything wrong. If it was anybody’s fault at all, I figured it was mine.

In any case, because it was such a powerful herb that, if used wrong, could be life-threatening, I made the girls promise to talk to Alna before they used it again. With that out of the way, we finished dinner and started getting ready to sleep. But before we settled into bed, I apologized to Alna for worrying her and thanked her for taking such good care of me. I did likewise with the twins. I told them I was grateful because their medicine had made me feel like a million gold coins.

The girls both looked at me with great big smiles.

“We’re just glad you’re looking so well!” said Senai.

“We’re super glad!” added Ayhan.

The twins looked so gosh darn happy, from the bottom of their hearts, that it made me think back to their parents. They’d lost their mother and father to illness, and their life had become that much more harrowing because of it. It had been a long and arduous journey, but they’d made their way here to Iluk and they were happy now. It seemed they had all the energy back that they were missing when we’d first met, but those painful memories had an awful strong impact on them even now.

I wonder how I must have looked to the two of them, knocked out flat by that fever...?

It was only natural that they'd want to do their utmost to somehow cure me, and I felt a bit ashamed of myself for what I'd put them through. I had to do better.

I patted the twins on their heads, and their smiles lit up the whole yurt. They flew at me with great big hugs, and I opened my arms wide to hug them right back. Then Alna got in from behind them to praise them, or maybe to soothe their souls a little.

Even though the summer heat lingered well into the evening tonight, we all stayed huddled up together. We were healthy and happy, and eventually, just like that, we all fell asleep.



The Next Day, in the Yurt

I woke to the first rays of the morning sun hitting my eyelids, right around the time that Alna woke, and I felt *amazing*. I was usually a bit lethargic when I got out of bed, but not today; today I was up and raring to go. My body was light and supple and full of energy, and I could scarcely believe it was actually my body at all. I felt ten years younger, maybe more, and it was astounding how nimble I was on my feet.

I went outside to the well and pulled up some water, and all the while I was stretching and swinging my arms and legs to get a feel for these new sensations. I didn't just feel incredible, I felt *so* incredible that it blew my mind.

The wounds that I'd received from the wind dragons, too, were neatly scabbed over, and itchy in that way that cuts get when they've just closed up and are on the mend. Why I felt downright fantastic was beyond me, and I was mulling it over when Kamalotz ran over to me in a real panic. He grabbed my shoulders with both hands and clenched real tight.

"S-Sir D-Dias!" he exclaimed. "It's inconceivable! L-Lord Eldan is brimming with energy! He quite literally jumped out of bed! He didn't even need his medicine! He's running all over the place! The doctor is stumped! *We're* all stumped! C-Could it be?! Could it be that what he drank was the real sanjivani herb?!"

Iluk was still asleep, but Kamalotz sounded like he was trying to shout his lungs out of his chest. None of us wanted an early morning commotion to deal with, so flustered as I was I did my best to calm him down. I told him we should talk more about it somewhere more suitable, and we headed for Eldan's tent.

When we got to the tent, however, we found Eldan sprawled across the ground, his breath ragged and a group of worried rabbit-looking beastkin watching over him. It looked like the exact opposite of what Kamalotz had just told me, and we both ran in to check up on Eldan ourselves.

"Are you okay?" we asked.

There was a human, an old man, among the group of beastkin, and he grinned at us.

“Lord Eldan’s just out of breath,” he said. “The boy got himself far too excited, that’s all. His illness might have subsided some, but that doesn’t mean he’s fully recovered either. He should still endeavor to take things slow and not push himself too hard.”

Kamalotz introduced the group to me. “This man is Lord Eldan’s private physician and the finest doctor in Kasdeks. The rabbitkin are his apprentices. After Lord Eldan’s episode during our last visit, we thought it prudent to bring the doctor with us.”

“I see,” I replied with a nod. “But if Eldan isn’t fully recovered, does that mean that it wasn’t actually the sanjivani that he drank?”

“Well, as hard as it is to believe,” said the doctor, shaking his head, “I daresay that it probably *was* the real thing. It shouldn’t be possible for Lord Eldan’s illness to have recovered this much in a single night. Nothing short of a miracle. But having said that, the root of Lord Eldan’s illness isn’t the type to just disappear in a day either. That miracle tea has put him well on the way to recovery, but he’ll need some time before he’s completely over it. Judging by the looks of him, I’d say a month, or more likely two, before he’s rid of his illness entirely.”

The doctor went on to explain to me exactly what it was that Eldan suffered from. Eldan’s insides were warped and distorted at birth. Those deformed parts could be healed and set where they belong, but it was a process that would take years. Not even a miracle could fix this over the course of a single evening, and even if his internal organs *could* be put right in such a short period of time, the strain it would put on Eldan’s body was potentially fatal.

“No matter the illness, recovery puts a great strain on the body,” said the doctor. “And in the case of something as severe as what Lord Eldan has, we’re talking in extreme magnitudes. The unstable nature of his condition at present may in fact be a message from on high; if he does not take things slow and steady, he could in fact get worse.”

The doctor’s words reminded me of my own experience the night before,

when I'd felt faint after giving Eldan a tour of Iluk. The sanjivani had healed me of my fever and festering wounds in an extraordinarily short period of time. But that healing had taken its toll on my body, and perhaps just the act of walking around the village was in itself a kind of overexertion.

I thought about that for a little, and then I noticed that Eldan finally had his breath back. He hefted himself up to his feet.

"I apologize for having worried you," he said. "And I apologize to you too, Kamalotz, for making such a racket so early in the morning. I simply couldn't believe what had happened, and I certainly let it get the better of me. As the good doctor has said, however, I'm healing and my condition is nothing to be concerned about!"

Eldan's face was flush with a healthy sheen, and his eyes sparkled with energy and excitement. "We'll meet for our discussion as scheduled, once we've finished our breakfast. We have much to talk about, including the sanjivani, but please, have something to eat and prepare your things before we get started."

I had to agree that he certainly looked well, and he probably didn't need us to worry about him.

"All righty then. Although I should say now that I have some daily chores to see to, so I might be a touch late."

This was my way of making sure that Eldan had sufficient time to rest. Eldan didn't say a word in response and, instead, beamed and nodded. His smile told me that he saw right through the little excuse I'd made for him, but I ignored it and went back to Iluk.

Back at the village, I got properly dressed for the day, had my breakfast, and talked with everyone about what work they had planned and how they were going to spend their day. There were a number of smaller discussions about various other things too. After I'd given it a bit more time, I put my little secretary, Aymer, on my head and got ready to go see Eldan. Ellie was also coming along, as she'd taken it upon herself to be a part of village discussions and negotiations.

We walked on over to Eldan's camp, where we were met with a mighty

impressive tent that hadn't been there earlier that morning. It was held up by a number of wooden pillars, and inside was the same white table we'd sat at after the battle with Diane, along with a number of white wooden chairs. On the silk tablecloth that covered the table were bound documents, small wooden boxes, and a porcelain vase.

Eldan himself was sitting in a chair on the far side of the tent, relaxing as he waited for our arrival. He grinned when he noticed us, and gestured for us all to take a seat. I introduced Ellie to him, and then we took a seat on the side of the table opposite Eldan. Ellie sat by my side, and Aymer dropped down from my head onto the table, at which point Kamalotz hurriedly rose to his feet and rushed off somewhere. He came back with two small boxes wrapped in silk for Aymer to use as her table and chair. He gestured for her to use them as she liked.

Eldan watched as Aymer politely thanked Kamalotz for his generosity and waited for her to get comfortable, then nodded happily.

"Well then. Let's begin, shall we? I have a number of edicts to pass on from the king, and we need to discuss a number of diplomatic affairs. Once we begin, it will be quite a lengthy discussion including much in the way of official clerical work. So before we start on any of that, I would very much like to talk more about the sanjivani herbs you have in your possession!"

Eldan was the very portrait of energy and health as he spoke.

"All right," I replied. "I'm happy to go along as you see fit."

"Firstly, I must thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for sharing such a valuable herb with me. Both Kamalotz and I feel on top of the world, so much so that we are simply unable to express the depths of our gratitude. While I understand that there is no amount of money that could possibly equal the worth of something so wondrous, we simply do not have any other way in which to repay you for such generosity. So, as a sign of our thanks..."

Eldan had been smiling happily as he talked, but soon he stopped. I'd had a lot of thoughts about what he was getting at, but the thing was, it felt awful rude to cut him off, so I let him go on and waited for an opportunity to speak. There must have been something about my face, though, because Eldan had seen

right through me.

“What’s the matter, Sir Dias?” he asked.

“Well, to be honest it’s about how I came into possession of the herb. It’s all a bit odd, and on top of that the circumstances for its use are pretty complicated to boot.”

Eldan looked puzzled, as I’d known he would, so I told him about the strange baar I’d met who’d spoken our language and entrusted me with the three leaves and the seed. I also told him about how the baar, or whatever it was, had warned me about how to use the plant.

“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.”

If that baar had really given us the real sanjivani, then the warning it had given us had most likely been true as well.

“If you give us some kind of reward as thanks for the sanjivani, then that might be considered a sale, depending on how you look at it. Money, items, or even action taken as a sign of thanks could be considered a trade. We’ve used up all the leaves that we got, but we think it’s best to avoid doing anything that might cause the seed to wither away. The whole village got together to discuss the matter, and...”

We all knew now just how amazing the effects of the sanjivani were. With that in mind, it wasn’t an easy thing for me or any of the other villagers to handle the plant without letting our own desires potentially get the better of us. I told Eldan how we might well find ourselves wanting to use it in return for some kind of a reward, just like Eldan was trying to give us now, but there was no way for us to stamp those feelings out completely either.

I’d worried that maybe the sanjivani had already withered away, but when I had checked on it the tiny bud was still a healthy, happy green, and it didn’t look like it was going to die on us anytime soon. That left us with a question: why was it still there when we all had these latent desires lingering in our hearts?

The answer, as I saw it, was that it wasn’t us who had used the plant. It had

been Senai and Ayhan. When the twins gave me and Eldan and Kamalotz the medicine they'd made, they hadn't wanted anything in return. It was worry for us and genuine goodwill that had driven them to use it. And as long as we didn't go putting any ideas in their heads, we could be sure that if they used the sanjivani again, it would be with that same purehearted intent.

So, as long as the sanjivani had particular conditions governing its use, we thought it best to leave the plant entirely in the hands of the twins. Frankly, we didn't think we had much other choice.

"It's going to be a while before our sanjivani bud ever flowers, but we know that it might wither away at a moment's notice. So us adults at the village have decided to treat it like it was never there in the first place. We've decided to forget it. Even if the sanjivani flowers, we're not going to touch it. Senai and Ayhan will be the ones to decide what to do with it. And whatever they decide, the village will accept. Now of course, we'll help them out if help's what they need, but basically we're not going to say anything, and we're not going to do anything."

We'd want to fall back on the plant if we knew it was there, but if we treated it like it had never existed in the first place, then we'd be more open to losing it whenever that day came to pass. All of Iluk was in agreement with the idea—even Grandma Maya and her friends, who would have been a little more sensitive about it, given their age and frailty.

"So that's why I'd like to ask that you simply forget that you had any connection with the sanjivani at all, Eldan," I said. "We don't need any kind of reward, we don't need to talk about it any more than we already have, and we don't want to leave anything on the record about it. If word spreads to the wrong people, it could cause trouble for the village. People might come to us driven by their greed. That's why I'd like to ask you to keep the herb completely confidential."

Eldan closed his eyes, crossed his arms, and dropped into deep thought. He was clearly thinking pretty hard about it, letting out a long "hm..." After a time he heaved a great big sigh and opened his eyes.

"So even if someone, somewhere, is suffering from a grave illness, and they

can be saved by the sanjivani, you will not change your mind?"

"Nope," I answered firmly. "Ridding the world entirely of the sick is impossible, even with the power of the sanjivani. I'd much rather simply rip that plant out of the ground now than bear that kind of responsibility. We are going to leave the future of the plant to the twins and the whims of fate. It was fate that saw the three of us healed, and it was fate that brought the herb to the girls in the first place."

"If there are lives out there that can be saved, then fate will bring them to our village, and to Senai and Ayhan. And if, one day, personal desires taint the girls' hearts and the plant withers and dies, then all of us at Iluk will accept that as the way things are."

Eldan closed his eyes again, followed by another long "Hm..." As far as Ellie was concerned, however, the subject was done and dusted, so she was staring at her nails with a bored look on her face. Aymer, too, was no different and had taken to arranging her bottle of ink and her papers for recording the particulars of our actual meeting coming up. Eldan watched them through slitted eyes and noticed their somewhat strategic boredom, and it was enough for him to sigh a second time.

"Very well, if that is what you have all decided, then we will abide by your decision," he said, nodding and then turning to Kamalotz. "I want you to inform everyone about the confidentiality of this matter. Let them know that should anyone speak a word, it will be considered the gravest of betrayals, and their whole family will be made to bear responsibility. Those with us here are trusted retainers, so I don't foresee issues, but nonetheless the importance of this matter cannot be understated."

"Understood," said Kamalotz. He looked to me and added, "And while saying as much may be unnecessary, on behalf of all of Kasdeks's subjects, we could not be happier to see Lord Eldan recovering. We are nothing but grateful to you, Sir Dias, for sharing the sanjivani with him. I do not believe that anyone here will ever go against Eldan's wishes or bring your village any trouble or misfortune."

And with that, Kamalotz promptly left. Eldan chuckled, then cleared his throat

and sat up straight.

“Well then, let’s get down to business,” he said. “I’ll forget everything we just discussed, which means we can begin our official discussion. I have a message from the king. I also have the matter of your new rank of duke and a number of privileges to discuss with you, including your right to take on a new family name.”

I hadn’t imagined we’d be discussing anything of this sort. I just froze dumbly at first, but eventually I said, “I never believed that I’d ever be a noble with a proper family name.”

“Huh?” uttered Eldan.

“Eh?” uttered Aymer.

“Wha?” uttered Ellie.

All three of them stared at me with looks on their faces that said, “*Did he really just say that?*” I couldn’t work out why they’d all look at me that way. While I tried to figure that out, Eldan exchanged a glance with Ellie and Aymer. It seemed he was going to speak on behalf of all of them.

“Sir Dias,” he said, “you already *have* a noble name. You are a noble of the Sanserife Kingdom, and as such you would have inherited that name already.”

“Huh? No, no,” I replied. “Me? I’m just a commoner. My parents weren’t nobles either. We sure didn’t have any noble name to speak of, nope.”

“Papa,” said Ellie, “no matter how you fell into it, the moment you were assigned this domain, you became a member of the nobility. And that means you were given a family name, no?”

“Hmm? Hmm... Maybe I was...? But I don’t recall any talk of a family name.”

Eldan looked a little dubious as Ellie watched me in the depths of my confusion.

“Well, it must be said that you have never once introduced yourself by the name of Nezrose. I had always assumed you had personal reasons for doing so, but now it would seem you never even knew you *had* it. I can scarcely believe it. I mean, in the royal capital your name is a known fact, so the very idea that you

would be unaware, well...”

When Eldan mentioned the word “Nezrose,” little fragments of memories came to me. I dug deeper and then it hit me.

“Ah!” I cried, slapping my knee. “That’s it! Now I remember! When I was first brought here, that’s what I was told! I was told that these were the *Nezrose* Grasslands! But he didn’t say anything about it being a noble title or anything like that, so...?”

The sudden rush of memories had felt like an answer, but I’d promptly found myself confronted by another question. My head tilted again in confusion, and Eldan, Ellie, and Aymer once again looked exasperated with me. I could feel the pressure of their gazes weighing me down, and when I couldn’t take it anymore I spoke up.

“Look, let me explain,” I explained. “The day I got here, a noble title was the absolute least of my worries! They abandoned me out on the plains with nothing but the clothes on my back, so my first priority was how I was going to survive out here. The day after that was the day I met Alna, but that brought on another mountain of things for me to think about.”

“I see. I suppose given the circumstances it certainly wasn’t at the top of your list,” said Eldan, nodding at my explanation. “They told you to cultivate the plains, but you had none of the money or the manpower you were originally promised. Given that there was no official ceremony to announce your rank, I can see how you might not have been aware of it. In which case, given the king’s message, which I will recite to you now, you’ll have to start thinking of yourself as one of the nobility.”

Eldan then cleared his throat, and with one hand on his heart, he closed his eyes and shared the king’s message, which he had memorized.

“It pains me greatly, as the king of Sanserife, to hear of the punishment and misfortune that have fallen upon you, the heroic savior of our nation. When I learned that one of my own flesh and blood was involved in these evil deeds, such was my shame that I had not even words. And yet, through all your hardships you have remained ever loyal, and it is my desire to meet your devotion with a number of just rewards. I do so hope that they please you.”

“And there you have it,” finished Eldan, presenting a wax-sealed letter and a sealed box. “You have thus been appointed the rank of duke, you have the right to a new family name, and you have been awarded a three-year tax exemption. In this letter, you’ll find the message I have just recited, as well as further details regarding your rewards. As for this box, it contains the seal that is hereby proof of your rank.”

I took the letter and the box and held them awkwardly until Ellie whispered at me to just put them away for the time being, which I did. Eldan flashed a satisfied smile and jumped straight into telling me all about what he’d gotten up to while he was in the royal capital, including his audience with the king.

Based on the information Eldan had gathered from both Diane, myself, and his own intelligence team, he was able to confirm, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the money and manpower I was supposed to receive had been appropriated by another party. Eldan had informed the king of my circumstances and presented him with the magical stone from the earth dragon I had hunted. This had put him in a very favorable position for their negotiations.

And negotiate Eldan had, making sure to use the battle with Diane as a valuable bargaining chip to receive both the right to a new family name for himself and a tax exemption for Kasdeks. Afterwards, Eldan had stayed in the royal capital so as to gather information, spread rumors to help fan the flames of my growing reputation, invest in the royal capital’s theater so as to have them open shows about my adventures, and so on and so forth.

When Eldan got to a break in his episode, Aymer took her tail, dipped it in ink, and began recording all the important points. Ellie watched her and waited patiently for her to finish, then turned to Eldan.

“Even given the circumstances, granting a dukeship so suddenly is quite the grand gesture, isn’t it? There must have been some who opposed the idea of a commoner suddenly rising to such a high rank, no?”

“I understand exactly what you mean, Miss Ellie,” replied Eldan, “and when the king first mentioned the idea to me, I admit that I too held exactly the same worries. But when we looked into it, we were shocked to find that nobody

raised a single objection to the idea.”

“Not even one? Is that even possible?” Ellie asked.

“Indeed it is. At present, the kingdom’s nobility have splintered into several factions due to the current battle for succession, as I’m sure you already know. When First Prince Richard gave his approval for Dias’s promotion, his entire faction fell in behind him. As for First Princess Isabelle’s faction, thanks to its leader, Duke Sachusse, having a favorable opinion of Dias, they also gave their tacit approval.”

Eldan added that Second Princess Helena’s faction was made up largely of eccentrics and artistic types, and perhaps because of this they had shown zero interest in the matter.

“That leaves of course the troublemakers in Diane and Meiser’s factions, but none had anything to say about the dukeship, given that it appears to be the least of their worries at this point in time.”

“But for nobody to oppose the idea? That’s unbelievable,” said Ellie. “Nobles love to get into it and argue about this kind of political issue. Give them half a reason and they’ll pounce. Heck, half the time they’ll make up a reason of their own. That’s what I always thought, but perhaps I’ve got it wrong?”

“Well, they’re all so wrapped up in the political struggles of the succession that they don’t have time for Sir Dias. That, and...” Eldan paused for a moment to bring the palms of his hands together. He opened them to show nothing at all, and with an enigmatic smile, he explained, “You see, even if someone were to argue against Sir Dias’s dukeship, they gain nothing from it. No money and no property, for one thing. Then there is the fact that having just been promoted, Sir Dias has little in the way of achievements to his name. Bullying a recently promoted commoner is a bad look and could even be a fatal blow to one’s reputation!”

“And even if someone *were* to still insist on wanting to fight that political battle, in doing so they would be drawing the ire of the king, Prince Richard, Duke Sachusse, and myself. On top of that, there is the fact that in rising from commoner to duke, Sir Dias has become a beacon of hope for all commoners. Should someone look to knock him down from this position, the commoners

will be enraged. In a worst-case scenario, there could even be riots.”

“Given the circumstances, promoting Sir Dias to duke is in fact a rather cunning strategy and perhaps even part of the king’s grand plan. He may well have promoted Sir Dias specifically because he knew all of this beforehand.”

“Oh my,” murmured Ellie. “To think that the king went to such lengths to make Papa a duke... Just what are his motives?”

“The king’s position at present is nothing if not tenuous,” replied Eldan. “He lost much of his authority and many of his allies because of his disastrous strategies during the war. These failures brought about the current battle for succession, a conflict that continues despite the fact that the king is of perfectly sound health. When the dust settles and the king’s heir is chosen, where exactly does that leave him? That particular point is still unclear.”

“By giving Sir Dias and me the privileges that come with dukeship, and making us his allies, the king may perhaps be setting things up to ensure he has a safe place to live out the rest of his days upon retirement. That, and, given the trouble that Diane and Meiser have caused, the king may have wanted us to have an official ‘right to reprimand,’ which would allow us to keep the royal family in line.”

Eldan looked off into the distance while Ellie frowned to herself. Aymer took this moment of silence to whisper to Ellie.

“Shall I record this information too?” she asked.

Ellie’s vigorous head shaking was answer enough. The silence went on a little longer before Eldan’s attention came back to the table, and he spoke again.

“Things are quite a mess in the royal capital at present, and that means that it will take some time before the money and manpower you were always owed can be readied. That said, it’s also a problem for everyone if you’re left simply twiddling your thumbs and awaiting support. The king has thus asked that I provide you with the resources you need, be they money or people. I have official documentation stating that all funding related to this particular problem will be issued to me as government bonds, so please go right ahead and request as much as you need!”

Ellie's eyes lit up at the last part. As for me, I'd thought long and hard about it all and really made an effort to get my head around it. Finally, after a whole lot of thinking, I came to a decision.

"Nope," I said. "We don't need money, and we don't need manpower. You and the king have already done more than enough for me, and I think I'd be asking for too much if I dared ask for anything more. So could you tell the king that he doesn't have to worry about me and that we don't need him to ready any of the supplies that were originally planned?"

That was my conclusion.

"If that's what you want, then of course I will do as you ask," replied Eldan, his features now a touch tight with tension. "But may I inquire as to why? I would very much like to know how it is that you've come to decide that you don't need any further support."

"Y'know, in the first place... Uh, how best to put it?" I mused. "I'm just not all that mad about it. Yeah, I was supposed to get some money and some people, and that was all stolen from me, but I'm not bothered by it. To be completely honest with you, I'm glad that it happened."

If I'd come with bags full of coins and caravans full of people, I probably never would have met Alna, and even if I had we never would have built our relationship. If that had never happened, Iluk Village wouldn't exist, and it was more than likely that Eldan and I would never have become friends.

"I know that it wasn't right for someone to take what was mine, but in terms of how things worked out, I couldn't be happier."

Eldan's brow furrowed, and his eyebrows rose and fell at a furious pace with every word, making it all too easy for me to read his reactions.

"I love Iluk Village and the fact that me and the villagers built it ourselves," I continued, "and I love all the people that have come to call the place home. I want us all to keep on building the village and protecting our way of life. I know how this might sound, being that we've relied a lot on you for so much of what we've done, but I think that the future of these plains is something we're going to build ourselves, with our own hands. And that's why, as the lord of the grasslands, I want us to find new residents and make money on our own."

I paused for a moment to look at Ellie and Aymer. When both offered wry grins and nods, I went on.

“And given how busy you’re going to be with your own dukeship, who’s going to want to come all the way here from Kasdeks? Now, if anybody sees our advertisements and they really want to come on over, like the small-ilk dogkin for example, then of course we’ll welcome them with open arms, but I think forcing people to lluk just because the king or you ordered them isn’t fair to those people. Chances are they might not even like it.”

“As for domain funds, I know you can never have enough money, but I don’t think there’s any need to go as far as government bonds. You just said it yourself: the king is in a tight spot. So you tell him that if he’s got time to worry about little old me, then he should put that time into worrying about himself. He’s the one that gave me the chance to start the life I lead now, after all. I’m still thankful to you, Eldan, for helping us get on our feet and make sure we’ve got a stable way of life, but that was more than enough, I think.”

Eldan’s face in that moment looked troubled, and once more he let out a long, thoughtful groan.

“I understand how you feel, Sir Dias,” he said after a time, “but I would like to correct you on two points where I believe you’ve misunderstood me. Firstly, our relationship is not one-sided; I have not simply been providing you with support. I have received more than enough recompense in the way of earth dragon materials, and I have received a great many other benefits in large part due to you. This is particularly true when it comes to my dukeship and inheriting the Kasdeks domain. As you know, my father and I were forced into battle, and I expected that I would have to go through great hardships before the king would recognize me as Kasdeks’s new ruler.”

“Ordinarily, the solving of such a problem would require a great deal of planning, scheming, time, and money, but thanks to you, my position was accepted and recognized remarkably smoothly. There is much I owe to you in this regard. There was the weakening of the Meiser faction, which would have certainly caused trouble being that my father was a member. Then there was the fact that I, someone who has never before made an appearance in the kingdom’s noble circles, was able to get an audience with the king. This was

thanks to you and your past, and words can't express how indebted I am to you for such support."

Eldan then slapped his big belly and told me the rest with the look in his eyes. It said, "*And let us not so quickly forget the sanjivani.*"

"Next, let's correct what you think about government bonds. For starters, you can rest assured that they will not cause any strain or loss to myself or the king. Government bonds are essentially an investment loan, and the more you take, the more your standing as a noble rises. They act to give you a more powerful voice in matters concerning the kingdom."

