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HUNTER OF THE AZURE SKIES



The Frontier Lord Begins
with Zero Subjects

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Illustrator: Kinta

Dias! Dias!
The flowers
are blooming!
They're
blooming!

We wanna
go see them!
The flowers!
We wanna
see the
flowers!

It's like
they've
got the
spring
wind in
their
sails.



Cast of Characters



Dias

Lord of the Baarbadal Domain,
formerly Nezrose.



Klaus

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



Eldan

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



Ellie

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



Juha

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



Hubert

Civil servant who formerly served
the royal palace, now working for Iluk.



Alna

Onikin tribe member
and Dias's wife.



Senai and Ayhan

Twin sisters and forestkin
with mysterious powers.



Aymer

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



Zorg

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



Narvant

Elderly cavekin
and skilled blacksmith.

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

Aymer's Report

**Residents:
From 125 to 129!**

While the domain lord Dias and the villagers of Iluk prepared for a harsh winter, Francois and several dogkin mothers gave birth to healthy children.

The two forestkin twins, Senai and Aymer, encountered a cavekin man by the name of Narvant. Together with his wife, Ohmun, and his son, Sanat, the three cavekin joined the village to uphold a promise made between their ancestors and a human. The new looms the cavekin crafted improved the village's baar wool production, which allowed Ellie to complete all the winter clothing she designed.

While out hunting, Dias and one of the dogkin encountered two wild baars, who they rescued from a monster attack. Around the same time, the onikin Alna rescued Hubert, an incredibly loyal civil servant who had collapsed in the snow. He now serves Dias by managing Iluk's domestic affairs.

Thanks to Hubert, who is insanely passionate about his work, Ellie and I have way more support for our own duties! He's a real blessing! Time for me to put in an even greater effort! Don't think you can outdo me, Hubert!

The Baarbadal lands were attacked by a giant flame dragon. The Iluk residents worked together to slay the beast, and thankfully, damage was minimal. With that behind us, all the residents of Iluk Village are working together and supporting one another to make it through the winter.

And so the story continues...

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

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

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Soaring the Open Skies—???

With its powerful wings, it glided gracefully, tracing the downward slope of the mountain. About halfway down, where the world was blanketed in pure-white snow, it spotted a pack of wolves. Perhaps they had been spoiled for prey; the adult wolves all lazed atop the snow, their bellies round and fat, while the puppies raced around happily nearby, kicking up the snow as they went.

Oh? This is not at all how things looked last time I was here. There are fewer of them than I remember, but they look so peaceful... Hmm? I wonder, did something happen?

The creature circled the wolves, pondering as it soared, and then, with a mighty flap of its wings, it rose higher into the sky.

I spotted a dragon here not so long ago. I was expecting it to have sullied this whole area with miasma by now. But instead, it is a portrait of quiet calm...without a trace of miasma to be found. Could it be? Could the wolves have killed the dragon?

No. That's impossible. Even a hundred wolves wouldn't have stood a chance. But if not the wolves, then what...?

The creature soared, its sharp eyes scanning the lands as it left the mountain for the snowy plains. It had always known the plains to be empty and uninhabited, but now it spotted what appeared to be a settlement, and so it flew closer.

A village of dogs? No, it's a human settlement. A human settlement in which many races reside.

And is that... Is that a dragon corpse?! Did these villagers slay the dragon? Did they really hunt a monster of nigh impenetrable miasma?!

The creature could not believe that such a small group of villagers could have slain a dragon, and so it began to observe the village more closely, shocked by this apparent revelation. It flew, and it watched, and never did it even dream

that the two children down in those snowy fields, wrapped in warm clothes with their pom-poms bobbing up and down, were looking up at it, bows in hands, imagining what a wonderful meal it might make...

The Iluk Square—Dias

“Senai, Ayhan,” I said. “What’s up?”

It was the day after we’d slain the dragon, celebrated our victory, and tidied up after the banquet. I’d been watching everyone work on taking apart all the dragon materials in the village square when the twins ran over with their bows in hand. They peered up and stared into the sky after they stopped, and shouted as they followed the movements of something up there.

“There’s a tasty-looking bird up there!”

“It’s probably a falcon! And it’s really big!”

When I heard that, I looked up into the sky. Some of the dogkin around us did the same, and we eventually spotted what the twins were talking about: a bird with its huge wings spread wide, colored in a unique pattern made up of black, brown, and white. Yep, that was a big old falcon if I’d ever seen one. I put my hand to my forehead to shield my eyes from the sun and get a better look.

“Wow, that’s huge,” I exclaimed. “But a falcon that big is probably going to be tough to hunt. Look how high up it is. I’ll bet it’s quick, and falcons that big are usually pretty clever to boot. I guess you could use some bait to lure it down to us or set a trap of some kind, but...I reckon that given its size, it’ll see through those tricks.”

Of course, none of that did anything to discourage the girls. They both kept a tight grip on their bows with one hand, each reaching for their quivers with the other, and all the while they kept their eyes on the falcon circling the village. I watched them like that and wondered whether I should help them, but I realized that even if I wanted to, there wasn’t anything I could do. I figured I’d just let the girls do what they wanted, and my eyes fell back to the village square.

The actual material gathering was going very smoothly under Narvant’s supervision, and Hubert had neatly divided up all the payments and parts for

the onikin and Kamalotz. It looked to me like we'd be mostly done by the end of the day. Having a dragon corpse smack-dab in the middle of the square had the baars really on edge. They couldn't relax with the corpse just sitting there, so ultimately it was good for all of us if the work finished quickly.

Once the dragon was all done and dusted, I'd be back to hunting until Ellie got back. Then when Ellie returned, we'd have to organize another shipment for her to take to Mahati. Thinking about that made me realize that spring was still a long way off, but before I could muse on it for long Hubert wrapped up his negotiations and walked over to me with Kamalotz.

"Sir Dias," said Kamalotz. "As per your wishes, we've accepted the piece of magical stone from the flame dragon along with some of its materials. Once I've made my report to Lord Eldan, we'll send the magical stone to the king. We'll put the materials to use as per Lord Eldan's judgment. With regards to payment for those materials, we'll send that back with Ellie, so there will be a slight wait."

"Sounds great," I answered with a nod. "Then I'll just wait for Ellie's return. Thank you so much for coming out all this way, Kamalotz. It means a lot to us that you're here."

"Oh, no. No, no. We took far too long getting prepared, and in the end we didn't make it in time. It's embarrassing."

"Yeah, maybe you didn't make it in time *this* time, but I'm just glad to know that I have friends who'll rush to our aid when the village is in need. So I know I'm repeating myself, but thanks. And if Eldan ever finds himself in trouble, you can bet we'll be there in a flash, so just say the word, okay?"

"It means the world to us that you would say such a thing," replied Kamalotz. "I will not forget what you have said, and Eldan will receive your message as you have spoken it."

Kamalotz then softly set a hand to his chest as a gesture of respect and gratitude. In return I did likewise and nodded, because Hubert had taught me that this was what a lord did. Once we settled down, we chatted a bit more. I said that I would visit Eldan in the spring and that he was always welcome here.

When Kamalotz decided it was time to take his leave, I decided I'd see him off

at the outskirts of the village. Kamalotz's men finished loading all the materials onto the carts that Narvant had hastily thrown together for them, then readied their horses. Kamalotz jumped on his horse like a man half his age, gave another salute, and then headed off east with his soldiers. I watched their silhouettes until they disappeared over the horizon, then turned around to head back.

"Dias!" shouted Senai.

"We caught it!" shouted Ayhan.

The twins were beaming as they ran to me, each of them holding the leg of a big old falcon. It must have been the one they had pointed out earlier. The falcon, dangling between the girls with its beak wide open, was even bigger up close, and I wondered how they had caught the dang thing. Had they shot it down with their bows? Knocked it on the head with something?



Figuring I could get the answer later, I muttered, “I guess we’re having roast falcon tonight.”

The falcon must have heard me, because its crest—which came down low enough to look like eyebrows—arched and its eyes opened wide.

“But I’m not a falcon!” squealed the bird. “And I beg you! No roasting! I am not a good meal!”

Senai, Ayhan, the dogkin, and I almost fell over at once.

“It talked!” we all shouted.

Senai and Ayhan had both been staring at the falcon with a longing in their eyes, and that hadn’t escaped Zorg’s notice. He thought of the girls as his nieces now, so he and his fellow onikin had all put their concealment magic to work and hidden the square entirely. He’d told the girls that there were two reactions the falcon might give: it would either run away in shock at the square suddenly vanishing, or it would be drawn in by its curiosity. As it turned out, curiosity had gotten the better of the bird, and it had slowly started to descend for a closer look.

With the plan a success, Zorg and his companions had snatched up the falcon in a leather sack. The falcon, for its part, had fallen unconscious about as soon as it was captured and smothered in darkness.

“Based on how big it is, I’d say it’s a female,” Zorg had said, “but it’s fast and powerful, and the fact that it drew nearer to check on things shows that it’s brave to boot. It’s not easy to train a fully grown falcon, but if you treat it well and show it that you care, you’ve got yourself a hunting bird for life.”

That was the whole reason that Zorg had used a leather sack; that was how you caught falcons for hunting purposes. He had then passed the bag over to the twins, but the girls didn’t know the first thing about falconry, so they hadn’t really known what Zorg meant. They’d just been happy to have found what looked to be really good meat, and they’d run straight over to me to show me their catch...and somewhere along the way they’d lost the bag.

“Well, I’m not hurt, so I’ve got that going for me,” said the falcon. “And it was

pretty nice to hear someone call me brave, if I'm being honest... That and the part about me being a reliable hunter too. But knock it off with the jokes about eating me, yeah? Like, seriously, okay? That's terrifying."

The fact that it was talking told us all it was a demi-human, and we knew then that we couldn't eat it. We hurriedly released the falcon—uh, falconkin, I suppose—which then moved to the rooftop of the nearest yurt, where it began grooming its ruffled feathers.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Really sorry," added Senai.

"Really, *really* sorry," added Ayhan.

Hit with all three of our apologies, the falconkin sighed.

"No, look, I *did* fly into your turf without so much as an introduction, and like I said, I'm not hurt. I think we can call it even, yeah? But more importantly, that dragon you're taking apart over there...who in the world slew that thing?"

"Who? Uh, well, all of us here in Iluk," I replied. "There was us and the onikin who are helping us take the dragon apart. We hit the thing with arrows, and we plowed into it with our baar wagons...and then I struck the finishing blow. Senai and Ayhan also helped us out with their bows too."

I gave each girl a pat on the head. The falconkin looked astonished for a moment, then stared at us all more closely with its piercing gaze.

"I see..." it muttered. "And how many other dragons have you slain?"

"Hmm..." I murmured. "Well, there was the turtle, then the dragonflies... Uh, I mean, I took down an earth dragon with Alna, and I teamed up with Zorg to slay a group of wind dragons."

"Aha, okay, okay. So *that's* why there's been no spreading of their miasma even though they've been pretty active of late. Well then, let me ask you two girls something: you want some tasty meat to eat? You wanna go hunting?"

The first part of what the falcon had muttered didn't make much sense to any of us, but the falconkin leveled its gaze at the twins with its question, and though the girls were a little surprised at first, they replied at once.

“Yep!”

“Ha! In which case / shall be your hunting falcon! With the heroic falconkin Sahhi by your side, you’ll have full bellies every day. It’ll help you two grow by leaps and bounds! All I ask is for a place to sleep and a chance to fight by your sides should another dragon set its sights on your village, which means a small portion of its materials as loot once the dust has settled.”

That said, the falconkin Sahhi raised his beak, stretched his wings, and artfully bent them into something of a heroic-looking pose.

“Really?!” cried the girls, unable to hide their smiles.

“Uh...” I said, interjecting, “does that mean you’ll be living with us and...becoming a resident of the village? We do provide all our residents with a place to sleep, and we’d be happy to give you a portion of whatever materials you help hunt...”

Sahhi floated off the roof and glided down to our feet.

“A resident, huh?” he replied, looking up at us. “Yeah, I guess that’s what I’ll be. My clan and our families are beholden to old duties of dragon slaying and halting the spread of the miasma...and, uh, well, once you hit a certain age and you don’t have a wife, like me, you get driven from your nest and told to hunt a dragon...”

He sighed and continued, “I don’t really have the tools to take down a dragon solo, but if I don’t hunt one I can’t go home either, yeah? So I’ve spent my time looking for a dragon-slaying hero to join forces with. And you’ve hunted *three* different types, which sure is something. Look, I’ll do my darndest, so I just ask that you share some materials with me. You know, for my honor, and so I can go home...and maybe so I can take a wife.”

As he finished, Sahhi gently held out a wing as if he were looking to shake hands. Me and the twins knelt down, and one by one we took his wing in our hands.

“So what are all your names, anyway?” asked Sahhi, tilting his head.

That was when it hit us all that we hadn’t even introduced ourselves. We quickly gave Sahhi our names, and then he climbed aboard my arm and I took

him through the village to introduce him to everyone. Being that everyone already knew about Geraint (the dovekin), Sahhi didn't surprise anybody much, and everybody welcomed him with a smile. When I introduced him to Zorg and the onikin and explained the falconkin's circumstances, Zorg's jaw dropped.

"No way," he groaned, his whole body starting to shake. "The falcon can talk...and its soul is blue...and it's *that* big *and* it's male?! D-Do you have any idea how *easy* that's going to make all of your hunting...?!"

Zorg and his onikin sure looked rattled, but Sahhi merely looked at them through narrowed eyes and replied, "I'm not a falcon, you hear? I'm a falcon*kin*. Yeah, we look a bit alike, but we're *totally* different. I remember the others saying to steer clear of these grasslands, and I guess the rumors were all because of whose turf this was..."

Sahhi heaved a great big sigh, but Zorg quickly went from being shocked to having a strange glint in his eye. In the next instant, he was all over Sahhi, promising him that if he came with them they'd make him a stunning blinder and an anklet and make sure he ate quality meat every single day.

Zorg was insistent, because in a world blanketed in all-encompassing white, people stood out like sore thumbs. This meant that not only was hunting a real struggle, but even just spotting animals was a challenge. Having a trained hunting falcon by your side at such times made all of this much easier, apparently. If you and your falcon were on the same wavelength, so to speak, then it got even easier still. So perhaps unsurprisingly, Zorg was desperate.

"Enough! Enough already!" said Sahhi, half exasperated and half flinching away. "I'm the *twins'* hunting falcon! The three of us are a team, and I ain't teaming up with anyone else! Those old geezers...they were all blabbering about the dragons and the miasma when they should've been warning me about these underhanded and annoying idiots..."

Sahhi's voice dropped to a whisper around the last bit, and it was clear that he didn't like all the pressure Zorg was putting on him. I could actually feel it in the way he was trembling and digging his talons into my arm.

Treading Out Across a Landscape of Smooth White Snow—Senai and Ayhan

“Falconry in these parts is all about foxes. Their meat is pretty average, but the Peijins buy pelts at a high price. If you tan and wash them so they’re in good shape, you’ll get a fine price for them come spring.”

A few days had passed since Sahhi had become a resident of Iluk Village. There wasn’t a hint of snow in the clear blue sky, which made for perfect hunting weather. Senai and Ayhan had taken Sahhi out on their first hunting expedition.

“Just judging by Sahhi’s size, you could even hunt wolves. Like foxes, their meat isn’t all that tasty, but again the pelts sell well, so they’re not a bad catch. If it’s tastier meat you’re after, you’ll want to be on the lookout for rabbits and birds. Deer too, but you’ll want to take them down as a team; you two with your bows and Sahhi or the dogkin on support.”

The one doing all the talking—and it wasn’t clear if he’d even taken a second breath from the moment they set out—was Uncle Zorg, who’d come flying to the village that morning to tell the twins all about the perfect hunting weather.

As far as Zorg was concerned, Senai and Ayhan were essentially Alna’s adopted children. The onikin didn’t consider bloodlines a matter of huge importance, and so Zorg considered the twins part of his own family. The twins, too, saw Zorg as a fine uncle and teacher of the hunt, and they nodded along happily as he prattled off his explanations, enraptured by every word.

The twins had seen the incredibly strict way in which Alna treated her brother, but they had also seen the other side of her—the way she had crafted him a bow and arrows, the way she cooked for him, and how she prepared medicinal tea to ease his exhaustion. Through all of this, the twins understood that Alna loved him...in her own way. Their minds were still those of children, and while they sensed a wall between the two siblings, they sensed it was not the kind of wall that could destroy their relationship entirely. This was why they

smiled so brightly and why Zorg, when faced with these smiles, grew even more spirited.

The twins were accompanied by a number of dogkin bodyguards and, as always, Aymer, who rode aboard Senai's winter hat. The girls held between them a long pole, at the top of which sat the star of today's show. The pole had been readied at Sahhi's request, when he'd explained that the higher up he sat, the more easily he could find prey. In order to ensure the twins were not left with too heavy a load to bear, the falconkin sat gingerly, his magical energy helping to keep his body light.

In this way, Sahhi scanned the snowy plains with a piercing, focused glare...and at the same time, he remained wary of Zorg, who was leading the group onwards. It was he, after all, who had been so insistent on going hunting together.

The flame dragon materials had all been gathered, and so really Zorg no longer had any business in Iluk. In fact, he should have been busy with the task of dividing those materials between his people, and yet here he was. For Sahhi, Zorg was someone to keep tabs on.

And while Zorg had given up on convincing Sahhi to join the onikin tribe, he nonetheless saw an opportunity to ascertain the location of the falconkin's nests. Sahhi wasn't going to say a word and remained steadfastly cautious.

Of course, Zorg didn't want to draw the ire of his sister and his two nieces, and so he had been prudent, but he simply couldn't rid himself of the thought of how *manly* it would be to have a falcon like Sahhi and how much more he could earn over the winter with such a falcon by his side.

So for much of the expedition, a unique and somewhat nervous tension existed between the onikin and the falconkin: Zorg continued his explanation to the twins while occasionally glancing in Sahhi's direction, and Sahhi made it obvious that he was not about to let his guard down.

Time passed, and just as Zorg's excited chatter finally calmed, Sahhi's eyes picked up the tiniest of movements, a near imperceptible change in the landscape around them. The falconkin watched closely, and when he was sure that what he had in sight were animal tracks, he spoke.

“Stop for a moment. I see tracks. Now, let me explain what to be aware of when hunting with a falconkin. As Zorg has already explained, the best days are like today, when the skies are clear and the air is warm. This makes it easier to fly, and the slight melting of the snow means it is more likely our prey will leave tracks that we can follow. As we were leaving, Dias said that it is hard to hunt when you are surrounded in white, but in fact the opposite is true. As for why, if you look there, you will see.”

Sahhi then thrust a wing out, pointing to a specific location. The twins squinted and stared while the dogkin and Aymer tilted their heads curiously.

“We see it!” cheered the girls.

“As expected, those who hunt with a bow boast good eyesight. Zorg has been aware of them for some time, but you two were quick to pick them up too. Aymer and the dogkin can’t see them yet, but what we’re looking at are the tracks of our prey. And by the looks of them...I’d wager it’s a fox. All that is left now is to chase it and to hunt. Dias is...something of...an absent-minded sort, and it’s likely he’d never have noticed such tracks.”

Sahhi then spread his wings and, with a shake, had himself ready to fly at a moment’s notice. He directed the twins to carefully follow the tracks they’d spotted, and all the while he stared onwards to where those tracks led.

“Hunting is easiest when you can climb to a higher vantage point after spotting your prey, but in plains as flat as these such options are nonexistent. And that is where I come in. All you two have to do is hold my perch tight, then stay silent so as not to disturb my work. Please do not bark or run wild, my dogkin friends; we falconkin launch our attacks in an instant, from the depths of silence, as that is our way. Now come. We shall soon spot our prey.”

There was a glimmer in Sahhi’s eyes as he shut his beak and settled into a position from which he could launch whenever he wanted. A few moments later, a large fox revealed itself, digging through the snow. At Zorg’s signal everybody fell silent and crouched down low.

“It’s so far away,” whispered Senai.

“We’d never hit it with our bows from here,” added Ayhan.

Though there was definitely an animal out there, it was so distant that only the twins and Zorg were able to make out the general shape of it. However, none were able to make out from the blurry shape that it was a fox, and when they stated as much, Sahhi chuckled from atop his perch.

“Once a falconkin can make out the form of an animal, from whatever distance, there is nothing it cannot hunt. All you have to do is hold my perch up high and remain calm.”

With that, Sahhi spread his wings, and with a powerful flap, combined with his magical energy, he drifted up into the air. He flapped his wings again until he reached a point at which he could simply stretch his wings and glide. From here he drifted silently towards his prey.

“Did he get spotted?!” whispered Senai.

“Will the fox flee?!” whispered Ayhan.

As Sahhi closed in, the fox digging through the snow became aware of the falconkin’s presence. Its hair stood on end and its tail shot upright, and it let out a bark of intimidation that reached even the twins. But none of this stopped Sahhi, who was on a direct course straight for his target. The fox spun, ready for battle...

...but the decisive blow took only an instant.

Sahhi’s talons gripped the fox by its neck and torso, and with a smooth, swift jerk he snapped the animal’s neck, so cleanly that the fox felt not even an instant of suffering. The fox didn’t cry or struggle, simply collapsing in the snow as if all the energy had simply dissipated from its body. Sahhi landed by the animal’s side and deftly folded his wings over his chest—a show of respect for the fox, which had bravely stood ready to fight, even in its last moments.

Zorg, the twins, and the dogkin came running soon after, and each of them clasped their hands together or put their hands to their chest like Sahhi to offer up their own prayers. When they were done, Zorg quickly whipped his knife from his satchel and set about dressing the animal. Sahhi returned to the top of his perch and looked down as the twins helped Zorg with his work.

“Well, it seems you have no problems with dressing hunted animals,” he

muttered. “Although I should have realized that from the moment you left with me on this expedition of ours...”

His words were for nobody in particular, but the twins still picked up his message with their long, pointed ears, and they looked up at him.

“We’re fine with it. And besides, it’s important,” said Senai. “It’s the circle of life.”

“We treat what we hunt with respect, waste nothing, and show our gratitude,” added Ayhan.