"The bonds that I would receive for any support I give you would not be a loss; they would give me a stronger foothold in terms of weighing in on domestic matters. On top of that, as long as the king and I are using them to strengthen our positions, the bonds are a loan in name only. I am not demanding repayments, which means there are no losses to speak of."

Eldan also mentioned that the bonds *did* have an upper limit. However, he assured me he had enough funds that there basically wasn't one as far as I was concerned.

Eldan burst into an ear-to-ear smile when he was finally done. I mulled over his explanation, and I did my utmost to process it, and in the end I was left just like Eldan, sitting there with a long "Hmm..." I gave it my best think, and then I realized that I was thinking so much that I was thinking myself in circles, and that was when Ellie chose to speak up.

"Papa! You want nothing more than for us all to work together to help Iluk Village grow! The duke of Kasdeks wants nothing more than to support your efforts! And I have come up with a most *wonderful* suggestion that will no doubt satisfy both of your desires! I present to you: a road!"

She gave us a grand flourish, then turned to Eldan.

"Sir Eldan, was it not a difficult journey to get here, even in your most wonderful carriage? Did you not have to work your way through the forest, and then the grassy plains? One has to admit that the land is far from suitable for carriage travel, yes? So I suggest that we build a highway! One that links Iluk Village to the closest city in neighboring Kasdeks!"

Her plan included wells, sheltered rest areas, and guard houses all at regular intervals. “And yes, I’ll want roadside inns for trade caravans too!”

Ellie’s eyes sparkled, her fists clenched, and she seemed to be speeding up the more she talked.

“A road is where everything starts! With a road, we can do anything! It’ll bring in people and money! And it won’t go against any of your wishes, Papa! Plus that whole issue with the bonds is solved! Building a highway and its wonderful facilities is going to cost quite a lot of money, after all! Well, how about it?!”

“It’s true! You are exactly right!” cried Eldan, caught in Ellie’s pace and clenching his own fists in excitement. “A road will make the delivery of both goods and people infinitely smoother! Not only that, but I can come and visit that much more easily! Whenever I want!”

Ellie and Eldan then threw themselves into a passionate discussion of exactly what sort of road to build and which city to build it to. Such was their enthusiasm that the matter was practically already decided and agreed upon. As for me, well, I had been overwhelmed by their excitement and the sheer number of words flowing between the two, so I fell silent. Aymer, meanwhile, walked on over to me and giggled into her hands.



“It’s a lot to take in, isn’t it? Nonetheless, you were very impressive. More than anything else, I’m glad you’re just being yourself. As a resident of Iluk myself, I was overjoyed to hear you put your feelings into words. To hear you talk of wanting us to work together and how you love us all—it made me so happy. There hasn’t been much of an opportunity for us to really hear what you want to do and how you feel about the village, and I’m certain everyone will be just as happy as me when they learn about it!”

Aymer then held up a sheaf of papers with a summary of all the things I’d said. It was embarrassing for me to see it like that, but I knew that even if I told Aymer not to show anyone, she’d still make sure the whole village knew. I let out a defeated sigh, and right then Kamalotz came in and started pouring tea for everyone. I took my cup and I drank it in one gulp.

Ellie and Eldan were so passionate about their talks that they were practically white-hot. After they got into where and how it would run, they shared a firm nod and left a cloud of dust in their place as they took off from the tent. I figured they must have decided it was best to see the site themselves to continue their discussion.

If we did want to build a road, we’d have to ask the villagers and the onikin for their thoughts. I had figured checking out the site would start after that, but I knew I wasn’t going to be able to stop Ellie and Eldan when they were still so enthralled in their planning. I decided it was best just to let them be.

Kamalotz returned with another pot of tea; he refilled my cup, then poured some into the little seed cup made specially for Aymer. I watched Kamalotz at work, and then I remembered something.

“By the way, Kamalotz,” I said, sipping from my tea. “I read in a letter a little while back that you went and hired Juha? Guy must be a real handful, no?”

“Oh, not at all. He’s exceptional,” replied Kamalotz. “He’s been a wonderful source of both inspiration and teaching. Not just for Lord Eldan but for me and all the retainers too.”

“Well, yeah, he’s sure good at what he does,” I said, “but he’s also a bit...loose and wild when it comes to certain things, that guy.”

“Indeed. He’s certainly...wild when it comes to matters of pleasure, but his teachings more than make up for it. More specifically, his antiwar stance and his insistence on avoiding war as a tactic are, simply put, extraordinary.”

Aymer lifted her head from her little walnut-shell cup to look at Kamalotz.

“Juha is Dias’s former brother-in-arms, yes?” she asked. “The man who called himself ‘the kingdom’s finest strategist.’ But a war-averse military strategist? I hope you don’t mind me asking, but how does that work?”

“According to Juha, war only ever ends in losses,” I said. “The longer it goes on, the more you lose. He says that war is the worst, and it’s as inefficient a thing as they come. You lose weapons and equipment, you lose a whole heap of money on it, and worst of all, you throw away countless lives. Win or lose, you come out of it worse than you go in, and if you keep it up, it sets the world on the path of decline. Fall far enough, and you’re looking at the end of humanity by monster invasion. Juha always liked to say that if you’re going to use that much money and resources and people, it’s a far smarter idea to put it all into farming. He said that so much I started to get sick of hearing it.”

“That’s exactly what makes him such an exceptional strategist,” added Kamalotz. “In his efforts to avoid war he puts his focus on tidying domestic governance, improving the economy, promoting culture, building our military defenses, and engaging actively in diplomacy. Which is better: putting all your energies into war, or all your energies into avoiding it? The answer is obvious. And yet, Juha puts just as much careful consideration into the potential outbreak of war, and his knowledge of military tactics is astounding. I know that once those very same skills earned him a spot at the royal castle, but I do not know how it was he fell from grace.”

Kamalotz frowned at the thought. Looking at him reminded me of the first time I had met Juha. I’d heard the same thing, and I felt some old memories stirring inside of me and rising to the surface.

“As I recall, when the war began, Juha was in a meeting with a lot of very important people, and he was adamant that the best course of action was to enter a peace treaty with the empire as soon as possible. He was a little *too* adamant. For Juha, war is something that you should end as quickly as possible,

even if it means cutting your losses. His opinion was that we should enter peace talks and focus on rebuilding the nation, then put our recovered power into taking back our losses.”

Kamalotz’s brow remained furrowed.

“So then the war began and the royal army suffered defeat after defeat, and Juha demanded a peace treaty even harder. But even when the tide turned and we started to win, Juha was still adamant that we should enter into a peace treaty. All the kingdom’s elite thought he was an idiot whose only solution was a treaty, no matter the circumstances. They suspected that he might have been working with the empire, so he was pressured to resign.”

“I see,” Kamalotz muttered, falling deeper into thought.

Noticing a slight pause in the conversation, Aymer placed her cup back on her little table and began to summarize our conversation at a ferocious pace on her papers. I figured that we were just chatting, and it wasn’t anything that needed any real recording to speak of, but I was happy to let Aymer note down and record whatever she felt like.

I stood up and stretched my body, since I felt a bit stiff after sitting down for so long, and I heard the clunk of the box that Eldan had given me earlier. That reminded me that I’d been given a letter too, so when I sat back down I took that letter out, thinking it best to inspect it. I peeled off the wax seal and found a few letters along with another small envelope inside.

There was no seal on the envelope, which was made of some pretty thick paper, and inside of it was a blank piece of white paper.

What in the world is this for?

“The paper and envelope is for the writing of your new family name,” explained Kamalotz, noticing my puzzled look. “You write Dias followed by your new family name on the piece of paper, then stamp your new seal into wax to seal the envelope it’s in. Then you can either give it directly to me or pass it on to Geraint if you need a little more time. We will ensure that it gets to the king. I don’t believe there’s a strict time limit on when you are supposed to decide on your new name, but we think it best to do so within perhaps thirty days.”

“Wait a second!” I cried out in shock. “You mean I have to come up with the name myself?!”

Aymer and Kamalotz both looked at me with a shared expression that said, *“Did you really just say that?”*

Eventually, Aymer broke the silence with an exasperated sigh.

“You have received the right to a new family name, one with which you will introduce yourself and be known to others,” she said, her eyes narrowed into slits. “Of course you’re going to think of it yourself. And though it should be obvious, let me remind you that your family name isn’t just yours. It will also become Alna, Senai, and Ayhan’s family name too. So please make sure that you choose a name befitting a duke’s family. It will be a name that will be carried through the generations by your descendants, so don’t choose anything odd!”

All this time, I’d thought that somebody important back at the kingdom would pick out an appropriate name for me, but now I realized I had a whole new problem to deal with. I let my head fall into my hands, and I let out a sigh unlike any other I’d ever known.

Dias, Trying to Get His Thoughts in Line

Early the following day, Eldan gave me a crash course along the lines of “Everything that newly appointed dukes need to know about dukeships and the nobility.” I did my best to understand all of the new information, and we were finally done some time after lunch. I went back to my yurt, sat in my usual spot, and stared down at the envelope on the floor in front of me. I was racking my brains as I thought about our family name.

Eldan had taught me a lot about the nobility, and it turned out that it wasn’t just my direct family that would take on the new family name; it was the name of the whole domain too. It was *very* important. If, for example, I made our family name “Yurt,” that would mean that the land we lived on would be the Yurt Domain and that the grasslands would therefore be called the Yurt Grasslands.

The right to give yourself a new family name wasn’t something that was just handed out like a donation. Some family names had even persisted since the founding of the kingdom itself. With that in mind, it was important to choose a name that wasn’t going to be a hindrance; after all, it was supposed to be used for centuries.

So, we need a name befitting this place and its people that we can go on using for generations...

But there was no way that *I* was going to be able to pick out anything so distinguished. I was really starting to think that the best idea was just to give the envelope to someone else and have them think something up.

“Ah, thought you’d be here.”

That was right around the time that Uncle Ben entered the yurt. He sat down facing me, picked up the envelope that sat between us, and took the piece of paper out of it.

“I’ve come up with a new family name for you,” he declared, taking out a pen

and a pot of ink. “I talked it over with Alna and the twins to settle on it, so don’t go thinking that I did it on my own.”

He was all set to write that new family name down when I broke into a panic. I leaned forwards and grabbed his arm to stop him.

“N-Now h-hang on just a second!” I started. “Could you...please...kindly...tell me what you’ve come up with before you write it down?”

“I told you to knock it off with all that overly polite ‘kindly’ stuff, didn’t I?” said Uncle Ben, more bothered by how I was talking than the fact that I had a hold of his arm. “You’re a grown man, and a duke now to boot. Quit standing on those formalities.”

He’d been so strict with me about manners when I was a kid, so I didn’t think it was fair of him to go flipping the script on me now, and I guess he must have read that in my face, because he flashed me a cheeky grin.

“Fine, fine,” he said. “I’ll tell you the name, then. Baarbadal. That’s what we came up with, and we think it’s a good fit for a family name.”

I let go of Uncle Ben’s arm and sat up straight.

“Baarbadal?” I replied, my head tilting to the side. “I’m guessing the ‘baar’ part comes from the animals, but where’s the ‘badal’ come from? What’s that mean?”

“Alna says that in the ancient tongue it means ‘hero’ or ‘the courageous.’ So Baarbadal can be translated as ‘courageous protector of baars’ or ‘the hero who lives by the providence of baars.’ I’d wanted to have something in the name along the lines of ‘knightly protector’ or ‘holy knight’ anyway, so I quite like it.”

Dias Baarbadal.

“It’s got a fine ring to it, and it’s not too long either. And it’s not like you have any objections, right?”

“No, but I just... Well, could you tell me why you went with that meaning?” I asked.

Uncle Ben’s face scrunched up into an exasperated frown.

“You always need to have it spelled out for you, huh?” he sighed. “When

you're thinking up a family name, and a name for these lands, the first thing you have to consider isn't you yourself but the people you share the land with...and that means the onikin tribe. That's all the more important when you want to maintain friendly, harmonious relations."

"The grasslands of the courageous protector of baars is a name that is likely to please the onikin too. Baars are a core part of how they live, remember? Alna said as much herself, so we can't really argue. And the word Nezrose is an ancient Sanserife word meaning *unnecessary*, so pretty much anything is better than that."

My jaw dropped. I'd had no clue the name of my domain had such a depressing meaning hidden behind it...

"The next thing you have to consider with a family name," continued Uncle Ben, ignoring the look on my face, "is the future of the domain. Being that your intent is to make baar wool and baar fabric our local specialty, then why not have that reflected in this great opportunity we've been given?"

He made sure to really drive the point home from here.

"Specialty *baar* wool from the *Baarbadal* domain, as sold by Duke *Baarbadal*! Now *that's* easy to wrap your head around! And if we need to, we can send a baar-wool handkerchief to the king along with this letter. If word gets around that the king's a fan, then it'll be fantastic for our reputation, and people will be scrambling to get a hold of their own baar-wool items."

Uncle Ben flashed that cheeky grin of his again, but it was even cheekier than before. I'd seen it in the past, and I knew it well. It made me a little hesitant.

"Uncle Ben," I started. "You've got something else in mind too, don't you? Another scheme or something like that? I know that look in your eyes, and it's always when you're thinking up some plan or another."

"Heh. Should've known that you'd notice," said Uncle Ben with a chuckle and a slap of his knee.

But then his expression grew serious.

"Firstly, I'm not thinking up any wicked schemes, so you can relax," he said. "What I'm thinking of won't be possible for a long while. But look, here's what's

on my mind: when the time comes, I'm thinking I'd like to build a temple here. The reason I'm smiling is that I hope this place is Baarbadal when I finally get around to doing it. That's all."

Uncle Ben met my look of doubt with honesty. Ever since he'd arrived in Iluk, Uncle Ben had become something of a counselor for all the adults in the village—a shoulder when they needed someone to lean on. He had a wealth of life experience and stories passed on from the temples, and he put these together into anecdotes all of his own to help and teach the villagers, and they loved it. Sometimes people even lined up to talk to him, so I'd known for a while that one day he'd want a more suitable place for listening and talking to people.

And while I was happy to provide him with such a place, I couldn't quite understand what any of that had to do with our family name. As usual, I figured the best thing to do was just to ask, so I did.

"Well, it's because that temple of mine is going to be a place to celebrate the baar, of course," said Uncle Ben. "The way some stories tell it, the sanjivani herb is a gift from the gods. Now, based on the results of the leaves you got, they were the real deal. On top of that, it was a talking baar that gave them to you. That tells me that baars are messengers of God. Saint Dia never left any writings regarding what form God or God's messengers took, but by coming here we got a glimpse of that. So if you ask me, it's only right that we build a temple here to celebrate and worship baars, the messengers of God. And it's only right that the lord of these lands makes the name of those messengers a part of his own."

I could tell that Uncle Ben was very earnest about each and every word he spoke.

"Having said that, I understand that a temple isn't something we can build for a long time yet. We'll have to grow to at least the size of a town first, and you'll need to have yourself an equal amount of power and authority. Until then I'll just go on counseling the people here, and, well, I want you to be an upstanding lord with a name befitting of your rank. Do it for them...your parents."

Uncle Ben had really left me stunned. He took that moment to flash me that cheeky grin of his and, before I could say a thing, he dipped his pen in his bottle

of ink and scribbled our new family name on the blank piece of paper. *Dias Baarbadal*. Uncle Ben looked down at his handiwork and nodded happily to himself. Then he stood up and, just like that, he was gone.

So there I was, sitting in a daze, alone in my yurt. When I finally came out of it, I took that piece of paper in hand and stared at the name Uncle Ben had written.

“Putting aside the idea of building a temple for baars,” I muttered to myself, “it *does* have a nice ring to it. And I sure don’t mind the meaning either.”

I picked the envelope up off the floor, and it was then that I remembered I had no idea how to use a wax seal. So I got to my feet, and with my letter and envelope in hand, I headed for Eldan’s camp.

When I arrived, I told him that I’d decided on a family name. They were surprised by how soon I’d come up with something, but they taught me how to set the wax seal on the envelope, and then I handed it over for them to give to the king. I went on back to Iluk after that only to find that all of the villagers were bustling about every which way. It was still only around noon, yet they were putting out the dinner tables and cutlery and preparing a campfire and torches.

It looked to me like they were getting ready for a banquet.

We’d only just held a banquet to celebrate the vanquishing of those wind dragons, but when I considered my promotion and our new family name...I guessed I should have seen it coming. The villagers just loved holding their parties, and they weren’t going to let an occasion like this go uncelebrated.

Steam and smoke were quickly rising from the kitchen range, and the dogkin were running left and right carrying this and that. The twins and Klaus and Canis were decorating the square and the dining tables, and the grannies were making sure that everything was in order. I couldn’t do much else but stare at how efficient the village had gotten at prepping parties. When things cooled down a bit at the kitchen range, Alna took a moment to come on over and talk to me.

“Have you handed over the official announcement of our family name?” she

asked.

“That I have,” I replied. “I literally just came back from handing it over to Eldan. He’ll see that the king gets it safely. We’ll have to wait until we get a reply before we can officially go using that name for ourselves, but I don’t see the harm in going right ahead and calling ourselves the Baarbadals.”

“Well, I don’t really understand all that family name business, but I will say this: it feels good calling this place the Baarbadal Grasslands.”

Alna looked out at the lands surrounding our village. She watched the wind rustling through the plains. I watched her watching them, and a thought bubbled to my mind. I decided to bring it up.

“Speaking of which, the onikin don’t have a culture of family names, huh? Being a commoner originally, I was pretty much in the same boat, come to think of it...”

“We don’t have commoners or nobles or any culture of that kind,” Alna said, turning back to me. “Back when there were more of us, we had something a bit similar, though. We’d introduce ourselves using our fathers’ names in addition to our own, to make it easier for others to know which family we belonged to or where we came from. But that’s not really anything like a family name.”

“You used your father’s name?”

I hadn’t heard of anything quite like that before.

“It’ll be easier if you just see it for yourself,” said Alna.

She called Senai and Ayhan, who were busy decorating tables for the banquet.

“Give Dias your family introduction,” she said.

The two girls stood up straight and each raised a hand.

“I am Senai, daughter of Dias!”

“I am Ayhan, daughter of Dias!”

They both spoke with loud, clear voices. I could tell by how they spoke that this was something they’d been practicing. Alna nodded, satisfied with what she

saw.

“Good job, girls,” she said.

Senai and Ayhan burst into smiles and looked at one another.

“We did it!” cried Senai.

“We did!” cheered Ayhan.

Then they took each other’s hands and jumped up and down happily. A moment later they remembered they still had work to do and got back to decorating the tables. Alna smiled until they were out of sight.

“That’s how we used our fathers’ names to tell others where we were from,” she said. “Sometimes, once you were married, you’d introduce yourself by your husband or wife’s name, and in the case that your grandfather was someone important, you’d introduce yourself with both his and your father’s name. In that way, maybe it is similar to your family names, but in our case it wasn’t exclusive to nobles, and you didn’t use it for land.”

“I see. It does feel a bit similar,” I said, “but I feel like it gives a bit more information, and it’s a bit easier to understand.”

“Yeah, it’s polite to introduce yourself as thoroughly as you can. And when someone gives you such an introduction, it’s only good manners to respond in kind.”

“I see...”

There wasn’t any need for me to go introducing myself to the onikin anymore, but given that it was an issue of manners, I made a mental note not to forget what Alna had just told me.

“By the way,” said Alna, “how far do these family names stretch? Who can go using it as their new family name?”

“How far does it stretch? What do you mean?”

“I’m not well-versed on the subject, but I know this much: you can use it, and as your wife, I can use it. Senai and Ayhan live with us, so they can use it too, but what about Aisa, Ely, and Ellie? Or the other orphans you raised? What about Uncle Ben? And if your parents were still alive, could they use your new

family name too?”

“Ah, okay, now I get it,” I said, nodding. “I learned about that with Eldan this morning. It’s up to me to decide who gets to use the family name. I can give the okay to Uncle Ben, I could have given it to my parents, and if I want, I can bestow it on the kids I raised too. That said, anyone who takes the name will be expected to behave as a member of the nobility. Anyone who can’t follow noble rules and etiquette runs the risk of sullyng our name and reputation. If I allow my children to take on the family name, it means they’re officially my heirs. So I guess it really comes down to whether or not the twins or anybody else wants the name or not.”

I knew that Senai and Ayhan still had a special place in their hearts for their real parents, and I knew that Aisa and Ely had lives and families of their own now. Eldan had been real patient with me, but noble rules and etiquette were complicated and I couldn’t remember it all. There was no way I was going to be able to enforce all those rules, so I figured I’d leave it up to each individual to decide.

“So if someone wants to, they can become a Baarbadal?” asked Alna, her smile growing much brighter and bigger. “So I can be one of the kingdom’s nobility? And the twins and Ellie can be your heirs? And if I have kids, they can be nobles too?”

“Hm? Hmm...? Well, yeah, I don’t mind. I mean, if it’s what you and they want. I’m not going to force any of you. All those noble rules are just ridiculously complicated, and I honestly don’t know if I want to force them on children. Which reminds me, I’ve got another class with Eldan tomorrow, so maybe you should come along. Then you can see for yourself just how annoying it all is.”

Alna was still beaming as I spoke, and her smile grew even bigger. She chuckled to herself for a bit, and that marked the end of our little talk.

“Get yourselves ready for a bigger banquet than usual!” she declared, loudly enough to be heard by everyone in the whole bustling village square.

Alna then ran off back to the kitchen range, leaving me to just stand there scratching my head.

With Alna's energetic attitude buoying all the others, preparations started moving faster and livelier, and we really did end up with something even bigger than usual. Given the occasion and the fact that Eldan was around to see it, we invited him and his people to join us, and before I could check the time it was already evening. The banquet was so bold and boisterous you couldn't compare it to anything we'd had in the past.

Alna was enjoying herself even more than usual, and that set off Senai and Ayhan, who were all the more excited. When you threw in all of Eldan's wives and servants, all of whom were overjoyed at his newfound health, you had an Iluk banquet with a brand-new energy.

At the center of it all were the seats of honor, all done up so they stood out, and that was where I'd sat with Eldan, talking while we watched everyone enjoying themselves. Eldan was slowly eating some food that Alna had made just for him, and he looked to be enjoying it. It was made by stewing cheese and goose eggs in one of her herbal concoctions, then adding little round pieces of dough, as well as dried meat that had been thoroughly soaked in hot water. When it was all done, Alna had topped it off with some more herbs.

I didn't know if you'd call it an herbal porridge or an herbal soup, but it was full of herbs. It had a unique and somewhat polarizing taste, but Eldan liked it a whole lot. After he finished his first bowl he had another, and then another, and then asked for another again. But even then the spoon in his hand never stopped shoveling food into his mouth.

"Wow..." he uttered. "This stewed bread dough is so soft and chewy. I positively can't get enough of it. I'd never even considered the idea of crushing rice down and adding it to bread dough before. I'm going to have my own chefs try it!"

As he gave his compliments to the chef, Eldan emptied a fourth bowl of Alna's specialty, and only then did he finally put the bowl and the spoon down. He rubbed his stomach happily and turned to me.

"Everyone is so spirited. Everywhere I look there are smiles, and the food is simply divine! Thank you so much for inviting us to such a wonderful banquet!

This might be the first time I've ever seen one so filled with joy, and so tasty to boot!"

"Well, I'm just glad you're having a great time," I replied.

Eldan nodded happily, and then he seemed to notice something. He looked over at the twins and his head tilted to the side.

"After you explained it to me, I see why Alna is so very happy, but why is it that the twins are so boisterous today? I see them looking over at me and Kamalotz, and I can't help but wonder whether we have something to do with it..."

Senai and Ayhan had been running back and forth from one end of the banquet to the other, but then they stopped and they stared at Eldan. Their faces bloomed into great big smiles and they started running around in circles together. I thought about it a little before answering.

"Well, I think for those two it's not so much about the banquet but just seeing you and Kamalotz looking so healthy. That really pleases them. They lost their real parents to illness, and they've never forgotten. You and Kamalotz weren't well before, but now you're better, and I can tell that they were glad to have helped you two. I think for them, it might feel a bit like striking back against the illness that took their parents."

"I see. In which case I can understand their joy. Perhaps more than striking back, they've been able to play a part in helping others to overcome and surpass what once befell their parents."

Eldan smiled warmly at the two girls, and their running around must have set off some dogkin, because they joined the girls and everyone was running around in circles. Eldan watched them as he rubbed his jaw thoughtfully.

"I was surprised to see the small-ilk dogkin so conscientiously going about their various jobs," he said, "but it surprises me all the more to see them getting along so well with other races too."

"Ah... I heard that they were a bit troublesome in the past. Is that what you're talking about?" I replied. "I think the environment here might suit them, because ever since they arrived I haven't had a hint of trouble. Not from their

attitudes or their actions. In fact, I'm kind of stumped as to what trouble there could have been in the first place. The mastis are working hard as our domain guard, the sheps love taking care of our livestock, and the senjis are always working the fields and looking after the twins. They help us out all over the place, and I couldn't be more grateful."

Eldan crossed his arms, his brow furrowed with deep thought. He let out a long "Hmm."

"There is much in this world that I have yet to fully understand, and this just drives the point home again," he said. "I lacked the necessary commitment, and once again...I feel glad to have met you and made you my friend, Sir Dias. Even putting aside the sanjivani completely, being able to see your village like this fills me with both joy and gratitude."

Eldan paused for a moment, flashed a great big smile, and turned to me.

"Thanks to you and your village," he said, his voice taking on a certain meaningful weight, "I see all new possibilities opening before me. If I cannot repay you with monetary rewards, then at least allow me to once again express my feelings through my words. I am so very, very grateful to you and your people, Sir Dias! I have long dreamed of changing the world, and yet at the same time I felt defeated by the fact that I would be unable to achieve such a grand goal over the course of my short lifetime."

"But now things are different. Now I am different. My dream is no longer just a dream, it is a goal I can realistically aim for and achieve, and now that I have been given the foundation upon which to build to that goal, I must see it through!"

There was a great depth of strength and emotion in Eldan's voice, and it left me unable to even reply. I couldn't help thinking that it was all the result of coincidence. Everything that had happened had just happened the way it had, and it wasn't like I'd had Eldan specifically in mind for any of it, so I didn't really know if it was right for me to accept all that gratitude.

But my face must have been an open book to Eldan, because he looked at me being silent in thought, and he grinned.

"From now on, I am going to work even harder than before," he said. "I will

endeavor to take the sight I see here before me of various races mingling and smiling together and spread it across the world. And so I hope that you, Sir Dias...no, Duke Baarbadal, will support me in my efforts!”

I didn’t think there was much I could do for him, but I decided to offer what I could.

“Compared to your grand goals and the feelings that drive them, I might only be able to assist in small ways, but if that’s enough for you, then I promise to give you all I have.”

The next day, I sped through our daily chores and housework because Eldan was holding another class for me on the nobility. Alna was going to be joining me on this occasion, and the two of us took a seat at the table in Eldan’s big old tent while Eldan walked around the place happily and taught us all the ins and outs.



According to Eldan, it was Sanserife's founding king who had devised the "peerage system" with its nobles and commoners. It had been conceived in order to manage the lands when they were far more expansive. The ranks of the nobility were established to encourage growth through competition, and the highest rank of duke was put in place to keep the royal family in check.

Dukes therefore had access to special, enviable, and powerful rights unique only to their rank. This made their position very appealing and was intended to ensure that all worked to the best of their abilities in the hopes of attaining such authority.

That said, there were a number of strict conditions that one had to meet in order to attain dukeship. As the legitimate son of a duke's family, Eldan met these conditions. In my case, the conditions were met thanks to my efforts in the war, my slaying of a dragon, and then my presenting said dragon's magical stone to the king. Well, according to Eldan, anyway.

As for what rights dukes had in their power, one of these was the right of reproof regarding lower-ranked nobility, then some rights related to laws and taxes, and... I'm going to level with you, there was just so much that I couldn't remember it all. The point is, dukes had a lot of privileges.

What surprised me most out of all of this was that dukes could support the king and his work as regents. Additionally, if all the dukes voted unanimously, they could remove the king from the throne; and if even a majority of dukes voted for it, a prince or princess could be disinherited. What this told me was that the position of duke was much more important than I had first thought.

"Of these privileges and special rights, I want you to take special notice of the 'discretionary right of domain,'" said Eldan. "This right gives you permission to sell the land under your control without seeking the express permission of the king. It also allows you to cultivate and acquire uninhabited land in the same way. It is an extremely powerful privilege. For example, the Kasdeks domain grew to its current size because my father, Enkars, bought the neighboring domains with his abundant wealth. Buying your way to expansion is thus one potential path forwards, though you may also sell your lands to pay taxes and ensure the stable management of your property."

As he spoke, Eldan pointed to a map of Kasdeks, which hung on the pillar at the back of the tent.

“I see,” I said, a little confused as I took it all in.

“I get it,” said Alna, nodding confidently.

Eldan then cleared his throat, straightened up, and looked at us both before going on.

“Now that I have explained this, I would like to put it into practice right away,” said Eldan, gesturing to his map. “On the border between our domains is a forest, and I would like to sell the half on the side of the grasslands to you. I would thus like you to name what you deem a satisfactory price for it.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I thought Eldan might be doing it as a reward for the sanjivani herbs, but once again Eldan saw through me right quick and shook his head.

“This is not about...*that*,” he said. “I am not about to simply give away the lands of my people as thanks for a personal favor. I will admit that your generosity did influence my decision to sell, but I intend to make sure that you pay an appropriate price, so please do not worry about anything like that.”

“Let me say this: after having seen your village myself, I believe the forest is important to you...and *your people*. What I am referring to specifically is where you...and *your people*...are acquiring the wood that you use for your homes and in your daily lives.”

For some reason, Eldan was putting a great emphasis on the words “your people,” and I just couldn’t work out what he was getting at.

“All the yurts and timber we’ve used so far have come from Alna and the onikin,” I said.

“And where have...*Alna and the onikin*...gotten their lumber from?”

He was at it again, putting emphasis on his words. Except this time it hit me. I knew what Eldan was getting at.

“So you mean...”

I turned to Alna, who swiftly looked away. Her posture erased any possible

doubt, and her silence spoke volumes. The onikin people had been taking their wood from Eldan's forest.

"Oh..." I said.

The truth of the matter was that for our yurts, and for pretty much everything else, we had used a good amount of timber. I hadn't even thought about any of it really, because it had all come to us by way of the onikin tribe. Now, however, I knew exactly where they'd been getting all that wood that they'd given to us.

When the onikin needed materials they couldn't acquire on the plains, most of it came by way of the expeditionary parties that Zorg was a part of or from locations nearby. But as it turned out, harvesting from some of those "locations nearby" amounted to theft, and Eldan had noticed, which was why he wanted to make this deal.

So I guess the reason he kept saying "your people" was because I haven't talked to him much about the onikin, and he was being considerate.

"Now if you need wood, you can always tell me and we will gladly prepare some to sell to you. However, that will always involve some clerical work and if that is too much of an issue, then simply selling you an amount of land is another option. I believe doing this is something of a necessity to avoid future conflict, and I believe we have an easy solution right there in front of us."

I took a moment to think. Now, I knew that I *could* tell the onikin that the forest belonged to Eldan and that they should stay clear, but as to whether they would all just go along with it...I couldn't say anything for certain.

Let's be honest, as long as timber is a life necessity, they'll just keep on taking it no matter what I say. In which case, as long as that forest is a part of my domain, it's not a problem.

"I understand now that buying the forest is a necessity," I said, "but putting the right price on it is a whole mess of its own. I don't know a thing about property value, and in terms of what I can pay you with, well..."

But in response to my hesitation, Eldan just smiled.

"That's the hard part of being a duke," he said. "Negotiating prices, raising money for payments, reaching a point of mutual benefit... And if people are

living on the land you're dealing with, you may need to convince them beforehand. You have the right to certain freedoms in your position, but that doesn't mean that things will always go the way you want. I want you to be aware of that while you think things over."

So I did as Eldan said and thought things over. I let out a long "hmm" and then I let out a whole lot more, and when I felt like I was all out of "hmm"s, I finally spoke.

"Well, all we've got to offer you is our remaining gold and materials from two and a half wind dragons. How about that?"

The smile on Eldan's face froze the moment he heard me. He stayed like that for a little while, then the color drained from his face and he heaved a big ol' sigh.

"Sir Dias... Dragons, *again*? And two and a half of them this time? That's just not fair. Not fair at all. I mean, in terms of value it's fine, not to mention how rare they are. That will indeed solve the problem at hand, but it's just *not fair*!"

Eldan's shoulders slumped defeatedly, and that was when I remembered that I hadn't yet told him about the wind dragons. Still, now I wasn't sure how best to explain how that had happened...

While wind dragon materials weren't as tough as earth dragon materials, they were still plenty hard and lightweight to boot. They were valuable because they could be used for accessories, tools, weapons, and armor. The rarity of the materials also put them right up there next to earth dragon materials, which made two and a half wind dragons a good deal for the forest that Eldan was offering.

Now for me, it felt like enough just to go get the materials, give them to Eldan, and be done with it, but this was a lecture of sorts. Eldan wanted me to practice negotiating, even if it was just practice. So I gave it a shot, but...after a while I just plumb gave up and decided that from that point on, I was going to drop all negotiations in Ellie's hands.

Clothes and food and everyday essentials were one thing, but land and dragon materials were another, and when it came to bigger discussions about

land value and the economy, I really couldn't follow. Maybe I just hadn't the imagination for it, but it was more than I could handle. Still, Ellie made a living in sales, so it seemed best to leave things with her.

"Well, that's certainly one option," Eldan told me. "And it is very important to surround yourself with friends and assistants that you can trust. However, if you, as the person in charge, know nothing about what's going on, you won't be able to make the correct decision should things go wrong. For that reason, studying the matters of your domain is important, and you simply must keep it up!"

That got Eldan even more passionate about the session, and he launched into a really long-winded explanation of all sorts of things, most of which Alna and myself couldn't remember. In that way, alongside our study session, Eldan spoke to Ellie about the highway, and negotiations proceeded with regards to the forest and the wind dragon materials. In the end it was decided that the highway would start at the city in which Eldan lived, Merangal, then pass through the forest and the grasslands and along the side of Iluk Village to about the center of our domain.

We'd have to pay separately for any other roads we wanted to build. Ellie had lots of ideas, but that was all going to happen in the future.

As for the forest, Ellie managed to bargain Eldan down to just two wind dragons. With the bargaining settled, we drew a line through the forest on a map to make clear which parts belonged to whom, and then Eldan and I stamped a number of documents certifying the fact. There were two copies of the maps and the contracts: one for me and one for Eldan. The original would go to the king. Once that was done, our property negotiations were complete.

All the studying and negotiations took three days in total. But now that Eldan was all done with the official business he'd had to share and the dukeship business he'd had to inform me of, he was very happy. Things had gone even better than he'd expected, and he went home with a real hop in his step.

Before he left, though, he gave me a book to review our lectures. It had all the stuff he'd told me about in his lecture, in excruciating detail, so I could study it whenever I wanted. He must have known that I simply wasn't going to take it all

in on a first hearing, and I planned to go to it whenever I came up against something to do with nobles and dukes that I didn't understand.

In any case, that marked the end of some jam-packed days with Eldan's entourage. I thought we'd have a little peace and quiet for the next while, but just a few days later, around noon, there was a whole new commotion to deal with.

That commotion started the moment Senai and Ayhan found out that the forest had become part of our domain. They immediately went about ranting and raving and stomping their feet.

"We want to go to the forest! Let's go to the forest! Let's all play in the forest!" cried one.

"We'll gather walnuts! Go mushroom foraging! Pick herbs!" cried the other.

The twins had lived a good portion of their lives in the depths of the forest with their parents. I'd bet that as soon as they'd heard about the new forest, it had sparked a whole lot of happy memories. So the girls just couldn't contain themselves. It wasn't often that they expressed themselves with such intensity, and I wanted nothing more than to give them what they wanted, but I couldn't just let them waltz off into the forest either.

While the matter of the forest had of course been settled in person, it was still technically Eldan's domain at the moment. We couldn't quite claim it as our own just yet, and it was going to be some time before the official papers made it to the king's desk.

Once Eldan has gotten all settled back into daily life, maybe we can ask him if it's okay to enter the forest.

Figuring it was going to be a while, I knelt down by the girls and was about to give them the bad news. Right then, however, Alna walked up to us all carrying a bunch of different baskets of varying size.

"Senai, Ayhan, Dias," she said. "We're okay to visit the forest as long as we don't go too deep. I already got permission from Eldan, so we're all good. More importantly, fall is coming, and I'm not going to wait for some annoying bit of paper to give us the okay to start gathering."

When I heard Alna say that, it was the first time I noticed that the sunlight was losing its usual strength, and the wind was bringing a chill with it. It wasn't cold yet, but it didn't feel like summer out on the plains anymore, which meant we were standing at the doorway to fall.

"We've passed through spring with its fading hints of winter, and we've been through the peak of summer with its searing heat. Now autumn has started, and that means it's time to prepare for winter. We'll gather nuts and berries that have grown in the sun, make fodder for the livestock, and get the yurts ready for the colder weather. We're going to be busy, and we'll need as much help as we can get. It won't just be Senai and Ayhan working either; we'll even give the baars jobs if they can help in some way! Girls, you're going to be going to the forest every day from now on, you hear?"

She couldn't have made the girls any happier, and they started jumping around with excitement.

"We're going to the forest!" cheered Senai.

"Every day! Every day!" added Ayhan.

I watched the girls jump and shout and sing for a bit, and then I turned to Alna.

"Is fall really that busy here in the grasslands?"

Perhaps she saw the look of uncertainty on my face, or perhaps it was just that she didn't know why the twins were so gosh darn happy, but either way Alna flashed me a great big smile as she replied.

"Yep! You'll be so busy you'll feel like sleeping is a waste of time! If we take things easy and slack off, the summer sun will be all gone before we know it! Fall is a season for hard work! It's all about making sure we're prepared for the cold!"

Alna went on to explain that there were a number of rules that had to be followed when the onikin tribe prepared for winter. Firstly, the migrating birds were the first sign of fall, so that was when preparations had to start. When you hunted, you had to be careful not to hunt the females. It was also important to avoid fighting with other families over materials and hunting spoils. Livestock

fodder was to be made with the stiffer grass that grew far from the village, but you had to make sure not to make too much.

Her lecture went on for a good while.

Alna had seen a migratory bird just a few minutes ago, and that was all the sign she needed to switch her mindset to winter preparation. It was why she was carrying all the baskets too.

“We’re mainly going to be gathering rock salt in the southern wilds, making fodder and hunting here on the plains, and gathering food and materials in the forest,” Alna explained. “We can leave the rock salt to the dogkin. They already proved that it’s easy work for them. We’ll put Klaus in charge of the fodder and the hunting since he told me he’s done that kind of thing before. I don’t want to leave the forest foraging to just anyone, though. It’s difficult work because you have to know the difference between what’s safe and what’s poisonous, and there are lots of other rules to remember.”

“Fortunately, the twins look like they’re raring to go, and your axe was practically made for chopping down trees, Dias, so I’ve put our household in charge of forest duties.”

And with that, Alna passed me a kind of basket knapsack that looked like it was made especially for me. Inside of it was a pair of long leather boots, leather gloves that went up to my elbows, a leather cloak with a hood, and a jute bag and knife for harvesting and foraging. Senai and Ayhan were given the same stuff, and they threw it all on right away.

“So, uh...are we going to the forest every day now?” I asked as I took a closer look at everything in my basket. “I mean, we’ve got the onikin village nearby, and I’m a bit worried about spending so much time in the forest with Francoise so close to giving birth.”

“You don’t have to worry about her,” said Alna, without a hint of worry. “Uncle Ben will take care of that.”

“Uncle Ben?”

“Yep. He’s been a good companion to Francoise, and the dogkin that are expecting too. He’ll take care of them all. He’s already easing all their worries

with his fables, which teach all about babies, raising kids, how to prepare for giving birth, and how precious it is to bring a new life into the world. Let me tell you, it was a real surprise to see how good he is at putting a pregnant baar's heart at ease."

She paused for a moment to look over at Uncle Ben's yurt, then continued.

"Onikin mothers and grandmothers offer their own words of wisdom, of course, but Uncle Ben's advice is unique. There's some kind of power to his words, or perhaps he just knows how to word his messages for his listeners. It's like there's a magic to his aura, his gestures, and even the way he breathes."

Fear was a matter of the heart. We feared the darkness that fell over evening, we feared sudden disaster, and we feared the unknown. There wasn't much people could do about these irrational fears, so it was the job of the priests at the temples to ease people's worries. That was what Uncle Ben was doing; he was putting his wealth of experience to use here in the village.

"I see," I said. "In which case I guess it's fine to leave Francoise in his capable hands. But her being pregnant and all, we'll come back if we hear word of anything out of the ordinary, okay?"

"Of course," replied Alna. "I've made sure that in the case that anything happens here in the village, the dogkin will send someone immediately. So you can relax. I know that Francoise giving birth is important, but so is getting ready for winter, and we can't afford to be unprepared! Now, hurry up and get changed and ready your axe. As soon as you're good to go, we'll set out!"

Alna finished talking and immediately got into prep of her own, so I followed suit. I put on my basket, hefted my axe onto my shoulder, and said a few words to Francis and Francoise. When Alna and the girls let me know it was fine to go, I headed with them into the forest.

The Forest in Early Autumn

“The forest is like a storehouse all its own, but it’s just as full of the poisonous as it is the delicious,” grumbled Alna once we’d entered the forest. “There’s poison berries, mushrooms, and grass. And there’s poisonous bugs, snakes, and monsters. That’s why even before you start foraging, you’ve got to be careful and aware of your surroundings. You have to follow the rules... Well, *usually*...”

The sour look on Alna’s face was on account of the twins, who were happily jumping around through the forest, ignoring her every word. I didn’t think Alna liked it very much.

“Look, it’s not just them, okay?” she said when I asked her about it. “*You* look like you’ve done this sort of thing before too.”

She was watching me as I picked a big brown mushroom. I cut off the bits eaten by bugs, wiped it free of dirt and leaves, and put it in my basket.

“Hm?” I replied. “Well, there’s a lot of forest in the eastern part of the kingdom, and I gathered my fair share of food from it back when I was an orphan, and during the war too. Oh, but I’m only gathering the stuff I’m absolutely sure is safe, so don’t you worry about a thing.”

I plucked a second mushroom and cut away the nasty bits just like before. Alna leaned in close to watch me carefully.

“I am shocked you’d even think about eating mushrooms in the first place. I never even knew there were mushrooms that *weren’t* poisonous.”

“Come to think of it, I’ve never seen you put mushrooms in anything you’ve cooked,” I said. “But they’re handy. You can roast them, boil them, or stick them in a stew. You can dry them too. I guess you’ve never really thought of eating them because you don’t see them on the plains. But there’s a whole lot of different varieties in the forest, so it’s worth gathering what you can.”

Alna stared at me dubiously, and then she cast her soul appraisal on me just to be totally sure. Only then did she nod in agreement, and even then I could

tell it was reluctantly. But when she reached out to touch a nearby mushroom, I stopped her.

“Not those,” I warned. “They’re poisonous. They’re the same color so they look similar, but you want the ones like this, where the gills are bigger. *These* ones you can eat. Best remember that, okay?”

But the moment I finished speaking, I noticed a really bitter and increasingly sour look fill Alna’s face.



While Alna and I were having our talk about mushrooms, the twins were still hopping around with more joy than I thought they'd had in their bodies. Then they seemed to find something interesting and stopped, only to go dashing off towards it. Alna and I watched as they ran over to a big old tree, and when we saw what kind of tree it was, we both let out gasps of awe.

The tree had branches thicker than my arm and leaves bigger than my head, and there were lots of others around it filled with one of the twins' favorite foods: walnuts. The girls dropped their baskets, took out their knives and little rags, and began picking up walnuts. Their eyes were all lit up as they knelt down, sifting through the walnuts for the best ones. Once collected, they hulled them with their knives and wiped them clean with their rags.

After they'd gathered about a third of what they could find, they stood up and began their search for something new.

"Hm," remarked Alna. "Looks like the girls already know the rules for foraging. Seems I don't have to tell them."

"I'm guessing the rule is not to take too much?" I mused as I inspected another mushroom.

"Yep. Take too much from a single tree and you interfere with new growth. Not only that, but you have to think of the people and animals it will impact too. If the animals that depend on it starve and die, that inevitably means that we starve too, so it's imperative that you only take what you need."

She then added, "The twins also know not to touch anything that has been on the ground for too long. They know to leave the forest's refuse as it is."

"Ah, I get it. Oh, looks like the girls have found their next target."

Senai and Ayhan were waving their hands wildly for us and shouting, "Over here!" Alna and I put our conversation on hold and went on over. We caught up with the girls and headed where they said, and we found ourselves looking at a tree full of little red berries. The girls had found a rowan tree.

"Quite the haul on it too," I remarked.

Alna's brow furrowed.

“So that’s called a rowan tree, huh? Weird that you’d give a name to a tree that grows poison.”

“Yeah, the berries are poisonous all right. You can’t eat them like this, but get rid of that poison and they’re plenty helpful. Rowan berries don’t rot in the winter, so once you get the poison out you can make a liquid out of it. Put that in sausages or rub it into meat and it lasts much longer. Works with fish too, and I’m pretty sure it’ll be just as helpful with bread.”

Alna’s expression bloomed into one of curiosity, and she walked up closer to the tree.

“Are you for real?!” she exclaimed. “These poison berries can do *that*?! But how do you get the poison out in the first place?!”

“If you leave them in the cold winter air and let them freeze, it neutralizes the poisonous acid and makes them safe to ingest. We know this because birds don’t eat rowan berries until winter arrives.”

The twins ran up to the base of the rowan tree and took their ropes from their baskets. They picked out rocks, which they tied to one end of their ropes, then threw the weighted ends so they would each wrap around a branch. By pulling on the rope once it was caught, they could bring the leaves down closer to themselves. Then it was just a matter of picking out the berries and putting them in their baskets.

“They’re going to fill up those baskets in no time flat,” I said. “Once they’re done we’ll head back to the village to unload, then we can make another trip. Maybe that’s best? We’ll be preparing along with them, and we’re not in any rush yet, but I don’t really know how much is too much or too little yet.”

I had the twins at the edges of my peripheral vision, but I’d found leaves sticking out from some forest potatoes and was thinking about how to dig them up with my axe.

“No, today was all about learning the rules of the forest and taking a look at what we’re working with, but that’s not all we’ll be doing. We’ve got firewood to think about, and we’ll want to get the horses on that carriage of ours so we can gather food in larger quantities. We’ll need a lot of it. Then we’ll be looking for older male animals to hunt, and...yeah, we’ve got a lot to do.”

“I remember you mentioned not hunting females earlier, but is older males another rule?” I asked.

“Not hunting females is a rule, but hunting older male animals is just a preference of mine,” replied Alna. “When you’re making jerky from animal meat, the flavors don’t change whether the animal is young or old, so it feels like a waste to use the juicy, delicious meat of the young for it.”

“Okay,” I said. “So it’s not just mushrooms and berries that we’re looking for but also animal tracks. I had thought maybe we could use matani dust, but now that I think about it, that doesn’t discriminate in what it attracts. In any case, the forest looks full of nuts and berries, so we can come early in the mornings and use the time before winter to hunt about as much as the last lot of black ghee that I hunted.”

“Look at you and all your manliness! That’s what I like to see!” said Alna with a giant grin. “This isn’t like spring, where we can take things easy. Winters on the plains are a really harsh time. If the head of the household lacks manliness, you end up losing your livestock. When you don’t have livestock, and you don’t have help, and you don’t have manliness, you’re in for a long, tragic winter. It’s heartbreaking when you can see you don’t have enough stocked up for the coming season, and it can mean some long, sleepless nights.”

Alna closed her eyes for a moment, perhaps letting some emotions pass, before she spoke again.

“I’m glad it’s looking like this year we won’t have those kinds of worries. And to be honest...it’s been a long time since winter prep has looked like so much fun! I’m so lucky to be blessed with such a good husband!”

We’d literally only just begun preparing, so I really didn’t know if we could get everything together in time, but I didn’t want to rip her excitement to shreds right then and there, so instead I figured I’d just put my heart into my work and give it my best. My job was to keep her hopes alive.

With my enthusiasm at a high, I looked through the forest like a hawk, and in no time at all I found a thick tree with forest potato vines around it. I dug into the earth around the base of the vines and used some fallen tree branches to

dig up more of the earth too. I had to get through tree roots and grass, and some rocks too, but in the end I had a vine with some ten potatoes on it.

I guess I should leave some of them, what with the rules and all, right?

The twins finished gathering their rowan berries while I wondered how many potatoes to leave behind. They came running over to me, their eyes sparkling as they looked at the potatoes. They took some of them in hand and wiped off the dirt, inspected them closely, smelled them carefully, and picked out about half to put in their baskets.

“Are you girls separating the potatoes by which taste better?” I asked.

The twins were poking at the ground with branches and digging holes for the other potatoes.

“It’s not about their taste but their power!” said Senai.

“It’s whether they’ve got growing power or not!” added Ayhan.

“We eat the ones that don’t! We plant the ones that do!”

“It’s so we can eat them next year too.”

“I see,” I replied. “So you’re going to plant the potatoes that can grow in those holes you’re digging? You can’t just put them back where we got them?”

“We’ll put one there, and the others elsewhere!” explained Senai.

“We’ll put them in different places so we have more!” added Ayhan.

“Then we’ll have lots of potatoes! They’ll grow strong, together with the trees!”

“If they’re all together, they won’t grow well! They need space!”

The girls went on earnestly digging their holes. Alna and I looked at each other and shared a nod. If the twins said so, then it was probably the best way to handle them, so we followed their instructions and helped plant the remaining potatoes. Once we were done we had a short break. We gathered up some big old leaves to use as a mat, then we sat down alongside one another and sipped some herbal tea that Alna had brought in a leather sack. And all the while, the girls looked lovingly at the walnuts in their baskets.

“By the way, is what you said true of trees too?” I asked. “Is less better?”

The twins looked a bit confused by my question.

“Too few is no good, but too many is no good too,” said Senai.

“They have to be just right,” added Ayhan. “The branches should let in just a bit of sunlight.”

“Hmm...” I murmured, looking up at the ceiling of branches and leaves. “So I guess there are maybe too many trees where we are.”

We couldn’t even see the sky, let alone the sun.

“Yes, without sunlight you won’t get healthy trees or herbs,” said Senai, looking up. “The forest will be all shriveled.”

“There are lots of mushrooms, but that’s not good,” said Ayhan.

“All righty,” I said, glancing at my battle-ax. “Then I guess next time we come out here we’ll pick out a few random trees from around here and chop them down. We’ll need the firewood anyway, and it’s even better if it helps keep the forest healthy.”

But the twins immediately took to hitting me on the knees.

“You can’t just cut them down at random!” lectured Senai.

“You cut the ones that are weak or in the way!” added Ayhan.

“You mean there are trees that are okay to cut down and trees that aren’t?” I asked.

“Of course!” the twins shouted.

Their shouts had me reeling, and Alna, who’d been listening quietly until now, laughed at me.

“You’re just as useless in the forest as I am!” she said. “Out here, the girls are our teachers, so make sure to take their advice to heart.”

“We’re teachers!” cried the girls, bursting into smiles.

They clearly liked the idea of being called teachers, and they rocked left and right with joy as they started to sing in unison.

“The Leaf King is an envious, lonely soul...

Always watching over the forest...

The loss of the forest is the call of the desert...

So treat the woods wisely...