Sahhi responded to the girls’ words with silence. Meanwhile, Zorg continued to work his knife through the animal as he spoke up.

“Looks like Alna has taught you two well,” he said. “You’re good girls, the both of you. This fox hunted mice out here and made them part of its own flesh and blood. In turn, we hunted this fox, and by eating it, we make it part of ourselves. When our lives run their course, we will return to the earth, and grass will grow where we fall. That grass will feed the baars and the ghee, and so the cycle continues, ensuring that no life ever goes to waste. There is meaning in all life, and all life is important. No one life is better than another, and so we must not forget to pay our respects and show our gratitude. And like this fox, one day we, too, may find ourselves hunted...or under attack. That is why we must make ourselves strong and learn to fight... All of this is what it means to live.”

The words had been spoken countless times, and they acted like a mantra when said aloud. The twins, Aymer, and the dogkin all listened quietly. Sahhi nodded to himself as the words sunk in, clearly musing over his own thoughts on the matter.

For a little while, only Zorg’s hands going about their work made any sound. He put the pelt and the meat into separate bags, and anything that could not be used for food was buried in the earth. The rest of the innards that could be eaten were placed in their own separate bag.

When he was done, Zorg removed the grime from his hands with snow, then used some herbal water in a leather pouch to wash them clean. It was then that Zorg gasped as he remembered something.

“I completely forgot,” he exclaimed. “You deserve thanks for your work, Sahhi. Will you eat some of the raw meat I just cut? Or would you prefer some innards? Falcons eat both, right?”

Sahhi responded at first with a silent narrowing of the eyes and then a long sigh.

“How many times do I have to tell you that I’m not a falcon. I’m a falcon*kin*. Yes, I can eat raw meat and innards, but I usually eat meat that’s *cooked*, okay? I mean, yesterday I enjoyed the same soup as everyone else, and I eat vegetables and berries just like the rest of you. I’m begging you, quit treating me like just another bird.”

Sahhi shook his head, exasperated, and it was then that the twins nodded at one another, their eyes saying, “*Sahhi needs a reward for his efforts!*” They brought forth a small bag of dried walnuts and put some in their hands, which they held out to Sahhi.

“Here!” they cried out in unison.

“Uh...yeah... I’m grateful, because it’s true, I *am* a fan of walnuts...but, uh...you don’t have to hold it up like it’s bird feed, you know? I’m perfectly happy to be treated as just another villager, living the same way you all do and eating the same food. Okay?”

But the twins still held their palms out, going as far as pushing them towards the falconkin, and he eventually realized he had no other choice. Sahhi deftly pecked at the walnuts in the twins’ palms and swallowed them down. The twins were overjoyed at the sight. On the other hand, Sahhi looked considerably more awkward.

It was then that a huge, powerful presence, unlike anything they had ever felt before, wrapped itself around them. The first to notice were the dogkin, followed by Sahhi and Aymer, then Zorg. Everyone immediately prepared themselves for an attack; Zorg and the twins readied their bows, the dogkin took formation in a tight ring around the twins, and Sahhi spread his wings as he scanned the area. Aymer, for her part, held tight to Senai’s hat.

“Who is it...?!” she asked.

But there was no response, and none of them saw any figure among the snowy plains that spread out in every direction. Nobody let their guard down, but confusion began to take root. They could feel an overwhelming pressure nearby, closing in little by little, but no matter where they looked, they could not see it. The group gulped nervously as a collective, unsure of what was happening, and even less sure of what was about to happen. That was when something rose from the snow and spoke.

“Wait a second, wait a second! I’m not your enemy, and I don’t mean you any harm. Attacking me won’t have any effect, but I’d prefer you didn’t do it anyway—what hurts *hurts*, you know.”

The presence emanated...from a baar. It was wrapped in fluffy white wool, and along with its four hooved legs it boasted a far more impressive set of curled horns than an ordinary baar. However, though it appeared to be a baar in form, its presence was anything but, and the fact that it could talk only added to the proof. Despite the baar’s assurance, everyone’s guard tightened further.

“Wh-Who are you?! You look like a baar, but that aura of yours... And more importantly, how can you talk?!” asked Aymer on behalf of everyone.

The baar-like creature grinned.

“Ah, okay, I get it, so you can feel my presence, then. Yeah, okay, that makes sense. That other guy...Dias...? Is that his name? He couldn’t feel it at all, but when I try to get near him, he seems to instinctively sense me coming. You can see it in his eyes. They speak for him. ‘I’ll get you this time; you won’t get away.’ But anyway, because of that I can’t get anywhere near the village, and being as I didn’t have any other choice, I’m here talking to you.”

The creature gave no room to cut in. “Looks like you put the sanjivani I gave you to its proper use, and you even took out a dragon...and an especially troublesome flame dragon, I might add. And well, because you’re all living the way you’re supposed to, my master has ordered that I bequeath upon you a reward. So keep on protecting our children and eliminating the dragons that look to harm my lord, you hear? You two young ones, you’re to take this bag to Dias and give it to him, okay?”



So saying, the baar-like creature reached its mouth into its woolly body and pulled from within a small bag, which it tossed at the twins' feet. The bag landed with a soft *fwump*, and everyone looked down at it. The moment they did, they were hit with a sudden dizziness, and when it cleared the baar-like creature had vanished completely. The presence that had pressed down upon them was gone.

Everyone was left wondering: What exactly was that creature with its imposing aura? The question wove through all of their minds as they once more looked at the bag in the snow, which Senai and Ayhan timidly, cautiously knelt down to pick up.

The Iluk Village Square—Dias

“And, uh...in that bag,” I muttered, “there were these jewels, huh...?”

Once they had finished their falcon hunting...or, uh, falconkin hunting, I suppose, the twins had returned and passed me the bag they’d been given. I was clutching one of the jewels between my fingers, examining it closely. At a glance, it seemed just like any other similar stone, but when the sun hit it, the jewel let off a light that made me think of gold that had been dyed red. Perhaps it was because of the metals within the stone or something.

Whatever they were, they weren’t your ordinary jewels. I got the sense they had some kind of power in them. Unfortunately, the baar-like creature hadn’t given the twins any sort of detailed instructions, so we didn’t have any idea whatsoever what the jewels were or what kind of power they contained. All we knew was that there were three of them, and they all came in the one bag.

What am I supposed to do with these?

I had a feeling that the jewels were like the sanjivani herbs, which meant that if we did the wrong thing with them then they’d just disappear on us. If so, I didn’t want to do anything reckless. But that left me absolutely stumped. Given that we’d been gifted genuine sanjivani herbs before, and given that they had an amazing effect, I thought it likely that the jewels had some kind of bigger purpose.

I sat staring at the stones trying to figure out what they were for until the twins spoke up. They were by my side, working on tanning hides near their field, with Aymer watching over and teaching them.

“Those aren’t jewels,” said Senai.

“There’s something different about them, but they’re not jewels.”

I nodded at the girls. I remembered then that the standard for jewels was whether or not they held magical energy. I looked back at the stones, and I wondered if they were like verdant leaf stones in that maybe we could crush

them up and spread them across our fields. Still, I wasn't keen to do that while the exact purpose of the stones was still unknown, but I knew that just sitting and staring wasn't going to do anything either. Just as I was thinking that maybe I should crush at least one of them, I heard the stomping of heavy feet as Narvant marched over.

"Aha! So *these* are the stones everyone's been talking about! I've heard all I need to! Give them here and let me have a look! I might be able to give you an idea of whatcha got there!"

The cavekin thrust out his hand and I passed a stone over. Zorg and Sahhi arrived soon after, and it turned out they'd called Narvant over because he was so knowledgeable when it came to ores and whatnot. Zorg looked exhausted from chasing after Narvant, and Sahhi was flapping his wings as he watched the cavekin examining the stone in his hand. Everyone wanted to know the same thing: what were they?

Narvant had been drawn in by that same curiosity, and he looked the stone all over before narrowing his eyes and turning to Zorg.

"What do you think these are, young'n?" he asked. "Just stones? Or jewels of a sort?"

"H-Huh? You're asking *me*?" replied Zorg, taken completely off guard. "Hmm... Well, I don't think they're jewels. But I get the sense that they're not just ordinary stones either. I mean, I know that much is obvious just by the coloring, but...there's some kind of aura to them."

Narvant dropped into thought, his beard swaying as he continued to inspect the stone.

"So if the twins don't know, and you don't know, I guess that puts it in the cavekin sphere of knowledge, but y'know...I don't have the faintest clue what I'm looking at. I don't know what we're supposed to do with 'em."

"Wait, wait... How can *you* not know either?" asked a shocked Zorg.

The somewhat exasperated Sahhi shook his head and flew over to his perch, which stood in the ground next to the twins. Narvant's troubled murmurs floated through the village square, and as the time passed none of us got any

closer to an answer. We took all the stones out and put them in my hand, and we stared at them really hard together. At some point unbeknownst to all of us, Uncle Ben appeared with the wild baars in tow.

He took one glance at the stones and stated as if it was the most obvious thing in the world, "Crush them up and mix them with steel."

All of us stared at him so wide that our eyes were about to pop out of their sockets.

"Mix them with steel?" asked Narvant after a quick recovery. "Where'd you get that idea from?"

"It was written in a sacred tome I saw a while back, and apparently the results are pretty good."

In contrast to Narvant's shock and confusion, Ben looked as calm and peaceful as always.

A sacred tome, huh?

Uncle Ben had worked at the temple in the royal capital for a great many years, and it was certainly true he'd been there long enough to read a wide variety of religious texts. But why would such strange stones be written about in a tome in the temples anyway? I felt my head tilting with confusion, but Narvant was nodding to himself hearing the explanation, and soon he spoke.

"Well, if that's what you say, then I'll give it a shot," he said. "Steel, you say...? In which case I'll mix it with Dias's armor when I melt it down."

And with that said, Narvant took the stones and marched off towards his workshop. I couldn't quite believe it. When it came to smithing, Narvant was nothing if not stubborn and opinionated, but he'd just accepted Uncle Ben's advice without so much as a peep. I couldn't help wondering when the two had gotten to be so friendly.

"Well, we're both old timers, and we can relate to one another," explained Uncle Ben, reading the question on my face. "More importantly, I wanted to talk to you about the baars. Do you have a minute?"

I cleared my throat, and I tried to remember what Uncle Ben had told me

when I replied.

“O-Of course. How may I...help you?”

Uncle Ben had been really strict in terms of educating me as a boy, but he'd told me I didn't need to talk to him like I was his nephew. He said to talk with him like a domain lord. The thing of it was, I just couldn't quite wipe my memories on demand, and the habits that came with them were just as hard to break. Talking with Uncle Ben was hard for me in this way, so I was always fumbling my words.

“Well, I appreciate the effort, Dias, I do. Anyway, these baars here...they want to become residents. As proud as they are of their wild heritage, they've seen the flame dragon and other monsters of late, and they know that pride will beget a fall, now more than ever. It might even put their families in danger. So they're ready to serve you, seeing as you took out that flame dragon without a single casualty. All of the wild baars are in agreement.”

Then he added, “They also talked among themselves about the herd chief, and they're happy to leave Francis's position uncontested. What all this means is, they'll need yurts of their own as soon as you get the chance to put them up. They want to move out of their current accommodations and into proper yurts like the other baar residents.”

“Yes, si... I mean, well okay then,” I said, stumbling again. “I'll make the time to put them up. And th-thank you, Uncle Ben, for hearing them out on my behalf.”

I walked over to the baars behind Uncle Ben, then knelt down and put a hand out.

“Thank you,” I said, “for joining our village as new residents. You aren't just visitors anymore, and you'll be treated like this is your home, because it is from now on. I'll do my utmost to make this place a home you'll be proud of, so don't hesitate to let me know if you have any problems. Put 'er there.”

On the part of the baars, they each wore a different and rather unique expression as they bleated their responses. Then the baar standing in front of them all lifted his front leg, bent it slightly, and then touched my hand with his knee. He followed that with a message of bleats. I didn't have the slightest clue

what he was saying, but I gathered from his body language that it was something expressing friendship, so I smiled.

“He’s telling you to stand up,” Uncle Ben translated from behind me. “You’ll just get your clothes dirty kneeling down like that. He’s happy you’d offer a handshake, but he’d only dirty your hands if he gave you his hoof. It gets a bit muddy in the winter, so watch yourself.”

The snow in the square was always getting trodden on and kicked around because everyone walked through it so often. That meant all the earth that wasn’t covered in snow was a muddy sludge, just like Uncle Ben said. Without another word, I picked myself back up.

I figured I should clean the dirt off of my knee before it stained, so I walked towards the kitchen range, where I knew we kept tools for cleaning.

The next day was bright and clear, so we put up six new yurts to the north of the village for our new residents. Now that I had homes up for all the baar families, it was time to think about names for them... That’s what I was thinking about as I stood in the village square, watching the baars bathe in the sun.

It hadn’t been easy naming Ethelbald and his wives, but now I was looking at a whole *eighteen* baars to name all at once. It was doing my head in, but Francis and Francoise’s six kids didn’t share a hint of my worry as they raced happily around the square. They ran around saying hello to their new friends by nudging them with their noses or pushing against them with their bodies. And all the while, they bleated their little bleats.

I thought the six baar kids were the happiest out of everyone to welcome the formerly wild baars as new residents. Part of it was that they just had so many new friends, and part of it was that their dad’s herd had gotten bigger. Another part of it was that there were more baars around who could play with and look after them. Not so long ago, those kids had stayed cooped up inside of our yurt because of the cold, but now they were so lively and energetic it was like the temperature didn’t even matter to them anymore.

The new baars, for their part, all happily played with the kids or otherwise entertained all the bleating by touching noses or tidying the little ones’ wool. It

was nice to see them all getting to know one another more closely.

I was still gazing at the adorable baar interactions when Sahhi, who'd been soaring gracefully above, slowly descended and came to rest upon his perch, which we'd made a place for in the square when it wasn't being used for hunting.

"Nothing out of the ordinary in the surrounding area," reported the falconkin, neatly folding his wings. "The air is beautiful too. It's likely we'll have a few more days of good weather ahead. That aside, have you decided on the names yet?"

I shook my head.

"It's not going very well," I admitted. "If they were *all* the same family it might've been a bit easier to group them together, but they're all different. To give a sense of family and to make the names easier to remember I should name them family by family, but it's a real challenge when you've got this many to deal with at once."

"Baars have always lived without names, so I don't think you need to worry about it too much. Still...I mean, they'll have kids one of these days, so you could name them with that in mind. It'll make things easier down the line, no?"

"Hmm... I might ask the baars themselves if they have any preferences, then ask for opinions from the other villagers. Maybe somebody's got a good idea."

"Somebody, huh? How about starting with the people most happy to have new residents? They're in such high spirits I'm sure they'll come up with something for you to think about. While I was soaring up there earlier, I saw...uh, the skinny guy. What's his name, Hubert? That guy is always running about the village as though he loves being the busiest person in the world. The grandmas are a good group to check with too; they're all having a grand old time carrying baar wool here and there. I'd start with them."

The conversation led Sahhi's thoughts in another direction. "You know, usually people prefer having free time and hate rushing all over, but with all the residents here it's the exact opposite. It's a bit weird. I can't tell if it's just that there aren't any lazy people here or if it's just that nobody even knows that the word 'lazy' exists. I mean, as far as I can see, there's only one lazy person here,

and it's *him*."

Sahhi lifted a wing up and pointed it at Zorg—he'd actually returned to the onikin village yesterday, but he'd come back this morning to spend time with the twins. He was talking to them about hunting and falconry, and boy did he look like he was having a good time doing it. The twins, too, seemed to be enjoying themselves and listening intently.

"Well, he's teaching the twins all he knows about hunting, so I don't know if you can call that lazy, exactly," I said, pausing for a moment. Then I added, "I mean, I think?"

Sahhi noticed my awkwardness and shook his head.

"Nope. No, no, no, he's doing it all wrong. Yeah, he's having so much fun that he can't help himself, but also he's gloating and bragging about all the stuff he knows... If you ask me, I'm not seeing a hardworking individual over there, you hear me? Let's be real, he's got work of his own to do, and the place to do it is his own village. He's in a position of authority, isn't he? So what's he doing over here talking himself blue? Alna told me all about that guy before we went hunting together, and she said he got caught up in some trouble with a woman and I should be on guard. So what I'm seeing right now has me worried that we might end up seeing a repeat of that incident."

And with his piece spoken, Sahhi stared at Zorg through narrowed eyes. I took a good long look at Zorg too, and then I noticed Alna striding on over towards him.

"I think he'll be just fine, Sahhi. He's got Alna here in Iluk, and he's got the chieftain back at the onikin village. That means that whenever he looks like he's about to give in to his more slovenly ways, he has people right there to knock him back into shape."

And as if on cue, Alna's voice filled the square. It wasn't an angry voice, so to speak, but it was loud enough that it echoed, and it was filled with Alna's various feelings for her brother. Zorg paused midsentence, and his face filled with fear. I was pretty sure his legs started trembling too.

"What do you think you're doing? Shouldn't you be over at the onikin village? Didn't the chieftain give you an important job to do? Is this how you're going to

reward the village's faith in you?"

With her hands on her hips, her shoulders shaking with her familiar ire, and her gaze squarely on her brother, Alna almost literally pelted her words at Zorg. Having been summarily pummeled, Zorg said a few words to his two nieces and took off running in a right panic for the onikin village.

Senai and Ayhan wore guilty looks and they went up to Alna to apologize, but she quickly told them that it wasn't them she was scolding, and they hadn't done anything wrong. They'd shot up in terms of height of late, and Alna gave those taller heads a pat, then took the twins' hands and walked towards the kitchen range.

"You see? All's well that ends well," I said.

"I suppose it is what it is," replied Sahhi, who took to grooming his wings.

The falconkin neatly tidied his own wings and then gave them a few flaps to set them right before taking off skywards once more. But it wasn't very long before Sahhi returned to his perch with a report.

"Hey, Dias. There's a weird group headed this way," he said. "There's some dogkin and a caravan, and the guy in charge looks to be a dude dressed in a weird outfit! Do you know them? Or are they strangers? Is it best we send word around the village?"

I had to take a moment to think about what Sahhi had said, but eventually I realized who was coming in, and I let out a loud gasp.

"Ah! Sahhi, all the members of that caravan are residents of Iluk, so you don't have to go warning anyone about them. But, uh...the person you said was wearing a weird outfit? If you go calling her a dude you're only going to hurt her feelings, so please be careful not to say that, okay?"

Sahhi saw the earnestness on my face, and he heard it in my tone of voice. After a gulp, he looked at me with an earnest expression of his own and nodded. Then I went about explaining to Sahhi how Ellie and the dogkin had gone to the neighboring domain for trade purposes. Halfway through my explanation we heard a howl from one of the incoming dogkin. Perhaps they saw home and just couldn't help themselves, or maybe they just wanted to get

to the village as quickly as possible, or maybe they just wanted to let us all know they were back. Whatever the case, we heard more howls all the way up until the caravan arrived in the village proper.

The howling mastis led the sled-equipped caravan to the storehouse, then ran over to me, all of them eager to give their report. I listened intently and replied as was appropriate: welcome back, glad you're all safe, you had a long journey I'm sure, thanks for all your hard work, and other similar statements. At the same time, I made sure to give all the dogkin some pats on the head.

Once I was done, Ellie came strolling over waving a piece of paper at me. "We're back," she sang.

"Welcome home."

Ellie smiled and handed me the piece of paper she was holding. It was a list of what she'd received through trade at Merangal. I quickly scanned the contents.

There's 150 bales of dried grass, 10 pots of sugar, 5 bottles of tea leaves, 20 boxes of jerky...

The list also contained nuts, berries, cheese, butter, barrels of wine, dried vegetables and fruits, all sorts of spices, construction materials, and... Anyway, suffice it to say it was quite the haul. I rubbed my eyes, then looked at Ellie, then at the storehouse, then once more at the list in my hands.

"But this is *way* too much stuff," I said. "We'd need twenty or thirty caravans to transport all of this, wouldn't we...?"

"Well, that's what happens when you go out and slay a flame dragon, papa," replied Ellie. "With just the baar wool we were all set with our grass, sugar, and jerky, but when dragon materials were added to the equation, it all just expanded exponentially!"

"I didn't forget our original purpose," she continued, "and so I have detailed notes regarding the current price of baar wool and how much grass we can buy with it, so you don't have to worry about that. The livestock isn't mentioned on the list because talks are still ongoing, so I'll be going back for another round of negotiations. I figure we'll be making lots of trips like that—probably around

ten just to collect everything on that list. Eldan also has some gifts for us, so we'll bring those back too. But before that, I think we've all earned ourselves the right to sleep comfortably in our own beds tonight."

"Yeah, of course. Thanks, Ellie. You really have earned yourself a rest, so make sure you take it."

Ellie smiled and nodded, then raised her head and uttered, "Oh," as if she'd just remembered something.

"I almost completely forgot. While we were on our way back, some black ghee attacked us. They must have caught the scent of all the grass we were carrying. Together with the mastis, I punched their lights out—uh, I mean, we *overpowered* them. They were far too heavy for us to bring back with all the stuff we were already carrying, so we drained them of blood and left them out in the snow."

"I have to see to all our stocks and report to Hubert, so would you mind going to collect them? It wasn't that long ago, so I suspect they'll be fine, but if they've been eaten by wolves in the meantime... Well, in that case I suppose we'll just have to give up on them."

I nodded and said it was fine, then went to my yurt for my axe, just in case there were any wolves out there. Then I went around the village to tell Alna and the others that I was heading out. While I did that, Sahhi descended and landed by Ellie's side to introduce himself and ascertain her character. Ellie responded to that with a thick, booming shout.

"You're gigantic! *And* you talk?!"

Everyone in the village knew how she felt, and laughter drifted over the yurts. A number of dogkin came running over to me saying that they'd help me with the black ghee, and together we followed the sled tracks until we reached the black ghee. They were all covered in snow, which I guessed was Ellie and the mastis' doing, and as far as we could tell no wolves had gotten to them yet.

We got rid of all the snow and the black ghee all looked good, so we wrapped them in cloth, hefted them up, and carried them home. The dogkin led the way with their tails whipping up snow behind them.