And keep the Leaf King happy...”

They sang their little hearts out, then they looked at their walnuts again, and their singing gave way to gentle humming. It was a free, easy, and fun time while we rested.

I guess their parents must have taught them that.

“I bet right about now, Grandma Maya and her friends are singing their weaving song back in Iluk too,” said Alna, watching the twins.

“Yeah. Ever since Ethelbald and his wives arrived, they’ve been hard at work every day,” I said.

“The Peijins will come at the end of fall with a big caravan full of goods,” Alna continued, with a great depth of emotion in her voice. “Where he comes from, baar wool is a luxury product, so summer is a time for having the baars eat lots and put on weight, and fall is a time for growing lots of high-quality wool. We’ll need a lot of supplies for the winter, so merchants always come around the end of fall. When the Peijins came in the spring and summer, it was to get a sense of what we might need...and to make sure that we and our baars were still alive and kicking.”

“Ah, so that was their objective, huh?”

“It’s because of the baars that the merchants visit, and it’s because of the baars that we have this life. When you own more baars than your manliness can handle, you can’t take care of them all. Come winter, your baars will perish, and you’ll be punished for it. The number of baars a household owns is a symbol of wealth and a symbol of manliness. I thought we’d see out the rest of this year with Francis, Francoise, and their little one. I never thought we’d see so many more make a home of our village...”

I thought of the Iluk baar herd led by Francis, and I couldn’t think of them as

livestock. To me, they were village residents that the rest of us looked after and took care of. And just like always, Alna read the look on my face without me needing to say a word.

“You were just thinking that the baars are fellow residents and not livestock, right?” she said. “And you know, I guess that’s one way of looking at it, sure. We’re the Baarbadals from now on, and Uncle Ben says he’s going to build a temple to worship them, so it’s probably not right to treat them like any other livestock. They’re residents, they’re family, and they’re divine messengers.” Alna paused to giggle. “I wonder what Francis and the others would think to hear us talk about them like this?”

I imagined the looks on the baars’ faces and I laughed. Senai and Ayhan must have imagined the same thing, because they laughed too, and then Alna along with them. We all had a good laugh about it, then stood back up and got ourselves ready to get into some more foraging.

???—???

“That song I just heard... How long has it been? It’s so old. Ancient. Prehistoric, even. Why, I can’t even believe anyone’s still singing it.”

Whoever was speaking, their voice echoed off the roof, the floor, and the walls around them. A cool breeze flowed through the dark space, and by their movements the speaker looked to be a person.

“I wonder who in the world is even singing it?” they mused. “Doesn’t sound like anyone I know. But those slight traces of magic... Oh? Whose magic was that?”

The person thought carefully, but the memories wouldn’t come. Their head tilted quizzically to the left, then the right, and then they continued to trudge onward.

“In any case, I can’t stop now. I’ll think on it more later. I’ll think on it in winter, when things relax, or perhaps around the spring I’ll hear that song again, and then I’ll remember whose magic it was.”

And with that, the figure trudged onward and away.

Upon Returning to Iluk Village

We returned home with our baskets full of foraged goods. I left my basket with Alna, who had decided to try her hand at cooking mushrooms with some help from the twins. While they were doing that, I went back to the yurt by myself and plonked down on the floor in my usual spot. Francis and Francoise were sleeping on either side of me, so I gave them a pat, then I took out the map I'd received from Peijin and spread it out in front of me.

In the center of the map, the grassy plains spread out in all directions. The east edge of the map showed forest, while the north had rocky mountains, with the wilds occupying the south. The west, however, was blank. I took a couple of small stones and placed them on the map about where I thought Iluk and the onikin village were located, then put a stick down which pointed from the forest to the center of the grasslands.

"Baa?" asked a stirring Francis.

"On our way back from the forest I found the makeshift road that Eldan had traveled to get here," I said, giving Francis a pat on the head. "The trees have been cut, and the earth has been stamped down, and simple bridges have been constructed over the rivers and streams. Now, if we build a highway, I imagine it's going to pass through that same location, so I'm putting all this stuff on the map to get a better idea of how it would all look. The highway will go all the way to the center of the map, and Ellie wants to continue it all the way to the west so it connects with the country where the Peijin family lives."

As I was explaining things I put another stick down, this one going west from the center of the map. Now I had sticks running from the east of the map to the west.

"Baa baa?" bleated Francoise.

"You see, Ellie says that by connecting the east and west like this, we can help the flow of people and products," I said, giving Francoise a good pat too. "By making Iluk the center of that flow, we can earn ourselves a lot of money. And if

we extend the roads north and south like this, then we can more easily transport whatever we gather from the north and the south and sell our baar wool. That'll leave us at the center of a crossroads. I want Iluk to slowly expand from there, like a circle in that center point."

I put down another two sticks, then placed a bowl down in the center of the map, covering the two stones.

"After talking to Alna today, I was reminded that to live here we need baars, and we need food for our baars. That's an imperative not just for us but for the onikin tribe too, so we can't do anything that's going to lose us too many baars and too much of the plains. Having said that, I do really want our village to grow, and I want our people to live well. That's been weighing heavy on my mind of late. And then I'm sure that the onikin will want to grow their village too, so we'll be together in that."

The two baars gently poked me in the ribs.

"Baa baa, baa, baa baa."

"Baa baa baa, baa."

I couldn't make out the bleats clearly, but I kind of got the message.

"First things first, what do you want?"

"Don't worry about the rest just yet."

I nodded at Francis and Francoise, then told them what was on my mind.

"Now, I like the idea of this crossroads, so we break it up a little...then we've got halves...and then with a little of this...and a little left over here...and if we don't have enough we can pay for this..."

I took my time explaining my thought process, and it took a little while but when I was finally done, the baars bleated their responses.

"Baa, baa baa, baa baa."

"Baa baa baaaa, baa baa baaaa."

Which I took to mean the following:

"That's good, isn't it? The rest will work itself out."

“If you’ve thought about it that hard, why worry so much? Do what you like.”

I looked at them, hoping they understood that this was important to them too, then looked back at the map to make sure I was really happy with it. I dropped into thought, and I stayed there a long while. Finally, a noise brought me out of my contemplation, and I saw that it was Aymer.

“Dinner will be ready soon!” she announced.

As soon as she got a little closer, though, she saw the map with its sticks and its bowl, and she looked real surprised.

“Are you playing some sort of game?” she asked.

“It’s not a game at all,” I said, and so I explained to her everything I’d just explained to the baars.

Aymer nodded along the whole time, then replied thoughtfully: “Aha, I see, I see. I think it’s a fine plan... However, for something this big you’ll want the opinion of the village representatives, and someone from the onikin tribe too. The bigger the plans, the harder it gets if things go sour because of misunderstandings.”

“Well, yeah, I was planning to talk to everyone, of course. But is it okay to ask Alna for the onikin side of things?”

Aymer shook her head at that idea.

“Alna lives here with us now and has done so for quite some time. Her opinion is more likely to be that of an Iluk resident. And you can’t take the idea to Moll, because you’ll want to take the idea to her only once it’s finalized. Is there anyone else you can ask?”

That’s when a face drifted to the forefront of my mind.

“Aha...” I knew just who to ask.

“And that’s why you came to me, huh?”

Zorg was sitting cross-legged in the assembly hall, looking very relaxed now that we’d finished dinner.

“And look, I’m not complaining,” he continued. “Not after you threw in that delicious dinner Alna made. But who would’ve thought you could make something so delicious just by throwing some salt on some mushrooms and roasting them? The stems in the soup were good too; great texture. Think I might want to learn how to pick out the safe ones myself now...”

I’d sent one of the dogkin to pass a message along to Zorg, asking him to visit when he had a little free time. I’d figured that way he could sort out his schedule and come when it suited him, but to my surprise he’d turned up the very same day. And according to Sedorio, who’d delivered the message, he hadn’t looked unhappy about my request in the slightest. This was a relief. I’d thought there was a chance he would refuse me outright.

“Now, what’s all this about an idea you can’t take to Moll just yet?” Zorg asked.

He looked around at everyone in the yurt. Alna, Aymer, and Ellie had all decided to sit in on the talk, but they let me take the lead. I was a bit nervous, honestly, so I spoke slowly and told Zorg that I had to clarify some things before we got into the meat of it all.

I told him about my dukeship and how Baarbadal was now my family name and the name of the grasslands. Then I explained how one half of the forest was ours now so we could all use it as we saw fit, and we could cut down the trees that the twins told us were okay to cut.

Once that was out of the way, I got into the topic of the future of the grasslands. It was something that I’d talked to all the villagers about before Zorg arrived. I’d gotten their input and further solidified the idea, and now I was ready to explain it to Zorg.

“This here is Iluk Village, and this is the onikin village,” I said, pointing the locations out on our map. “We want to build a highway that runs through the grasslands. By making it easy for people and goods to flow from east to west, we can make our village a center for trade. We’ll be a place where people and goods gather, and that’ll help us build our wealth.”

“First, we plan to build the highway from the west to the center of the grasslands, then we’ll send it out farther east when we have the capital to do

so. Once our finances are secure, we'll expand to the north and the south too, like so. That said, this is a big plan, and a bigger undertaking, and it's going to impact the onikin people, so I don't want to just force it on you. At the same time, I know it's not so simple as just asking your people for their permission before we go ahead with things."

The highway would increase the number of people who came and went from the grasslands, and while we wanted the onikin to accept that because it was key to our expansion, it might also be the opposite of what the onikin themselves wanted. That made it a potential point of conflict. So I was surprised when Zorg dropped into a thoughtful silence. I'd expected more outrage.

"All of us at Iluk Village intend to make the Baarbadal Grasslands our home for the foreseeable future," I said. "That means harmony with the onikin tribe. We don't want anything to get in the way of our friendly relations. But after some thought, and even putting the highway plan aside for the time being, we've found that there are a number of issues that could become points of conflict. Things like the past wars between the onikin and the kingdom or the matter of who actually owns the grasslands—that kind of thing."

"With all of that in mind, well, I put my thinking cap on and tried to work out something that would cover everything and help us resolve all our issues."

I paused here for a moment to wait for Zorg's reaction.

"You've got things to say, so lay it all out," he said, looking carefully at the map, his expression one of deep thought. "It's pointless for me to go throwing opinions around when you're only half done."

"All righty then," I said. "Given that I thought up the idea, it's not especially complicated. I wanted it to be real simple to understand, and I wanted it to settle any issues that would come up by way of the highway. So here's what I'm thinking: how about we split the grasslands between us, fifty-fifty?"

"We'll each take care of our own halves, and that's where we'll live. Now, I know that we can't split things east and west or north and south because it means we can't build our highway, so I'm proposing that Iluk takes the land on which the highway is built and this circle in the center of the grasslands. Everything outside of the circle will be considered the onikin domain."

I had prepared a specially cut piece of paper for just this point in the discussion. It showed our proposed highways and, in the middle of it, a circle for our domain.

“It’d look something like this,” I said, placing the piece of paper on top of the map. “Now, it might look like the onikin domain is split into four sectors, but we’ll grant you free access to the highway lands, so you’ll be able to move freely and without issue.”

I hoped Zorg would be able to work out the split with the help of the map. Even so, nothing was final quite yet, so I had thought of getting Geraint or the help of our bird friends to get a literal bird’s-eye view and make sure the split was fair. And for the grasslands and forest alike, we’d be able to hammer down some stakes or something to better define the borders, which should get us something close to what we had envisioned.

I said as much to Zorg, and that was when he let some emotion into his face. That emotion was shock, and it was clearly telling me, “*What in the world are you on about?*” He looked at Alna, then at Aymer and Ellie, to see if they all agreed.

Alna and the others all nodded, and Zorg’s disbelief only grew. He had gone well beyond simple shock by the time he got back to facing me, at which point I went on.

“Your people have always lived here, and you might think that we’re taking half of your land from you. I thought about this long and hard for a good solution, but in the end I really think the simplest and fairest solution is to split the land evenly between us. Fortunately, now that I’m duke I have something called the discretionary right of domain, and if I say that half of the domain belongs to you, then my word is as good as the king’s. Which means that so long as Sanserife still stands, half of the grasslands will belong to you, the onikin people. You won’t have to hide, you can live free, and you’ll be guaranteed good land.”

“In terms of particulars, we’ll pay you reward money for any highway bandits you capture, and we’d like to leave some of the grasslands free for wild baars, which means I hope we can come to an understanding of mutual gain in terms

of access to grass. But coming back to the bigger picture, half of the grasslands will be yours to do with as you like.”

That was everything I’d wanted to say, so I waited to see how Zorg would respond. His shock gave way to something I couldn’t read. He was frowning, but he wasn’t angry. Rather, it was like he was stuck between thoughts.

“There’s a lot I want to say,” he finally answered, “but if I were the chieftain, I would take this deal in a heartbeat. For half a century our population has been decreasing while the kingdom continues to grow and develop, even after going to war with another nation. The onikin wouldn’t stand a chance against the kingdom in a war now, so half of the grasslands is... It’s almost like taking too much. The highways will make travel easier for Peijin and other merchants, who will visit more and allow us to prosper further too.”

“And if you think about it, the onikin will see total victory without a fight. We’ll own the whole domain. I mean, how else can you look at it? Alna is your wife, and your children will be her children. When they inherit this domain, it will mean that its leaders are blood relatives of the onikin. Which means the onikin will own both halves...”

Zorg paused for a moment as a realization hit him, and he gasped. He put both hands behind his head and heaved a long sigh like he’d just figured out something huge.

“The chieftain saw this right from the start,” he muttered. “She knew that the moment you two got married, this would be the end result. Even the most stubborn of the onikin will have to be open to the idea. They’ll go along with it. Then it’s just a matter of time...”

“Now I get it. Now I see. That’s why she gave you two of our best baars. It’s why she gave you yurts and tools and why she had you live the same as us. It’s why I’m in consideration for the position of chieftain. If I’m chieftain, it means that the leaders of the two halves of the grasslands will be relatives. *It’s all in the family*. All that big talk about dragon slayers and working that to our favor... All this time we’ve all been puppets dancing on the palm of her hand.”

Zorg kept talking to himself for a bit, looking up and stretching his arms over his head, and I waited for him to finish since he looked pretty serious. Then he

suddenly slapped his hands on his knees and stared me straight in the face.

“Dias. You said you’re a duke, right? I want you to tell me everything. Tell me what that means, explain that discretionary whatever you were just talking about, and get me up to date with the kingdom’s laws. I want all the details. Then we’ll talk about the particular conditions of the deal. I’m not going to be satisfied until I show that old woman up! And I bet if I get all this done and dusted, she’ll be blown right out of her robes!”

There was a confident glimmer in Zorg’s eyes, but I didn’t know what in the world he was talking about. So I just smiled and nodded my head.

Kasdeks, in the Western City of Merangal—Narius

The bar located next to the domain lord's residence was, as it always was, packed to the brim. With the economy booming, coin was being spent like it was going out of style, and there was no end to people sharing good news. Customer and bartender alike were smiling and laughing, and the bubbly atmosphere spilled out onto the street outside. It reverberated from the center of the city, where the domain lord's residence was, and out to greater Merangal.

In the bars, the street, and the main square, people were enjoying themselves with barrels of wine abounding. Atop the barrels was sumptuous cuisine, and even with the sun having set, lamps around the city kept the place as bright as day. It was a bright and spirited scene that easily could have matched the feel of a celebration.

Sitting at one of these barrels was a slightly shady-looking human with shaggy black hair and matching black eyes. That man was Narius, who was in Merangal by Prince Richard's order, and right at that moment he was licking his lips at the sight of the meat-heavy feast laid out before him while he listened closely to the beastkin conversation nearby.

"Hey, did you hear? Eldan's started training recently. All of a sudden he's practicing with swords and spears, and he's even fighting on horseback. He never used to be interested in that sort of thing."

"Yeah, I heard all right. And with all that training he's been hungry too. His chefs are having trouble keeping up, but they're loving it."

"Ah, that. This morning when I saw Eldan and said hello, he was looking really healthy. Gallant, even. Is it just me, or has he gotten taller?"

"Well, the king made him a duke, and then he took on the new name of Mahati. I guess he's more determined now than ever. And with the economy on the up-and-up, it's a good time to be working."

“Hmm...” murmured Narius, cramming his face with a chunk of roast meat stuffed and seasoned with herbs and garlic.

Got to admit, I like this city. The food's crazy good, it's lively, and because of all these different beastkin living together, there's a nice carefree, casual feel to the place. Safe, boomin' economy's good for the guild... Feels like a real shame to let Meiser and the empire just run amok. That said, Richard gave me a job. I can't just not do it. He's been good to me, and I respect the man.

So how to handle things, then?

Meiser was in league with the empire, and planning something nasty. Prince Richard had ordered Narius to make sure that Meiser remained trapped exactly where he was. Narius knew, however, that this would have an impact on Merangal and that it wouldn't be good. On top of that, if those negative effects were to be stretched out and prolonged, the comfort and joy that made Merangal such a pleasant place might then be lost. The thought made Narius uncomfortable.

How to handle things, indeed...

He reached once more for the meat on the plate in front of him, then noticed a giant of a rhinokin woman passing in front of him. Around her were a number of different beastkin children. They were on her back, pulling her by the hand, and happily walking along with her. When those children saw Narius watching them, they waved at him with great big smiles.

A family? No, not when they're all different species. Perhaps the rhinokin looks after the kids in the neighborhood? Either way, this is a place where a woman can walk around at night with her kids in tow... Ugh. I give up.

Narius grinned back at the children and returned their waves.

But what's a guy to do? Well, perhaps nothing. If the exceptional lord of the land just so happens to cotton on to Meiser's plans and make his move before I even have a chance to do anything myself, then there ain't nothing a small fry like me can do about it.

Narius made his excuse and repeated it a few times. Then he gripped a bottle of wine in hand, hoping it might make the talkative citizens even more so, and

he called out to a couple of men chatting away by the bar's entrance.

The Chieftain's Yurt in the Onikin Village—Zorg

Zorg had spent the night at Iluk after his discussion with Dias, then returned to the onikin village early the next morning. He went immediately to Moll's yurt, and he reported to her everything he had discussed with Dias, though he made sure to do so with a somewhat arrogant air; he wanted it known that it was a grand and heroic achievement.

"So here's the agreements we're looking at," he said, summarizing. "Ownership of half of the plains, permission to use the highway and forest, fodder sales to ensure even conditions, bounties paid for bandits captured, and a dedicated spot for our people at the marketplace once such a location is built and established."

Zorg held up a sheaf of papers. They'd been drawn up as per the laws of the kingdom, stamped by the duke, and signed by both Dias and Zorg.

"Now, at present all we've got are these papers," said Zorg, looking Moll right in the eyes. "Nothing official yet. Once we decide to really go through with this, we'll be revealing ourselves to the Sanserife Kingdom. But even then, the documents have the real seal of the duke on them. They're legitimate. The deal is that when we're prepared, Dias will have it all made official. After that, it's a matter of whether we establish our own nation or fall in with Dias...and we can make that decision based on the circumstances."

Zorg waited for Moll's reaction. The chieftain let out a quiet breath and closed her eyes. Then she opened just one of them and spoke in a quiet, solemn voice.

"And what of those outside of Dias and Alna? Do the others agree with this plan?"

"Huh? Uh, well, yeah, they agree," Zorg answered. "This girl named Ellie was there at the discussion, and she said if that's what Dias thinks is right, then she'll support him. There was also a tiny little one called Aymer, and she said she didn't have anything to add, being that it was all so simple it was almost *too* easy to understand. But she didn't look at all like she was against the idea."

“I see.”

That was all Moll said before slowly pulling herself to her feet and walking to the back of her yurt. She took a metal ring from a shelf and threw it at Zorg.

“You have done well and made it a step higher. You are now second in the chieftain discussion. As of today you will take a group from the expeditionary parties and lead them as our captain of the village guard.”

“The village guard?”

Zorg had never heard the term before, and the confusion was written all over his face. Moll slowly ambled back to her cushion and sat down, then let out an exasperated sigh.

“When the highway is complete and people visit in greater numbers, the number of quarrels will increase along with them, no? Let us not forget that we should be wary of the strange behavior of dragons of late; there is something disconcerting in the air, and we must ensure we are prepared.”

“Free access to the forest also means that the expeditionary parties will have less work to do, so you will train those who are free and make certain they are excellent guards. Take charge of the new village guard, and show the village that you are a capable leader.”

“Do not forget: we can thank Dias and Alna for this agreement and what it means for our future. The village guard will work to help and support them in times of need. They have agreed to give us half of this domain, and then they went and made you look like a hero; if someone should look to take advantage of this situation, it would be wise for us to take measures to ensure that they cannot.”

Moll set her stern gaze on Zorg, who gulped nervously and nodded.

He reached for the ring with a trembling hand, and his voice softened as he replied, “Understood.”

Zorg then took out the ornamental horn he had been given and attached the metal ring to it, putting it away carefully once he was done. Then, with his hands still shaking, he slapped his knees and stood from his seat. In that moment, Zorg was the embodiment of resolve.

With Winter Preparations in Full Swing—Dias

Ten days had passed since we'd started preparing for the coming winter, and the village was full steam ahead no matter where you looked. Grass and meat were neatly arranged and drying from poles, mushrooms and berries were arranged on drying beds, and we had huge amounts of freshly washed baar wool drying to be sold later.

Then there was a group of young sheps, led by Shev, who were stomping on sacks made from black ghee hide. The sacks had been boiled in herbal water and an ointment made from animal fat had then been rubbed inside. After the prep work they'd been packed full of grass, and Shev's gang was stomping on them to get all the air out. Once that was done they'd be tied up tight and left to brew, so to speak. The end result was grass that smelled amazing and apparently tasted great too. I didn't really understand the process, but Alna told me to think of it as a kind of grass cheese.

According to Alna, the apricot-scented grass cheese was full of nutrients that helped baars and horses make it through the harsh winter, and it was important as much for its taste as its nutritional benefits. That was probably why Ethelbald and some other baars were happily stomping on the sacks with all they had along with the sheps. The sheps were fine on their own, but I thought the baars needed to be a part of it all to be truly satisfied.

"Baa! Baa!" bleated Ethelbald.

"I get it! I get it!" replied Shev. "We're doing our best for all the newborns!"

Ahh, so Ethelbald is looking over things because he's got Francoise's baby baars in mind. I'll have to thank them all for their hard work.

When I turned away from them, I noticed Klaus and the mastis coming from the north with a cart full of hunting spoils.

"We're back! And what a haul!" declared Klaus.

The senjis and Canis were with him, and a bunch of grandmas all came out

and huddled around the cart. Notable among them were Grandma Alida, who loved dried meats and was awful picky about them, and Grandma Chima, who loved dressing up.

“A ‘haul’ is right! And what a big one!” remarked Grandma Chima. “Splendid job!”

“We’ve still got much in the way of salt and herbs,” added Grandma Alida, “so once we’ve properly thanked the animals for their gift, we’ll make them all into the most delicious dried meat you’ll ever taste!”

The grandmas started saying their prayers, and when they were done they got into the work of dressing the animals. At a glance, it looked to me like Klaus and his team had mainly hunted mountain deer. The animal usually made its home in the northern mountains, but as winter arrived it was driven down and into our domain by the cold. Deer meat wasn’t quite as flavorful as black ghee, and to be honest, it didn’t taste all that great.

So if we’ve hunted this much, then it’s gotta be because the dogkin love it.

For the dogkin, mountain deer, and more importantly their antlers, made for good room decorations. The tough meat was a good snack as well, but the dogkin were more about the antlers.

Grandma Alida and the other grannies were real happy too. They said that the texture and flavor (or lack thereof) of the deer meat made it good for drying, and Grandma Chima said that the hide was good for cold weather gear. When they put it that way, I was happy for the dogkin to hunt as they liked.

I watched all this going on as I leaned on my axe, and then I noticed Alna walking over. She looked a little more tired than usual.

“So you’ve finished chopping the firewood, huh?” she said. “And I see Klaus and the hunters are back.”

“Yep, and they’ve brought back a whole heap of deer. Firewood is just about done too. How are the twins doing?”

I thought back to their fierce pouts, and Alna let out a long sigh.

“Well, it took some help from Aymer, but they’re okay with things now.

There's a whole load of prep that needs to be done for the stuff we've gathered in the storehouse, and they'll be busy with that for a while."

We shared a wry grin between us.

Until yesterday, we'd visited the forest almost every day. The twins had gotten so good at locating and foraging and gathering that they'd managed to collect everything we needed at a blazing pace. Alna had figured that anything more would be overkill, so this morning she'd announced that we wouldn't be going to the forest.

Needless to say, Senai and Ayhan, they hadn't liked that idea one bit. They'd said they'd been working their hardest to help everyone, so why couldn't they go to the forest they loved so much? They'd pouted so hard I'd thought their cheeks might pop.

While this was going on, Alna had decided that if I tried to say something and said the wrong thing, it'd only make the twins angrier, so she'd had me go off and chop firewood.

"Well, when we've got a little more time, I'll take the twins over to the forest myself," I said. "We still haven't finished chopping down trees, and they can use that time to have some fun."

Alna looked relieved at the suggestion.

"Yeah, and it'll be good for the two of them. But we've still got a lot of preparation to do. We have to insulate the yurts, for one. We have to build shelving for the firewood too. We're only just getting started."

"Yep, yep," I said, nodding along.

That was about when the heavy flapping of wings from somewhere above us caught our attention. It drew our gazes, and we found a struggling Geraint, Eldan's dovekin agent, carrying what looked to be a massive bag around his neck. It seemed bigger than him at the angle we were looking from, and I was sure it had the weight to match.

"Geraint!" I called out, hoping to give him a hand. "Over here!"

And just like that, the dovekin practically plummeted out of the sky.

“My oh my, I did *not* expect to find myself on the business end of a hawk’s talons today!” said Geraint, after I’d caught him in my arms and carried him to the yurt to rest. “They’re always on the lookout when I’m slowed down by heavy deliveries, but I say! My luck is simply dreadful sometimes.”

“Well, at least he got away, right?” I said to Alna. “And he doesn’t look hurt.”

“I don’t have any experience treating bird-type beastkin, but I can see to him if he needs medical attention,” she replied.

She looked down at Geraint sitting on one of the yurt’s cushions, but the bird casually spread his wings and, with a light flapping gesture, indicated that he was fine.

“I appreciate the concern, but there’s no need to be worried. I’m perfectly fine. I’m smaller than most hawks, so I put that size to good use. I hid somewhere along my route, and eventually the hawk lost track of me! I will admit to being a tad exhausted due to the size of the package, but give me a few moments to rest and I assure you I’ll be just fine!”

Senai and Ayhan then ran in with wooden bowls, one filled with water and one with nuts and berries.

“Help yourself!” they said, before plonking themselves down in front of Geraint and staring at him.

They didn’t say any more than that, but the hopeful looks in their eyes were far louder than their voices, so the dovekin leaned over to drink a little water and eat a nut. The twins smiled happily at that and took a seat next to Alna. Geraint watched them go, then took a few more sips of water and settled his wings before speaking once more.

“Hoh ho ho! Your generosity is muchly appreciated, girls. I feel rejuvenated! And now that we’re all comfortable, would you mind if I got straight to business, Sir Dias?”

“Not at all.”

Geraint took his bag and pulled it over to me with his beak. It was so full it

was practically bursting at the seams.

“As you can see, I’ve brought you a bag full of letters,” said the dovekin. “Now, let me explain exactly what you’re looking at. The greater half are from Lord Eldan and Kamalotz regarding current circumstances, such as Eldan’s recovery and the lively new life he is living.”

I opened up the bag as Geraint spoke, and took out the letters carefully so as not to tear any of them. As I browsed through them, I saw that Geraint was right; most of them were from Eldan and Kamalotz. The sheer number of them threw me for a loop, but that aside, I saw that there were also three folded pieces of paper—different letters from different people.

“Those three letters are from the lionkin elder, the sambarkin elder, and Canis’s father, the dogkin elder. They are letters of gratitude for ‘recent events’ and include symbolic gestures: a lock of lionkin mane, a piece of sambarkin antler, and dogkin tail fur. Now, we’re well aware that the ‘recent events’ in question are confidential, and that no thanks were necessary, but...it would seem that the three elders were able to put things together just based on the bearing of Lord Eldan’s guard and a few stray words here and there. As such, they insisted on at least sending a brief word of thanks.”

Geraint assured me, however, that the guards had been talked with—and rather strictly, at that—to ensure the secrecy of anything they might have learned.

He went on to explain that there was an important meaning to the elders’ gifts. The animal parts of the beastkin were important to their appearance and, therefore, a point of pride. Parting with even a piece of those things carried great symbolic weight. According to Geraint, it was an unprecedented gesture.

“That said, the parts themselves are of no special value, and you will receive nothing by way of having them, so think of them more as a mark of honor,” said the dovekin.

Even after being told that, however, I still wasn’t sure what I was going to do with the three beastkin parts. Alna saw the look on my face and, without so much as a word, held out a hand, took the letters from me, and put the beastkin parts neatly in a piece of baar wool fabric. She then placed them

carefully in one of our treasure boxes before she returned the letters to me.

I was a little more than relieved knowing that the beastkin parts weren't going to go missing. I turned my attention back to the letters and wondered if it was best to go ahead and read their contents now.

"You can read the letters from Eldan and the elders whenever you have the free time to do so," said Geraint, reading my mind, "and there is no need to write a reply. However, there is one stamped letter in there that is quite urgent, so if you would be so kind as to read this one here..."

I searched through the bundle of letters until Geraint stopped me on the one he was talking about. The letter was a report informing me of plans for Aymer's brethren, the big-eared hopping mousekin who had attacked me in the past. It seemed Eldan was planning to give them work so they could atone for their crimes, and I was being asked for my opinion. The overall point was that Eldan wanted me to either give the go-ahead or reject the idea entirely.

The hopping mousekin would be tasked with investigating and dealing with the suspicious types in and around the domain. And I had to say that, given their tiny bodies and their speed, they were well suited to the job.

"If the mousekin are given complete freedom, there is a chance they might once again attempt to attack you out of feelings of vengeance," said Geraint, "but Lord Eldan wants nothing more than to give them a chance at rehabilitation. Naturally, Lord Eldan will do his utmost to ensure that an attack on your person never happens again. He asks only for your understanding in this matter..."

Geraint sounded suddenly apologetic, but I felt a little relieved by what I'd heard.

"Well, when it comes to the mousekin's punishment, I already told Kamalotz that I was happy to leave it all in his hands, and I'm not about to butt in with an opinion now. If Eldan thinks that rehabilitation is the right thing to do, then I'm happy for him to go ahead. And I think it would make Aymer happy to hear that her fellow mousekin have turned over a new leaf and are hard at work. I owe Aymer a debt of gratitude for all she's done for us, and I want Eldan to do what's right by her and her people. But I guess it's best that I put that in writing,

huh? Hang on just a second, okay?”

Geraint was happy to hear my thoughts, as were Alna and the twins.

“That’s so great, isn’t it?” said Senai.

“So great!” added Ayhan.

I didn’t know who the twins were talking to, so I looked over and saw Aymer sitting on Senai’s shoulder. I didn’t know if she’d just turned up or if she’d been there from the start, but she had a smile on her face just like the others.

“Thank you for being so very kind to all of us,” she said.

I tried to look casual as I smiled back, but honestly I was still a bit shaken by her suddenly being there and I was trying not to show it.

Geraint stayed the night in the assembly hall, and early the next morning he took my reply and he flew on home. After a good night’s sleep and with less weight to have to worry about, Geraint disappeared into the sky at tremendous speed, and I didn’t think he’d have to worry at all about any hawks getting the better of him this time.

Most of the letters that Geraint had brought concerned Eldan’s health. His recovery was going even better than expected; he was eating well and he could exercise quite vigorously. As a result he was putting on muscle and shaping up, and perhaps on account of his youth he was getting taller to boot.

In Eldan’s own letter his wives had commandeered a section to write a great deal of thank you messages, and I could tell by their handwriting that they were mighty happy about their husband’s improved health. I’d told Eldan not to speak a word of the sanjivani incident, so they couldn’t really say a direct thanks, but they all wanted to show their gratitude in a letter about Eldan getting better and them all having an even brighter future on the horizon. I couldn’t help thinking that perhaps they were all blowing things out of proportion a bit, but as long as things were going in a positive direction, then I was happy.

Eldan had also written about plans for the highway and how he was already getting prepared on his side. Once everything was in place, construction would

begin, and a temporary road would be ready by winter that people could use until next year. When the snow melted, they'd start on building the highway proper.

The temporary road wouldn't just be used for deliveries of items and whatnot; it would also serve as a means by which to deliver correspondence. Geraint and his people weren't so effective in the colder weather, so letters would instead be delivered on horseback. The temporary road meant we could feel assured that word would get to us should anything happen. In any case, there wasn't much I could do except leave all of that to Eldan. Sure, I could chop down trees and flatten the ground, but when it came to building a real highway I wouldn't be playing an active part.

And given the season, I had to make Iluk's winter prep my top priority anyway. Alna said that we still had a lot left to do, and it was about time we got real serious about it. If we waited until it was cold, it'd be too late, so we had to get going while it was still warm out.

"What should I do next, Alna?"

After I'd finished helping with the washing up after breakfast, I'd gone out to the kitchen range where Alna was scrubbing at the mountain deer hides. When she heard my voice, she held up a hide to show me.

"We've got pretty much all the food we'll need, so now it's on to preparing for the weather. We'll need to make winter clothes, insulate the yurts, and whip up some winter pajamas for the grandmas and the coming babies."

"Huh? You mean we only need to make winter pajamas for the grandmas and the babies?"

"Of course," replied Alna. "The younger of us won't need them. Oh, I guess it doesn't get quite as cold in the east, huh? So I guess it's only natural you wouldn't know. Winter in these parts brings with it a harsh, freezing cold, but the creatures around here won't succumb to it; the blood flowing through their bodies keeps them warm, particularly at night. This isn't true in babies and the elderly, however, because their blood flow isn't strong enough, and they can freeze to death. For that reason, they'll need proper winter sleepwear."

“I see. And that’s what the mountain deer hides are for?” I asked.

“Nope. You’ll only freeze if you wrap one of these around you,” Alna said, slapping one of the hides into a post to send the water on it flying.

It didn’t make any sense to me. *Wouldn’t the deer hide be perfect for winter?* I thought.

“Mountain deer hide is good for blocking the wind, and it’s good in clothing for protection against rain and snow, but it doesn’t make for good sleeping gear. It doesn’t absorb any sweat, so when you wrap yourself up in deer hide, your sweat ends up cooling. Worst case, it can freeze and cause frostbite.”

“Baar wool makes the best sleepwear. It absorbs sweat and dries quickly, and it’s great at keeping the cold out. In the long distant past two young onikin wanted to climb a mountain in the winter. One wore mountain deer hide and they froze to death in a day. The other wore baar wool underwear and baar wool clothing, and they summited the mountain without issue.”

“Is that so?”

I understood it, but also I didn’t. The mountain deer hide looked plenty warm to me, so Alna’s words weren’t quite sinking in for me.

“When winter gets here, it’ll all make sense,” she told me, and she got back to work.

With most of the water on the hide taken care of, Alna hung it on a drying pole and began scrubbing the next hide.

“Oh, and, uh...what should I do next?” I said, scratching my head. “Should I make up those pajamas you mentioned? Or do you want me to help you wash the hides?”

“Oh, right!” exclaimed Alna. “That’s what you came here for in the first place. I want you doing some setup for insulating the yurts, and that means inspecting all of them. If any of them need any repairs, I want you to handle all of that to minimize exposure. We’ll need to reinforce the yurt pillars to make sure they’ll hold up against wind and snow, then wrap the yurts with another layer of material, but we’ll do all that together once you’ve seen to any repairs.”

“All righty,” I said with a nod. “I’ll get to it right away.”

And then I trudged off to the storehouses.

I took the ladder that we kept in one of the storehouses and hefted it onto my shoulder. Then I lugged it around to all of our yurts, one at a time, and gave them a good look over. I checked the roofs, the walls, the pillars, the flooring, and finally the skylights. If anybody was in the yurts I asked them if they’d had any issues with rain or wind. We hadn’t had any typhoons or rainstorms since we’d moved here, and no major disasters to speak of either, so most of the yurts were pretty much pristine, and I didn’t see any noticeable tears in them.

I took a break for lunch, then rounded up some dogkin to help me with the rest of my yurt inspections, and finally we circled around to the storehouses. We were always moving things in and out of them, so they were looking a little worse for wear and needed a more thorough check than anywhere else. That meant moving out anything that was going to get in the way of our inspection, and that was the most laborious part of the whole inspection process. By the time we finished it was late afternoon, but fortunately the storehouse yurts all looked pretty good.

The next day, with help from Alna, Uncle Ben, Klaus, Canis, and a number of dogkin, we set about insulating all the yurts. We used timber to reinforce the pillars, we wrapped another layer of material around the walls, we covered the roofs, and we made sure that the angle of the roofs and walls was conducive to snow sliding off and onto the ground.

It was a bit different from when we’d been putting up the yurts, so at the start it was a bit slow going. But after we got the hang of things we settled into a nice rhythm and we finished almost everything by the time the sun set.

You wouldn’t have noticed anything different just by looking at the yurts. They looked about the same as always. But when you stepped inside them now that they were fully equipped for the winter, you could really *feel* it. The air was different, and there wasn’t nearly as much in the way of wind or a passing chill. I could already tell that the insulation was sure to be a help when the winter cold set in.

When we'd finished everything, Alna and Canis went off to prepare dinner, Klaus went off to check on the dogkin, and Uncle Ben went off to check in on Francoise. As for me, I decided to check the interior of each of our newly insulated yurts just to make sure everything was really up to scratch.

My last stop was the assembly hall, and I thought about how hard it was on account of it being so big. It made me consider the fact that when our population grew even bigger we'd need to make a different assembly hall. Most likely we'd have to upgrade from a yurt.

"Do you have a minute, Papa?" asked Ellie, who was standing at the entrance.

"Sure. Did something happen?"

Ellie nodded and stepped inside, waving some papers in her hand. She passed them to me and I took a seat. Ellie sat down in front of me, and I waited a moment for her to explain things.

"I heard all about the merchant from Alna, and so Aymer and I got together and did some preliminary calculations regarding how much baar wool we can expect to sell and how much we'll probably buy in terms of food and everyday supplies. We've got a good supply of wool thanks to our darling baars, but we'll be using a lot of that for the yurts and our clothes, which will hurt our sales somewhat."

She laid out the papers on the ground between us, and they had whole jumbles of numbers that were admittedly not in my wheelhouse.

"That said, we'll need to buy quite a lot, and our preliminary calculations show that the imbalance will put us in the red. Fortunately, we still have the gold you received, so it's not like we'll be completely floundering. I just wanted to ask for your thoughts on it all before it comes to any of that. This is just an idea, but we *can* avoid falling into the red by combining other materials for our clothes instead of using exclusively baar wool—"

Ellie looked a bit worried about it all, so I raised a hand to stop her for a moment and shook my head.

"Hoarding coins isn't going to feed us, and it isn't going to clothe us either, so we don't need to be so insistent about saving what we've got. What's most

important is that everyone makes it through the winter, and if that means we run out of gold, then we run out of gold. We'll find a way to make some more. Don't worry about us being red or whatever and just go on ahead and use whatever gold you need to."

"I knew you'd say something along those lines, but all the same we put together these calculations. I just want you to look them over, okay?"

Ellie poked at the papers to get my attention on them, and I noticed that besides the numbers, they were filled with Ellie's and Aymer's handwriting. I ran my eyes across it all, and when I figured that I'd looked at it enough, I nodded at Ellie to indicate I was finished.

"Papa," said Ellie, a little exasperated, "you realize that looking at something and looking *over* something are very different things, yes? I know it's all a bunch of numbers, and it's not exactly easy to read, but... Ugh, fine. I guess it's down to Alna and each representative for these finer numerical matters? I'll show them all when we next have the chance, but let me make sure I have this straight: your stance is that we shouldn't worry about falling into the red, and we should prioritize our winter preparations, yes?"

I nodded again.

"I have one more matter to talk to you about," said Ellie, neatly collecting all the paper spread out on the floor. "It's about the clothing that Alna wants to make for winter. What's our monetary budget for that?"

"Hm...? I mean, we'll need some quality gear to make it through to spring, so like I said, you just go right ahead and—"

"Sorry, sorry," said Ellie, cutting me off. "I didn't explain myself properly. I want to use some money to make our clothing *stylish*. Look, I know that as long as our clothing is functional that's fine, and I get that looking good isn't a necessity, but...it's such a perfect opportunity to dress everyone up in adorable, fashionable clothing, don't you think?"

Alna was making everyone clothes, and Ellie wanted to use some of her know-how to give it a little Sanserife flair, thinking it'd be fun for everyone. "It'll help brighten the mood, and more importantly any clothing we make now is a potential product down the line. So...how about it?"

Ellie gently tapped the sheaf of papers against the floor to neaten it and shot me something of an apologetic expression.

“I don’t see any problems with your idea,” I said with a resolute nod. “And when it comes to fashion and that kind of thing, I think that’s more Alna’s area of expertise, so you feel free to work things out with her.”

I wasn’t really interested in looking stylish, and I was worse about fashion than I was about numbers, but even I knew that wearing something cute would make the twins happy, in which case having nice clothes wasn’t a waste of resources...probably.

In any case, if Ellie was just going to add a little flair, then I didn’t think that would cost too much, so I was happy for her to do what she wanted. And as soon as I said so, Ellie’s face lit up and she clapped her hands together.

“Of course! I’ll talk through all the details with Alna and we’ll work on the clothes together! I’ll have to write to Aisa immediately and have her tailor some things for us! If we don’t hurry, autumn will be over before we know it! There’s northern and eastern aesthetics to think about! But oh! They’re so expensive... Aha! I’ll just go right ahead, and if the budget looks iffy then I’ll have Goldia put it on our tab! After all, we’re helping him set up another shop, so he owes us at least that much. In which case, perhaps we’ll just do all the ordering through him and...”

With her papers clutched in hand, Ellie shot up and raced out the door, speaking her thoughts aloud as she went. I didn’t even have a chance to ask about the stuff she’d mentioned—stuff that left me more than a little worried about how it would all work out...

Mahati (Formerly Kasdeks), in the Eastern City of Bangal—Meiser

In the old city of Bangal, which was a gateway into Mahati and center for trade with western Sanserife, stood a row of old houses. In a room in a mansion among these houses was a desk. It was stacked high with money and documents, and on either side of it sat two men in the midst of conversation.

“It’s amazing that you managed to accumulate such wealth and all these deeds in such a short time. It’s no wonder they call your thirst for coin unquenchable.”

The man who spoke was hidden in robes that covered his entire body and face but was otherwise entirely ordinary. There was nothing particularly remarkable about him. Across from him sat the young Second Prince Meiser, wearing similar garb. Through his robes one could spot his wavy silver hair, his sharp gaze, and a confident grin on his thin face.

“You mean this piddling excuse for gold we have on our table?” he said. “Anybody could gather this much money if they wanted, though it might be too much for that blockhead Diane.”

“So you say, but what you did earlier was like magic and far beyond the likes of me. I couldn’t keep up with whatever you were doing or saying, and I was right by your side. You flashed a coin or two and spoke a few words, and people were suddenly opening their wallets to you. You drew in gold with gold, and just like that, you were buying buildings and property... Now you have amassed a veritable fortune. I can scarcely believe it.”

Meiser sighed.

“We can thank the young Kasdeks and his failures for that. Tax exemptions and free markets are one thing, but you have to keep your eyes open for anyone looking to take advantage of the situation. His failure to track who and what enters his domain is why I made a killing on contraband and bootleg

products.”

Meiser took a few coins from the bottom of the mountain on the desk and smiled as the rest came tumbling down.

“When I think of what is to come, this is truly no more than a pittance. We will multiply what we have here and grow it even further, and then we will finally make our move. Money will bring this area under my control, and then Dias and the Kasdeks boy will become my puppets. And I will sell whatever I must to make that happen—be it goods, contraband, or people and beasts.”

“Then my faction and our spending will aid your lot, and all will go as you planned. And when your plan finally comes to fruition, I will retire to a life of luxury, basking in my riches.”

The man to whom Meiser spoke, an imperial spy, grimaced.

“And what about the plans for you to take the throne and vacate the lands of your kingdom?”

“After all this time, you’re *still* on about that? Given the circumstances, the throne belongs to Richard now. There’s no changing that. Not even if my father sides with me. And when one door closes, all we have left is to use another. But with my...magic, as you called it, we can reach a similar goal in two to three years.”

“If you are not going to take the throne, then this partnership of ours is meaningless. What is stopping us from taking this money here and your head along—”

A distressing outburst of laughter stopped the spy midsentence.

“Give it a rest,” said Meiser, cackling. “Why bother saying that which you are not capable of? If such a thing were ever an option, you would have done it long ago. You pay me to do that which you cannot do yourself. And do not think I have not made preparations of my own. Kill me, and it will not be long before certain *unpleasant* truths spread throughout the kingdom’s lands.”

The spy grunted in shock but was quickly silent. Meiser stared at the man, and the maniacal look in his eyes showed that he held no respect for him whatsoever.

“That the empire sent me the likes of *you* says that they, too, are scraping the bottom of the barrel for manpower.”

Meiser let out a frustrated sigh. The spy opened his mouth to retort, but no worthy argument came. Instead he gritted his teeth and simply spoke his mind.

“What manner of animal are you? In your obsession with money you sell your family, your country...and you do it without so much as a hint of hesitation or guilt. Why? What makes you do such a thing? Is it really money? Is that the sole reason you go as far as you do?”

Meiser replied in an instant.

“It is the idiots of your nation and mine that have made me.”

The spy looked dumbfounded, and Meiser chuckled. It grew from a chuckle into full-blown laughter, and only when he had exhausted himself of it did Meiser go on.

“It was not me who sold this country; it was the idiots who called it home. My father might be incompetent, but he is a good and earnest king. And yet, when the empire attacked, his people were all too happy to betray him. They sold our nation’s food, our weapons, and even our intelligence.”

“From the very start of the war, things were already in place for spies like you to do your work, but that doesn’t make matters any better. Far from it. And when the tides of war began turning in our favor, those past traitors came running back, panting like obsequious dogs. Some were tried so as to set an example for the others, but the merchants that had sold out their own country to line their pockets got off scot-free. They escaped because they claimed they were ‘rebuilding the economy’ or otherwise simply paid their way out of punishment. When I saw that, the truth became clear to me.”

Meiser then snatched up a handful of coins and looked at them with a hateful gaze, all but growling his next words from the depths of his heart.

“Money is everything.”

“My father would have been killed if we’d lost the war,” he continued, “even though he gave everything he had—sacrificed body and soul for his country, for his people. He tries to be a good, honest king, but even he is powerless against

coin. His honesty and compassion are nothing against money taken through blood and crime. Money is so much more powerful than both my father and my brother. They just don't see it."

When he had finished, he threw the coins out the window. Then he stood, approached the windowsill in silence, and stared at the streets outside, that distorted grin still on his lips.

In the Ceiling above That Very Room—Creeping Creatures

"Why can't we attack yet? Let's just jump 'em already!"

"What's the procedure again? When we launch an assault, we get down low and make sure we're not spotted, right?"

"You idiot! The instructor said we have to report *before* we do anything!"

The hopping mousekin, all clad in black, whispered among themselves as they hid in the ceiling.

"You guys! First things first, we have to record this conversation! The instructor will have us for breakfast if we miss even a single word!"

All the mousekin then remembered their instructor, who had overseen their "education" over the last several months. They thought of their instructor's huge mouth and sharp fangs, and they trembled with fear. And so they took out the tiny report papers they'd brought with them and scribbled down Meiser's conversation as they fought against the trembling in their bodies.

A Few Days Later, in Eldan's Office—Eldan

Eldan sat cross-legged at his desk, leaning forwards on his elbows, and he sighed. It was a dejected sigh, and upon hearing it, the self-proclaimed finest strategist, Juha, who was lying on the floor reading reports, spoke up.

"Don't tell me you still regret making your decision yesterday. Look, if you feel that strongly about it, you can still call off Meiser's assassination. But the path that lies ahead of us if you do so is about as bad as it gets... We will have nothing but the most meager of plans to work with."

Eldan sighed once more and shook his head.

“Based on this intelligence from the hopping mousekin, we simply cannot let Meiser and his conspirators do as they like,” he said. “It’s too early for me to put my right to reprimand to use, so I understand that...disposing of the issue is our best course of action. However, while I can understand the decision, it still amounts to killing a member of the royal family. That is a depressing thought.”

While Eldan writhed in discomfort, Juha held up the papers in his hand, shook them loudly to draw Eldan’s attention, and spoke up.

“Hmph. Royalty, citizens, slaves, they’re all mere castes of a man-made system. Strip any of them of their rank and they return to being simple men, with nothing to separate them. All that’s left is how they choose to live. You should know that better than anyone, given the complicated nature of your birth and upbringing. All you’re doing is taking out a bandit. A criminal. You shouldn’t let it worry you any more than that.”

Juha meant it as solace, and he succeeded in making Eldan feel a little better. At that moment, however, the old lionkin who acted as the mousekin’s instructor burst into the room.

“Lord Eldan! My apologies for the intrusion! Meiser was ready for the mousekin’s attack. They have failed! We captured all of the imperials, but Meiser has disappeared! We’ve no idea where he is! We know that he has bought the trust of several citizens and merchants, so he may be hiding with one of those associates, but he might also have left our domain entirely!”

Eldan and Juha were at a loss for words. Their faces grew pale as their thoughts raced. They leaped to their feet almost simultaneously and raced out of Eldan’s office to deal with the situation immediately.

As Fall Settles over Iluk Village—Dias

A few days had passed since Ellie and Alna had started working together on our winter clothes, and both of them were busy dyeing material and taking everybody's measurements. The rest of us were getting into the last of our winter preparations now.

We gathered all the dried grass in bundles and put them neatly in a corner of one storehouse. Delicious-looking dried meat hung at the kitchen range and along the walls of each yurt. Sacks of grass cheese were piled up next to the storehouses, and all the nuts and berries we'd foraged in the forest were separated into different bags and boxes. The twins had told us which trees were okay to cut down, and the firewood we'd acquired from our logging was stacked up next to the kitchen range on shelves we'd built.

I looked around at it all—the sight of all our hard work finally paying off—and I felt the warmth of satisfaction well up in my chest. I almost couldn't wait for winter to get here already. Alna had already told me that winter in the grasslands was a harsh, unforgiving thing, so I knew it wasn't something to go getting excited about, but even then I was buzzing with anticipation, and I just couldn't help walking over and admiring our handiwork at the storehouses whenever I had a spare minute.

I wasn't the only one who felt this way. Sometimes I saw the twins and the dogkin doing the same, and they always smiled to see our wood stockpile or all of our food and whatnot in the storehouses.

After all that rushing around, things had gotten a touch quieter, which meant I could take the twins to the forest more often. They were all smiles, playing to their hearts' content, and I don't think anything could have made them happier. When our winter preparation was fully done we'd probably have enough time to go to the forest every day, and I was thinking about just that when the twins ran up to me.

"Dias, are you free?" asked Senai.

“Do you have some time?” asked Ayhan.

“I am, and I do,” I answered, kneeling down so I could look them in the eyes. “What can I do for you, girls?”

“The field!” said Senai, moving her hands in a kind of triangle shape. “Make shelters for our field!”

“We have to protect it from wind and snow until spring!” said Ayhan, mimicking her sister’s gestures.