When we reached the village, Grandma Alida was waiting for us looking plenty excited and beaming real bright. She loved making jerky and was great at it, so she led us straight to her oven at the kitchen range, where wooden boards were already laid out for us to leave the black ghee on. We all gave thanks and prayers to the black ghee, and then with the help of the dogkin and the Wives' Club, we got to dressing them. The most delicious cuts of meat were reserved for dinner that evening and handed to Alna and the dogkin with her. The tougher, sinewy cuts of meat were given to Grandma Alida for her jerky, and she was so excited that she'd prepared all her things well in advance.

Everything Grandma Alida needed was out and neatly arranged, and now she had the meat on a cutting board. With a big knife in hand, she cut the meat into smaller chunks, then poked holes in the pieces until she was satisfied. Only then did she start rubbing salt and herbs into it all.

"So much to look forward to!" she giggled. "Meat this good is sure to make for fine jerky. Every piece is going to be scrumptious, I'm sure of it!"

Once she had covered most of the meat very generously with salt and herbs, she wrapped it all in thin cloth and tied it tight. That was how she usually prepared jerky, but for the remainder she decided to try flavoring it with a blend of spices.

"Salt, spices, and garlic..." she muttered. "I'm certain it should be a wonderful combination, but I've never done it before, so who knows? Anyway, if worse comes to worst and the flavor isn't up to snuff, I'll make sure I eat it all myself, so no harm done."

Grandma Alida went on that way, talking to herself as she worked, and while she was doing all her preparations Hubert showed up. He watched me and the dogkin dressing the black ghee, and he watched Grandma Alida preparing her jerky...and then he seemed to cringe as he looked into the pot of salt that Grandma Alida was using.

"Um, Lord Dias," Hubert said, "I have a most pressing question for you. Do you have a moment?"

"Absolutely," I said. "What's up?"

Hubert looked over at the pot of salt while I worked.

“It’s about the salt,” he said. “How do you get it? I couldn’t help noticing that it wasn’t on the list of goods we’re receiving from our neighbors in Mahati.”

“Salt? We buy it from Peijin, and we get it from Eldan, and...more recently the dogkin have been gathering it for us. They get it from the south, I think. Is that right?”

“Yep!” cried one of the dogkin who was helping me out.

Hubert’s face scrunched up like he’d just eaten a fistful of bitter herbs and he looked down at his feet. Then he pressed a finger to his forehead as he spoke his thoughts.

“This southern area you speak of, is it a nation? Who governs that land? Does anybody live on it?”

“Nope. According to Alna, it’s uninhabited—total wasteland. No trees or plants, so no way to live off the land.”

“No animals either!” added one of the dogkin. “Not even birds! But we do see insects sometimes.”

At this, Hubert raised his head and heaved a great sigh. He settled a heavy stare on me.

“In other words, the southern area is an uninhabited wasteland with enough salt for us to gather for our daily needs,” Hubert said, his voice weighted with meaning. “And am I right in thinking that you’ve been there multiple times now?”

“Well, I’ve never been there myself,” I replied, “but the dogkin? Sure. According to Alna, the salt we pick up in the south isn’t bad, but the sea salt that the Peijins sell has a different flavor, so we buy it. Still, that’s a luxury, which is why we basically live off the rock salt we gather.”

“I...see...” said Hubert. “So the rock salt in the southern wasteland is an indispensable part of life here. In which case! Why?! Tell me why?! Why have you not secured the location as part of your domain?! You are a *duke*! You’ve been given influence! Authority! It is your duty to secure that which is necessary for the ongoing life of your citizens! What if another country moves in and occupies the south?! How will you get your salt then?!”

Hubert got more and more fevered the more he spoke, and he raised his voice further with every word. As his words sunk in, I stopped working on the black ghee.

“Oh!” I exclaimed.

I’d never really given it much thought before, and I’d never much cared either, but Hubert was right. As a duke I had very unique rights that I could take advantage of at my own discretion. And if the southern wasteland was uninhabited, then I had every right to secure it in the name of Baarbadal. That wasn’t a bad idea.

“I never thought of it that way,” I answered, nodding. “So, uh...when we secure uninhabited land, exactly what do we do? Do we just put up a sign saying it’s ours or something?”

Hubert had already been looking nonplussed, and now his face was on another level, but just like that the energy left his body and his head slumped lifelessly between his shoulders. A moment later, he let out the biggest, longest, heaviest sigh that I’d ever heard from the man.

Well then, what to do about making the southern wasteland part of our domain?

I’d thought about this for the rest of the day, and when the next came I asked Hubert again.

He stated simply, “We do everything we are capable of.”

That struck me as vague, but he went on to explain that first we had to traverse the place to make sure it really *was* uninhabited and not already somebody’s home.

Next, we had to investigate the land itself. That meant working out exactly what it was made of, how vast the area was, and if it contained anything other than rock salt. We’d make a map while we worked on which to record any discoveries.

Once our map was complete, we’d send it to the king with a report stating that we had acquired the land as our own. When that was done, we could put

up the sign I'd asked about. Then we needed to build a little storehouse for rock salt; this would make it clear that Baarbadal was actively making use of the land.

“Even if royal law deems that the land is ours, that doesn't mean anything as far as a foreign nation is concerned,” said Hubert. “In this world, there are those with the greed to invade and take land regardless of the knowledge that it is owned by someone else. However, it's important we fulfill our duties with regard to this land as best we can; doing so puts us in an advantageous position for negotiations both before and after any conflict and serves to boost the morale of our own forces. It may also have an impact on the general zeitgeist among the enemy nation's citizens.”

So, we jumped into the carriage that Narvant had made—the one with the interchangeable sled and wheels—and the dogkin pulled us south. At the entrance to the wastelands, the snow thinned and dead grass peeked out among it, and then we noticed rocks and stones littering the ground. It was a bumpy ride, and when we alighted from the carriage Hubert continued his explanation on shaky legs.

“Let's say tyrannous invaders arrive upon the land we use for our daily life and that our soldiers contrive a reason to storm and take back the land they once held. Such actions may well result in war, and many may die as a result. We cannot underestimate the effect this could have on the will of our people and their morale. With something so important potentially on the line, it behooves us to do everything we can to show everyone—both foreign and domestic—that the land is ours.”

“Should such circumstances actually come to pass, we *will* have to put our military to work and engage in a great many negotiations, so it's not exactly a cut-and-dried process. However, doing what is in our power to assert that the wasteland is ours is an important step, the actions of which will resonate into the future.”

It was a long explanation, and it had lasted from our early morning departure from Iluk all the way up until we arrived at the wastelands. I did my best to take it all in, and when Hubert was finally done I nodded.

“I see,” I said with some understanding.

Hubert nodded in return and flashed a satisfied smile under the hood of his thick cloak. Then he took off the leather bag he had on his back and retrieved some paper and a piece of charcoal for writing...along with the box we’d gotten from Peijin, which held a map, a telescope, and a whole host of other tools.

“First things first,” Hubert began. “Let’s make sure this place really is uninhabited with a dedicated survey of the lands. We don’t want to accidentally find ourselves playing the part of the tyrannical invaders, after all. We’ll do that by making a very basic map as we do our first survey, which we’ll use to make a more detailed map later. We should be able to do this before the arrival of spring, though that of course depends on exactly how expansive these lands are too.”

“And please, don’t worry, Lord Dias, I’ll be heading up this operation, so you won’t need to make your way out here for every outing. I wanted you to accompany us on this occasion so I could explain everything to you and so you could get a real feel for it by seeing the place with your own eyes.”

Hubert stared at me expectantly, so once again I nodded.

“I see,” I said.

And just like last time, Hubert’s face broke into the same big smile. He opened the lid of the box he’d brought and took out some of the tools inside of it. Naturally, I didn’t know what they were called, how they were used, or what they even did.

“When I was taking inventory of the items in the storehouse,” Hubert said, putting a hand gently to the tools, “I never imagined I’d find such high-grade surveying tools. I heard you received them from a merchant, yes?”

“We’ve a compass, a telescope, and a quadrant, which contains accurate scale readings though I can’t actually read the letters on it... In any case, these tools are invaluable to our making an accurate map. We also have a set of eyes in the sky thanks to Sahhi.” At this, Hubert chuckled. “Oh, it’s enough to make the heart flutter!”

Hubert seemed to know what was in that box Peijin had given us, and with

telescope in hand he wore a grin the likes of which I didn't even have words for.

"Uh, Dias, look at that face, would you?" said Sahhi, grooming himself on the edge of the carriage. "Really something else, ain't it?"

Today's survey team was made up of me, Hubert, Sahhi, and a group of masti dogkin. Hubert was the brains of the operation, Sahhi the eyes, and the dogkin the nose. I just knew they'd do a bang-up job. As for me, well, honestly I couldn't really help out very much, and it didn't seem like there was any work for me to do. Still, Hubert had wanted me along for the ride, so here I was to help out where I could.

"Anyway, Dias," said Sahhi, "ever since we left Iluk you've been lost in thought. What in the world is on your mind?"

I really was agonizing over something, and at Sahhi's question I let out a sigh.

"Well, I just can't come up with names for the baars," I admitted. "I was thinking about it all through Hubert's explanation, but I didn't come up with a single good idea."

"You're *still* letting that get to you? No wonder your only reply to everything Hubert said was 'I see.' Can't you leave the naming stuff until later? Isn't there a whole lot you're supposed to be thinking about, right here and now, as the Baarbadal domain lord?"

"Oh, you think? I figured it was okay just to leave all of this to Hubert. I mean, it doesn't look like there's much for me to do around here. And with that in mind, the naming of the new baars feels more pressing, or at least something I can't afford to do half-heartedly. The names will help them settle into their new home, after all, so it's something I want to do sooner rather than later."

"I suppose their names are important and all, but let's say we're out here doing our survey and we find out somebody is living out here. What then? If that happens, *you'll* be the one dealing with it, and your decision will make the difference because you're the one in charge, no?"

I gazed out at the lands before me, at the rocks and the stones and the wide expanse of earth. It was a cold and lonely sight.

"I don't think there's any need to make such a big deal of it," I replied. "If we

find someone then I'll just treat them like I would any neighbor and say hello. I figure we can work out some kind of rock salt for food or baar wool trade deal, and...if I'm being honest, anybody living out in these parts would be glad to get some food or clothing, I reckon. They might even have some kind of knowledge or technology that we don't. You know, like something to help them live out here in a wasteland. So I think it might even be pretty good for us if someone is living out here."

Sahhi's lower beak almost dropped to the ground, and for a time he didn't speak a single word. But after a little time he let out a guffaw and then his beak opened and shut as he cackled with laughter.

"So *that's* the way you see things, huh? You know, I thought it was weird when we came out here with so few people, but I guess the whole reason Alna and Klaus and the others didn't join us is because they're already well aware of what you're like."

Sahhi was looking at me kind of strange as he opened up his wings and gave them a jovial flap, but I could only tilt my head in confusion at him. I honestly wasn't sure what to say. That was when Hubert seemed to have wrapped up some of his preparations and came back to the carriage.

"Okay then," he said, the telescope and compass clutched in hand, "let's first head to the salt plain where the dogkin have been gathering. We'll know just how important these wastelands are once we have a chance to see how big the plain is and how many more years we'll be able to use it."

"All righty," I said.

Sahhi nodded his approval and took to the skies to get a better view of things while we followed the dogkin, who were leading us to their salt-gathering location.

In the Wasteland—Hubert

Hubert set the compass at the center of the octagonal wooden box and closed the glass lid, then occasionally glanced down at it as he peered in each direction through his telescope.

“It’s over there!” shouted the dogkin leading them to the salt plain.

Hubert’s heart leaped and his mind raced. He was a man with the blood of the low-standing beastkin running in his veins, and all he had ever been good at was studying. The king had seen something in him and made him a civil servant, and by His Majesty’s order Hubert had been assigned the task of cultivating the untouched frontier. That had been a year ago, when the winter prior had ended, and Hubert had been overjoyed at the very idea of putting all of his knowledge and skills to work. But then he had found himself whipped around by the winds of fate, and it wasn’t until almost a whole year later that he found himself finally on the plains.

Now that he had arrived, he was in the midst of acquiring new land for the domain he served. Could anything have brought him more joy? Could anything have made him prouder? Could anything have been more exciting? These were uncharted lands, and as a civil servant, exploring them on his own two feet brought with it a feeling beyond words.

When Hubert had first walked through Iluk Village to better understand it, the excitement had already begun to burn. It was a place brimming with potential, and very much worth putting in the effort. But even that was incomparable to being here in the wasteland, which was several times—no, for Hubert it was easily a *hundred* times more exciting. It was so thrilling, in fact, that his heart threatened to burst from his chest.

Iluk had its own specialty product and a trade route in the middle of construction, and now they were securing an income of salt. Just how much could they raise profits? How much more clerical work could they gain? How affluent could they make these lands?

The answers to all of these questions, and the extent to which they grew, rested upon Hubert’s shoulders. *This* was what it meant to be a civil servant, and the mere thought of it had Hubert trembling with anticipation. He realized then that it might have looked weird for him to be shaking when no wind was blowing, and he spun to look around.

Fortunately, Dias wasn’t paying him any notice and was instead gazing upon the arid wasteland. When he was done looking, Dias took the bar at the front of

the carriage and pushed it along. Inside of it sat the dogkin who had brought them this far.

“Let’s swap, okay?” Dias had said. “I’m sure it was tough work carrying us out this far, so you guys just take a rest while I push us the rest of the way.”

The dogkin had taken the man up on his offer and were making the most of their chance to relax. They sat with their paws dangling over the sides of the carriage, smiling and laughing as they enjoyed the scenery.

Nobody in his right mind would ever expect a duke to act like this...

Had the duke been a born noble or someone else of rank from the royal capital—someone with the kingdom’s sense of propriety—then they would have undoubtedly balked at so much as the very idea of doing what Dias did now. They would have chuckled derisively at a task that was so beneath their station. It was the absence of this attitude in Dias that Hubert so appreciated.

Dias had listened to and accepted Hubert’s advice on the very first day they met. He had trusted Hubert immediately and delegated to the civil servant a great many tasks. He took in each and every word that Hubert spoke and expressed a heartfelt, genuine thanks for them.

And while Dias still did not know much of what he was supposed to know, and while he was still somewhat lacking as a duke, the man himself was aware of this and was applying himself to do better. Though at times he admittedly seemed to have his thoughts elsewhere, and his replies during this venture were somewhat vague, even then he still did his best to listen. And more importantly, he took action.

“It certainly doesn’t look like anyone has made a home of these lands...” Dias muttered. “The dogkin haven’t picked up any scents pointing to inhabitants, and... Sahhi! Have you seen anything of note?”

Hubert had told him that they had to make sure the lands were uninhabited, and so Dias had been looking around carefully for just this reason.

“Nope! Not a thing!” replied Sahhi from above. “I haven’t even seen any animals around!”

Dias didn’t really need to do anything, not while they had Sahhi watching

from above, the dogkin sniffing around, and Hubert with his telescope. But even then, Dias still kept his eyes peeled.

“I see,” he noted. “I guess there really isn’t anyone living out here...”

At that point, a thought seemed to strike Dias out of the blue, and insight filled his features.

“Ah!” he exclaimed. “Myulia... No, Baalia. Yeah, Baalia’s good...”

Dias muttered the name a few more times to ensure it felt right, then nodded to himself. Hubert was struck then by just how busy Dias was, and he chuckled. He turned his gaze back to his own work and took once again to confirming their location with the compass and telescope.

Dias was, at heart, the sort of person who preferred working over being still, and moving around over sitting down to study. If something needed doing, he threw himself into the task, though it had to be said that sometimes he put *too* much energy into things and was sometimes terribly inefficient.

While those around him told Dias to consider the baar names later, Dias simply couldn’t help himself. He knew that the baars were waiting for their names. Some might have called Dias’s way of thinking foolish, but Hubert liked it very much.

Real idiots were people like his former colleagues, who let jealousy rule their hearts while they shirked their responsibilities. *Real* foolishness could be found in the likes of his former boss, who was born of a high rank but was otherwise useless and spent his days unknowingly getting in the way of everybody else.

However, there were none of those idiots, nor any of that foolishness, here. It was a working environment that suited Hubert, and it felt wonderful—so wonderful, in fact, that Hubert found himself getting excited all over again. His heart raced, his every footstep felt like it floated, and on cloud nine he skipped onwards as Sahhi called down from the sky.

“Hey! There’s something massive ahead! It’s... Oh! Is that the salt plain?!”

Hubert quickly peered through his telescope in search of Sahhi’s “massive” discovery but wondered if he was looking in the wrong direction. He saw nothing.

“You won’t be able to see it from there!” shouted Sahhi. “You’re going to have to keep moving a bit. But when you see it, there’s no missing it!”

Hubert felt a rush inside. He tucked away his compass and telescope and took off running. Whatever was up ahead, he wanted to lay eyes on it as soon as he could. After all, just what kind of a place was a vast salt plain? Was it so immense a salt deposit that it was unavoidable from the air?

Hubert could barely contain himself, and so he ran until he was panting and out of breath. But when it finally entered his vision he stopped in his tracks. He could do nothing more than stand with his mouth agape. He was stock-still even when Dias arrived, happily pulling the carriage filled with dogkin. When Dias saw what Hubert was looking at, he let out an awed gasp.

“Now that sure is something,” he uttered. “It’s like a gigantic soup bowl... When the dogkin started bringing salt rocks, I’d wondered how they did it, but I never imagined that the ground would just be layered with salt.”

It wasn’t an exaggeration to say that the very ground before them was rock salt, though a significant amount had been dug up out of the center and taken away, making for what looked like a crater shaped like a soup bowl in its center.

How many years, or tens of years... No. How many *centuries* had it taken to create this gigantic crater? The bowl was so large it seemed beyond belief, and the history of the location seemed to press upon the shivering Hubert as he took in the overwhelming sight with every fiber of his being.

With timid steps on weak legs (and far more trembling than ever before) Hubert made his way closer to the salt plain. When he set foot on its edge he knelt down and picked up a small chunk of rock salt to examine. It was dirty from the earth and the rain, but after brushing off the dirt and splitting it in half, Hubert found a clean white center, tinged with a little red.

Then he brought one of the halves to his face, and as he gave it a cursory lick it spread through his mouth with complex salty flavors he couldn’t quite describe. And once the taste settled, he clutched the salt in his hands with new resolve.

At the Salt Plain—Dias

While I was taking in the incredible sight of the bowl shape of the salt plain, Hubert stood with his fists clenched around salt rocks. He muttered something to himself, but when he noticed me watching he was suddenly flustered and unsure where to look.

“I don’t see any man-made structures to indicate salt gathering,” he said. “But it seems simply unthinkable that such a vast reserve of salt would just be left completely untouched and unmanaged by any nation whatsoever. Did nobody notice this place but the onikin? But...no. No, no. How is that even possible...?”

Hubert continued mumbling to himself as he looked out at the plain. I watched him for a little while, but then I figured he probably wasn’t moving anytime soon, so I left the carriage nearby, then walked the sloping path that led into the center of the soup bowl. I figured I would get a better look at the place up close.

The dogkin sniffed at the air and set themselves up in a circle around me while Sahhi kept watch over the salt plain from the air. When Hubert finally realized that he was all on his own, he ran over to catch up in a panic. We all walked deeper into the bowl, right into its center, and that was when Sahhi suddenly came flying down towards us at top speed. I raised my arm up for him, but when he landed I noticed he was pretty dazed, so I supported him with my other hand.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” I asked. “Was it something up there in the sky?”

“N-No, I don’t know if it’s anything, actually... I just got dizzy all of a sudden. Feels like my head’s all foggy. I... I don’t feel well, Dias. I’m going to rest over by the carriage.”

Sahhi’s voice sounded terribly weak, so I spun about to take Sahhi over myself. That was when all the young mastis huddled around my feet, their tails drooping between their legs.

“Lord Dias,” said one, “something has afflicted us too. We’ll join Sahhi at the carriage.”

I looked around and discovered that the dogkin—and even Hubert—all had

their heads low and their shoulders slumped. I didn't have the slightest idea what was going on, but I figured the most important thing was getting everyone out of this place, so I gave Hubert a shoulder to lean on and cradled Sahhi in my arm. The dogkin could still run at least, so we made our way back to the carriage together.

Once we got there everybody brightened up, and it was like they'd never even felt off in the first place. Everybody could stand on their own feet without any trouble, and the dogkin tails were back to wagging up a storm. It was all very puzzling.

"It's like that dizziness from earlier was just a dream," Hubert observed.

"I don't know what in the world that was," said Sahhi. "I felt dead on my feet, but now I'm perfectly well."

"We're all much better too," said one of the dogkin. "Good as new!"

"It could be because you're all tired..." I said, taking a good look at all of them, "so why don't you all just rest here for the time being."

I took my axe from the carriage and hefted it onto my shoulder, then headed back for the soup bowl on my own.

"L-Lord Dias?!" cried Hubert. "There might be some kind of poison in there! You mustn't go alone!"

"I appreciate the concern, but I'll be just fine!" I replied. "For some reason I didn't feel anything like the rest of you did!"

Still, I took things slow and cautious, being that there was still a chance it was a poison of some kind. I focused on my nose in case any strange smells caught my attention and walked on. It wasn't long before I made it back near the center of the soup bowl, but I really didn't feel anything. No dizziness, no sickness, no nothing. I had to scratch my head; why was it that I was completely fine and the others weren't?

I wondered if maybe it was a poison that only affected those with beastkin blood, but that didn't explain how Sahhi, who'd been so high in the air, had suffered the same thing. If there'd been poison in the salt itself, then we would have noticed those effects whenever anyone ate the salted food prepared at

the village.

I kept walking, thinking everything through, and I made it to what felt like the exact center of the bowl. I still didn't feel anything poisonous whatsoever. I thought about it, and I thought some more, and then I remembered what Ohmun had said: poison *spells* didn't work on me because I didn't have any magical energy, which meant there was no magical flow for the spells to interfere with. That also reminded me that I was wearing the special amulet that the cavekin had crafted for me out of their hair, which held protections against other kinds of magic as well. I figured one of those might be the reason I was unaffected by this place. I took another look around, scanning the salt plain for anything that might be spreading a magical poison.