“Ah, you mean the field next to the square, huh? All those seeds of yours sure are sprouting up, so they’re definitely gonna need roofs over their heads. You want me to put up some wood to cover it all?”

“You can cover it with wood in a triangle, then bind it with dried grass, like this!” said Senai.

“Then we need to put dried grass over the ground to keep it warm!” said Ayhan.

But the twins weren’t just talking with words—they were crouching and jumping and using their whole bodies to show me what they wanted. I grinned watching them, and all the while I did a little mental calculation in terms of how much wood we’d need and how we’d put those roofs up for them. That was when Grandma Chiruchi walked up to me with a hoe on her shoulder.

“Ah, young Dias. There you are,” she said. “Just wanted to let you know to keep some time free tomorrow or the day after. We’ll want to start harvesting.”

She said it real casually but it took me by surprise.

“Harvesting?” I asked.

“Just what do you think those fields of ours are *for*, young man?” replied Grandma Chiruchi. “They’re our food, you hear? The green vegetables will be fine with a little snowfall, but not the potatoes, so we’ll do them tomorrow or the day after.”

I could tell by the exasperation in her voice that she meant business. Before I had a chance to think about it, however, Alna and Canis had arrived.

“Dias, we’ve started preparations for Francoise’s delivery,” said Alna. “We

expect she'll give birth tomorrow or the day after, so you need to be around."

"Lord Dias, we're also starting preparations for the pregnant dogkin mothers," said Canis. "We expect them to give birth around the same time."

I jumped back to my full height with joy hearing that.

"Wow! Is that so?" I marveled. "We'll have to make sure everything's ready for them! I'm not very well-versed in this kind of thing, but just tell me what to do!"

I whooped happily, but then I noticed the worried looks on the faces of the twins.

"Now, now, don't you worry," I said, kneeling back down. "I'll make sure I get to your field too! You two have taken great care of it, and I won't let it be buried in the snow."

That was right as Klaus came running towards us all.

"Lord Dias!" he said. "Grandma Maya has looked at Iluk's fortune and she says that we can expect both a sudden chill and a monster attack, either tomorrow or the day after! She's asked that we prepare for both as soon as possible!"

I'd already been racking my brain over how to balance everything by this point, but Klaus's report made me realize I might've been in over my head, and I let out a low groan, hoping I could figure something out.

Preparing the twins' field for winter, harvesting our vegetables, Francoise and the dogkin's childbirths, a cold wave, and a monster attack...

It was everything, everywhere, all at once, so we all got together as a village and split up the tasks between us to make sure we had everything covered.

Klaus and the mastis were handling the monster attack; being that monsters came from the far north, they planned to set up a yurt to the north of Iluk in order to meet any monsters well before they arrived. Klaus was about as passionate as I'd ever seen him, promising that he'd make sure the babies were delivered safely and that not even an ant would get past their defenses. I felt confident his team would be just fine.

Alna, Canis, and the grandmas were going to look after Francoise and the pregnant dogkin. The assembly hall thus became a makeshift delivery room; it was cleaned, then cleansed with incense, and then beds were made along with a dedicated place for all the tools and medicines the women might need. I didn't know a darn thing about delivering a baby, so I left it in their capable hands and let them make all the big decisions.

The sheps and the senjis were assigned the task of harvesting our vegetables. It was mostly digging for potatoes, and the dogkin weren't just good at digging holes—they absolutely loved any opportunity to do it. There was no doubt in my mind that they'd finish the job well before we were hit with the coming temperature drop.

As for generally preparing for that drop in temperature, Ellie and Uncle Ben were working on that with the dogkin women and children. Ellie had put her more complex tailoring on hold for the time being because of the sudden rush we were in and turned her focus to making simple cloaks that we could wrap around ourselves. Alna had already completed some winter pajamas and cloaks, but we didn't know just how cold it was going to get. With the newborns on the way we'd decided it was best to have more at the ready. We knew the incoming cold snap was a short-term thing, so we just had to make it through a couple of nights.

That left me, Aymer, and the twins to handle Senai and Ayhan's field. We had to work quick to beat the cold wave that was coming, and we had to make sure that our work met the twins' high expectations. I was on this duty in particular because it put me in the village square, where I could quickly respond to anything unexpected elsewhere. Once we were done with the twins' field, I was going on night-watch duty in the square, and I wasn't going to sleep until all was well in Iluk.

But before guard duty, there was the field. And because of all our planning for everything, we didn't get started until after noon.

And if the chill hits us tomorrow, then the sooner we get this field ready the better...

So, I walked on over to the twins' field with a bale of dried grass and got to work with Senai, Ayhan, and Aymer. We were going to lay the dried grass over the soil, make sure there weren't any openings, and then secure it all in place with rope, stakes, and stones. Doing so would make sure that the roots were protected from the cold, and we could go on to building roofs.

I couldn't help but think that what we'd done with the grass wasn't going to be enough, but the twins assured me that it was no different from a yurt. And it was true enough to say that yurts kept pretty warm even with their thin cloth walls, so if I thought of the grass as a kind of yurt, then maybe it wouldn't be so bad.

We covered a few types of trees, including walnut, some fruits, and the sanjivani plant. The fruits and walnuts would sprout in spring, and the sanjivani next summer, but even now they were looking well on their way. We'd look after them over the winter, and in one or two years, maybe even longer, we'd have trees bearing fruits and nuts.

But even that'll bring its own share of problems...

The question hit me as I watched the twins, so I asked them about it as I put some grass down by their side. They were kneeling on the ground, hard at work.

"Isn't this field a little too small for growing trees?" I asked. "When the trees in here get bigger, it's going to get real crowded, real quick..."

"This is just a nursery, so it's fine," said Senai, reaching for some grass.

"It's a nursery for us to raise saplings," added Ayhan.

"When they get bigger we'll plant them somewhere else."

"This is a field for plant babies. They'll stay here until they grow up."

"And then Iluk will have lots of great trees!"

"It'll be a great village with trees full of nuts and berries!"

"And everyone will be heaps healthy!"

"And all the new babies will have lots to eat!"

I could hear just how passionate they were by the excitement in their voices,

and Aymer's smile grew with every word too.

"I see, I see," I said, nodding. I was satisfied with their answer, so I headed off to the storehouse for some timber.

I wasn't too sure what the girls were talking about, really, but I knew that they were doing it all for the sake of our village. With that in mind, I was happy just to let them keep on at it, and all I had to do was help them where I could.

I hefted some timber onto my shoulder and took it on back to the field, then did as the twins told me. The dried grass was all in place, so we made roofs around the saplings with wooden poles and, when they were secure, hung more dried grass from them. Each sapling had its own roof, which meant their little field became full of dried grass covers, and when they were all ready we went around checking all of them to make sure they were all secure and safe from exposure.

By the time we were done with all the winter insulation for the twins' field, the sun was beginning its evening descent. I was mighty glad that we'd finished before nightfall, and I couldn't help but sigh in relief. I picked up the twins, who were both exhausted from the work, and I was planning to take them to the yurt so they could rest. But for some reason they stretched out their arms and legs and struggled.

I couldn't work out what was going on, and Aymer couldn't work it out either, but the twins looked over at the assembly hall, and at that moment we heard a great commotion coming from inside the delivery room.

But I thought Alna said tomorrow or the day after... Have things started already?

The twins were very concerned about it all, but I kept a tight grip on them and marched on towards our yurt.

"Look, I know you're both real worried about Francoise and her little ones, but it won't be any good if you two don't rest and end up catching colds instead. So you're going to get some well-earned rest. Dinner's already cooked, so eat as much as you like."

“Alna and Miss Maya are right there with Francoise, so I’m sure she’s going to be just fine,” added Aymer. “You’ll hear from them if anything happens, and they’ll certainly call on you if they need anything. The best thing the both of you can do now is warm your bodies and rest.”

That was right about the time that Ellie ran up to us carrying a whole heap of furs in her arms.

“I scarcely believe it myself! Seriously! But somehow I got it all done in time!” she cried. “Here! These are for the twins, and this one is for you, Aymer! It’s your cold weather gear. Wrap yourselves up! This one is for you, Papa! It’s got a kind of mountain bandit flair to it, but we were very short on time so you’ll just have to deal with it. It’s certainly no armor, but the hide is quality like no other, so it’ll offer at least some defense. You’re our night watchman, right? Keep yourself warm! We’re all counting on you.”

Ellie draped the cloak over my shoulder, then was just about to do the same for the twins when she noticed their faces.

“Oh my, oh my,” she uttered, her eyes growing wide. “Whatever is the matter, you two? What’s got you so bothered? Ah! Oh! Are you lonely with Alna gone? Oh, my little darlings! That leaves me no choice but to spend the night with you! Now come on, wrap yourselves up in your new cloaks...and there. Once we get home I’ll warm your dinner so you go to bed with full stomachs!”



Ellie promptly took the twins and Aymer into her arms and headed off to our yurt. That left me holding the hide that Ellie had given me, which really did scream “mountain bandit.” Nonetheless, I put it on, if a bit reluctantly.

With my new cloak on, I picked up my axe and built a bonfire in the square to serve as a source of light and warmth, then took to patrolling the village when night fell. The chill still hadn’t hit Iluk yet, and there weren’t any signs of monsters. It was about as quiet as always...except for the commotion coming from the assembly hall.

Perhaps Francoise or the dogkin had already gone into labor, or maybe it was just labor pains—I didn’t really know—but I could see everybody’s shadows rushing around on the walls of the yurt. Alna’s shadow was bustling to and fro without rest, and when I saw her I felt it was important that I did my part with just as much gusto.

When it came to childbirth, I was practically useless, so I wanted to do what I could to make up for that. I had to be useful in whatever way I could. So I hefted my axe back on my shoulder and, feeling reenergized, I kept my eyes peeled and my ears sharp as I marched around the village to make sure it was a safe place for Francoise and the dogkin to deliver their children.

A Yurt on the Northern Plains—Klaus

“Guards, you don’t have to watch for everything in every direction!” barked Klaus. “We can’t cover the entirety of the plains, which is why Alna’s magic will cover what we can’t! Our top priority is to protect Iluk, so keep your eyes and ears peeled for anything approaching from the *north*! That means monsters!”

Klaus issued his orders from within the yurt erected north of Iluk Village. He had his spear in hand and was fully armored, as were the masti dogkin, who woofed and grunted in reply to his commands.

“And remember, if something does approach, the first response is intimidation! If the monster doesn’t flee, we hit its legs so it can’t move and leave it where it falls. But if our threats *are* successful and the monster flees, do not give chase!”

The mastis’ eyes glimmered with a fierce determination; they were ready to defend their village at all costs and to protect the lives of those soon to be born. The sight of them filled Klaus with pride.

“As leader of this mission, I will not be sleeping, but the rest of you will work in shifts, eating and napping as necessary to keep your morale and energy levels high. Combat will drain you—much more than you think—so rest while you can or suffer the consequences.”

“Huh? What about me?” he continued.

“You’d ask that of the guy who fought by Lord Dias’s side for years? Two or three days without rest is a cakewalk for me. Back in the day we had to be ready for a week’s worth of fighting without rest, so believe me—I’ll be just fine. Seriously, Lord Dias doesn’t even know the meaning of the word tired; keeping up with him will *really* take it out of you. He can sleep no matter the conditions, and he’ll eat even the most horrible rations... He’s made of different stuff...”

“Anyway, vision will be clearest during the middle of the day, so use that time

to rest, and don't feel guilty about it!"

Klaus looked off into the distance, perhaps reliving those old memories of war, and the mastis barked affirmatively.

Iluk Village—Dias

It was late, and all the warmth of the sun had dissipated. Just as the north wind brought with it a sharp chill, Grandma Maya appeared from the door of the delivery room. She shivered in the cold and walked slowly, perhaps towards the privies. I walked over and matched her step, curious for an update on how things were going.

"How are they all doing?" I asked. "How's Francoise and the dogkin? Are you and Alna and everyone else doing okay?"

"There's no need for you to worry, young Dias," was the reply. "Francoise and the dogkin are doing just fine, and the rest of us are working and taking breaks in shifts. Even if the deliveries take four or five days, we'll draw them into this world of ours. I'm sure of it."

"Draw them into this world?"

She'd said it so naturally that I couldn't help but ask. Grandma Maya then squinted at me and let out a sigh.

"A man of your age and you don't even know about... My oh my. Listen carefully now, you hear? The belly of a pregnant mother is connected to the world of the gods. Children are a gift from that world, but if we don't work to keep them here, then they won't stay. It's not just a matter of giving birth, you see; we have to put our every effort in to truly draw them here. That means cleansing their bodies in herbal baths for starters, but even then a newborn still exists somewhere between the two worlds. The slightest setback can send them back from whence they came."

"That said, Francoise and the other mothers are smiling even through the pain, so I don't foresee any issues."

I nodded, making sure to absorb every word, and Grandma Maya smiled up at me.

“You heard it getting rowdy in the delivery room, yes?” she noted. “That’s because everyone was laughing. Your silhouette was projected onto the yurt walls by the campfire as you wandered to and fro, and the mothers started joking that you looked just like a lost bear cub. You’re nothing if not dependable when you’re needed most, young Dias.”

Grandma Maya then waved me off and told me to get back to my post, so I did as she said and went back to the square. I threw a few logs on the fire to make sure it wouldn’t go out, and I thought about what Grandma Maya had said. Then I hunched my shoulders and took to trudging to and fro, just like a bear, hoping it would bring more smiles to all their faces.

Back at the Yurt to the North—Klaus

The moon rose high into the sky, and a cold wind blew from the north as the day of the attack that Grandma Maya had foreseen drew upon them. It was then that the mastis on guard in the yurt sensed a change in the air. They lifted their noses to take in the drifting scent and stood tall. They were suddenly tense and began walking around the yurt, trying to work out exactly what it was they felt coming.

The mastis were decked out in their earth dragon equipment—their dragon fangs and dragon scale cloaks—and upon seeing their worried pacing, Klaus reached for the spear by his side and quietly rose as well.

He walked outside to the campfire where Marf, leader of the masti dogkin, was similarly on guard. He, too, was trying to get a better sense of the thing that approached, so Klaus began to warm up and ready his body as he kept a close watch on their surroundings.

Just as Klaus felt nice and loose and ready for battle, he heard the barking of the mastis posted farther north. It was a menacing, intimidating message to a yet unknown threat. The sound of it alerted all of the Iluk Guard at the yurt, so they all gathered at the campfire and stood ready for anything.

The mastis were doing exactly as Klaus had asked, and that meant trying first to scare away their enemy. If that failed, they would attack the enemy’s legs. If that failed too, the mastis would herd the enemy back towards the campfire.

The dogkin had prepared the area with basic pitfall traps, and they would work as a team to fight off any dangers, but failing that they would have to rely on Dias back at the village. Still, Klaus did not expect that they would face an enemy of such unmanageable strength.

In any case, Klaus and the dogkin trained every day for this very purpose: to develop the strength needed to defend their home even without Dias's support. They were prepared; of this Klaus was certain. It was then, however, that the three mastis posted on guard to the north came running towards the campfire, their cloaks waving in the air. It was a sign; their foe was more than they could handle on their own.

"Rowan! Senga! Tokade! Report!" shouted Klaus as the dogkin drew near.

The three dogkin flicked off their masks with a practiced ease.

"Monster incoming! A big one! But slow!" barked Rowan.

"Soft too!" roared Senga. "The dragon fangs pierce its skin!"

"But it does not back down!" woofed Tokade. "It does not stop!"

Klaus nodded at the dogkin, who steadied their breath and readied themselves for another round.

"Good job, guys!" he said. "If you need to catch your breath, drop to the back lines!"

None of them knew the exact size of the monster they were dealing with—it was a dark and cloudy night, and visibility was poor. The dogkin had likely relied on their sense of smell to work in the darkness, and Klaus was proud of them for having done so well. The mastis must have sensed this, because their tails wagged happily as they set their feet and prepared themselves. They flicked their masks back on and took up position by Klaus's side.

All seven of the mastis at the campfire heard what came next: the heavy, lumbering sound of something dragging along the ground. Not long afterwards, a black shape appeared, growing clearer as it neared the campfire. The monster had a huge body covered in black scales, held up by four thick legs. Behind it was a long tail, leaving its mark in the dirt as it shifted left and right. Two distinctly unique eyes sat on either side of its face, and its long jaw jutted

forwards. But it was the sharp horn upon the monster's nose that demanded attention.

"Oh, it's just a giant lizard," stated Klaus.

Yes, it was a monster, but it breathed no fire, nor did it boast any special abilities. The toxic miasma spilling from its body was also not a particularly big problem. Giant lizards certainly had a strength that matched their size, but all the same Klaus breathed a sigh of relief—it could have been much worse. Then he reminded himself that he could not afford to underestimate *any* enemy and settled into a battle-ready posture.

"Giant lizards like this one will swallow a man alive!" he shouted. "So watch out for its mouth! After that, it's the tail you have to keep your eyes on! I'll take it from the front, so the rest of you spread out to the flanks! Go for the legs first, then the stomach! Don't do anything rash! Your first priority is to stay safe! Watch that you don't get crushed underfoot!"

The mastis quickly circled out from Klaus's position and surrounded the lizard. Klaus nodded when they were all in position, then held his spear out towards their enemy.

The Northern Plains, Now a Battlefield—The Big Lizard

As soon as the spear was pointed in its direction, the big lizard ceased all movement. What it faced was no ordinary spear. There was a great power in it. The lizard knew that a direct hit would end its life in an instant. Its body went tense, ready to avoid the spear at all costs so as to launch an attack of its own. Every fiber of its being focused on the movements of that spear.

There is too much fire here. Too much light. The swirling of that heat makes it hard to sense much of anything.

The lizard continued to watch its enemy closely, observing his movements, but it knew it could not stay still forever. The spear wielder did not fight alone, and his comrades were waiting eagerly for any chance to get to the lizard's guts. They were not a threat like the spear wielder, but their fangs made them a handful, and the lizard racked its brain for how best to respond to these

threats. What was the best course of action?

It was then that the lizard decided that perhaps the wisest move was to not fight at all, and to flee...but the moment the thought crossed its mind, the miasma in the magical stone at the core of the lizard's body rejected the notion. It cried out as if to command the lizard's every cell to fight.

"Fleeing is unacceptable."

"You will tear your enemy to shreds."

"None are allowed to live save our kind."

"We will bury this world in our miasma."

Those voices from deep within the miasma took complete control of the lizard, drowning it in raw hatred. The lizard had no choice but to accept it. Once it did, its trepidation over the spear wielder vanished, along with its desire to survive.

The big lizard raised its head and unleashed a piercing wail at the top of its lungs. However, the spear wielder responded as though he had not heard a thing; but when the lizard moved to catch him in its jaws he deftly leaped up and out of the way, landing on its back. In one swift, silent movement, the spear wielder located the lizard's heart and ran his spear straight through it. The lizard did not feel a thing as its life was taken.

Standing upon a Dead Lizard—Klaus

The battle was over. Klaus pulled his beloved spear—which, after much deliberation, he had named "the Blitzing Lance of the Dragon Fang"—from the lizard and looked around the immediate vicinity. Surrounding him were the dogkin guard, clutching their ears with their paws.

"Hey now, what happened to you guys?"

The dogkin writhed on the ground, unable to respond.

"Ah, I think I know now," said Klaus, wiping the blood from his spear. "That lizard let loose a scream beyond the spectrum of human hearing, huh? I guess having great hearing has its weaknesses."

Klaus dropped from the lizard's corpse and went from dogkin to dogkin, making sure they were uninjured and checking that none had ruptured their eardrums. Little by little the dogkin recovered and lifted their heads. They smiled as they noticed the dead lizard and their unhurt captain. Their tails wagged rapidly as they barked with joy.

"All right, looks like you're all fine and your ears are okay too. We can worry about dealing with the corpse once things have settled. In the meantime, anyone who needs a rest can head to the yurt. It's important to take breaks whenever the opportunity presents—"

But before Klaus could finish his sentence, the air filled with a familiar sound. Something was once again dragging its way towards them from the north. Klaus and the dogkin quickly readied themselves as the remaining dogkin on patrol returned. The ten mastis and Klaus readied themselves as the sound multiplied...and a shiver ran through each of them as they realized that a fierce battle awaited them.

Early the Next Morning—Dias

The evening passed by without any incident to speak of. As morning grew near, the air chilled suddenly, and the frost that came with it felt noticeably out of place for the season. It was as if the cold sapped the grass of all its energy, and I was glad that we'd finished all our harvesting before this change in temperature.

At the same time, I was once again shocked by the power of Grandma Maya's clairvoyance. The other grannies had told me that Grandma Maya had never once been wrong, and so they did as she recommended, always believing in her advice...but all the same it still left me in awe.

If the chill had come on just like she'd said it would, then that meant that the monster attack was almost certainly coming too. Not that I put much worry into that particular problem. I trusted Klaus and the mastis completely. If they were in any sort of real trouble, they'd send a messenger or fall back. I was sure of it...mostly.

I mulled over this and that as the sun rose in the distance, bringing a slightly

different kind of morning to Iluk. Everyone crawled out of their yurts—the twins, Uncle Ben, the dogkin husbands worried about their wives in labor—and there was excited conversation at the well which eventually turned into lively hustling and bustling at the kitchen range, and just like that the whole village was up and moving.

With Alna and her team still busy in the delivery room, Senai and Ayhan took the lead for breakfast, and the dogkin hustled with even more energy than usual. In the end, breakfast was a bit more slapdash than usual, and a little less flavorful, but it was done with gusto.

Before we sat down at the square to eat, a couple of special dishes were taken to the delivery room: a wheat porridge filled with cheese, a warm herbal concoction, and a selection of nuts and berries, among others. Then we took the fodder to the goose pen and the stables, and once the animals were fed we all settled in for breakfast.

The dogkin thought I looked mighty tough and gallant in my new cloak, and that became the main subject of our breakfast conversation. Naturally we also touched on the delivery going on in the assembly hall and Klaus and the mastis to the north, but given that we didn't have a whole lot of information yet, we couldn't get into things in any meaningful way.

We were all praying and worried, of course, but we kept ourselves from barging in to see how things were going. We told ourselves that we'd work just as hard here as Alna and Klaus and the others were. When we finished our breakfast and cleaned up, everyone except for me got straight to work, even though it was so cold. I wanted nothing more than to work alongside everyone, but I'd spent the whole night watching over the village, so the twins ordered me to rest. I wrapped myself up in my cloak and took things easy next to the delivery room.

There was so much to worry about that I wasn't sure I'd get a wink of sleep, but all the same I closed my eyes and dozed a little while the sounds of the village filled my ears. Then, around noon or so, loud voices came from the delivery room unlike anything I'd heard until now. They were cries of celebration, and a few moments later Alna came out from the delivery room with a smile so bright you couldn't even tell how tired she was.

“Healthy babies!” she announced. “There are five of them, all of them Rupa and Beato’s kids! And their first cries are all as healthy as they get!”

This was fantastic news. All of us within earshot let out celebratory cries of our own, and Rupa tried dashing right into the delivery room. He didn’t get very far, though—Alna stopped him right in his tracks.

“Rupa! Nobody’s allowed inside until *all* of the children are delivered!” she said. “We’ll take Beato and your children to your yurt once things have calmed down, so it’s your job to get things prepared back home. Light that incense you received earlier and prepare some hot water for Beato. This is where things start for you.”

Rupa dashed off like lightning for his yurt. We watched him go, and then Alna spoke to me before I could even tell her what was on my mind.

“And don’t worry, Dias: everybody’s doing fine. It’s taking a while because there’s more than we were expecting at once, but I’m pretty sure we’ll see all the newborns safely delivered by this evening.”

“So they’re all doing well,” I said. “Well, that’s all I needed to hear. You guys in the delivery room want or need anything?”

“We’ve got everything we need in the assembly hall, but we’ll let you know if we need anything else. The best thing you can do now is just show everyone here that you’re calm and in control. And by the way, that cloak looks amazing on you.”

With that, Alna disappeared back into the delivery room. I did just as she told me, standing tall and calming everyone down by just showing them that I was calm too. But on the inside I had a heck of a storm raging on; I wanted to see the newborns, and I wanted to help everyone who was working, so really I was anything *but* calm. All the same, I put on the face that Alna had told me to put on.

Time passed, and soon enough the new dogkin mothers came out of the delivery room with their babies all wrapped up in baar wool. They didn’t have any hair, and they were wrinkly little things. You couldn’t even tell what type of dogkin they were. The mothers were smiling placidly, their babies were letting out adorable little cries, and those little cries reached everyone in the village.

As the sun started to fall, the only mother left in the delivery room was Francoise...and that left me and Francis pacing outside like we were trying to carve a rut in the ground. Ethelbald and the other baars tried to calm us down, and the rest of the villagers all surrounded the assembly yurt once they'd finished work.

Every time Alna came out with one of the dogkin mothers and her new babies, she assured us that everything was fine and we shouldn't worry, but every time she said it I couldn't help getting even more worried. It got so bad I thought I was going to burst, but right before that could happen we heard some very new cries from inside the delivery room.

"Beeahhh! Beeahhh! Beeahhh!"

First it was one, then two, then there was a third...then there were so many I started wondering how many baby baars were even in there. Then Alna and Grandma Maya came out with little baar wool-wrapped babies that, like the dogkin, were hairless and wrinkly.

"There's six of them!" Alna declared. "For baars, even giving birth to three is considered a lot! What a mother that Francoise is! And congratulations on becoming a father, Francis!"

Alna had to have been utterly exhausted, but you never could have guessed that from her grin. And as soon as everyone heard the news, the village erupted with cheers. This was the happiest I'd ever seen everyone, and Francis was crying tears of joy as he started jumping around and dancing.