But try as I might, nothing stood out to me. Just as I decided to give up on looking for the source, however, something else happened. I felt something weird in the salt at my feet. I don't know how else to put it. It just kind of wafted up at me. If I had to compare it to anything, it was like the power that came from my axe when I made it mend itself. So I readied my axe and swung it at the ground.

Shards of rock salt scattered around as I dug down deeper with every swing, eventually revealing an ornate short sword.



The handle reminded me of my axe, and there was a beautiful jewel in the pommel. The sword was sitting inside of a rather luxuriously crafted scabbard and decorated with a poisonous scorpion—an animal I'd heard lived in the desert. I stared at that suspicious short sword for a good while, wondering if I should just break it on the spot. After some consideration, however, I put my faith in the amulet that Narvant had made for me, thrust my axe into the ground, and then took hold of the sword.

I drew the blade from its scabbard and once more felt that strange sensation from earlier. I felt that the sword was similar to my axe, but the only way to know if that was true was to put it to the test. I focused on the weapon, just like I did when I mended my axe, and sent it a thought.

Stop spreading poison!

The jewel in the pommel of the sword emitted a faint light, and the strange sensation began to subside. Eventually the sensation faded and the light from the pommel died down completely. I gave the sword a few swings, then looked back towards the carriage. I wanted to make sure that the sword and the ebbing sensation I'd felt were the source of our issues.

"Sahhi!" I called. "Come over here for a second!"

Sahhi was the fastest of us all, so I thought that with his light body he'd be able to quickly fly back to safety if anything happened. The falconkin responded immediately, flapping his wings and cautiously circling the sky above me before slowly descending to where I stood.

By the time he got down to my head height, I could see how worried he was by his expression, but all the same he came down and landed on my arm.

"I'll be honest," he said, "I was ready to turn tail and flee the moment I felt anything like before, but...I feel fine. No problems at all. Which means...is that thing you're holding the cause?"

Sahhi had been watching me closely from way up high, and his gaze rested with some disdain upon the sword in my hand.

"It would seem so," I replied. "It was releasing a poison spell...or I suppose it's more accurate to say it was casting a spell to interfere with the internal flow of

a person's magic. It was buried right here in the middle of the salt plain. Can't help thinking it must have been someone pretty dang mean to set a trap like this one..."

I was still wondering what to do about it when Hubert and the dogkin came running—they'd seen it was safe because of Sahhi's reaction. I explained that the sword was the source of the issues and asked everyone what we should do about it. I was in the middle of telling them that perhaps our safest bet was just to destroy it when Hubert piped up.

"Yes, destroying it is indeed one of our options, but...shouldn't we first try to learn more about it? We need to be sure that the sword truly *was* the source of that dizziness. Then we can perhaps determine to what extent its power can be controlled. If it can be wielded freely, it could come in handy."

"Yeah, I guess there's that," I agreed.

That was when Sahhi started flapping his wings and making a racket.

"No! No! No! That thing's dangerous! We've gotta destroy it! The onikin were lucky they never came out this far, because if they had they could have found themselves dizzy, sick, and maybe even dead! Taking that thing back to Iluk?! Are you out of your mind?! Breaking that sword's our best option."

"That sounds a bit rash..." said Hubert, who paused for a moment before continuing. "Hmm...yes. You raise a good point, and a rather strange problem with it. The onikin have been using this place for a good long while, so why haven't they ever been hit by the poison? If they had experienced it firsthand, Alna certainly would have said something before we left. It's one thing for the dogkin to have come here a few times and not felt it, but over decades and even generations...? Was a spell cast here that for some reason spared the onikin people? Is this sword...the reason that the onikin had this place all to themselves?"

Hubert was talking as fast as his mouth would keep up with his brain, and he stared at the sword with his eyes wide.

After that conversation we spent some time learning the ins and outs of the short sword. Just like the axe, the only person who could use its power was me.

I could use it to cast the poison spell, and I could use it to break the poison spell. Hubert, Sahhi, and the dogkin all tried doing it but nothing happened. They couldn't even pick up on the sensation I felt from it.

Also, we worked out that the poison spell could target people selectively. When Hubert had said that maybe it spared the onikin people, I decided to try that idea out. When I focused on casting the spell to protect a specific person, starting with Sahhi, that's exactly what happened. The same was true when I cast the spell to protect a specific race, like the dogkin. That said, when I cast the spell to protect humans, Hubert still got sick. When I cast the spell to protect demi-humans and beastkin, however, Hubert was just fine—it must have been because of the beastkin part of his blood.

Given the results of our tests, it seemed fair to think that if I cast the sword's spell to protect the onikin, it would do just that, but the actual radius of its effect wasn't very large at all. I could only cast within a range of about my arm span. That meant it would be impossible to cast something that covered the entire salt plain.

That said, I didn't think it was very likely that the sword had been buried here to protect the onikin. It seemed more likely to me that they'd just never known it was here, or, more likely, poison magic just never worked on them in the first place.

Once we were done working out how the sword worked, we got back to the topic of whether to take it home, break it, or just bury it again. But I didn't want to take it or break it if it actually belonged to the onikin, and I didn't like the idea of burying it when there was a chance it might interfere with Hubert's work again. So, while Hubert and the dogkin continued their survey, I took my axe and the sword and made the trek to the onikin village. Sahhi stayed with Hubert and made it very clear that he was done getting involved with the onikin.

At the Onikin Village, in the Chieftain's Yurt

"I see... However, I have never seen a sword with such unusual power in my life," said Moll, "nor have I ever heard any tales of such a weapon. I have also

never heard any talk of us onikin being immune to poison magic, and I do not think our ancestors would have buried a sword of such immense power, then completely forgotten to pass the story down to their descendants. I fear your thoughts have led you to a mistaken conclusion.”

I sat across from Moll, having passed her the short sword, and watched as she inspected it.

“And this idea of ‘focusing’ to release a power, I don’t understand that either...” she added, unsheathing the sword. “Hmm... So when you feed it magic it stores that power like a jewel would... Still, I don’t feel any sort of poison spell from this, nor do I get any strange sensations whatsoever. But if I were to focus now on the spell casting only on you, what would happen? Would it work?”

Moll cackled.

“Oh, well, it doesn’t work on me,” I answered with a wry grin, “and apparently that goes for poison magic in general. I don’t have any magical energy to disturb, or something like that...”

“Oh, I see... In any case, I know nothing about this sword, which I suppose means it is yours to do with as you wish, no? You can bury it, break it, take it home with you; it matters not to us onikin. What *do* interest me, however, are the property rights you spoke of for the wasteland and the salt plain to the south. We don’t object to it becoming yours—we’ve no interest in land where grass doesn’t grow—but it is something of a problem for us if your ownership means we can no longer gather salt.”

Moll’s eyes narrowed, and I nodded.

“There’s no need to worry about that. Even if that land becomes the domain of Baarbadal, I’ve no intention of banning your access to salt. It was the onikin who first discovered and made use of the plain, after all. I will not cut off your access. We’ll have to discuss some conditions regarding the use of the place, but I hope that we can work together to watch over it, and make sure that neither of us looks to gather and sell far more than we need. I think it best that we manage the use of the location together. Even though we’re looking at an enormous amount of salt, it isn’t infinite, and the plain will run dry if we are too

greedy about our sales. We must work to ensure this doesn't happen."

Moll watched me carefully through her slitted eyes, then grinned. She placed the short sword back in its scabbard and tossed it at my feet.

"If that's your plan, I've no complaints. As for the conditions you spoke of, go to Zorg when you have those ready. He is my acting representative when he is not busy with other tasks."

"Got it. Zorg it is."

I picked up the sword and tucked it away. Then I stood from my seat. I'd said all I had to say and figured I'd head for the door. That was when Moll spoke up again.

"This just came to me now," she said, and I heard a depth in the echo of her words, "but that axe of yours, and that sword... You said that only *you* can use them, yes? Are there other such items?"

I turned around and thought for a moment, then nodded.

"Well, there's the fire-starter rod, which we got a while back. My uncle, Ben, can use that too though, so that one's not really exclusive to me."

"Your uncle, you say? And is that Ben like you? Bereft of magic?"

"That he is, yep. Me and Uncle Ben are the only two in Iluk who can't use a lick of magic."

"I see, yes. As I said earlier, that sword of yours will absorb any magical energy poured into it. I can't see the bottom of its potential. I'd say it's capable of storing the equivalent of a hundred—no...as many as a thousand magical stones. Now, if that sword were filled to the brim with magical energy...you might well have the power to cast its spell over the entire salt plain."

Moll's face scrunched with wrinkles, and I couldn't tell if it was because she was happy or angry. She spoke as if she was lost in thought.

"If we onikin had wanted to protect the salt plain, all we would need is about twenty or so jewels, which we could imbue with our sensor magic and place around the area. The very idea of using a thousand jewels' worth of magic simply doesn't make any sense. But regardless of how much sense it makes, if

someone *did* use such an exorbitant amount of magic, then it was not us onikin but somebody else...perhaps someone who does not understand the weight and value of such magical energy. Perhaps someone of a bloodline which, like yours, does not have any magic whatsoever.”

Her face seemed to loosen up a little as she went on. “That of course still leaves us with the question of how such a person could gather such an amount of magic, but it might be that your axe, that sword, and the rod of which you speak are all weapons made by people of your bloodline especially *for* the people of your bloodline. That would be why only you and Ben are capable of using them. But one has to wonder...for what reason would a magicless people want such weapons?”

Moll cackled raucously, and something clicked into place for me as I listened to her, like pieces of a puzzle.

Back when I’d first acquired my axe, I’d done my darndest to explain to my fellow soldiers how to use its power. I’d wanted them to be able to use it in the case that I ever got hurt so bad that I couldn’t fight. But nobody could make it work—not Klaus, or Juha, or any of the volunteer soldiers or knights. I’d always assumed that the reason they couldn’t use it was because I just couldn’t explain it to them properly. But maybe it wasn’t that at all. Maybe the real reason was that only I could use it, because only I lacked magical power entirely.

Klaus had magical power, and Juha had a little too, and I was pretty sure I’d heard the knights talking about theirs as well. As for the volunteer soldiers, I wasn’t really sure, but I had to assume that they were capable of it. Having that riddle solved for me felt a bit like a weight lifting off my shoulders. I grinned from the realization.

“You’ve just answered a question that always lingered with me,” I said. “Thanks, Moll!”

Moll looked a bit shocked by my response to her long rant, but I left her there and skipped out of the yurt happy as could be. I decided then that I was going to give the sword to Uncle Ben so he could use it to protect everyone in emergencies when I was away from the village. And so I headed straight for Iluk.

Iluk Village—Alna

Alna saw Dias and his gang off as they left for the wasteland, then finished up chores with the Wives' Club, and then, just to be on the safe side, she did a patrol around the village in place of Dias. When she was satisfied that the twins, the dogkin children, and the baby baars were all safe and sound, she headed to the assembly hall.

The assembly hall had a number of looms arranged tightly in a circle next to the wall, and all the grandmas were there. Alna watched them as they worked and listened to the pleasant *clack-clack* of the looms before heading to Grandma Maya's side. She took over for the grandma working right next to Maya and began to work.

"You're after another story, are you?" said Grandma Maya with a giggle. "You're enthusiastic, that's for certain. Well then, what shall we discuss today?"

Grandma Maya continued to work the loom as she talked, her eyes tracing upwards as she combed her mind for topics.

"We could talk about the fallen civilizations of the long past, or the relics they left behind, or myths and legends...which is to say, tales of the gods. In that area, we have stories of the gods who made sacred tools of great power for those lacking special skills and stories of the gods who sleep below the earth, charging their powers; and we have stories of the god who still watches over us, even now, from the sacred lands. Or perhaps we could talk about magic again?"

Alna knew exactly what she wanted.

"Let's talk about magic."

Maya nodded and, her hands never faltering in their weaving work, began to talk of the magic she knew. Since encountering Narvant and his family, Alna had come to speak to Grandma Maya to learn more about magic—and more specifically, the kinds of magic that differed greatly from the onikin magic she was most comfortable with. Alna knew that the future might bring people upon

whom her soul appraisal was ineffective and that an overreliance on the spell might only lead to misfortune.

When her magic had not worked on Narvant and his family, Dias had told Alna that she could get by without it. She had thus tried to ascertain Hubert's character without relying on her soul appraisal, but something still gnawed at her. Was that enough? Wasn't there some other way?

The thought refused to leave Alna's mind, troubling her endlessly. She talked to her mother and father about it, and then she talked to Moll about it, and then she went to Iluk's resident counselor Ben about it. Ben had gotten through to her with the following:

"Before you start panicking and fretting about things, how about first trying to expand your knowledge? You could ask the cause of your concerns, the cavekin, to teach you what they know. Or you could go to Grandma Maya, who is a skilled clairvoyant. Ellie, too, has things to teach, and there is perhaps much you could learn from her. By expanding your horizons, you may find unexpected solutions to your worries, or you may even come to devise entirely new spells. Unfortunately I can't help you, as I don't have one magical bone in my body. But just look at how many people reside in Iluk; there is a great deal of wisdom hidden everywhere here, and it is there for the taking should you reach out to grasp it."

Uncle Ben spoke kindly and his words resonated with Alna. It was winter on the plains, which meant less work out in the snow-covered plains and more time indoors. And so Alna took to finishing her chores and spending her free time making an effort to learn more.

"The magic of the kingdom was originally devised for fighting monsters and warring with foreign countries, but things did not work out as planned," said Grandma Maya. "The most skilled spellcasters, who would have been the most helpful on the battlefield, did not want to go to war; they wanted to continue their studies. As such, and because they had not trained for battle, these spellcasters were of no real use. When attempts were made to train spellcasters for both study *and* battle training, both areas suffered, and the magical power that was so necessary for battle lacked strength."

Grandma Maya then explained that things were different in the empire. “People quickly separated war and magic, and magic became a means for improving general life and production. War was entrusted to the military men and women who spent their lives training for that specific purpose. For that reason, daily life in the empire was greatly enriched by the study of magic, and it would seem that onikin magic seemed to develop in very much the same way.”

“I see...” muttered Alna.

Grandma Maya’s story paused for a moment, and Alna organized her thoughts around what she had heard. As she did, a question floated to her mind.

“You use clairvoyant magic,” she said, “but based on what you’ve just told me, does that not mean you are using imperial magic?”

Grandma Maya chuckled.

“Is that what it looks like? In truth, my clairvoyance differs from both imperial and Sanserife magic. My magic does not use magical power to directly cast something, but rather it acts like a series of questions for the god asleep in the sacred lands. It is a magic that asks whether the chances of a potential future are high and then relays an answer of a sort.”

“Given that the magic only asks for the potential happening of a particular occurrence, it cannot be said to be fully accurate, and so I ask a number of related questions to increase the accuracy of the answer I am searching for. Let us look at an example. If I want to know tomorrow’s weather, I might ask these questions: Will it snow tomorrow? Will the sun show its face? How will the clouds move? How will the wind blow? By asking such questions and thinking over the various answers to multiple questions, I can arrive at a single answer for one.”

“That said, even the gods sometimes err, and they do not know everything. Their answers are not entirely infallible. But if one bears this in mind, clairvoyant magic can be quite reliable.”

Once Grandma Maya ended her explanation, Alna chimed in with a new inquiry. “So if I could learn that magic and combine it with my soul appraisal, I

can get an even more accurate understanding of a person's soul. Can you teach me your clairvoyant ways when you have the time?"

"Teaching it is nothing, but teaching it does not guarantee that you can use it yourself. The ways of onikin magic are unique unto themselves, and it is possible that you will not be able to use clairvoyance even if you learn the ways and practice them."

"If that's how it goes, that's how it goes," replied Alna. "I want to learn more and expand my horizons. There is great meaning in simply seeing more with my own eyes...well, according to Ben, anyway. And that makes me your disciple! Be good to me, teacher!"

Alna gave a beaming grin, and Grandma Maya smiled gently as she nodded in return. The two of them continued their work on the looms, and with each *clack* that echoed through the yurt the baar thread turned to fabric. As the rhythm of all the women working filled the air, Maya began thinking it was time to sing, and it was then that Alna spoke.

"Come to think of it, how do you know so much? There's the mythology, of course, but then there's the differences between Sanserife magic and imperial magic, and your clairvoyance... None of those can be easy to learn on their own, right?"

In response, Maya let the hint of a grin creep to her lips as her eyes turned to the entrance of the assembly hall, looking somewhere beyond the door.

"Well," she said, "perhaps a long time ago I worked at a most important post, and through that post I researched a great many things and peered into the future. However, clairvoyance is but a peek, no more than a whisper. It is not a prophecy, and sometimes it is wrong. Sometimes, the results are not what one desires. So perhaps it was that, after I gave my predictions, the results were despised and fervently rejected, and thus I fell out of favor."

"Not everyone in the world is as earnestly accepting of things as young Dias, you see. In fact, the boy is so honest and accepting that I must be very careful about how I translate my clairvoyance to him. For if I spoke what appeared to be the future, and if he knew what was coming, he would most certainly accept that as fact and move as told, without any hint of hesitation. And that would be

most problematic, so you must make sure not to speak a word of this to him.”

Grandma Maya’s smile widened.

“As you wish, teacher,” answered Alna, smiling back.

And so Alna meditated on Grandma Maya’s teachings, accompanied by the clacking of looms.

The Iluk Village Square—Dias

The day after I'd helped inspect the wasteland and talked with Moll, Hubert said there was still a mountain of work to do down south, so he took off with Sahhi, who was essential to his mapmaking. Senai, Ayhan, and Aymer all wanted to join him, so they took the horses and were joined by Klaus and some dogkin as protection. I saw them all off, then headed to the square to get to the work I still had for myself.

All eighteen of our new baar residents were gathered, and I knelt down to talk to each of them and give them a pat, and finally...after all my hours of endless worrying...grant them each their new name.

I gave each family their own unique names, which included Baatak, Baalia, Liugene, and Liukilly. Last time I'd named baars there'd been a few complaints and I'd had to go back to the drawing board, but this time everyone was happy with my choices, and the baars all happily accepted their new monikers. They played around with each other celebrating, then ran around bleating at Canis and the grandmas to listen to their new names spoken aloud. Then Francis, Francois, Ethelbald, and his wives arrived and all bleated their congratulations. The newly named baars bleated back, and suddenly the whole square was filled with lively baar conversation.

"Seeing them all here like this," I said to myself, "you really get a feel for just how many baars we've got now."

First it had just been Francis and Francoise, and then the two of them had given us six little ones. Ethelbald and his wives had added another six baar residents. Then the two wild baars had arrived, who had then called upon another sixteen, which in total gave us thirty-two baars. And when they were all bleating at the same time, the atmosphere was boisterous to say the least.

"But we'll need one or two hundred baars if we really want our baar fabric to be our specialty product," commented Uncle Ben, who must have sidled up while I'd been lost in my own thoughts. "Still, this is more than we could have

hoped for in our first year out here. I think that if we just take things steady, we'll naturally just arrive where we need to be."

I remembered then that I needed to talk to Uncle Ben, and so I pulled out the short sword we'd found at the salt plain and passed it to him.

"This is the sword you were talking about, is it?" asked Uncle Ben.

He slid a little of the blade from the scabbard and looked at it.

"Yes, it is my understand..." I started, stopping as I caught myself slipping into my overly polite manners again. "I mean, I think that if you can use the fire-starter rod, then you can probably use this too. May I humbly reque— Uh, would you use this to protect the village when Klaus and I are unavailable?"

"Ah, I see. Looks like you were right—I *can* use this. I'll keep a hold of it," replied Uncle Ben. "But I'm going to need Alna to charge it with some magic, the same way she does for the rod. I'll talk to her about it later. Where is Alna, anyway? She'd usually peek her head out for something like this."

"She's seeing to her chores in the yurt and practicing the magic that Grandma Maya taught her," I said. "She's hell-bent on learning some magic to help the whole village out, and it's keeping her busy. She's really keen on it, and it's rare to see her so excited about something that isn't her daily work, so I really want to support her. When I'm done here I'll head back and help her however I can."

"It's a good thing for couples to support one another. And while I'm here, about the salt plain—are you sure about keeping things the way they are? That much salt would earn you some really good money."

When I heard that, I couldn't help but grimace.

"But it was *you* who told me not to do such things when I was just a boy, Uncle Ben," I said. "You said that taking money you didn't earn was the same as poisoning yourself. You *also* said not to trust anything you didn't work hard to earn with your own two hands. I never forgot that. Mom and dad always liked to say the same thing, and I refuse to be a duke or a noble in name alone. I couldn't even do it if I wanted to."

Revisiting those old memories had me unintentionally adopting the same quiet politeness of my youth, but this time Uncle Ben didn't scold me for it, and

instead he just stood there silently rubbing his beard.

“My parents taught me how to live and just how hard kings and nobles work for the good of the people. So now that I’ve accidentally fallen into becoming a noble myself—and to be honest I still don’t know if it’s okay for the likes of me to be one—I want to be the best noble I can be. And no self-respecting noble would sell off all that salt the onikin need just to line their pockets with gold.”

Uncle Ben stared at me in silence for a second, then slowly tilted his head back and looked up at the sky.

“Hmm...” he murmured, turning back to me. “Dias, have you ever *met* a noble?”

“A noble...? Uh... I saw a bunch of them when I met the king. Eldan’s a noble too, right?”

And...well, Uncle Ben just slapped himself square in the face when he heard that.

“So that’s why...” he muttered. “Now look, I know you learned all about the nobility from Eldan, but have you ever been told about the types of nobles in the kingdom and what sort of people they are?”

Uncle Ben peeked out at me from between his fingers and sighed like he already knew the answer.

“Nope, not really.”

His sigh suddenly deepened as he dragged his hand down. He put his fierce thinking face on for a moment, but then he just looked resigned to something.

“Fine then,” he said. “I guess this is a job for your Uncle Ben. Dias, I know you want to help do the chores while Alna is practicing her magic, but you make some time to come and see me at my yurt, you hear? I’m going to teach you everything you *really* need to know about the nobility. We can also use that time to discuss the new temple. Things like what lessons the baars have taught us and how those same servants of god have led us on our path. We’ll need to decide all of that. For starters, we’ll come up with a few teachings that best suit you, like ‘the virtuous earn their keep’ and that sort of thing. Then we’ll ban slavery and encourage scholarly pursuits. Oh, and for Alna’s sake maybe we

should ban adultery too.”