Surrounded by the Corpses of Giant Lizards—Klaus

Klaus and the Iluk Guard had found themselves under attack late in the evening, but they had struck back and emerged victorious...only to realize that the first lizard's cry had been a call for reinforcements. And so, Klaus and the mastis had gone on fighting, slaying countless lizards without rest. They gave it everything they had. Night turned to morning, and morning to noon. By the time they finally found a break from the fighting everyone was covered in blood

and exhausted beyond belief.

But even then, neither Klaus nor any of the dogkin had any real *injuries* to speak of. Their pitfall traps had worked a charm, and the lizards themselves were low-level monsters; they weren't as tough as earth dragons, nor were they as quick as wind dragons. The giant lizards were heavy, lumbering beasts that didn't even breathe fire. The problem, then, had really only been in the sheer number of them; Klaus and his masti fighting squad felt utterly overwhelmed.

I can still keep fighting, but the rest of the men are spent. Our weapons are practically blunt from the blood and gore all over them, so perhaps we should...make a retreat...

This was what Klaus thought as he stared down yet more lizards closing in. He had long lost count of how many he had slain. Retreat was a simple thing, yes, but it was complicated by the question of whether or not the lizards would give chase. If they did, Klaus and the mastis would be leading them straight to Iluk...

Klaus refused to allow Iluk to come to any harm, especially while there were mothers there in the midst of giving birth. The powerful masti warriors had crumbled at the first lizard's scream. What would happen to the mothers if they heard the same thing?

Klaus did not want to think about it.

What should I do? We can't go on fighting like this, but we can't just retreat either... If we go to Iluk we can call Dias, and he'll handle what's left in a heartbeat.

Klaus was breathing heavily, but his wavering eyes remained locked on the next wave of giant lizards, carefully observing their every move.

If Dias were here, what would he do?

"Mastis! Retreat!" Klaus barked. "Head back to Iluk and inform Dias of the situation immediately! I'll stay here and hold the lizards off! Don't look at me like that! They're just lizards! I could take another ten or twenty with ease!"

Klaus wanted to make himself the rear guard, just as he knew Dias would have done, but the mastis were shaken; they could scarcely believe what their

captain was suggesting. They knew that Klaus was just as tired as they were. The mastis always held their companions above all else, and they were not about to abandon one of their pack.

Dias had ordered them to drive back their enemies, and it was their duty to obey. And yet the mastis were uncertain. They were completely exhausted. They were never very deep thinkers, but the tribe always did their best to work out their best course of action. After a time, the masti clan leader, Marf, stepped forwards and, with a few young warriors in tow, stood by Klaus's side and glared at their enemy.

Marf was no less tired, but all the same he let loose a powerful bark through his mask. All the warriors who had stepped up were married, and Klaus knew that all of them wanted nothing more than for their wives to safely give birth to their children.

"Your wives and kids are waiting for you at Iluk! Why don't you run?!"

But Marf simply stared at Klaus, and though his gaze did all the speaking for him he barked his muffled message through his mask nonetheless.

"Worrying gets us nowhere! So we let our instincts decide! The will of our blood calls for this! It calls for us to protect our friends, defend our families, and defeat our enemies!"

His words were so muffled that no ordinary man would have understood them. But Klaus and Marf had spent a lot of time together. Klaus understood every word. He gritted his teeth. This was one of the weaknesses of the masti dogkin; with their backs against the wall, and with the situation calling for a firm decision, they fell back on their instincts.

The will of their blood, as they called it.

Once the dogkin had surrendered to that will, very little could sway them from their decision. It would take one as strong as Dias to make them listen now.

But instincts or not, they're at their limits. If I let them fight on, they won't just get injured...some of them might even die.

The remaining mastis lined up next to Klaus, and he opened his mouth to

shout, in the hope that he might change their minds.

That was when it happened.

There was the sound of something huge being dragged along the ground, but also the sound of something crashing down onto the dirt. Tremors ran through their feet as the sounds gathered around them from all directions. It was louder than anything else they had heard during the battle, and it rattled Klaus and the mastis to their cores.

I recognize the sound from the lizards to the north, but that crash was... It's coming from behind us...

Klaus didn't want to believe it. Was a new monster approaching from the south? From Iluk Village? He started to imagine the worst, and then he heard a familiar voice echoing through the air.

“—ey! Hey! What's with all these lizard corpses?!”

Even with their enemy standing right in front of them, Klaus and the dogkin turned to the voice booming behind them.

“Oh! Anyway, forget about that! Forget it! They've been delivered! They're all born! Marf! Mastis! Your babies are all safe and healthy!”

It was a big ball of fur, and it was shouting at them. It was smiling too, and in its hand it waved a giant battle-ax like a toy. The man in that ball of fur had, quite recently, been bedridden with a high fever. But somehow he had fully recovered before anyone'd had any real chance to worry, and he was in better shape than ever.

And for reasons unknown to all of them, he was dressed like some kind of mountain bandit.

His eyes fell upon the approaching lizards that were still not yet corpses. His features hardened, and his grip on his axe tightened. His pounding footfalls suddenly grew louder, and he flew over the grassy plains.

It was Dias, and in a single motion he had leaped over Klaus and the mastis and summarily lopped off a giant lizard's head, landing with an astounding boom. But before they could catch his shape again he was already gone. They

could only follow boom after boom, new dents in the dirt being left beside every new corpse. Each was followed soon after by the screams of lizards and their cries of abject terror.

The sound put Klaus strangely at ease, and with a wry chuckle, he felt the energy leave every pore of his body. The mastis felt much the same, and they all took a seat without moving another inch.

Upon Returning to Iluk—Dias

After I finished off those strange lizards—and they were quite the pack—I went back to Klaus and the Iluk Guard, all of whom looked completely exhausted. I told them that we could clean the mess up later, so we all set out for home.

We had gotten through the worst of everything Grandma Maya had predicted, and now that we were over the hump I didn't think there was anything more for us to be too worried about. We'd harvested the vegetables, delivered the new babies, prepared for the chill, and fought off the monsters. All that was left now was to throw the biggest banquet the village had ever seen, but being that the sun was already setting and everyone was at their physical limits, I didn't think we'd be throwing that party tonight.

So tonight, we'd prepared a more humble feast of sorts and a little wine to show our gratitude for the efforts of Klaus and the mastis. They could have a good time and get themselves a good night's sleep. Tomorrow, we could start cleaning up the battlefield and holding ourselves a proper party.

I was telling Klaus just how great it was going to be, and it put a real pep in my step, but Klaus looked heavyhearted, and he lumbered along until he just stopped completely.

"What's wrong, Klaus?" I asked.

"It's just..." he started. "We failed you."

"Failed? What happened?"

"We were overwhelmed by the enemy. I couldn't lead the mastis to safety or victory... If you hadn't come, Dias, who knows what would have happened..."

His voice was heavy and dark, and his face fit the very picture of how he felt. For my part, I just tilted my head in confusion.

“If you’re going to call that much a failure, then I really couldn’t tell you how many times I failed back during the war,” I told him. “Sometimes I got so caught up in my own thing that I left everyone behind, only to be surrounded by the enemy when I came to my senses. Then there was the time I got lost and plumb walked straight into an enemy castle. Don’t you get me started on the rest, Klaus, because I can go on all night... Listen. What I’m getting at is this: after all of that, here I am, alive and well. So as long as things worked out, isn’t that enough?”

Klaus looked real surprised and then suddenly perplexed.

“Nobody was hurt, and everybody survived,” I continued. “If you ask me, that’s success to a T. If you’re really hell-bent on thinking you failed, then just make up for it when you next have the chance. This last battle is a chance for you to grow, and to do better, and put any of those past failures behind you.”

“But look, I reckon you’re thinking the way you are because you still haven’t seen what you and the dogkin protected. You still haven’t seen what the village was blessed with. But when you do, you might not be so hard on yourself.”

Klaus looked like he didn’t get what I was saying, so I assured him that he’d understand in due time. With Marf and his dogkin brothers restless and antsy to get back to the village despite their fatigue, we hurried home.

It wasn’t long before we saw Iluk, all lit up by the fire in the square. All around there were residents holding newborns wrapped in baar wool. Even Zorg and a group of onikin were there; they’d felt the strange chill coming and had decided to come and check up on us. Zorg and a few onikin were holding baby baars and they looked just as happy as the actual mothers and fathers surrounding them...maybe even happier.

“For us onikin, the birth of a baar is like the birth of our own child,” Zorg said. “Nothing could bring us more joy.”

And the fact that Francoise had given birth to *six* babies was mind-blowing. Zorg and his group had been struck by awe since the moment they arrived. They looked ecstatic, and the villagers looked overjoyed as well. It was this sight right

here that Klaus and the mastis had protected.

Marf was so excited he was about to dash straight off for his wife until I stopped him.

“Hold it right there, Marf!” I ordered. “You go and wash all that gunk off yourself right this instant if you want to touch your kids! The last thing we want is them getting sick!”

Klaus, for his part, was kind of frozen watching everyone, so I just gave him a pat on the shoulder. He looked a little troubled, but I took him and the village guard over to the stream where they braved the cold water and washed away the blood and grime covering their bodies.

Mahati, in the Western City of Merangal: The Domain Lord's Bedroom—Eldan

"I can't believe Meiser escaped..." Eldan muttered, lying in bed. "I was careless. I underestimated my enemy..."

Eldan had been trapped in a two-day panic since the news of Meiser's escape. How many times had he given voice to his regrets now? Eldan no longer knew, and his wives said nothing, choosing instead simply to listen. Were he asking their advice they would have given him an answer. Were he asking for suggestions they would have done their utmost to devise a plan. But Eldan was simply lamenting what had happened, not as a duke, but as a man. His wives thus felt that silence was most fitting for the moment.

"It's at least a relief that he doesn't seem to have his sights set on the royal capital or Iluk Village," said Eldan, sensing the weight of his wives' combined gazes. "Such a move would only spell trouble. But if he has not fled, and if he remains in our domain, then it is because he does not see us as a threat. This vexes me."

Eldan rolled over, let out a long sigh, and continued.

"The fact that he is taking us lightly means he will leave openings we can exploit. We will no longer rely on only the mousekin. We will make use of our entire intelligence division. If necessary, I will lead them myself..."

Eldan was far from done, and he still had yet more to say, but before he could go on a yawn overwhelmed him. With it came the invitation of unavoidable slumber, and Eldan promptly fell into a deep sleep.

A Room in a Merchant's House—Meiser

"...and so, we are rid of the imperials, just as you wished. I was in no mood to tolerate them any longer after they tried to threaten me, but we couldn't have planned things better ourselves."

Meiser slumped into the finely crafted chair, brought an ornate glass to his lips, and sipped at some wine. The man across from him, the owner of the house they were in, took a moment and then replied.

“Well, well... I do apologize for the inconvenience. This nation is a *human* nation. It is *our* nation. I can barely stand the sight of anyone who refuses to understand this simple truth. However, a humble merchant like myself can scarcely raise a finger to change things.”

“A humble merchant, you say... But this scent, those boxes, and the handwriting on that ledger... You’re in league with some rather dangerous people, no?”

“My my, you’ve seen right through us, haven’t you? You have taught us a good lesson, and we will be more careful to conceal such things moving forwards.”

“So there’s you, and then whoever warned us that the attack was coming,” said Meiser, thinking. “That tells me Eldan has his fair share of enemies.”

The merchant waved Meiser off.

“Who, me? Don’t be ridiculous. I may disagree with him on some points, but that boy is the very reason I’m able to make such a killing. We welcome the man, and especially his generosity. If we have any problems to speak of, it is with those who surround him.”

“Hm? Ah, you mean the beastkin. But you’re a merchant, aren’t you? Why not simply focus on your sales? You and the temple, you really can’t stand the beastkin, can you?”

“Now *this* is a surprise, especially after you agreed to the idea of making them all slaves.”

“I agree with *selling* them, because then we *profit*. But when Eldan made them into citizens, he also turned them into potential customers and, in doing so, vastly expanded the marketplace. That wasn’t a bad idea either; look what it’s done for the economy. But for me? I couldn’t care less what they are—human, beastkin, or otherwise, they’re all just merchandise.”

The merchant narrowed his eyes and watched as Meiser finished his glass of

wine. He remained silent.

The Next Day, in the Office of the Domain Lord's Residence, Merangal—Eldan

"Put the entire military into action," said Juha.

It was early morning in Mahati. Juha was lying on the floor of Eldan's office, having just heard a summary of Eldan's plan: to use the intelligence division to find and attack Meiser. Needless to say, he had other ideas.

"I've had my eye on a certain group of merchants for a while now," Juha continued. "This group has been putting a little *too* much effort into their smuggling, and if they've sided with Meiser, then their sheer financial capital will make them quite a pain in the butt. So here's what I suggest: We make extensive use of your armed forces to bring them all under your control. We do it quickly and we round them up all at once—not just Meiser, but the scheming merchants with him."

Juha spoke coolly and calmly, but Eldan and Kamalotz were dumbfounded. They had not even considered the military an option.

"I'm not so sure we should rush into something so rash," replied Eldan, with something of a reproving tone. "It's not that big of an issue, and even if it were, we would need to conduct a thorough investigation before we made use of our military."

Juha sat up, crossed his legs, and shrugged.

"Come on, now," he said with a hint of exasperation, "are you listening to yourself? You're the *domain lord* here, and a *duke*. You don't *need* to investigate anything. You don't need a reason either. If you tell the military to mobilize, they will do as they are told. If you need proof, or if you need to investigate, do it *afterwards*. It doesn't have to be pretty. You can make things ugly, just like your father did. Just nip this uprising in the bud, and do it fast."

Uprising. Father.

Eldan and Kamalotz couldn't help but flinch at the words. Juha ignored them

and went on, still as calm as ever.

“I’ll give it to you straight: I don’t know exactly what they’re up to. But Meiser saw our first attack coming and he’s still here; that means this place is his target. There’s no doubt. Mahati only just had an uprising, and the domain is yet unstable. Whatever Meiser has planned, we cannot let it happen. I am giving you my advice as a man who despises war. Understand that I do not make this suggestion lightly.”

Juha rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. His gaze told Eldan that he meant every word he spoke. Eldan shut his eyes and dropped into thought. *What is the best course of action?* He struggled to find a suitable answer. After some time, he told Juha that he would put a small portion of the military to work, but he would make the intelligence division his key force; they would work behind the scenes to fix the situation.

Juha said nothing in response. With his gaze low, he rose to his feet and left. Eldan could have chased after him, and could have stopped him, but instead he chose to discuss things with Kamalotz. Together they considered how best to put the intelligence division to work. Kamalotz said nothing of Eldan’s decision and instead followed his lord’s lead.

It was around noon that a message suddenly arrived from their agents.

“We’ve got intel on Meiser! He’s hiding here in Merangal!”

The Mahati domain was often considered the largest in the kingdom, so it came as a surprise that Meiser was right beneath their noses, but Eldan contained his shock and gave the order to move. His squad was made up of an aerial team led by Geraint, a ground team including hopping mousekin led by lionkin, and a small military force directed by Kamalotz.

Eldan asked Kamalotz to put together a squad of the very best people they had. He wanted as small a team as possible, filled with people who would not falter no matter the situation.

Kamalotz left to do as he’d been ordered. Eldan then went to the back of his office to change into clothing that would not stand out. He hung his beloved sword from his belt, then strode from his office and towards the doors of his home like a man prepared to direct his forces in battle.

When he reached the doors, however, Eldan paused, caught in a moment of uncertainty. That was when he noticed one of his wives, Patty. She had heard that Juha had left the house and had waited here at the doors, racked with worry. Without so much as a word she quietly grabbed her husband's sleeve. She would never give her input in matters of governance, and so this was the most she could do for him. The gesture, coming from his most beloved of wives, shook him, and for a time he hesitated.

Patty had looked after him when he had been so unwell, and it took courage for her to do what she now did. Eldan could not bring himself to brush her off. Her worry was a sign that she loved him deeply, and it was this love that empowered her. Eldan took Patty's hand and squeezed it, then turned to look his wife in the eye. In that moment, the face of a certain man rose to Eldan's mind—the face of a man that he looked up to. Eldan nodded resolutely. His mind was made up.

“Do not worry, Patty,” he said. “I will be fine. Though it will still take some time before I am fully recovered, I am capable of moving as much as an ordinary man, and thanks to my daily training my skills in battle have come a long way. On top of that, I am not alone; I fight alongside trusted comrades. We fight here, in the city we call home, on home ground, and we cannot possibly lose. Trust me, Patty, and await my safe return.”

Eldan's strong, honest gaze matched the feelings his wife held for him. He refused to plunge his wives' hearts into tragedy, and it was with these feelings in his own that he left.

As the Setting Sun Dyes Merangal Red—Eldan

The battleground was Eldan's turf, and he had made sure that he had a fighting force with him that was more than prepared. They had come with a plan they felt could not fail, but they were met by a series of unforeseen surprises.

First were the many locations made up to look like hideouts. Then there were the decoys, given money but holding no information of any real worth. Then there was the information Eldan *did* receive; it was almost certainly false, and yet it had to be confirmed all the same. Eldan's forces were sent to every corner of Merangal, their objectives suddenly less clear, and with each new problem to solve they were spread more and more thin.

So excessive was their runaround that Eldan had started to wonder if perhaps Meiser had no plan, no scheme at all, and had simply done all of this just to gloat, and to laugh, and to keep Eldan dancing on the palm of his hand.

The day passed with an infuriating lack of progress, and the sun began to set in the distance. Eldan's intelligence brought him to a collection of abandoned buildings on the edge of the city, all of which had once acted as the base of operations for supporters of the young lord's father.

Eldan and the group with him ventured into the area, and then it happened. Armed humans appeared in dingy garb, covering all the exits. With Eldan's forces now spread so thin, they were easily outnumbered, three to one. The humans stood waiting, some of them behind fences that had been set up around the buildings, but all of them wafting ill intent. Kamalotz and the rest of the team were at a loss for what to do and put their focus on surrounding their lord so as to best protect him.

The hopping mousekin on Eldan's shoulders and by his feet looked desperately for a way out in order to call for reinforcements, but the humans had predicted this and had prepared nets and glue which they flaunted to threaten them.

When the leader of the humans arrived, Eldan and his men gasped. They watched in stunned silence as Second Prince Meiser emerged on the roof of an abandoned building, at a safe distance where no arrow would reach him.

“You and I really are alike!” Meiser boomed. “We love money, and we hate what our fathers did so much that we’re willing to rebel! The only thing that separates us is that you succeeded where I failed. Nonetheless, we are practically brothers, you and I!”

“But then, I suppose the fact that you killed your father sets us apart, hm? I’d still wager that you’re more a brother of mine than my actual siblings! Especially when it comes to how we think! You are an open book, Eldan! I put out a little bait and you came out of hiding to chase it like a man starving!”

Meiser wore a cloak, but his wavy silver hair still fluttered in the wind. At a glance his face was so pale he looked ill, but his face was twisted into a grin and he cackled with glee. Meiser’s gaze was for Eldan alone, and he made it crystal clear that he held little, if any, regard for the new duke. He laughed until he was satisfied, and just as Eldan was going to shout back, a bundle of dark green plants was thrown at his feet.

Eldan recognized them immediately as contraband that had been banned since Sanserife’s founding. It was the kind of drug that devoured a person’s mental faculties, and Eldan knew exactly what Meiser intended to do with it. He was going to make the duke an addict, and then, when his heart and his soul were lost to the drug, Meiser would make him a puppet leader. What would happen next was still unclear, but Eldan knew that nothing good could come from such a thing.

“That’s good stuff!” said Meiser. “Clears the mind and helps you get by on less sleep! Gives you a bit of body odor, unfortunately, but you’ll get used to that in no time! I take small doses of it myself, but I prepared something a little more...*intense* for you!”

Meiser’s voice rose into a shriek, and that appeared to be a signal, because the humans surrounding Eldan’s forces began to move. But Kamalotz was not about to let them have their way so easily, so he let loose a fierce shout of his own.

Kamalotz nearly hurt his own throat over it, but it managed to cause several of the approaching men to shrink away. This allowed the servant an opening, and he leaped in with his rapier at tremendous speed.

His swordsmanship matched the professionals of Sanserife; the style he used excelled at dealing with armored foes. The rapier stabbed the enemy in the openings between their armored plates, weakening their limbs and dulling their movements until a killing blow could be launched at the neck.

However, the rapier style was meant for duels, and so against a mob of foes it was not nearly as effective. However, Kamalotz made up for this with his years of experience and the fierce pressure of his offense, and all were surprised at how sprightly the older man was in battle. With lightning speed he cut down one foe, then another, and another; in the blink of an eye five attackers were down. Unfortunately, for all his effort, there were far too many for him to handle alone. Kamalotz was but one man, and he was quickly short of breath, spitting blood from the exhaustion.

But even then, Kamalotz's rapier sped through the air as he fought to seize an opening so that Eldan might yet escape. His energy buoyed the rest of Eldan's men, who ran to join Kamalotz in battle.

And just as Eldan's soldiers gained the courage to fight, the battle took its next turn.

A shadowy figure entered the fray in a flash of black, together with booming laughter unlike anything anyone had ever heard. The shadow's glossy, flowing black hair whipped around like ink caught in a violent current. They wove between the assailants, evading attacks within a hair's breadth and wielding their own blade as though in the midst of a dance, cutting down whoever dared stand in their way.

The figure's steps were light as if they were walking on thin air, and all would have called them beautiful if not for the irritatingly bold grin on their face.

"Behold!" shouted the graceful figure, Juha. "The blade that troubled even the great Dias returns to the battlefield!"

His voice echoed, and with it came a group of beastkin armed with farming and carpentry tools.

“Protect Lord Eldan!” they roared.

The beastkin launched themselves at the humans, who suddenly found the tables turned and themselves outnumbered.



The beastkin kicked the crap out of the humans, beat the stuffing out of them, and held them back while Juha continued his beautiful but murderous sword dance. And yet, while he fought, his eyes were on Eldan.

“Lesson one of the Mighty Juha’s Tips for Clever Domain Lords: Numbers are strength! A leader does not launch mere sneak attacks on their enemies, or they invite the chaos you see before you!”

“Lesson two: When the smartest man in the entire kingdom—i.e., me—gives you a warning, you *listen*! No matter how much it might displease you!”

“Lesson three: the men fighting for me are not your army but my good-hearted friends from the bar, which means I have not deviated from any of the rights you have bestowed upon me!”

Both Eldan *and* Meiser were left stock-still at the unusual display of heroism. It was then that voices and footsteps could be heard surrounding the immediate area. Realizing that the tide had shifted away from his favor, Meiser turned and fled.

Eldan and his forces saw this, and they moved to pursue...until Juha, who had cut down all the enemies that might have obstructed their chase, stopped them with a most titillating gesture.

“Lesson four: do not foolishly pursue one who has most certainly left traps for those who might follow! And finally—for today, anyway—lesson five: Know the right tool for the job! Leave the busywork to people you can trust!”

Eldan stared silently at the grinning Juha, whose black hair now shone with sweat. And while he did not understand all of the man’s so-called lessons, he responded with a resolute nod all the same.

“Understood.”

In an Empty Alleyway Not Far from the Abandoned Buildings— Narius

“Aw man... I never should have believed it!” muttered Narius as he heaved a sigh. “I never should have believed it when he said that there’d be delicious

food and wine and beautiful women if I just waited here...”

Narius had been running, partially enraged and partially frantic, when he’d run straight into Meiser and, without even thinking, knocked the second prince out cold with a sucker punch.

He’d met a guy at a bar a few days ago and they’d shared drinks. He’d been a charming sort and they’d gotten along well. Even though there’d been something fishy about that Juha character, Narius had still believed his promise and walked himself straight into a new mess. A scream echoed within him from the pit of his heart, resounding throughout his body.

“First I go and deliberately disobey the orders I’ve been given, and now *this*. What the heck is a guy to do...?”

Narius reluctantly tied and gagged the unconscious Meiser as he went on muttering to himself, then put the second prince into a large sack, turning him into just another piece of luggage. He stared at the bag for a bit and briefly considered killing the man on the spot. It was then that a most stunning woman approached from the far end of the alleyway. Even her ordinary traveling garb could not hide her beauty.

“Huh?” uttered Narius.

He was confused. The woman was out of place here. What was a woman like her doing in a place like this? But in response to his bewilderment, the woman simply smiled.

“You are Narius, yes?” she said. “Your reserved carriage awaits, and in it a most delectable selection of food and drink. I will be your guide on your return to the royal capital.”

Narius understood the situation immediately, and he heaved the biggest sigh he had that day. But when he got sick of it and was ready to move on, he hefted Meiser onto his shoulder and walked with the woman to the carriage awaiting them.

A Few Days Later, in Eldan’s Office—Eldan

“In short, you were impatient. You rushed things due to the huge and sudden

changes to your body,” said Juha.

Eldan had been sitting at his desk, and he’d let out a sigh of relief at everything having come to a close. That was when Juha had arrived and made his comment.

“Impatient...?” uttered Eldan, his eyes wide and his head tilted. “What do you mean?”

“When you were sick, you didn’t know if you’d ever be able to achieve the goals you’d set for yourself, and so you merely looked up to Dias. But when you found yourself with a healthy constitution, he became not just an idol but a man you might one day equal. It was a subtle change in mindset that began in your heart.”

“But know this: Dias never stays still, and in fact he’s always running around like the world is going to end. He is the very embodiment of the word ‘idiot.’ And yet he slays dragons, his domain grows slowly but smoothly, and he encounters what can only be considered mythological in nature...all things you have witnessed, and all things that you have not accomplished yourself. And so, somewhere in your heart, you felt that as the lord of this domain, you had to achieve something of equal worth.”

Juha leaned against the doorframe, running a hand through his lustrous hair. He spoke with supreme confidence, and Eldan had not a single retort.

“Before you encountered that plant, you never would have pulled something like that. You would have delegated the work to those you trusted, or you would have proceeded at such a cautious pace it would not have been wrong to call you paranoid. That, or you would have simply taken my advice and put your largest force to work.”