Uncle Ben was counting things off on his fingers as his gaze rolled over me, the sky, the baars, and the village. I knew we weren’t just going to take the baars’ words and thoughts and make them our doctrine, but now I realized that Uncle Ben fully intended for us to come up with the groundwork ourselves...

“I kind of got an inkling back when you said you wanted a temple, but are you really going to come up with the doctrine yourself?” I asked. “If that’s the case I’m going to want to start joking about banning alcohol.”

But Ben shook his head.

“That one’s not so simple. None of Saint Dia’s teachings say anything about the evils of alcohol. We’re going to use Saint Dia’s teachings as our base, but we’ll make ours more applicable to the modern world. We’ll be taking a different road from the fundamentalists, but there’s no use sticking to a failed strategy.”

And with that, Uncle Ben wandered off back to his own yurt, but he turned around halfway to remind me to make sure I made time to see him. I nodded, because it wasn’t like I could refuse, and while the baars continued their celebratory bleating I headed back to my own yurt to help Alna.

The next day, everybody was busy as ever. Alna went to study magic under Grandma Maya. Ellie and her dogkin gang headed off to Mahati once again for trade and to pick up our gifts and whatnot. Hubert and Sahhi headed back out to continue their mapmaking. The twins helped out with chores and used their free time for knitting. And the cavekin kept working at my set of armor.

As for me, I visited Uncle Ben to learn about the nobility and the Sanserife Kingdom. Even one person rushing around eagerly doing their work always started a fire in the other residents, so everybody was throwing themselves into their own tasks. It was still the middle of a long and cold winter, but Iluk was bustling like the biting chill was a spring breeze.

From Uncle Ben’s yurt, I could hear the voices of the grandmas at their looms, and people walking by the door, and it made me a bit restless. I couldn’t help thinking about how much I wanted to be outside myself.

“Hey, concentrate, would you?” said Uncle Ben. “The closer you listen, the quicker this will all be over. Huh...that’s weird, I feel like I said those exact words a long time ago...but I guess no matter how old you get, you’re always going to be Dias, aren’t you?”

I sat at a small table in the middle of Uncle Ben’s modest yurt, which had paper, inkpots, and pens on it. Uncle Ben was standing on the other side, and there was a really strong pressure emanating from him and his glare. I couldn’t take it.

“Yes, sir,” I muttered, sitting up straight.

“Let’s continue, then. When we talk about nobles, we mustn’t forget that the founding king and Saint Dia were the ones who founded the ideas of monarchy and the aristocracy. In the ideal monarchy, power is concentrated in a single point: the king, who manages all of a nation’s affairs. But because there’s no way for a king’s orders to instantaneously traverse the country, this management requires more than just the king and his closest civil servants.”

“Given no other choice, the king took those most loyal to him, gave them the rank of noble, and sent them to manage the countryside areas that were farthest out of reach.”

As Uncle Ben droned on, I copied his words down on a piece of paper—doing that helped me memorize it more than just thinking on it. What I gathered was that the king had been at war, and then suddenly he’d been governing the population, and in trying to improve his country he’d come up with a plan. That plan was to promote his most loyal servants and let them develop the countryside areas to bring stability to the nation.

To ensure that stability, these servants were given titles, and their children would inherit those titles. But stability alone was not enough, and so a hierarchy among the nobility was devised to keep nobles competing with one another as a way to improve. The position of duke, which was the highest of this hierarchy, was implemented to ensure that neither the king nor any nobles ever got out of control. This system had been revised over and over until the founding king’s passing and was supposed to be a trustworthy bedrock.

It was *supposed* to be, but...that’s not how things had worked out.

The age of the founding king had become a distant past, and one easily forgotten. The present kingdom, which should have ruled the entire continent, had lost half its domain since its founding, and the nobles who simply had their titles by birthright were a far cry from the chosen retainers who had once loyally served the king. The rivalries that had once served to inspire the nobility to further greatness had devolved into ugly power struggles driven by greed.

As for whether there had ever been a method to defend against this, Uncle Ben said that it wasn't all the fault of the aristocratic system. The reality was that the nobility had festered over time to the point that most nobles were like an illness, sapping away at the kingdom's strength.

Now, they weren't *all* like that, and apparently there were paragons like my mother and father. Unfortunately, those driven by greed and power were able to assert a wider influence, gaining money and authority through any and all means, which allowed them to drive out those who stood for good.

"You must have the devil's luck, making it all this way without putting your foot straight into the mud that is this kingdom's nobility, but realistically that won't last," stated Uncle Ben. "They're swarming in the capital, and now that you're one of them, so to speak, it's only a matter of time before you have to deal with them. Once the snow melts and spring arrives, and the road between here and Mahati makes coming and going easier, they *will* come."

With his explanation over, Uncle Ben glared at me expectantly, and with his gaze boring into me I furrowed my brow and spoke up.

"I don't want to end up as one of those corrupt nobles," I said. "I want to live by the words my parents left me, and I don't want to do anything I'll regret. I want to live an honest life. One I don't have to hide from Alna, the twins, and the residents of Iluk."

"If that's what you want, that's well and good. And I'm not telling you to join the dark side just because the other good nobles were driven out. I'm just telling you that if you don't want to share their fate, then you better be prepared. Fortunately, you're a duke now, and you're tax-free for three years. On top of that, slaying all those dragons has earned you a good amount of capital."

“Us being so far from the capital is something that works in our favor,” he continued, “and I believe that the temple and doctrine I’m preparing will be a good support for you. And everyone else here doesn’t even need to be told; they’re all working their hearts out for you. Alna, Ellie, Klaus, Hubert, and all the elderly ladies are all behind you. Aymer is helping to make sure that your supporters grow smarter too—she’s teaching mathematics and literary skills to any inclined dogkin. Things are already moving in that direction regardless of how you might feel about it. With all the pieces in place, all that’s left is for you to take the reins.”

“And, uh...yes. That is...what I...I intend to do.”

“Then quit making me repeat myself, and fix that odd tone of yours. You’re not a kid anymore, so act like it. Be the duke you’re supposed to be.”

“Oh, uh, yes. This is the last time. I will purge my mind of those childhood times and stand tall as the man I am.”

I gave Uncle Ben a nod, and he nodded back, finally satisfied. Then he went to the back of his yurt and took a piece of fabric by the side of his bed.

“Good, then we can move on. In order to counter those corrupt nobles, we need to take good care of the cornerstone to these lands, and what’ll make these lands truly prosper: the baars. Even if the gods hadn’t sent a baar to give you that sanjivani, I still would have done what I’m doing now. What these lands need is a Baarbadal family crest—something we can put on a banner and attach to our caravans. Next time we head anywhere for trade, or the next time we send a messenger, they’ll be going with *this*.”

Uncle Ben proudly held up his piece of fabric and unfolded it to reveal an image. It looked to me like it had been embroidered by Alna. It was a much bigger version of something that she and the twins had designed: the profile of a baar, complete with its uniquely shaped nose, its adorable round eyes, its spiraling horns, and its pillowy wool.

The fabric sported a circular golden border on red backing, in the center of which was a baar face. And boy did it stand out. It couldn’t have been more adorable if it’d tried.

“The main idea with this is to promote our wool, but it also promotes the

Baarbadaal family as well. By getting the word out there, we'll be letting the whole kingdom know what we're doing here and what sort of lord you are. In time, we'll be able to use this same flag to promote our temple."

"But like I said before, we'll want to be pushing that when you've built up enough power and authority and our temple is complete. We've got a great chance here to come up with teachings that put the corrupt nobles and the modernists on the back foot while giving the good guys a step up. We'll get ourselves properly prepared, make use of every advantage we have, and then put into play the glory of the gods."

Uncle Ben gave me a cheeky grin as he finished. "As long as we don't neglect the old teachings, I think Saint Dia will be fine with what we're doing. And I have to say...I think we'll be looking at this place turning out to be something truly magnificent."

I had so much I wanted to say that in the end I couldn't say anything at all. I couldn't tell if I was shocked or exasperated. And what did he even mean when he said he'd put the glory of the gods into play...? But all the same, he was mighty serious, and he was thinking real hard for the sake of our village. That much was clear.

I gave him a resolute nod and replied, "All righty then."

After Uncle Ben told me his hopes...and I suppose his dreams, it was dinnertime. I was sipping at the soup that Alna had made and telling her about my conversation with Uncle Ben. She listened quietly until the end, said, "I see," then offered her thoughts.

"For us onikin, as far back as our stories go we've always considered our 'gods' to be the grass, the wind, the rain, the sun, and fire, and so we've shown them the appropriate respect. So while there's much I don't understand about doctrines or religions that need to be fiercely protected, I think I understand what Uncle Ben is saying."

"If we leave our rules and way of life to others then things are bound to go south, so it's better to think up those rules for ourselves and give them form. By bringing gods and such into it you make it easier to explain to kids. That makes

it easier to remember too, which isn't a bad thing."

I nodded. Then I ate a spoonful of the spice-heavy soup, and after a relieved breath, I replied.

"Yeah. After I lost my parents, and went to war, and talked with Juha about all sorts of things, I might have lost my faith... I stopped believing in the existence of God with the fervor that I used to. And I think Uncle Ben went through something similar. He didn't go as far as to say that the gods don't exist, but he does want to use them to make things better for us. At the very least, he plans to create rules and tenets that we can stand by and believe in, because the current temples are going in the wrong direction."

"He wants to leave the roots of Saint Dia's teachings—things like not discriminating against a person for where they come from and not hurting others—but he wants to take the finer details and tweak them to match with our way of life here."

Once I was done, Alna responded again. "I see. And through those teachings, it'll be the baar temple that supports the people the way that Uncle Ben does now. But even if those rules and your doctrine support the people of Baarbadal *now*, what happens when they get outdated? Is the plan to keep on teaching the same doctrine to Senai and Ayhan when they get older, and the generations following?"

"All the original temples—the only ones I know, really—taught like that, and my parents were very much all about protecting the ancient doctrine, but Uncle Ben doesn't believe that's the way to do things."

"He's creating our new doctrine on the premise that when our generation's teachings grow old and are no longer useful, a new one should be created, or the old teachings updated."

"He believes something to the effect of, because we've got the baars here, and they're the messengers of the gods, it'll make sense to people if we explain that our new ways and teachings were granted to the baars by the gods. And you know, it all might be easier to accept and take in if we think of it as adopting the lessons of the baars we share our lives with. It's better than suffering because we adhered to the teachings of gods we've never met or

blindly trusted outdated temple traditions.”

I finished what was left of my soup, and then I gave all the baars in our yurt some gentle pats. Francis and Francoise were fine waiting for their turns, but it wasn't so easy for their six young ones, who bickered with one another to get their pats sooner than their siblings. Still, I did my best to get to every last one, and with an equal number of pats, and while I did Alna finished the rest of her soup.

“I see, I see,” she murmured thoughtfully. “But Uncle Ben is just a man, and he's not in a position of power. How's he going to convince anyone if he doesn't believe in the gods? His temple won't have much authority, and in time it may just fade out completely.”

“Uncle Ben says he doesn't mind if that's how things work out. If Iluk grows into a big, safe, and stable place to live, filled with people smart enough to refute the gods themselves, then he says his work will be done. But even then we're talking about things a long, long way into the future. Who knows when that'll happen...”

“So...you update the teachings as necessary, use what works for the people, and discard what doesn't. That's a line of thinking that might resonate with the onikin too. After all, it's very much in line with how our people live.”

Alna giggled, and I was puzzled. I didn't know what she found so funny.

“The onikin clans have lived on these plains as nomads since the distant past. We moved our villages to meet the baars' grazing needs, and if necessary we rebuilt them or discarded what we no longer needed. Iluk does not move the way the onikin village does, but that doesn't mean it's not going anywhere. These teachings can reach far beyond our land. So long as you have them and they remain under the name of the baars, it might be that the onikin adopt them too. I mean, even my parents, my younger siblings, and Zorg. And if we're all living by the same way of life on the same land, you could say that makes us all part of one big family. Perhaps that was what Uncle Ben was thinking right from the very start.”

My head tilted to the side as I mulled over Alna's words. It wouldn't have been all that surprising for Uncle Ben to think that far ahead, but had he

really...? He hadn't even been to the onikin village, so he'd never met Moll either. With that in mind, could he really have thought about it all so comprehensively? Still, based on how Alna saw things, the rules and teachings we came up with here might even be accepted by the onikin. I was still thinking it over when the twins, who'd been so quiet until now, spoke up loudly.

"We're bored of this!" shouted Senai.

"So bored!" cried Ayhan.

They'd finished their dinner already, and to kill the time they were listening to me and Alna talk. Aymer was too. However, the twins were tired of the topic at hand and they couldn't bear us talking about it any longer. So I yanked Senai into my arms while Alna took Ayhan, and as they cried out and laughed, the six little baars did likewise, copying the girls. We played and we enjoyed each other's company, and we did that for some time before Alna seemed to remember something.

"Speaking of things in need of renewal," she said. "We really have to replace our privies. Given that Iluk doesn't move around like the onikin people do, we have to make sure we keep them clean and maintained, or we'll be inviting sickness into the village. Once it gets a little warmer and the snow softens, let's bury the old privies and make some new ones. We've got a lot more residents now, and we'll want to have different sizes to match with different body types. Perhaps we can put them all in a row. We've got one by the kitchen range and one over at the well; they'll be fine for a time, but we'll want to be prepared to make new ones all the same. When we first got here we left the privies and the well to the onikin craftsmen, but I think we're at the stage where we want to be able to handle that kind of construction ourselves."

"I see," I answered, nodding along. "All right. I'll get it done."

So I took to asking Alna this and that about making privies, but it wasn't long before the twins piped up again, shouting about how much they didn't care to be privy to all the privy discussion. I gave in and looked at the twins.

"Let's clear away all the plates and clean up, and then we can play."

Prince Richard's Ballroom, the Kingdom—Gordon

The past fall had been busy and frantic, and barely a wink of sleep had been found among the taxes and the harvesting, but now the air in Prince Richard's ballroom was calm, and the place was draped in silence. It had not felt like much of a ballroom at all back then, filled with shelves full of documents, and just as many chairs and tables piled high with papers. But that was over now. All but what was necessary had been cleaned up and taken away, and the spacious location felt now a touch lonely, with only stoves burning firewood to keep the room warm.

But the calm air in the ballroom did not mean that all the work was done. The taxes paid—and only the taxes paid—had to be taken from the royal treasury, and decisions had to be made about what to do with them. This meant where to invest the money, which locations to further cultivate, and how to balance support for villages with good harvests versus those with bad ones. It was necessary to finalize all of this managerial work before the snow melted and the kingdom woke from its winter slumber. Richard now sat silently, contemplating these decisions.

Ordinarily, the work that Richard was doing would have been done by the royal palace's retainers and domestic administrators. However, Richard suspected many of them of having ties to the empire and could not entrust them with such duties for fear of further corruption. So while Richard had control over the palace, he saw to the work himself with support from his inner circle of aides.

"A little corruption is something I was willing to overlook," he complained, "but these fools and their greed have no limits. The nobility, the old retainers...not a single one seems to understand that when they go too far they put their own head on the chopping block. I'm sick of it."

Prince Richard sat at a large desk, his pen scribbling over a document as he grumbled. On the other side of the desk was the mercenary leader Gordon,

standing at attention. The man was something of a nervous wreck. He was confused. Why had he been called here? Why was he being made to listen to Prince Richard speak of these things?

“I... Yes, I see,” Gordon muttered, with palpable puzzlement. “And, uh...being that you have summoned one as lowly as myself, is this a matter of war? Or is this...a punishment for my actions under Princess Diane when she went to battle against Dias...?”

Gordon had thought long and hard, and these were the only conclusions he could arrive at. Prince Richard summarily shut him down.

“It is neither.”

Gordon winced. His reddish blond hair, which was dirtied by soot and ash from the stoves, was neatly combed, and the beard that covered his face was also trimmed. Gordon had even gone so far as to borrow some fine silk clothes from a merchant he knew. He trembled at the idea that he might be executed while looking so utterly pretentious, and his fists clenched with a flummoxed frustration.

Prince Richard gave no hint that he had noticed this in Gordon. Indeed, he did not even glance at the man, his eyes on his desk as his pen glided smoothly across documents. But he nonetheless took a leather bag and a folded piece of paper in hand, both of which had clearly been prepared earlier, and tossed them at Gordon.

Gordon panicked, unclenching his fists to catch the items as they reached him. The paper was stamped with a wax seal. Gordon suddenly found himself even more confused. He looked at the prince, then at the prince’s aides standing behind their leader: the old knight, the woman with the red hair, and the woman with the black hair. The old knight motioned with his jaw for Gordon to look at what he had been given, and so he did.

“Huh?” Gordon uttered. “A knight? *Me*? But I’m nobody. Why me?!”

The paper was an official document appointing the petty mercenary leader to the esteemed position of knight. In his new role he would serve the royal palace directly. When Gordon looked in the bag, he found a decorative short sword that acted as proof of the position.

“The war is long over,” explained Richard, “and there are far too many mercenaries for us to simply leave as they are. They may turn to banditry, or they may let their greed get the better of them and incite another war. Bringing them under our control is thus the far better option.”

The prince continued, “I researched you thoroughly. You appear to have made a good account of yourself during the war, and you are to be lauded for staying on your best behavior while out in the field. You were mercenaries, yes, but enforcing a ban on looting shows that you were a capable leader of men.”

Gordon was flustered, and all he could respond with was a cringe. The truth of the matter was that it had not been Gordon who enforced such a ban. In reality, he and his men had simply been too scared to loot and couldn’t have done so even if they’d wanted. They’d known that Dias had been on his rampage in the battlefield nearby, and the last thing they’d wanted was to draw his attention.

Dias had, for whatever reason, banned looting among his men during the war and even then had somehow kept his men in line and minimized casualties. This had given him a unit of such size it was ten—perhaps even a hundred—times larger than Gordon’s own.

Gordon and his men had feared what might have befallen them if they’d fallen to the temptation of looting, so he had banned it entirely. He had not been willing to risk having his balls completely crushed to dust like that one rumored noble.

“Not only that. You also showed remarkable self-control in the matter of Diane’s attack,” added Richard. “And when it was over, you went to your elders and bowed your head in apology. Commendable indeed. If those dishonest others had, like you, known more clearly their place, perhaps a different future might have awaited them... Gordon, you are a knight, and those who serve you are now esquires. You are hereby ordered to head east, to Duke Sachusse and Isabelle, where you will develop our occupied lands and rebuild our strongholds. Make sure we are prepared, should the worst come to pass.”

Gordon took the words in, considered what he was being asked, and decided to throw away his fears and his trepidations. He was a knight now, and so he

stood up straight and looked Prince Richard in the eye.

“Are you asking me to suppress Duke Sachusse and Princess Isabelle?”

“No. I don’t know what rumors you may have heard, but neither Isabelle nor Helena is an enemy at present. My younger sisters have their own ideas and preferences when it comes to building a kingdom. Indeed, they have assembled their own factions for it. But since I laid the groundwork for my own plans, neither have done anything of note nor shown any hostility.”

“Isabelle aimed to focus on domestic affairs and Helena, cultural. Both were working to eliminate their detractors...until a certain *idiot* went wild and the vast majority of those detractors lost their positions. As a result, both of my sisters have too much...leisure time on their hands. Isabelle, in particular, is thrilled at the idea of developing the occupied lands as she sees fit.”

“I...see,” replied Gordon. “In which case, you want us to be prepared for the empire, yes? We aid Princess Isabelle with the development of the lands, keep her satisfied, and ready ourselves for foreign threats. If that is the plan, then might I ask a favor?”

“What is it?”

“It’s about the strongholds. I ask that you let us build a number of new strongholds outside of simply reinforcing what is already there. What the empire built previously is largely focused on defending against threats from the north...monsters, in other words. They are a necessity, but they are also outdated and not well equipped for dealing with an army.”

Gordon then added, “After Dias’s rampage, many of the old structures are in disrepair, to the extent that some should be demolished, not rebuilt. So instead of pouring all our resources into rebuilding, I suggest also constructing brand-new strongholds that will protect the cities and fields. Doing so will make our enemies wary while helping our citizens to feel safe.”

Richard lifted his head from his work to meet Gordon’s eyes with a stern gaze. What exactly he was thinking was unclear in his expressionless face, but after a time, a corner of his lips curled and he let out the hint of a chuckle.

“You are even better for this job than I thought,” he remarked. “Consider your

test passed. As it stands, however, you lack the manpower to construct brand-new structures. You have my permission to hire what you need—expert craftsmen, experienced clerical administrators, and mercenaries you trust. Given that this is a long-term project, be mindful of whom you bring with you; it would be unwise to bring those who lost themselves during the war or those who might let their greed get the best of them on-site. I will contact you in due time with regards to your salary, the construction budget, the appropriate armor and weapons, and of course a manor fitting of your rank. And be sure you have a wardrobe and a look that befits your new position.”

Gordon broke out in a cold sweat. A chill ran down his spine. The prince had just told him that...he...had passed. All because he had not cried out in joy at his promotion but had instead stood tall and offered useful advice.

And so he wondered: if he had merely reveled in his promotion and said nothing, what would have become of him? Would he have been sent to his post without a budget at all? Or would failing have seen his position revoked just as quickly as it had been bequeathed? Both fates seemed equally plausible, and Gordon was once again filled with the tense nervousness that had filled him upon first entering the ballroom.

“I will acquire clothing suitable for a respectable knight!” he said. “I w-will s-see immediately to preparations and acquiring manpower for this duty and will take my leave!”

Gordon spluttered his way through his tattered nerves, and Richard smiled kindly at him, offering a short nod to go with it. Gordon saluted the way he had seen knights do out in the field in response, then spun on his heel, heading for the doors at such speed one might have thought he was fleeing.

Richard said nothing. There was no “wait,” and there was no “we aren’t finished yet.” So Gordon escaped the ballroom, but he kept himself from breaking into a sprint, knowing that he had to be on his best behavior until he was out of the palace and with his men who were waiting for him at their lodging.



The Southern Wasteland—Aymer Jerrybower

The skies were clear on yet another cold winter day. Aymer had accepted a request to help map the wasteland and headed out with Hubert, Sahhi, and their entourage of dogkin bodyguards.

The wasteland would soon be a part of Baarbadal, and that meant Hubert needed to investigate, survey, and, of course, prepare a detailed map. In the midst of his work, however, Hubert had found himself troubled, and so he had asked for Aymer's help. The first reason he'd done this was because Aymer, like himself, was well studied; on this level the two were on the same wavelength. The other reason was that Aymer originally hailed from the desert, which was located farther south of the wasteland.

"In other words," Hubert said as he wrapped up his explanation, "I am trying to work out just how far into the wasteland to go and where to draw a border to designate royal territory. My investigation has been very thorough, and I'm certain this place is uninhabited. This means we're essentially free to put the border wheresoever we please, but placing it too far will make the domain lands difficult to manage, and potentially out of reach if we find ourselves in trouble. It's also a possibility that we may end up encroaching on the desert lands you call home, which could cause conflict with your people."

He continued, "If only there were natural rock formations or rivers running through the area, then we could have named them natural border markers. I can't help thinking that the end of the wastelands and the start of the desert is much too vague for the purpose. I can't decide what to do."

While Hubert's eyes hovered over the map and compass in his hands, Aymer, sitting on his head, took a look around and considered the problem.

"While it *is* true that my people live in the desert to the south, it's not really south of *here*. More accurately, it's south of the neighboring domain, Mahati. It is possible that we'll reach the same desert by heading south from here, but I can't deny that we may end up reaching another place entirely. With that in

mind, perhaps it's best not to worry about such things and instead use the area's natural resources as your baseline. That is to say, why not simply make the area encompassing the salt plain our domain for the time being?"

"You raise a good point. Until we head south ourselves we won't know what's out there. Using resources as marking points, you say... In which case, let's not stop at just the salt plain. Alna supplied us with some information which we confirmed yesterday, so we'll have the border extend as far as the blackwater springs."

Aymer tilted her head, curious.

"Is fuel one of our goals, then?" she asked.

"No. As Alna explained to me, the blackwater, which in the kingdom they sometimes call earth oil or rock oil, is of poor quality and far too pungent to be used as a source of fuel. So it's not fuel but bitumen... With time the oil changes and becomes a sort of paint, and that's what I'm after. Bitumen works well both for waterproofing and as a preservative, so if you paint it over wooden planks for ships, you end up with a ship that lasts a remarkably long while."

Hubert then clarified, "Now, I realize we don't have a need for seafaring at present, but that doesn't mean we can't sell the product to nations that do. We can also use the bitumen for roofing, and so I thought it would be wise to have some stored away for the future."

"Wow... I wasn't aware of such uses," remarked Aymer. "So if we include the blackwater springs, just how big an area is the domain going to become? Do you already have a map ready? If so, we can bring it up with Dias and the village representatives once we've finished our survey and inspections. I'm sure that if we simply explain to Dias that it's worthwhile, he'll go along with us, but we'd best make sure we're on the same page before we do."

Hubert nodded and unrolled his map over a big stone. Then he readied a pen, a pot of ink, and several fresh pieces of paper, and he and Aymer began a discussion in earnest. They covered where exactly to draw up their border, in what direction to do so, and how far their guard could reach in an emergency. They considered those points, thought long and hard about the future of the domain, and did everything they could to make the best possible decision.

They talked until their throats were parched, and even then that didn't stop them. Sahhi, who had been brought for his literal bird's-eye view, came to perch on a nearby rock to rest his wings and yawned to express his rapidly growing boredom with the wasteland.

"Ah," he sighed, muttering to himself. "I sure wish I could be out there hunting with the twins instead of surveying this land of lifeless rock."

Iluk Village—Dias

It was official: the baar portrait was now the Baarbadal family crest. The twins were over the moon at the news, and with their own embroidered baar heads clutched tightly in hand, they ran around the village proudly announcing the news to anyone within earshot.

Thanks to their excitement, the whole village came to learn about the family crest, and then Uncle Ben declared it from the square for everyone to hear. When that happened, the whole village took to making and decorating their own versions of the crest whenever they had some spare time. Klaus in particular was really enamored with the design and announced that he was going to make a big baar-head flag. He said he'd get started as soon as Canis got a hold of some quality fabric, and made a *whole* lot more noise about the crest than I felt was necessary.

That said, we were still in the midst of winter, and I knew that it wouldn't be a simple thing to first get fabric in the size Klaus wanted or to accumulate the amount of thread and dye it in all the right colors. I figured that would be something for when spring came.

The village's first priority was of course just making it through the winter. On top of that, we had other things to prioritize, such as the privies and mapping the southern wasteland. Truth be told, I didn't have much of a role in the mapping, and I actually felt it was best to leave it with Hubert rather than to force myself into things and mess it all up. To that end, I put my energy into the privy situation instead.

We wouldn't be getting into the bulk of the privy work until much later, when the snow softened, but I still wanted to prepare what I could. That meant working out where to put them and preparing all the lumber we'd need. So I looked around the village, and I looked around inside the storehouses, and while I was doing that I heard the mastis howling from a distance. It was getting to be a pretty regular occurrence now.

The howls all came from the dogkin that traveled with Ellie to Mahati and back, and it always sounded like they were making an announcement: *“We’re home! We’re safe!”* After we’d sent about a third of the flame dragon materials to Eldan, he’d had gifts aplenty for us, and Ellie and her team were back from another trip of carting that stuff home.

Eldan had prepared so much that there was no way to get everything in a single trip. Ellie had gone back and forth between Iluk and Mahati several times now, and I figured that this was probably the last loop. I headed over to the village’s east exit to wait for them, and when I spotted the dogkin pulling along Ellie and their carriage sled they were all nothing but smiles.

“Great work, everyone,” I said as they pulled in. “Thanks so much for taking off in the snow and going on such a long journey for all of us.”

“You don’t have to thank us every single time, papa,” said Ellie. “For the mastis and for a merchant like myself, this is nothing. And this last trip wrapped things up for us. That’s officially all the goods we had to bring back and our market research done. We even got some good face time with our baar wool clients. Is everything in Iluk going well?”

“Yep, no problems to speak of. I guess the only news is that we decided to make the baar embroidery our family crest, and the cavekin are having a bit of a hard time with the armor forging.”

“Oh? But they’ve got so much confidence in their blacksmithing... What’s giving them so much trouble?”

“Well, I suppose the truth of it is more like they’ve made things harder on themselves by how they’ve chosen to put the armor together. They’re mixing a rock we don’t really understand in with the steel, and they’re using some flame dragon materials too, but the steel is stubborn to work with and the flame dragon materials can go out of shape at the lightest touch. They’re having a rough time with it all.” It was exhausting just to think about. “Personally, I don’t mind if they just throw something together for me, but the cavekin are obsessive when it comes to their work, and they refuse to even entertain the idea of doing a slapdash job.”

“Well, let’s not forget that the armor is for *you*, papa, and you’re the face of

these lands. I think it's much better and more appealing for you to have something lovingly crafted than mass-produced armor just lying on a shelf somewhere." Then Ellie muttered, placing a finger on her cheek, "Still, that is a spot of bother... I wanted to talk to the cavekin about some things and ask for their help."

She let out a troubled murmur. I knew I had a lot of things going on myself, but I was worried maybe Ellie didn't have anyone else to go to.

"I might not be able to work to the standards of Narvant and his family," I said, "but if there's anything I can do, you just let me know, okay? What are you hoping to do, anyway? Did you need some help unloading all of the stuff you brought back?"

Ellie spun around at my question to look at the mastis. They'd determined that there wasn't anywhere closer they could get with the sled legs on the carriage and had taken to unloading the stock where they were and carrying it to the storehouses. Ellie told me that she'd help out too, so we ran over to the carriage. I took a couple of heavy barrels and Ellie answered my question as we walked to the storehouses.

"While we were in Mahati doing research, we heard that there were some gangs planning a rebellion and smugglers bringing in dangerous goods. Anyway, it got me thinking about how in the spring we're going to have a road connecting our two domains. With a dedicated road like that, we're naturally going to get an influx of people coming and going. But I can't help feeling like it's a bit early to just let anyone with legs come and go as they please. I know that Eldan and his government are welcoming everyone from anywhere, but that means that you get a whole lot of different types of people, and not all of them good. We've been promoting our baar wool like crazy, and it's possible that some uncouth types might want to kidnap some of our baars."

"Unfortunately the world isn't all made up of good people," I commented.

"But we do want the road, and we don't want to leave it unfinished for whatever reason, so I was thinking we need some way to let in who we want and keep out who we don't. I was thinking we should make a dedicated border-guard station. There's no real point to building one out on the open plains, so I

thought we could put it in the forest. We could build a fence to make it harder to cross the border and have Klaus and the dogkin keep an eye on things. It won't be perfect by any means, but I can't help feeling it'll be safer than having nothing at all."

I took Ellie's thoughts on board and mulled them over good and proper while we walked, and then suddenly Uncle Ben popped up, and it seemed like he'd been listening in.

"I'm in favor of a border-guard station," he declared. "And not just to keep the bad apples out. If a virus hits next door, we'll have gates to close to keep the sickness from reaching our people, or at the very least it'll slow things down. All you need to do is look through history and you'll find countless examples of when border stations and gates kept nations safe from infectious diseases."

"We've already got a good hold on the area thanks to Alna's magic," Uncle Ben continued, "the dogkin's noses, and now Sahhi, but not making a dedicated spot for us to react to their intel is pretty much putting all their skills to waste. And besides, you've had intruders try to attack the village before, right? All the more reason to set things up now and be prepared for the future."

"I know Lord Eldan closed all his border stations to encourage trade, but we don't have the kind of market for that yet. We ought to build that station to keep our village, our baars, and our wonderful onikin neighbors safe."

Ellie nodded along in complete agreement, and he had me convinced too.

"All right," I said. "If that's what you two think, then that's what we'll do. Let's get the representatives together as soon as possible and discuss this border station. I'm not sure if we can build a dedicated structure by the spring, but we can at least put up something to hold us over, I reckon. As for the guarding of it, I think we can entrust that to Klaus and the dogkin."

Ellie grinned and nodded, but Uncle Ben stroked his beard and looked down at his feet; he didn't look entirely satisfied. He stroked his beard some more in deep thought, and he stroked it until I thought it would pop right off, and then he finally lifted his head.

"We'll build it, have the dogkin and the onikin help with it, and... I sure do

want somebody to keep an eye on things from up high, but we'll be stretching Sahhi awfully thin."

Uncle Ben spun around to face Sahhi, who was sitting on a yurt rooftop, grooming himself.

"Hey! Sahhi!" he shouted. "Fly on back to your village and see if you can round up a couple of trustworthy friends, would you?"

I was about to tell Uncle Ben that he was asking way too much of the falconkin, but Sahhi spoke up before I could.

"If you just want me to ask some people if they'd come here to do some work, then I'll get right on it! But just keep in mind that whether they'll agree to it or not is a whole other story, okay?"

"That's fine!" said Uncle Ben.

I looked at Sahhi as if to say, *"Are you sure? That's no problem?"*

But Sahhi kind of completely ignored me and gave his wings a preparatory flap.

"There's a lot of jerky in that stock you brought back, right?" he said. "I have a feeling that if you're willing to let some of the younger falconkin eat their fill, they'll be interested...probably."

"The people of my nest aren't particularly wealthy, so I think some of them will be motivated by the chance to eat heartily, feed their families, and maybe even take part in a dragon-hunting expedition. The nest is always happy to let the young ones go off to earn some money or food elsewhere, so I don't expect any complaints!"

And with that, Sahhi flapped his wings and was off, his silhouette fading into the northern skies.

Earning money elsewhere, huh? Which means that the falconkin can keep an eye on the village and the border station, and we'll pay them in jerky, which they'll take back to their nest.

That sounded like a good deal to me, and fair to the falconkin too. They'd get to eat, and we'd have more guards patrolling from the sky.

As soon as Sahhi was gone, Uncle Ben and Ellie started on their own early-stage planning for the border station. When I saw that, I figured I should start doing the rounds and asking for opinions about it...but first of course I had to get the barrels I was carrying to the storehouses.

I brought up the idea of the border station with the village reps, and nobody had any objections, so the decision was agreed upon without any issues. The happiest person out of everybody was the captain of the village guard, Klaus.

Since becoming captain, Klaus was out there every day patrolling and training, but there wasn't really much work for him to do, and except for the odd monster on the plains, life was peaceful. In the fall he'd kept himself busy hunting, but some part of him longed for work that was more befitting of his position, and the border station fit the bill.

In fact, he was happier than I could have imagined about it. He told me that for soldiers of the kingdom, being entrusted with such an important facility was quite the honor.

"You can leave the construction in my hands!" he declared. "I learned all about it when I was serving the kingdom and so I know how such stations are built and how they should be run. Back in the war I built base camps too, so I've got a pretty good idea of how to go about it all!"

Klaus's first stop upon his declaration was to talk to the twins. He'd seen the area with fragrant mushrooms that we'd built a fence around and knew how valuable the forest was to the girls, so he asked them all about where to build the station and what to be careful of. The twins were only too happy to help.

The next thing Klaus did was send Canis to the neighboring domain...which is to say, she visited home. It was important to contact your neighbors when you were putting up a border station, and it was Canis's job to explain the details to her father, get him on board, and get Eldan's stamp of approval. She would also spend some time recruiting laborers for the task. We planned to use the flame dragon materials to pay for the costs of both construction and recruitment, and Ellie was on top of that.

During the war I'd seen a few border stations, and I figured all we really

needed was a gate to control the flow of people in and out, but apparently there was a lot I didn't know about border stations. We needed towers to fight off unwanted intruders, a dedicated rest area for the guards, privies for people to do their business, and a well for people to refill from. Given that people would be coming and going on horseback, that meant we also needed stalls for horses. Then on top of all that we needed a jail in case we had to detain anybody. It turned out the ideal border station was less of a gate and more of a stronghold or fortress.

Naturally all of this would take time and money, so the plan was to start with simple wooden structures and over time build them all up into what we wanted. Once it was all done, Klaus would essentially be the border station lord, and... You know, when I thought about that, it suddenly made sense as to why he'd been so enthusiastic when I'd brought it up.

Klaus's wife, Canis, was even happier than he was, and she was intent on giving the construction project her all. After all, when the border station was complete, she, too, would occupy a very important rank...or so they told me. And while Canis was Klaus's wife, she was also the daughter of a high-ranking official in Mahati, and placing a border station between us would require more people than we currently had.

Ellie had seen a number of different border stations on her travels as a merchant, and she said that the person in charge of a border station had complete authority over it. When you made someone untrustworthy the boss, the whole thing went to hell...or so she told me. An unscrupulous sort would demand an unlawful traveler's tax, or steal cargo, and sometimes do even worse. If a border station of that nature was built, it would only make our neighbors cautious and anxious.

But in our case, the eventual lord's wife was Canis, which would go a long way towards reassuring Mahati's citizens that we wouldn't do anything unseemly and we wouldn't discriminate against the beastkin. All this meant that merchants would have no worries traveling between our domains.

There wasn't much travel at all between Baarbadal and Mahati at present, but when our baar-fabric production grew and stabilized, we'd be getting merchants to our lands, so we had to put the right people in the right positions

to keep that flow of trade healthy...or so they told me.

To be honest, I hadn't put that much thought into the whole thing, and I figured I'd leave it in Klaus's trustworthy hands because there wasn't anybody else. As long as things worked out just fine, that was fine by me.

A few days after our plans for a border station got underway, Sahhi returned from the north, where he'd gone on something of a recruitment run. With him were three falconkin, all considerably bigger than Sahhi himself.

"Hey, welcome back," I said. "Glad to see you safe, Sahhi. Looks like your trip home was a success."

I was out in the square hanging out the washing. Sahhi and his companions all came to a rest on the perch and the washing line.

"Uh...yep," said Sahhi.

I couldn't help noticing how his head drooped oddly between his shoulders.

"What's wrong? Did something happen?"

I was worried about him, so I just had to ask. Sahhi's head stayed drooping low as he explained everything to me. When he'd gotten back to the nest he'd gone straight to the chieftain. Because he'd come back home without having slain a dragon as he'd been ordered, he'd spent some time explaining all that had happened of late.

As soon as the chieftain heard, however, he had started cheering like he'd lost his marbles, spouting off stuff about an "old promise" and "the pride of the clan." He'd been overjoyed that Sahhi had found them a place to earn some food, and he'd even looked Sahhi in the eyes and told him he'd done a bang-up job.

"And, uh, all *that* stuff is all well and good," said Sahhi. "It's the stuff afterwards that's the trouble. I can't make heads or tails of it, but the chieftain was so excited that...he started talking about getting me married."

This was strange because the whole reason Sahhi had been driven out of his village in the first place was because he'd failed to find himself a wife. And now

he found himself being pushed into marriage before he was even ready for it. Sahhi had always wanted to get married, and everything had gone even more smoothly than he could have expected. So smoothly, in fact, that before he knew it he was wedded to the *three* most distinguished hunters in the nest.

I assumed that those three mighty women were the ones watching me from the washing line. Sahhi let out a defeated sigh and went on with his explanation. He told me that in falconkin clans, generally the women were bigger, stronger, and the better hunters. This was why it was common for the most distinguished falconkin in a clan—its heroes—to be women. And now Sahhi was married thrice over to his clan's most powerful members.

I walked up to Sahhi's perch and leaned in close to whisper.

"So, uh...is it a case of...marrying somebody, or *somebodies*, that you didn't want to?" I asked.

Sahhi shook his sad falconkin head.

"No... I mean they're all strong, they're great hunters—not to mention stunningly beautiful—and they're really popular too. Honestly I don't deserve any one of them...but now I'm married to all *three* of them. I just don't know if I can be a good husband or if I'm a good match... You know what I'm saying?"

I nodded. I could sympathize with his feelings...and I wondered if it wouldn't do the guy some good to have a chat with Ethelbald in case there was a knack to balancing multiple relationships. The three falconkin women flapped their wings and landed at my feet, bending their wings gracefully to offer a greeting.

"You must be the dragon slayer and chieftain of this village," said the first. "I am Riasse."

"You're clearly quite powerful for a human," said the second. "I am Bianne."

"Our husband has chosen to live here," said the third, "and while we are not exactly looking for jobs, we will work to the best of our abilities to feed our families the beef jerky you are said to provide. I am known as Heresse."

I knelt down and we all shook hands...or wings...or, well, suffice to say, it was a pleasant exchange of hand and wing.

“I am Dias Baarbadal,” I said. “And I’m the domain lord in these parts. It’s a pleasure to meet you all. We’re happy to have you, whether it’s to live or just to work. We’d be mighty grateful for any support you can offer us.”

Riasse and the other two falconkin women all smiled.

“The pleasure is ours,” they all said in unison.

The three falconkin women—Riasse, Bianne, and Heresse—had all come to earn food for their families and would spend their time traveling between Iluk and their nest together with their new husband, Sahhi. We were in the middle of winter, and the season was a difficult one for hunting. It would be a problem for any clan if their three best hunters suddenly disappeared, so until spring they were splitting their time between their two homes; they’d work in Iluk for food, which they’d take back to their clan.

I didn’t have a single problem with their plan. After all, I’d assumed from the get-go that Sahhi was only going to bring us temporary helpers. And if they wanted to slowly make a home for themselves here in Iluk while they worked through the winter, that was fine by me too. So I welcomed the three smiling falconkin women and their troubled husband to Iluk, and the women were all happy to see how lively a place the village was. We couldn’t hold a full-blown banquet because of the season, but that night we all ate a little more lavishly than usual.

Of all the villagers, it was Alna, Klaus, and Hubert who were happiest to welcome the three new falconkin. Alna was so happy to have more skilled and trustworthy hunters that she could have broken into dance. Klaus was so happy to have more eyes in the sky for patrols that he raised both arms and actually *did* dance. And Hubert was so happy to have help defining the wasteland border that there was an unusual glimmer in his eyes.

Actually, Hubert’s glimmering eyes were so glimmery that I couldn’t help but ask. He told me that the mapmaking was of course important, but he wanted to hammer in some border stakes before spring. The timing of the new winged helpers couldn’t have been better, and so he was as happy as he’d ever been.

When spring came, the grass would grow, and the baars and the horses would eat their fill of that grass. The grassy plains in the spring offered much in the

way of blessings, but according to Hubert there was a chance we could get into disputes with the onikin over which parts of the grazing area belonged to whom. To avoid this, Hubert thought it necessary that we hammer in stakes to make it clear well before spring.

Hubert knew that if we handled the job entirely on our own it might leave the onikin dissatisfied, so the plan was to discuss things with them and work from the map we'd agreed on to calculate the fifty-fifty land split and then hammer the stakes in. It was Hubert's intent to do this while he did the same thing with Eldan's people for the border station.

Hubert and Aymer both looked very comfortable with all the particulars, so I decided I'd just leave the work to them. In any case, this made Hubert a very busy bee practically every day, and Klaus was no different, buzzing around preparing for our border station. The rest of us in Iluk, myself included, all kept busy doing our own work too. I had to get the privies in order, and I knew that Hubert and Klaus both wanted me to help them out with things, and Narvant wanted me for his armor-making endeavors.

Because yurts weren't all that comfortable for Sahhi and his wives, we needed to make a big birdcage of sorts, or maybe it was more like a wooden tower...and at the same time we had to deal with the dogkin children, who were bigger now, full of energy, running here and there like nobody's business, and getting themselves into trouble everywhere they went.

The dogkin were very clever, and although their bodies were small they had tremendous physical attributes. The kids, too, weren't lacking at all in intelligence or agility, and as a result when they played around things got crazy.

Before coming to Iluk, the dogkin had lived under the strict rule of Eldan's father, and so under Eldan's rule they'd been cautious in how they held themselves, making sure there weren't any issues. But now that they were in Iluk and they could run around however they pleased, and they didn't have to worry about a cruel despot, the kids saw their parents living free and wanted to do exactly the same. All this added up to a bunch of dogkin children flying around the village and causing mischief at every stop.