“You cannot let yourself be overrun by impatience. I hope this has been a valuable lesson.”

“Are you telling me not to be impatient?”

“No, not quite. In our efforts to rise we feel impatient, jealous, and sometimes crazy. These are natural emotions, and we cannot completely rid ourselves of them. Lose them completely, and we lose the ability to connect

with the feelings of others. What I am telling you is that you must take your impatience and your jealousy and bring them under your control so that you can make the best possible decisions.”

“We are helpless against our emotions. At their worst, they lead us to do horrible things we can never undo. A true king is one who does not let their emotions get the better of them.”

Kamalotz’s eyebrow twitched slightly at the way Juha used the word “king” instead of “duke” or “domain lord.” Eldan, for his part, said nothing and turned his gaze out the window. Juha watched the young man’s expression, and then with a look of supreme confidence, he turned and left, his hair streaming behind him.

About Twenty Days Later, at a House on the Outskirts of the Royal Capital—Narius

“*Nobody* ordered you to capture him,” groaned Prince Richard. “And nobody ordered you to bring him to the capital either.”

In his defense, the flow of events had left Narius with no choice but to capture Second Prince Meiser. Then he’d been left with no choice but to bring the man to the royal capital. His boss, First Prince Richard, looked anything but pleased, and that displeasure sent a fierce shiver through the entirety of Narius’s being.

“Uh, well, look, I am *well* aware that I disobeyed your orders. I know that better than anyone. But can I just say that the way things played out, I didn’t have any other choice? Whoever the duke of Kasdeks, uh, I mean Mahati, has working for him, they worked it all out, and they were prepared for everything. The only option I had left was to bring Meiser here... I’d just like you to keep in mind that, given how he might end up, I was very careful about choosing this location, away from prying eyes.”

Richard listened carefully, then read the particulars in Narius’s written report.

“Well, if this was the best you could do,” he sighed, “then I can only conclude that more simply wasn’t possible no matter whom I assigned. Depending on

how you look at it, we *have* accomplished the feat of capturing Meiser, and now we have him as a pawn to play too. Given the messages that set everything up, and given the people the duke has working for him, as well as how you managed to get that fool all the way here without being spotted, I will say only this: you have done well.”

Richard then tossed a bag of coins in Narius’s direction. Just like the people Narius had just complained of, the prince had once again seen through everything, and the half-shocked, half-exasperated Narius could barely flap his jaw about it.

Early in Iluk Village, the Morning after Francoise Gave Birth—Dias

To celebrate the safe deliveries, and to reward the efforts of Klaus and the mastis, we had a simple but lavish dinner, which we invited Zorg and his onikin group to, with plans for a bigger party the next day. When morning came along, Zorg had offered to clean up all of the lizard corpses. He'd said that it was because they wanted some of the materials, but he also thought it was only right after we'd treated them to dinner and a place to sleep. Being that the lizard corpses were no longer a concern, the whole village got busy preparing for the day's banquet.

There was a lot of celebrating lately. There were the newborns, of course, but also the harvested vegetables and the rough couple of days that we'd overcome. We were busier than ever, but everybody was all smiles and having a great time.

Klaus had been all gloomy and troubled throughout the previous night, but now that he'd had the chance to sleep on things he was looking brighter, and I knew I didn't need to worry about him any longer. What had healed his heart and his exhaustion in the end wasn't the lavish dinner or the wine but rather the smiling face of his wife, Canis. And she, like all the other villagers, was bright and happy.

The village was livelier than ever, and nowhere else was that more so than at the kitchen range, which was especially loud and full of chatter. Alna, the twins, and the grannies were all hard at work, and even the new mothers were there with them. They'd practically gone without sleep the last couple days, but they were laughing and talking and working, and now you'd sometimes hear babies crying too.

There was a spot where all the newborns were kept while everybody was cooking and preparing food, and the women were all helping out to keep watch and take care of them. The baby baars sometimes let out their "beeaahh" cries

and the baby dogkin sometimes let out their “weef” cries, and you could hear them from anywhere in the village. Whenever the newborns cried, all of us would smile.

The crying showed just how healthy the babies were, and I had to wonder just how it was that they could make us all so happy. In fact, even though I didn’t have anything to do at the kitchen range, I still found myself finding excuses to go on over just so I could visit the babies.

While Iluk Busily Prepares for Another Banquet—Senai and Ayhan

Senai and Ayhan ran, holding each other’s hands, as villagers went to and fro preparing for the day’s banquet. They ran all the way to the stream, where the flow of it was particularly strong. It was where they had placed a leather bag the previous day.

The twins lifted up a stone by the riverside and pulled at the string tied around it to get to their leather bag. The bag was full of rowan berries they’d gathered earlier, and after being left in the freezing cold of the previous evening, the berries were completely free of their poison. The twins were delighted.

“Now we can make lots of different medicines!” cried Senai.

“Yes we can!” said Ayhan.

“We took the top layer of the sanjivani to make a safe delivery medicine and it worked great, but we have to make even more!”

“Mom and dad will be asleep until spring, so we can’t do lots, but we’ll do as much as we can!”

The twins nodded at one another, then headed back to the kitchen range with the dripping bag held between them. One corner of the kitchen range had been set up with its very own miniature oven for the girls to play at cooking, and today they simply couldn’t get there fast enough.

While the Village is Still Bustling with Preparations—Ellie

While the rest of the village was running about setting things up for the village banquet, Ellie was on her own, holed up in her yurt. And while she wanted nothing more than to help everyone out, she had a massive task in front of her that simply could not be ignored. It was, at least to her, a matter of most pressing concern.

Strewn across the floor of Ellie's yurt were pages of clothing designs. Each of them contained a little onikin flair, and a little Sanserife flair, combined with Ellie's own unique and subtle sense for fashion. The blend of it all created a completely new and never before seen selection of winter clothing.

The outfit she'd designed for Dias wasn't flashy, but it highlighted the man's presence. It showed off his strength and his dignity. The clothing was especially designed to be easy to work in. It was more about practicality than style. For this reason, the parts that were easily dirtied when hunting were easy to attach and remove as necessary, and even easier to wash.

As for Alna, Ellie was excited to dress her up in something cute, but the onikin herself had wanted something easy to work in as well, so Ellie had carefully crafted a perfect mix of the two; she'd worked with the design of the kingdom's dresses and mixed it with the versatility of baar wool. This meant that while the material covering Alna's arms and legs was thin at first glance, it was still excellent at keeping the cold out. Ellie had given her all to ensure that the style and its colors accentuated Alna's strength and beauty.

When it came to the twins, Ellie put her priorities on making sure they were both warm and utterly *adorable*. The twins had toasty caps to wear, upon which Ellie had placed pom-poms that brought to mind baar tails. She'd placed similar pom-poms on the backs of their gloves and on the insteps of their boots. While the twins both wore essentially the same outfit, Ellie had made sure they had subtle color differences to make them unique.

"At the very least, I simply *must* complete all of these designs even if it kills me!" muttered Ellie. "Especially if I'm going to unveil them in the middle of the banquet, when the festivities are at their peak!"

Her eyes were alive with a fiery passion that heated her whole yurt, and the

pen in her hand flew over her papers with a dauntless determination.

At the Start of the Banquet—Dias

With everyone in the village working on this and that, preparations came together nice and smooth, and we were all done just a little past noon. The banquet kicked off the moment everything was ready.

For starters, we gathered everyone we were celebrating in the center of the village square. We had the newborns, and Francoise (who had been sleeping until then with Francis by her side), and all the new dogkin mothers and their husbands. In front of them all was the feast we had prepared, which, while mainly composed of dishes using the potatoes we had just harvested, also included a whole bunch of other foodstuffs that I was sure we were *supposed* to be stockpiling for our winter supplies...

Well, I guess that just means that when the banquet is over we'll be putting in a little extra work, won't we?

The whole village surrounded all the newborns and their parents in a big circle, and the banquet started with words of gratitude, followed by singing and dancing. The banquet was also supposed to be a celebration of all the hard work we'd done recently and the valiant efforts of Klaus and the village guard too, but...well, none of that held a candle to those bubbly new babies. In the end, they were the focus of the party, but nobody was complaining.

The banquet got more and more lively as the day went on. More food came out, then there were performances and dances, and when things finally calmed down a little, we announced the names of our new village residents.

There were more dogkin babies than any of us could count, and that meant a *whole* lot of names I couldn't possibly remember all at once. Then once all the dogkin babies had been introduced to everyone, it was time to introduce Francis and Francoise's new family. I'd actually been the person to name the little ones, but...Alna had told me that all the names I'd picked were too long, so in the end she'd given me some help. I'd taken inspiration from their parents and, with Alna's advice in mind, had come up with six names that were short and easy to remember.

There were four boys—Fran, Franca, Frank, and Franz—and two girls—Framea and Frannia.

The baby baars were all wrapped up in blankets, squirming and letting out their little energetic cries while we hoisted them up one by one and announced their names. And I have to say, I don't think I'd ever seen the village more spirited than it was right then.

Meanwhile, North of Iluk Village—Zorg

The giant lizards had arrived in the region together with the sudden drop in temperature. Zorg had offered to clean up their corpses and had barely given it more than a thought. Now that they were all faced with the sight of the battlefield proper, however, Zorg's new village guard deeply resented their captain's acceptance of such a task without any forethought.

This was far, far more than just some ten or twenty lizards. There were so many, in fact, that Zorg and his men knew their work would not be done in a mere one or two days. At the same time, they knew how dangerous it was for the lizard corpses to be left to rot in the open plains since their bodies exuded toxic miasma. Every man among them knew that they were looking at several days of sleepless work.

And yet, as the work went on, the feeling of regret in the air gradually weakened. Zorg saw it in the faces of his men and their change of attitude. He had assembled the village guard in haste, at Chieftain Moll's order, and was only nominally their leader. Until now, every man who worked under him had done so with a certain reluctance—even disdain. Now, however, they were obedient and following his orders without complaint.

The reason was simple. They had all seen the shocking number of giant lizards that Iluk Village had slain. The fighting power Iluk boasted was—depending on how you looked at it—Zorg's strength too, being that he was a close relative of Iluk's leaders. The men would be more loyal to Moll now, impressed by how she'd so deftly built their relationship with Iluk. They viewed even Zorg in a new light, knowing that that same relationship now rested on his shoulders.

A single look at the battlefield drove these truths home for each member of

the onikin village guard, and the change it brought about in them was clear in both words and actions. Zorg had not been the driving force for this change, and so it was not something he could be proud of, but it was nonetheless undeniably valuable. The change in the attitude of the guard had been necessary, and this marked a huge step in the right direction.

All of this brought about in Zorg a deep gratitude to both Iluk Village and his sister Alna. It was a gratitude that powered his every movement as he quietly took to the work of disposing of the lizards' bodies.

To be continued in volume 5...

Extra Story: The Fruits of Bonds

Late Fall, in the Yurt—Dias

Fran, Franca, Frank, Franz, Framea, Frannia.

They were all the apples of Francis and Francoise's eyes. They were lives that had been born of the deep love that their parents held for each other. And today, just like every other day, they cried, they cried, and they cried some more.

"Dias! Frannia won't stop crying!" said Senai.

"Framea wants something! She's crying because she wants something!" said Ayhan.

The twins were each cradling a baby baar and desperately trying to soothe their wailing. They tried gently rocking them to sleep, they tried making them laugh by making funny faces, and they tried waving wooden toys in front of them to entertain them. But no matter what they tried, the baby baars continued to cry.

"Just one second, girls," I said. "I'm just taking care of Fran and Franca."

I'd just finished changing the boys' diapers, so I put them back in their wooden cradle to sleep, then took Framea and Frannia from the twins. I rubbed their stomachs with a finger to get a feel for what the two little baby baars wanted.

They were twisting and crying as hard as they could at my touch, and that told me that they were probably hungry. So I took them over to Francoise, who was next to our bed, and put them down beside her.

"I'm sorry you're not getting much of a chance to rest," I said, "but they need you."

Francoise smiled gently and shifted her body to make it easier for her two daughters to drink their fill. Framea and Frannia stopped crying almost the very

instant that they started drinking Francoise's milk, and this was a huge relief for Senai and Ayhan. But, tired from their own attempts, they slumped to the floor where they stood.

"Thanks for all your help, girls," I said. "But listen, you don't have to push yourselves too hard, okay? When you get tired, it's more than okay to find yourselves a quiet place to take a rest or to go outside and play."

The girls looked a bit troubled by what I'd said, and they shook their heads. However they might have been feeling, they were intent on sticking around and helping out. They were so gung ho about helping out that it brought a smile to my face. Then I took Frank and Franz out of the cradle, removed their dirty cloth diapers, wiped them clean, and started putting them in clean diapers.

Alna had been completely blown away by the number of baby baars Francoise had given birth to. It was wonderful and amazing, to be sure, but six kids wasn't all sunshine and rainbows either. Two babies was the standard for baars. Even three was considered fairly rare. Nobody could have guessed Francoise would give birth to *six*, so now the mother in question was left struggling a little because they were fighting for their nourishment.

They'd all been born much smaller than usual baby baars for the same reason, fighting for space even before their birth. Under normal circumstances a baby might even be walking by this time, but that wasn't the case for any of these little ones. They didn't even have a single strand of wool growing from their bodies yet.

Alna had told me that they were healthy and they were all drinking more than enough milk, which meant there was no need to worry about them, but I just couldn't help being worried all the same. Whenever I had a free moment I'd pop in to check on them and do whatever I could if they needed something.

"Dias, taking care of babies is really, *really* hard!" complained Senai.

"I didn't think we'd be so busy!" added Ayhan.

While I was getting the two boys into their cloth diapers, Senai and Ayhan took the dirty ones and put them in the washing basket. I looked at the two of them, and that was when I realized that it wasn't that the work was *tiring*; it was that the girls were a bit unsure and anxious when it came to childcare. I

didn't think it was right to gloss over it, so I decided to give the girls the truth. That said, I did have to be a bit careful about how I worded it all.

"Well, you're right," I told them. "It's not easy, that's for sure. I'm used to it because of all the work I did looking after Ellie and the others back when we were orphans."

Sometimes I had been so busy that I hadn't gotten a wink of sleep, and it had gotten me so flustered and confused that I'd almost wanted to give up entirely.

"That's why it wasn't actually a coincidence that the dogkin all had their babies around the same time. They know how hard it is to raise kids, and they know how important it is for everyone to help one another through it, so they aim to have their children around the same time. It's a part of their culture to help each other out like that, and it's been like that for a long, long time. That just shows you how hard it is to look after newborns."

I paused for a moment to put Frank and Franz back in the cradle, then wiped my hands with a clean cloth, tidied up the immediate area, and put my attention back on the twins.

"But raising kids? It's not *all* hard work and tough times. Watching little ones grow up before your eyes is a really awe-inspiring kind of joy. When I think about how energetic these little ones will be, and when I think about all the fun things they'll do and the happy times they'll have, I feel about ready to explode with joy myself. Sometimes I don't think there's a single thing in the world that could make me any happier. And I'll bet my life on the fact that your parents felt exactly the same way."

The moment I mentioned the twins' parents, the girls looked up at me like something had just clicked for them. I gave them both a gentle pat on the head.

"Doesn't matter who you are. You're born from your parents, and someone takes care of you until you grow up. Then one day *you* grow up, and suddenly you're the one taking care of others. You two still have a whole lot of growing up to do, so it might feel like looking after the baars is hard work and nothing else, but one day you'll understand."

"That's why I told you earlier that when you're tired of helping out, go out and play. And when you're tired of playing, eat your fill. When you've eaten

your fill, snuggle up somewhere warm and get some sleep. You two have one job as far as I'm concerned: you have to grow up, little by little, and step by step."

I gave them both another pat on the head. Some of what I'd said had clearly gone over their heads, but all the same I could tell that they'd gleaned something from it, because they started to brighten up and mumbled to each other. It was like they'd understood it with their hearts but not with their heads, so they couldn't quite put it into words yet. They stood there muttering to each other for a little, and when it seemed like they'd come to a consensus they looked back up at me.

"Is that what it's like for everyone? Did someone take care of you and Alna too?"

"Did you cry all the time when you were little?"

I chuckled and nodded.

"Yep, of course," I replied. "When Alna and I were just little babies, all we did was cry and cause the adults around us trouble. But those adults did their best to take care of us, and now we're the kind of adults who can help Francis and Francoise take care of their kids too. Every person is someone else's child, and we all start out as babies. The reason we grow up into adults is because someone raises us. They look after us. It doesn't matter what country, or what race, that's how it goes for everyone."

"Everyone is the same..." muttered Senai. "Everyone was a kid once, and they grew up because of everyone around them..."

"And when they grow up, they look after new kids, who grow up into adults..."

The twins were doing their utmost to take in what I'd told them and really think about what the words meant so they could explain it themselves. There was something mature in their expressions in that moment, and I felt like I was watching them grow up a little. I just couldn't help myself, so I tousled their hair a little more.



“Those connections that exist between all of us, adults and children alike—we call them bonds,” I said. “There’s the bond that you two have with your parents, the bond you have with me and Alna, the bond you have with Aymer, and the bonds you have with all of the other villagers too. Then of course there’s the bonds that are being built right now, between you and Francis and Francoise’s babies.”

“All of us make these bonds with the people around us, and there isn’t a single person alive who doesn’t have a bond of some kind with another person. Me and Alna want you two to treasure your bonds, and that’s why we tell you to be kind and not to fight. It’s why we sometimes have to tell you off.”

“If you treasure your bonds with others, then one day the two of you are sure to grow up to become real stand-up young women, and one day you’ll find wonderful partners to share your lives with, and you’ll have babies of your own to raise and take care of.”

The girls looked suddenly like they’d taken on a lot at once, and they weren’t sure exactly how to react to what I’d just said. But even then they nodded as if they’d understood what I was trying to tell them, then ran over to the washing basket and gripped it tightly between them.

“We’re going to do the washing!” announced Senai.

“We’re going to wash everything really good!” added Ayhan.

And just like that, they trotted away and out the door.

“The water’s cold these days, so make sure you warm yourselves by the fire!” I called out.

I watched them disappear into the distance, and I couldn’t have felt any prouder.

Afterword

As per established tradition, I'll begin with thanks. Thanks to everyone who has followed the story through its first three volumes. Thanks to everyone still supporting me over at Shosetsuka ni Naro. Thanks to all the editing staff who helped out with this volume. Thanks to the book's illustrator Kinta and the book designer. Thanks to Yumbo for the manga version, and all their assistants, and the editors supporting them.

And of course, thank you to everyone who picked up and read volume four!

Really, thank you all so much! It is because of you that this volume hit the shelves!

With that out of the way, let's talk about the story.

I thought a lot about the subtitle before settling on "The Fruits of Bonds." It was teamwork that brought about Dias's dukeship, and the newborns were a result of Francis and Francoise's bond. Iluk is going to get even busier with all the promotions and babies, but that's sure to bring its fair share of happiness too. In that sense, volume four is all about looking forward to the future.

In terms of the kishotenketsu writing structure, we've hit the starting line of the "sho" section. The story is only going to grow further from here, and things are well set up for it. For one thing, winter is coming, and while it's sure to be a cold and harsh season, the warmth that Dias shares with his villagers is sure to be enough to get them through the hard times. After all, they'll have fluffy and warm baars by their sides every day.

Now I'd like to write something that I've been wanting to put down since I first started writing this series.

I first started really reading novels in junior high school, when a friend recommended a book to me. I adored that series. I read all the spin-offs, bought

the illustrator's art book, and collected tons of merch. Seriously, I loved that series. Even now, twenty years later, those books I bought are still on a bookshelf in my family home, though they're looking a little worse for wear due to how much I used to read them.

In one of the afterwords in that series, I remember reading something along the lines of *"If you call yourself a novelist, you're already there. Even if you don't write, and you only have the ideas in your head, you're still a novelist."*

I read that as a junior high school student, and like an idiot I immediately thought to myself, "Wow! That makes me a novelist, then!" So I started writing novels. Every year I would enter something into publisher-sponsored competitions or send publishers manuscripts. That was how I spent my days.

I kept doing it even after I graduated, became an adult, and joined the workforce. My days of wallowing in obscurity continued, and one day in my thirties I bought my first smartphone because I needed one for work. It was like something straight out of the future, and I was like a kid with a new toy. I didn't know how any of it really worked, so I tried out a whole bunch of different games and apps, and I bought a few light novels on an ebook app because they caught my eye.

I read those novels and thought they were fun, and then I found out that the writers had started out on Shosetsuka ni Naro. That was the first time I started to get curious about it. I knew about it, but I'd never actually checked the site out, and I couldn't help wondering why as I opened the site on my phone. As soon as that happened, I became an avid reader. Over the course of the next year I'd read almost everything that was ranked highly, and *everything* that was a recommended read.

Once I'd gotten that far, I figured there was nothing left to do but write and put something on the site myself, and the story I started writing then is the same story you're reading now.

As for exactly why I wrote that spiel, well, I guess I just want to put the same idea to you readers: how about having some fun writing a story of your own?

The more stories there are, the more worlds there are for readers to explore.

If Shosetsuka ni Naro and the light novel industry continue to grow, that's a good thing, and I can't think of anything better.

You can start for any reason at all. You can even have a really dumb reason like mine... Yep, you totally can. So I guess I just hope that I might be a tiny part of the reason you decide to write or the push you need to take that first step. You can read my story and write your own, or you can not write at all—it's up to you. But as I sit here typing this, it sure would make me happy if you all wrote your own novels too.

Well then, it's on to volume five. In the next volume you'll get to see a character hinted at among the pages of volume four, and of course the arrival of winter. Dias and Iluk Village will be decked out in their winter gear, and they'll be experiencing another side of the plains they call home as they live out their busy days.

Things are going to get livelier again, and I'll be doing my best to write a great story that I hope you all enjoy.

I look forward to speaking to you all again in the next afterword!

Fuurou, March 2020

Bonus Short Story

Alna's Recipe

On a Rainy Afternoon, Alone in the Yurt with Alna—Dias

Rain continued its rhythmic pitter-patter on the roof of the yurt, and I was sitting on the floor thinking about how I wasn't going to be able to do any work outside. That was when I noticed Alna sitting at the table with some paper and a pen. She was writing. It wasn't something she did very often, and when I saw the serious look on her face and heard her murmuring to herself as she wrote, I got really curious and wondered what she was writing about. When she finally put her pen down for a moment, I decided to ask.

"What are you writing there, Alna?"

"This?" she replied, rolling her shoulders. "I'm just listing ingredients and how to cook with them. Recipes, more or less. Now that we have all this paper, it feels like a waste not to make good use of it."

"I always figured that cooking was a mix of experience, intuition, and taste, but I guess writing things down is important too?"

"Of course it is. Food is a pillar of daily life. Screw it up and you could get sick or even die. Experience and intuition are important, but having a solid base of knowledge to work from is what makes those useful in the first place. This is especially true for us because we use a lot of different medicinal herbs. How to mix them, how much to use, the health of the people you're cooking for—it's important to be careful of these and a whole host of other things so that you don't accidentally cook up a poison."

Alna picked up one of the papers on the table and passed it to me so I could take a look at it.

Sugar: Very nourishing. Dissolve in hot water for the sick or those with small

appetites. Too much is bad for you, so serve in moderation.

Tea Leaves: Boiling produces a pleasant scent and color. When simmered with meat, it softens the texture and removes unpleasant odors. Said to help alleviate drowsiness and make one more lively, so best not to consume too much.

Spices (red): Raises body temperature and encourages sweating. Increases blood circulation and loosens up the body. Can cause stomachaches when consumed in excess.

Spices (yellow): Helps meat to last longer when sprinkled on it. When fed to the elderly, results in something of an invigorating effect. Does not appear to have any deleterious effects no matter how much is consumed.

The paper was full of rather in-depth descriptions, and I was bowled over by just how much Alna had written.

“The Chieftain and I have been in contact, discussing the effects of the various ingredients we received from Eldan,” Alna explained. “Nobody has more knowledge about the medicinal effects of food than Moll, so I shared some of our stock with her in exchange for her knowledge. Thanks to her I was able to get an idea of what each ingredient does and how much to use depending on the person. From there I started to look for ways to use them in tasty dishes. The result of all of that are my recipes. And when you think about how much there is to remember and think about, it’s much better to record that information on paper than to share it by word of mouth, right?”

“Yeah, that’s true,” I said, taking another look at the paper in my hand. “But you know, I just never even realized that so much went into the meals we eat everyday. I’m so thankful for all your work, Alna.”

Alna chuckled, then looked at me with a warm smile on her face.

“The onikin have a saying: ‘Those who are good share their food, those who are trusting eat it, and those who are bad waste it by doing neither.’ It’s a saying filled with great meaning and wisdom, and one of those is the idea that food is a basis for trust. You never suspect that my cooking will have bad ingredients in it, or that it’s going to taste awful, or that it’s poisoned. That’s proof that you trust me from the bottom of your heart, and nothing could make

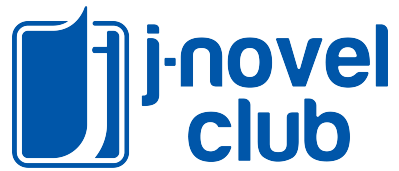
me happier.”

She continued, “Once you eat something, that’s a decision you can’t take back. You can wish you hadn’t eaten something because it gave you a stomachache, but by then, it’s already too late. Sometimes you might not even be able to speak. You might not even recover... But even before we built the relationship we have now, you always ate my food with a hearty smile and told me how much you liked it...”

There wasn’t anything especially deep in what Alna said, but I felt flustered all the same and scratched at the back of my head. I was like that for a little while before I could scrounge together some words again.

“Thanks for all your great cooking, Alna.”

“And thank you for trusting me, Dias,” she replied, her gentle tone the perfect match for her kindly smile.



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The Frontier Lord Begins with Zero Subjects: Volume 4

by Fuurou

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