They ran circles around the baars, they leaped all over with the geese and the

white ghee, and they got the horses agitated enough that they almost got kicked for their troubles. Then for some reason or another they saw fit to climb the yurts and in doing so tore open the outer fabric.

Whenever it happened, me or Uncle Ben quickly rushed to where they were and told them to knock it off or scolded them, and the dogkin kids always listened attentively. For a little while they'd be on their best behavior, but then before you knew it they'd be up to some unbelievable shenanigans again, or even completely believable shenanigans, and they were trying new things out just as quickly as they could think them up. So we fell into a cycle of trouble, scolding, behaving, and then more trouble.

The dogkin parents of course tried to keep their kids in line, and they scolded them like me and Uncle Ben did, but they weren't quite as strict about it... They were mostly left trying to work out what to do because they'd never been through this before. Still, they were lucky because Alna and all the villagers took everything in stride and laughed it off. "They're young, so of course they're full of energy," they said, and "they'll calm down as they get older," and "they're quite clever, learning their lessons each time they get scolded."

It was mostly smiles and laughter as the villagers watched over the dogkin children, and they enjoyed the way the kids kept them on their toes. And so it was, on one of these busy days, that I mentioned some new trouble to Alna.

"Today the dogkin kids tried sneaking into the storehouse for snacks," I said. "The adults have kept an eye on the place so the kids never actually succeeded, but they were kicking and screaming in their parents' arms until Uncle Ben came running over to give them a talking to."

We were in the yurt, and I was sitting in my usual spot while Alna was doing some leatherworking. When she heard what the dogkin were scheming she burst into laughter.

"It's always one thing after another with them, isn't it?" she said. "They're keeping us all very busy, that's for sure, and giving us such a runaround that you almost forget how cold it is. Usually winter is a really quiet season, and you spend most of it just shivering and praying for spring to arrive. But with them around, it doesn't seem like that's the case at all."

Just thinking about it made Alna laugh all over again, and when she was done she set her gaze back on her work and kept talking.

“Usually being busy in the winter means making up for a lack of preparations beforehand, and there’s nothing more embarrassing, pitiful, or painful. But the hectic nature of Iluk Village is so wildly different; everyone is working hard to grow the village, support more families, and make this place more well off... How can you do anything but smile?”

And Alna did exactly that when she was done. She smiled. She then held up the piece of leather she had been working on and turned to Aymer, who was teaching the twins basic mathematics.

“Aymer, I’m finally done,” she announced. “This time I’m *sure* everything will go just fine. You don’t have to worry about falling off, and wobbling around won’t be an issue either.”

Aymer’s ears stood up in an instant. “Thank you ever so much!” she cried.

Alna had been working on modifying a little saddle for Aymer to make riding Aisha more comfortable. Ever since Aymer had first ridden Aisha, Alna had gone through countless iterations of the saddle. At first it wouldn’t stay in place, then it would slide around because of bumps and whatnot, and sometimes the saddle itself would flip the wrong way around. Alna had been sure that making the saddle would be a simple and straightforward thing, and Aymer and I had thought so too, but until now it had been a comedy of errors.

Through much trial and error, Alna had settled on how to set the saddle to the bridle and revised the stability of it a number of times. Now she was brimming with confidence. The saddle in her hands really didn’t look much different from the first attempt, but it had a number of innovations that weren’t easily visible at a glance.

Aymer leaped for joy and ran straight over to Alna and took a good long look at the saddle before turning to the craftswoman with a smile.

“With this I can finally go out on journeys by myself!” she said. “On top of that, Hubert and I can work on our mapping in different areas at the same time! Together with the help of Riasse and her friends, everything is sure to go smoothly!”

With a great big smile on her face, Aymer hopped up to the saddle in Alna's palm. She must have been really happy, because her tail wrapped itself around the saddle and she even rubbed her cheek against it.

With Aymer's saddle complete, we attached it to Aisha's bridle. Aymer could now ride wherever she wanted, and she was so happy that she and Aisha went out pretty much every day from that point. Most of the time they went to the wasteland, but sometimes they just strolled around near the village or went to the forest, and sometimes they joined the twins on their hunting expeditions. Suffice to say, Aymer was having herself a grand old time.

With Aymer capable of doing more on her own, Hubert became even *more* efficient with his mapmaking work. With Sahhi and his wives helping out too, the end was finally in sight. Still, once the map was done there were the border stakes to consider, so Hubert was going to have his hands full for a while yet...but all the same, seeing that light at the end of the tunnel made everyone a little brighter.

As for me, work was going well on the privies and Sahhi's new abode; the materials were all just about good to go, which meant all that was left was waiting for the snow to melt. It hadn't taken all that long in the end; the birdhouse was a simple thing that couldn't really be called a building as such, and the privies were just holes in the ground sporting a hat of four walls and a roof. Now that I had more time on my hands, I thought about going to help Klaus out, but Uncle Ben was lying in wait. He'd been watching me and waiting for his opportunity, and he snatched me away to do some more studying.

And as soon as Uncle Ben had me in his grasp, he had a whole lot to say.

"In a kingdom with an aristocracy it is the natural duty of a duke to be well learned."

"In order to develop the wisdom that will no doubt come in handy in the future, a duke must make sure to study hard and prepare a strong groundwork, or nothing will come to fruition."

"This time I will accomplish that which your parents could not."

"Even Alna is studying hard right now to master magic."

There wasn't any reply I could give, and there wasn't anywhere to flee, and so as much as it pained me I did what Uncle Ben told me to do. My own opinion was that you left studying to the people with the brains for it. I wanted to move my body while I still had the strength to do so, and wasn't that a more effective way of doing things anyway?

Not as far as Uncle Ben was concerned.

So, while the rest of the village was hustling and bustling and keeping themselves busy, I spent my days indoors studying. And one day, around the time I thought that maybe we were finally past winter's peak, I was outside doing a little exercise during a study break when I heard some heavy footsteps coming my way.

They trudged through the snow from the south, stomping across the snow, and in time I saw that it was Sanat, one of the cavekin working on my new set of armor. He wore a great big frown and his fists were clenched, but he didn't look angry. If anything, he looked troubled, like he was going through something and he just couldn't bear it any longer. When he reached me, he took a deep breath, then opened his mouth wide.

"I want booze!" he cried.

I'd prepared myself for something more...serious. It took a moment for my brain to register Sanat's complaint, and even when I'd processed it, I had no idea how to respond. But then I saw that Sanat himself considered this of the utmost seriousness, so I stood up straight and replied.

"There should still be a stock of wine in one of the storehouses, so you can help yourself to that," I said. "Narvant asked us to keep some liquor on hand, so we did. I'm not big on people drowning themselves in it or getting drunk and going wild, but as long as you enjoy your drinking in moderation then like I said, you can help yourself to—"

"*It's gone!*" he shouted to cut me off. "We drank it! Everything in the storehouses! We drank it all, but it wasn't enough, so...could you get us some more? Now I know you might question what I'm saying being that we took up fixing your armor and still haven't finished, but listen...booze is *essential* to us cavekin! We drink booze to rehydrate after working with the heat of the

furnace. We drink it to soothe our weary bones after a hard day's work. We drink it to ease the pain of things not going how we wanted..."

"Look, here's the truth: the more we drink, the better work we do. That's just who we cavekin are! My parents both intended to come to you about it only after we finished your armor, but...we just can't muster the strength for the last of it when our booze reserves have run dry! Please, I'm swallowing my pride coming out here like this. I beg you, listen to a wretched cavekin's humble request!"

I took a good long look at Sanat. I'd seen people lying and making excuses for alcohol a number of times, but Sanat's plea felt completely different. He really was at his wit's end because of the lack of alcohol, and even coming to me about it troubled him greatly. It seemed to me he really had swallowed his pride, and I could tell by his face that he was suffering. Seeing the grave look in his eyes made me think back to the mare milkwine episode, and I decided to put my own feelings on alcohol aside.

"All right," I answered with a resolute nod, "I'll send Ellie to get you some alcohol from Mahati. I'm mighty surprised you drained our wine reserves, but I've seen how hard you cavekin work whenever I visit your workshop. I haven't seen you lazing around or going wild because of your drinking habits, so if you say it's essential, then it's essential. As for the armor, you don't have to be so obsessive about things, and there's really no need to rush, so feel free to just keep working at it at a pace that fits the three of you, okay?"

"You'll get some booze for us? You will? Oh, you are a savior and a half, you really are! We'll pay you back with the highest quality work you've ever seen, don't you worry! We'll smith up a whole bunch of stuff worth even more than you pay for our booze!"

He turned to leave with newfound resolve but then turned right back around. "Oh, and, uh...by the way, it's just one other small thing, but...do you mind if we build a wine cellar over by our workshop? No matter how much gold and silver you've got, you'll never have enough money to quench our thirst if you have to keep on buying it elsewhere. That's why we've been thinking we'll just brew our liquor ourselves. What do you say?"

I was a bit surprised and puzzled by the new request.

“A cellar? If you can get the materials for it, then sure,” I said, “it’s fine by me, but...I don’t think there’s anything around here you can brew into alcohol, is there? So what are you planning? Alna told me that they drink mare milkwine out in these parts, but still...”

“Milkwine!” exclaimed Sanat, his eyes glimmering. “Doesn’t taste much like booze but certainly a filling drink, that one! Perfect for rehydrating while you work! Once we get our cellar up and running we’ll brew some of that too, don’t you worry! We cavekin aren’t just smithing experts—we’re masters of brewing too!”

“Oh, and we’ll be just fine when it comes to ingredients. Even if there’s nothing out on the plains, there’s a vast reserve of sugar in the storehouses, and in the forest there’s bound to be berries and honey. Once we find them, we’re all good! Sugar wine is just fine, but some mead would go down a treat. We’ll want to get to distilling later down the road, but that can wait!”

Our conversation seemed to have really lifted Sanat’s spirits, and all his worries had vanished like our wine reserves. I scratched my head about the whole thing as Sanat went on.

“If we want to start raising bees we’ll need a flower garden. Hmm... I guess we can ask Senai and Ayhan about that, eh? I heard they got all the fields going last year, so I don’t expect a flower garden to be an issue for them. Then there’s materials for construction...and given that you’re building a border station, it’s only natural for materials to be a concern. But don’t you worry, we cavekin are capable of building marvelous cellars! If we’ve got earth and stone, we’ll make something happen! So we won’t get in the way of your lumber needs in the slightest!”

Sanat flashed me a thumbs-up, then pointed that same thumb south, to the workshop. I thought about the furnace they had there made out of brick, and I trusted that they’d be fine building a cellar too...probably.

I started thinking about their brickwork, and then I remembered something and nodded to myself. Before I let Sanat go, I asked him if he wouldn’t mind making one more thing while he was at it.

The Proposed Border Station Location in the Forest

—Klaus

A number of small yurts had been erected off to the side of the temporary road that led through the forest. This was the current base of operations for the border station construction, and Klaus was there looking over the supplies of timber and stone that Ellie had bought from Mahati. Since his arrival, Klaus had spent his time designing their border station and eagerly awaiting the return of his wife, Canis.

The border station's design was mostly complete, and he was sure they had all the materials they'd need to get started. All that was left now was the manpower, and once Canis returned with laborers in tow they could get to work.

His eagerness was, of course, partially a matter of the heart. Klaus missed his beloved wife and wanted to see her, and he couldn't get her off his mind even as his pen raced across the designs laid out in his yurt. That was when he heard the dogkin outside howl. They had picked up the scent of something approaching.

In response, there came a howl from quite a distance, and recognizing the sound Klaus put down his pen, placed the lid on his inkpot, picked himself up, and rushed outside.

The distant howl had come from his wife.

Among the large-ilk dogkin, howling was largely looked upon as improper, but for the small-ilk it was simply a means of greeting others and sending messages. Since she worked closely with the small-ilk dogkin, Canis could not avoid this method of communication, and the trembling of her howls made her embarrassment quite clear.

However, Klaus smiled at the sound of his wife's familiar call. He was so happy to know she was almost home, and so he stood dutifully watching the far end of

the road. After a time, he noticed a group of armed guards—likely a gesture of kindness on Eldan’s part—and behind them horses and a large carriage. Canis was by the side of the carriage, and she smiled and waved at the sight of her lover.

Klaus could no longer bear to simply sit and wait, and so he ran over to his wife, beaming the whole way.

“Welcome back,” he said.

“Thank you,” she replied with a gentle smile.

They did not embrace as usual due to the sheer number of people around, but nonetheless they took each other’s hands and shared a smile, though Klaus quickly noticed something apprehensive in Canis’s gaze.



“What’s wrong?”

Canis turned her glum features back to the carriage she’d come with. The carriage came to a stop, and people began to slowly shuffle from it...most of them elderly beastkin, women, and children. There were about twenty in total, and all of them were skinny, their faces tired and betraying their weakness.

“I’m sorry,” Canis finally said. “The plans for the station came together so suddenly, and it’s winter, so I had trouble recruiting help. All the best workers have already left to spend their winter working in other lands or are continuing their usual farming work through the winter. You told me that it didn’t matter if the help was old, or young, or women, so I just gathered whomever I could...”

Canis clutched Klaus’s hand softly and looked into his eyes as she admitted her worries.

“That’s not a problem at all,” Klaus kindly answered.

He’d known from the outset that recruiting good workers was going to be a huge struggle. For one thing, Iluk was asking people to work for them during the year’s harshest season. He also remembered that when they tried recruiting residents, it had only been the small-ilk dogkin who had answered the call. Iluk couldn’t offer much in the way of a salary to its laborers, as the vast majority of its budget went to construction materials, so Klaus had already predicted the sort of workers Canis would come back with.

He knew that the people who came out this far in this season had their reasons—whether it was something stopping them from going anywhere else, or something stopping them from working their winter crops, or any number of other possibilities. Klaus had correctly assumed this going in, and he took a look at the new arrivals, nodded to himself, and then turned back to Canis.

“I know I told you this already, but what we’ve got here? It’s a good start. We’ve got a lot of simple construction work that needs doing, and there’s a whole heap of stuff to be done that doesn’t require physical strength. So we’ll just have our laborers do what they’re capable of, and we’ll feed them well, and when they go back happy with their wages in hand, word will spread. That in turn will bring new workers to us, and the people here now will slowly get stronger and more energetic from the hearty, healthy meals we’ll provide; it

won't be long before they're working just as hard as anyone else. So it's okay for us to take things slow to start."

"We're just going to start with our temporary border station," he continued, "and then we'll move on to building the real thing. I don't even know how many years it'll take to finish, so there's no need to rush! We'll go nice and easy! That said, all of what I just said is pretty much just the way Lord Dias does things!"

In the past, Dias, Klaus, and their troops had come to a newly occupied land under Juha's guidance. There they'd taken down a number of strongholds, cultivated the lands, and cleared the forests... Klaus had watched it happen with his own eyes. And now it was his plan to copy those same methods with the border station.

Canis quite liked and respected Dias, but all the same she doubted his peculiar methods and even wondered if things had actually been the way Klaus said. She just couldn't shake her apprehension, and it clouded her expression and made it hard for her to smile. Klaus took one glance at her and chuckled.

"In any case," he said, "let's start with food! We've got a lot of good workers here, and we're going to cook them up a delicious and hearty meal!"

The dogkin who had returned from their patrols all howled happily in response. Meanwhile, the guards and new laborers all looked on in disbelief as Klaus and the dogkin rushed about with a practiced efficiency, bringing out jerky and other ingredients to whip up a soup.

The Wasteland—Hubert

Now that Sahhi had brought three more falconkin and Aymer was more mobile on horseback, mapping the wasteland proceeded at a heretofore unseen pace. The new domain lands went from the grasslands past the salt plain and to the oily blackwater. The team put out silver coins and jerky to coax any inhabitants out of hiding, and the falconkin scanned from the skies while the dogkin searched from land. All the while they continued to carefully survey the lands and draw up their map, which Hubert expected to be ready to send to the capital in just a few days.

The wastelands offered a few rocky mountains but otherwise nothing much of note. The land was largely flat all the way across, and so Hubert's finished map would end up looking largely...blank. While it made the domain seem somewhat lonely and isolated, its vast salt plain made it quite the valuable acquisition. And yet, Hubert wondered if there wasn't something more that might add to the wasteland's worth, and these thoughts sat in his brain as he looked at his map and walked with a number of dogkin.

"If only there were a river, a lake, or any source of water at all," he muttered. "Then we could try cultivating the place... At this rate the wasteland will stay just that: a wasteland. We'll never be able to make this into Dias's Golden Lowlands."

His complaints weren't meant for anyone in particular, but nonetheless they drew a response—not from the dogkin closest to Hubert but from Aymer, who was riding Aisha nearby. The horse boasted a golden mane and exuded an air that said it would only ever allow royalty upon its back, and yet the hopping mousekin rode upon Aisha's head comfortably, where her elongated ears caught Hubert's words.

"The Golden Lowlands?" she asked, riding up closer to Hubert. "I've never heard of that before."

"Oh? Really? It's a famous story from among Lord Dias's achievements during the war. I would have assumed he'd told you himself by now."

"Dias doesn't talk very much about his time in the war," replied Aymer. "He'll of course answer if you ask him something about it, and it doesn't feel like he *hates* talking about it, but it's clear he doesn't think much of his own efforts and so doesn't feel like they're worthy of discussion. He's never been one for grandiose tales or bragging about himself, so I've never had a chance to hear about these Golden Lowlands."

"Ah, I see. Yes, yes, I've noticed that about him since I arrived. During the war I spent most of my time taking shelter in the royal capital, but I nonetheless had my civic duties. It was my job to acquire intelligence regarding our battlegrounds, and that was how I heard of the Golden Lowlands. They were enemy territory that Dias and his troops entered and occupied during their

campaign.”

Hubert elaborated, “Instead of pillaging the locals, however, Dias’s troops protected them and their wheat fields from the empire, drove the imperials away, and even brought down several strongholds in the process. They did all of that while cultivating the land’s soil... I must admit, it’s quite the confusing story, and one that’s quite difficult to completely make sense of.”

“Now that *is* curious,” said Aymer. “So what happened? You must tell me!”

Aymer couldn’t quite believe her ears, and now, full of curiosity, her tail swayed strongly to show it. Hubert couldn’t help but grin, and he opened his mouth to speak...but before he could utter a word, a nearby dogkin spoke up.

“Look! The stars! Mr. Hubert! The stars are out!”

The sky was darkening, and with it the stars began to glimmer up above. Hubert responded immediately.

“I’ll tell you later!” he said, whipping out his surveying equipment.

Among Hubert’s equipment were tools used to judge the location of the sun and the stars; in addition, Hubert simply loved stargazing while he worked. He excitedly organized his equipment, then looked from his map to the sky and began taking survey data as he observed the horizon.

Aymer watched him and sighed. She nodded to herself, knowing that there would be other times to ask about the story of the Golden Lowlands.

“Let’s go,” she whispered to Aisha.

And so Aymer and Aisha raced around the wasteland while Hubert did his surveying, and they all enjoyed themselves to the very fullest.

In the Yurt During a Blizzard—Dias

Thanks to Ellie's efforts, we'd managed to bring in some liquor from Mahati. Narvant and his family had gotten a hold of it right off the cart, and the smoke was once again puffing away from their magic furnace, a sign that they were once again working hard on my armor. The way they told it, they'd gotten past the most bothersome kinks they'd bumped into and were past the biggest challenges. It was all smooth sailing from here, and whenever a cavekin came by the village, it was always to measure my waist or the length of my legs and to ask me, Alna, and the twins for our opinions on this or that.

They were working their darndest and always saying that they'd finish before spring arrived. Them constantly saying that lit a fire under Klaus and his crew and got them working even harder on their own projects.

It was still winter, and still dreadfully cold, but everyone was happy and healthy. They all said that the cold didn't mean nothing so long as they had their baar-wool gear on. Even the grandmas looked like they'd be keeping themselves busy all the way through to spring.

Still, winter was winter, and it rarely made things easy on you. One day, we heard thunder rumbling from the north, and the next day a wind blew in that was so cold it felt like it'd freeze water in an instant. Before you knew it, Iluk found itself caught up in a right nasty blizzard.

Naturally, there was no going out in that kind of weather, so we all holed ourselves up in our yurts to wait out the snowstorm. Yes, even me. People only went out when they absolutely had to, and so we took to doing whatever we could indoors. One day turned to two, then to three.

Senai and Ayhan had been whittling the time away with knitting and embroidery, then learning more about herbs, but...on that third day they lay down on the floor and started rolling around and shouting in protest.

"We're! So! *Bored!*" cried Senai. "We're sick of this! We want to go outside!"

“We hate blizzards!” attested Ayhan.

They rolled over to Alna to get her sympathy, and then they rolled over to Francoise looking after her little ones, and then they rolled on over to me.

“Look, girls,” I said, “I know how you feel. I’m bored out of my mind too, and I want nothing more than to go outside and work, but that’s a serious blizzard out there. Winter isn’t going to last forever, and it won’t be long before the blizzard calms, so we just need to stay inside and wait it out.”

I stopped the two rolling girls and gave them each a pat on the head, but they only moaned and struggled. Then they seemed to think of something and bounced up onto their feet before sitting down in front of me. I could see an excited glimmer in their eyes.

“Dias! Tell us a story!”

“Yeah! A story! Something! Anything!”

Sometimes when the rain or the wind was strong over the evenings, the twins got so scared they couldn’t sleep. I’d taken to telling them fairy tales to calm them and reassure them, and more often than not that put them to sleep. I guessed they must have thought of the blizzard as another chance for story time, which was fine by me; telling stories wasn’t hard work, and if it helped ease the girls’ boredom then I was happy.

“All righty,” I said, “then how about today I tell you the exciting story of the hero who slew a dragon?”

But when the girls heard my suggestion, their faces scrunched up and their cheeks went all puffy and they shook their heads like crazy.

“Uh...you don’t want that one? But it’s such a great story...”

The girls let out all the air in their cheeks and shot me exasperated looks.

“We already defeated a dragon!” said Senai.

“We all did that! We don’t need to hear about it again!”

I gasped. Iluk *had* slain a dragon. We’d joined forces with the onikin and taken down a mighty flame dragon. Senai and Ayhan had played their own part in the whole thing to boot; they’d caused serious damage to the dragon’s wings. In

fact, they'd done some of the best work in that fight. So for the twins, dragon slaying wasn't a fairy tale anymore—it was just a recent event and a part of everyday life. It wasn't something they got excited to hear about anymore.

But with no dragon slayer story, I was plumb out of tales to tell. I racked my brains to think of something new, and that was when Aymer decided to speak up.

“Dias! Why don't you tell us about the Golden Lowlands! Hubert said it's one of the greatest legends of your time during the war! I haven't had a chance to ask Hubert about the particulars, but what better opportunity than now to hear it all from the man himself? Well? What are you waiting for? Tell us the story! The story of the hero Dias and the Golden Lowlands!”

Aymer's sudden outburst drew in Alna.

“Ooh, now *that* sounds interesting,” she added.

Then Francis and Francoise, all of their little ones, the twins, and of course Aymer all looked at me with a fierce expectation in their stares.



Golden Lowlands?

What in the world is Aymer even talking about?

I combed my memories, but there was only one lowland I'd ever visited during my time in the war. I thought *maybe* that was what Aymer was getting at, but I was still mighty confused by it all. I'd just never heard the term "Golden Lowlands" used to describe the place.

But when the twins saw the look on my face they started to look sad and disappointed, like I'd stomped all over their hopes, so I shook my head to pull myself from my thoughts, and I sat up straight.

"All right then," I finally said. "I *do* have a tale about some lowlands, but I honestly don't know if it's all that golden a story. But I should warn you all that war isn't all that interesting. It's not much fun, so this might end up being pretty boring. Are you all okay with that?"

I looked the twins in the eyes, and both nodded. Aymer and the six little baars, who at some point had also gathered close by, also nodded.

That was when I noticed the similarly expectant look on Alna's face too, and so I started talking.

"Uh...now I'm not exactly sure how many years ago this was because I don't fully remember, but I was working with Klaus and Juha, a man who called himself the kingdom's finest strategist. With us were more than a thousand volunteer soldiers. Maybe around twelve hundred in total..."

We'd gone far to the east, deep into enemy territory, and arrived at a lowland. In it were a small village and vast fields of wheat, surrounded by enemy strongholds. I don't even know if you could call it a *village*. It was more like a smattering of houses. A hamlet, I guess.

Anyway, when we reached the village, the local elder didn't offer any resistance whatsoever. Instead, he welcomed us with open arms and even decided to hold a banquet for us. While the banquet was in full swing, he came up to me, Juha, and Klaus.

"Please," he begged, mustering all the courage he had, "protect us from the

imperial forces and their plundering!”

In Days Gone By: A Village on the Lowlands—Dias

The village elder had a gaunt face and long, scruffy white hair, and he was dressed in dirty hemp clothes. He seemed to be in something of a pickle. Juha told Klaus to watch over our soldiers, and the two of us followed the village elder to his house.

The elder's house was a simple timber structure that didn't seem like much of a house at all. It was more like...just a room. We went inside and urged the elder to take a seat on the house's sole dirty chair. Juha and I stood near the window and the door so we could keep an eye on the outside while we listened.

"Our ancestors were not citizens of the empire," said the elder. "We were not part of a nation or anything like one. We merely cared for and lived off these lands of ours. Those days did not last long, however, and we were swallowed up by the empire as it sought to expand its territory. As citizens of the empire, our people sat at the very lowest rung of their hierarchy."

"You see, the families and villages of the empire are judged by what they contribute to it. But for our people, raising wheat is all we know, and as such we have always been at the bottom of the barrel. Until now, we have been able to survive by donating a portion of our harvests to the empire, but the circumstances no longer guarantee even that. The empire's demands have only grown harsher. Last month, we were ordered to give up the entirety of our current harvest."

I had no words for what I heard, and when the elder saw the frown on my brow he quickly shook his head in a panic and went on.

"No, please don't misunderstand. I am not blaming any of this on you or your forces. Your nation, too, found itself on the verge of being consumed...but you fought back and have even emerged victorious in battles against the empire. To be honest, I'm envious. I have nothing but respect for you and your people."

"All of the fault for our predicament lies with the empire, and now it is on the verge of wiping us out entirely. So...if it is our people's fate to be snuffed out,

then we decided we want to follow your example and fight. But here is the truth: even if you decide to help us, we have nothing to offer you in return. In fact, we can do little more than cling to you and pray for the best. Still...I beg of you, please, protect us from the empire..."

The elder's voice trembled as he spoke, but there was a clear resolve in it. I knew he was not lying. I opened my mouth to reply, but before I could, Juha rubbed his chin with a flamboyant gesture and beat me to it.

"I understand your situation. However! All the same there will be a need to strike a fair bargain! As for what you can pay us with... Yes, let's have you pay us with all the information you have. Firstly, the situation here. I see that this hamlet of yours is surrounded by strongholds, but what are they all for? I want you to tell me, in as much detail as you can, what goes on in them and what kind of military forces they're packing."

The elder looked shocked. His villagers had done their best to welcome our soldiers, but that was literally the most they could offer. All they could do now was grovel. That much was crystal clear in the state of the elder's home. And yet even then he'd begged desperately because he had nothing else. Never had he imagined that we would accept so easily in exchange for no more than information. Disbelief was written all over his face, but in his eyes whirled the return of a certain lost vigor.

"Y-Yes, if anything I have can be of use, then I'll tell you everything I know," he said. "I have heard that the surrounding strongholds were all built to watch over us and ensure that we do not attempt to flee to another domain. The stronghold to the east, however, the big one past the barren land beyond the fields, is to fend off monster attacks. It is less a stronghold and more a fortress, and I have heard that it usually houses thousands of troops."

He continued, "I say usually because most of them have been dispatched much farther east, in lands far from here, to quell a rebellion. We have heard that the stronghold is running on a skeleton crew. It is rumored that their armored cavalry have all left for the east, but I haven't had the chance to verify this myself. If any of us get too close to a stronghold, we are killed."

"The smaller strongholds to the north and south watch over our hamlet. They

are strongholds in name only and are more like fortified camps. Each holds anywhere from ten to a hundred men, if our information is correct.”

“There are a number of strongholds to the west, but we heard that you took those down on your way here.”

Juha considered the elder’s words and then walked to the table in the center of the room. He took out a parchment, rolled it across the table, and began etching letters and images into it with a knife before drawing out a map with a piece of charcoal. He stopped occasionally to ask the elder questions—such as how many people lived in the hamlet, how big their food stockpile was, what facilities it offered, the locations of the strongholds, the geography around them, and the general weather in the area—and all of this he etched into his map.

When the map was mostly complete, Juha brought forth his wallet. As he placed a number of bronze and silver coins across the map, he spoke in a loud, booming tone. That said, he wasn’t talking to me, and he wasn’t talking to the elder either. He just loved the sound of his own voice.

“The empire has all these strongholds and all these soldiers...so why have they left our forces to do as we please? Their best option is to wipe us out as quickly as possible. But if it’s true that most of their forces have gone east, then perhaps they’re waiting upon those same forces to return before they act...? But what if the fields here become ready for harvest while they’re gone? Haven’t they considered that we might reap the entire wheat harvest and flee somewhere with these villagers? Or have they seen that Dias wouldn’t dare do such a thing? Knowing as much, do they intend to make this hamlet a burden to us? A weak point to exploit?”

“If they know we won’t torch the fields, and they know we won’t loot or plunder but we *will* try to protect these people, perhaps victory means simply trampling this entire hamlet to the ground with their cavalry? They have thousands of soldiers at their disposal...of which how many are cavalry, I wonder? If we give each foot soldier a value of one, then each cavalryman is worth ten. Even five hundred would be a real pain...and yet the main fighting force has been called away...”

“Is it possible that their thousands of soldiers are all cavalrymen? A thousand, or two thousand perhaps... Certainly not five thousand, though perhaps four thousand at a generous estimate? No, no, if they had that many cavalry troops, they all would be sent to fight the kingdom’s main military force...or they *were*. They sent their cavalry off, the numbers fell, and *that* was the opening for the rebellion. In which case we’re looking at a thousand. The fortress held a thousand cavalrymen, all of whom were sent to quell the rebellion...leaving perhaps no more than around five hundred foot soldiers.”

“But as long as those five hundred stay inside their fortress, our options are severely limited... Yes, that sounds about right. That means that the remaining strongholds are likely on the same scale as the ones we encountered on the way here, and we can expect at most fifty soldiers in each of them.”

Juha laid all his coins out along his map, and just when I thought he was done he began picking them all up and returning them to his wallet. First he took the bronze coins to the south and north, but then he put a finger to the silver coin to the east and dropped into thought. He rubbed his chin...then rubbed it a whole lot more, then he turned to me with a flourish, his long hair streaming through the air behind him.

“Dias,” he said. “I have a plan, but if that plan leaks we are done for. I will not even tell you. Are you okay with that?”

“Uh, yep,” I replied. “If it means we protect these people and their fields and defeat our enemies, then I’m all for it.”

Juha grinned. The elder, meanwhile, was so gobsmacked he was scrambling to pick his jaw up off the ground.

“Very good,” declared Juha. “It’s settled. Your job is to take down the strongholds to the south and the north before the armored cavalry return. I’ll leave you and Klaus with eight hundred soldiers, which should be more than enough for you to easily overwhelm the enemy.”

“However, do your best *not* to kill the imperial forces. You’re going to let them go east to the fortress there, but not before filling their ears with the following rumors: that we came here with only foot soldiers and we fled here to avoid facing the imperial cavalry. Make sure they know that we’re trying to

avoid a fight against the armored cavalry. It would be great if you could make it look like we're low on morale and that our teamwork is in tatters, but...I think it's a mistake to expect something like that of you, Dias."

We'd actually faced off against cavalry a number of times by this point, and we even had some cavalymen of our own. We also had a good number of horses just for carrying our gear, but all the same, I nodded and went along with what Juha had said.

"Once you take down the strongholds," he continued, "you'll take all the weapons and food—don't expect much—and bring them all here to the hamlet. Send the rest of the men out hunting and gathering food, the more the better. Then dismantle the stronghold and bring the materials here. *Don't* destroy them; we want to put those materials to other uses. In the meantime, I'll be working with some of our other soldiers on the plan, and I won't be back for a while. I won't be in touch either. Are we clear?"

"Crystal. By the way, you said to take down the strongholds before the cavalry returns, but how much time are we actually looking at?"

"Hmm. It looks to me like the imperials have their eyes on the wheat harvest here, so my guess is they'll be here in time for that. They'll need more than just foot soldiers to do the job quickly, and they'll want to avoid using their foot soldiers recklessly because for all they know we might get desperate and set fire to the fields."

And with that, Juha removed the silver coin from the map and tucked the map neatly away on his person. Then we said goodbye to the elder, who was still shocked stock-still like a statue in his seat, not speaking a word, and we got to work immediately, heading straight for our fellow soldiers back at the banquet.

In Days Gone By: A Corner of the Hamlet—The Village Elder

It was a decision made in desperation. With each passing year, the empire's treatment of them had grown worse, and finally the imperials had demanded the entirety of the hamlet's wheat harvest. This was, in essence, a death sentence.

To die of starvation. To die fleeing for another domain. To die having slit one's own throat. Or...to welcome in the empire's enemy and die in the midst of battle. Those were the choices, and when the elder had considered which choice the empire wanted least, he had decided to welcome the enemy forces, and in this way he'd met the soldiers under Dias's command.

There was every chance that their hamlet and their fields would be plundered and that their lives would end in a tornado of disorder and violence, but the village elder had decided that it was a risk worth taking and a far better choice than doing nothing at all. So when Dias and his soldiers arrived, the elder had been prepared to grovel at their feet, to flatter and charm and beg for protection. But the tragic resolve that had gripped the elder had never even been necessary.

Dias's forces had been on the land for three days now. In that time, not a single soldier had stolen a thing or stepped out of line. In fact, they wanted to thank the villagers for the welcome banquet and helped out on the farms and with physical labor. The soldiers were disciplined and well-mannered, and they worked to protect the hamlet without any expectation of being paid in turn. As far as Dias's forces were concerned, the banquet was not unlike being paid in advance.

Nonetheless, the elder was puzzled. A banquet held by a poor hamlet over a single evening was not much of an offer, and he was gripped by worry. *Just what are they really planning?* he wondered. So heavy was his concern that the elder even asked the soldiers themselves why they would go to such lengths to help such a simple hamlet, but no matter whom he asked, the answers always ran along similar lines.

"Well, if we don't, Dias is gonna be really mad."

"And Dias is terrifying when he's furious. Like, for real."

"You're not going to catch me doing anything weird. I don't want my balls ground to dust."

And whenever a soldier answered the elder's inquiries, they always went deathly pale and trembled as they thought back to a time in which they had seen Dias furious. And yet, mere moments later they stood up straight and said

something along the lines of “But Dias is Dias, and that’s why I wanted to fight by his side.” And with that, the soldiers also went back to the work they were doing around the hamlet.

The elder found himself quickly concerned with other problems, however. Chiefly, Dias led an army of some twelve hundred soldiers, and they would not be able to feed themselves without dipping into the hamlet’s food supplies. Wouldn’t they need breaks and entertainment? A way to cut loose? But the soldiers never used the village for their own needs, and so it was that around noon one day, an answer to the elder’s questions arrived from the west, having traced Dias’s footsteps.

That answer came in the form of a huge, twenty-caravan merchant party. They had come expecting over a thousand customers, and in their caravans were mountains of food, clothing, and daily essentials. Along with the caravans were traveling bands and dancing girls.

The second the merchants were set up, Dias’s soldiers dashed over happily and began digging through the various wares for sale, ready to trade with the coins and loot they’d picked up during their battles. The elder had heard of merchants who made it their business to trade with soldiers, but never in his long life had he expected such a gigantic operation. He looked upon it all with such a powerful shock that his body refused to move, and it was in this state that he was approached by the leader of the merchants, a man with an impressive beard and an equally impressive bouncing belly.

“Why, hello there,” he jovially greeted the elder. “I assume you’re the elder of this hamlet, yes?”

The merchant had surmised as much from the elder’s appearance, and the elder, still unable to fully comprehend what was happening, simply nodded.

“Ah, I thought so,” said the merchant. “I know this is a bit sudden, but I don’t suppose you’ve got any vacant homes or empty storehouses around, do you? We’d like to make use of them while Dias is staying here.”

“O-Oh, in which case you’ll find them on the outskirts of this place,” replied the elder. “A-Am I to assume that you’ll be staying here along with Dias and his soldiers?”

The merchant chuckled and shook his head.

“Nope,” he said buoyantly. “As I’m sure you’ve already noticed, we’re merchants. Once we’ve sold what we’ve got, we’ll head off tomorrow morning. But if Dias is staying, then we’ll want to bring over the next shipment right away, so we’ll keep anything we don’t sell in your empty homes and storehouses and have our staff rest in them if necessary. Oh, and it goes without saying, but we’ll pay you well for the support.”

The merchant then passed a bag of coins to the wide-eyed elder. Just how many decades had passed since the elder had last accepted money from someone outside of the hamlet? But from the heft of the bag in his hands, the elder knew that he had received quite the sum, and when he opened it to take a look inside he found not just copper coins but also a number of silver coins, which he had only ever seen a handful of times.

Just a few days ago, the hamlet had been set to lose everything. The elder, too, had been at the end of his rope working out how to stop this from happening. So why, he wondered, was he standing here holding newfound wealth in his hands? It was beyond comprehension—certainly well beyond the elder’s. He did not know how to explain any of it to his people. But even amid his confusion, the elder gripped the bag of money tight in hand and, with something of a bitter grin, tucked it away. It was just then that a young man came running over.

“Ah, there you are,” he said. “We’re just about to start our strategy meeting for taking down the southern stronghold. Your presence is requested.”

This was yet another thing that was beyond the elder’s ability to comprehend. This young man, this Klaus, he came searching for the elder every day without fail, requesting that he join them for whatever discussion was going on. Dias said it was because he did not want to take action upon these lands without the elder’s permission. Klaus said they wanted the opinion of someone who knew the lay of the land. But as far as the elder was concerned, they were free to do what they wanted, and if it was information they needed, they could just come for it as necessary. Why did they need him at each and every meeting? What would they do if he leaked their information to the empire...?

Though Klaus came looking for the elder every day, in no way was he keeping watch over the man's movements...and so the elder once again wondered: *What do they really want?* Were they testing him to make sure he was really their ally? Or was it possible that they weren't thinking anything at all?

The elder shook his head. No. That last option simply wasn't possible. But no matter how much he thought about it, he did not get the answers he was looking for, and so with a sigh, he parted with the merchant and obediently followed Klaus to the strategy meeting.

The two made their way to the campsite that Dias and his soldiers had built next to the hamlet. Simple tents had been put up and equally simple huts had been built, and a number of carriages were also being used as places to sleep. They had not used any of the abandoned homes, nor had they commandeered any villagers' homes for their own use. It was yet another item on the long list of things that puzzled the elder.

Klaus and the elder entered the most stable structure in the center of the camp—something you just barely could have called a cabin if you were squinting—where Dias and a number of elderly soldiers talked over a roughly drawn map.

“Our scouts report that there are two ‘strongholds’ to the south, but they’re little more than encampments of timber,” said one. “They’ve hammered in long stakes, around which they’ve placed planks of wood as barriers. There are two watchtowers, but we couldn’t get close enough to ascertain how many soldiers there are. They don’t put up many bonfires over the evening, so it would seem they don’t keep many people out on guard duty. The walls are about as high as two of you, Dias, and there’s nothing at the top of them; the stakes are sharpened to points at their tips, and that’s it.”

“Timber, huh?” said Dias. “Which means one option is just to charge in and open a hole in the wall with my axe. Juha didn’t much like me doing that the last time, though. Surrounding the stronghold with our forces will just wear us out unnecessarily... Ah, I’ve got it. What if I sneak out there by myself under the cover of night, climb the walls, and knock out all the enemy soldiers I find in a stealthy fashion?”

In response to the elderly soldier who had run the surveillance operations, Dias spouted sheer stupidity. And yet, in response, one of the other elderly soldiers nodded.

“I see,” he said, scribbling Dias’s absolutely asinine idea on a piece of parchment. “There are fifty soldiers at most within those strongholds, right? Most of them will be sleeping in the evening...which means if we can take out the guards on watch before they make too much noise, we’ll have the encampment under control. Juha *did* ask us not to kill anybody if possible...so I think your idea might be our best bet. What do you think, Klaus?”

“If it’s a stealth mission, then you won’t be able to wear your steel armor. It’ll make too much noise. You won’t be able to carry your axe if your plan is to scale the walls either. Will you be okay?”

Neither Klaus nor the other soldiers were at all surprised by Dias’s positively preposterous plan. Dias, for his part, thought about his options for a moment.

Then he finally said, “Meh. I’ll make things work.”

As if that was simply how things were going to be, the men then moved on to talking about what hunting they could do in the immediate area and how many soldiers to assign to the task. The elder could contribute to this part of the discussion, being that he had knowledge of the local fauna, but it was difficult for him to concentrate.

No matter how hard he tried, he just could not get his mind off the ridiculous excuse for a strategy meeting he’d just been a part of. You couldn’t even call the agreed-upon plan a plan at all. When evening fell and Dias began to move, the elder grew increasingly anxious, and his worries refused to let him rest. He woke the next morning having gotten very little sleep.

After washing himself at the local well, the elder noticed Klaus, who had come to give a report on the previous night’s “operation.”

“Last night went exactly as we discussed,” Klaus announced, “and thanks to Dias’s efforts, one of the southern strongholds fell without a fight! We captured all thirty-two enemy soldiers, which...was fewer than we expected. The plan is to release them not far from the eastern stronghold once we’ve finished taking down the remaining ones, but you don’t have to worry about the prisoners.

We'll keep an eye on them."

Klaus's report passed through the elder's ears...and his sleep-deprived mind was driven so far beyond shock that he could no longer feel it. He only felt profound annoyance in its place, realizing that he'd lost a night's sleep to his own thoughts.

Klaus then added, "We'll be bringing all the rations and weapons here, and Dias wanted me to let you know that you're free to take some if you need!"

Coming to the conclusion that perhaps he should stop thinking entirely, the elder replied to Klaus in a dry, deadpan tone.

"Please let us buy some of the rations you bring. We made some money yesterday, so we can at least pay for them."

In Days Gone By: The Remaining Southern Encampment—Dias

I waited for the cover of night, then headed off alone for the remaining encampment, located a little ways from the one we'd cleared a night earlier. I pressed myself against the wall and listened for any sounds of people on the other side. When I felt certain the coast was clear, I climbed up the wooden-stake wall using whatever dents and indentations and ropes were in reach. I made my way over the stakes, taking care not to stab myself, then dropped gently inside.

I set my sights on a guard standing by a bonfire. The guard yawned, and it was clear he wasn't expecting anybody at all to disturb him. He stood by the fire, sometimes closing his eyes—he wasn't even really on guard. Not on the slightest alert, he didn't have a grip on the handle of the spear by his side, and so I knew that if he were attacked, it would take him time to get himself ready for a fight.

I sneaked up behind that guard and tapped him on the shoulder, and then when he turned around, I socked him in the jaw. The guard collapsed right where he stood, so I took his spear, then gagged him and tied his arms and legs with some rope I'd brought with me.

Just like with the encampment we'd hit a night ago, this place had a decent

stock of weapons, but they were all kept in a storehouse. None of the guards were wearing a helmet or any armor, and they didn't even have a person in that impressive watchtower of theirs either. They'd gone to the trouble of making themselves an encampment, but they weren't making any real use of it. Everything had been going smoothly for them, so there'd been no real need to actually keep watch over the hamlet. There weren't any monsters around either, so they didn't have any work to do.

This is what becomes of idle hands... But in quiet times during the war you can always train, or you can send reinforcements to places that need help. There's so much you can still do.

I couldn't help thinking about how lazy they were as I went around the rest of the camp, knocking out each of the guards in turn and tying them up. I could have gone to the tents and tied up all the remaining soldiers like I'd done the night before, but I knew that if I did that I wouldn't be done until dawn. So I went to the encampment gates, quietly removed the bolt, and opened the gates as silently as I possibly could. Then I took the torch I'd made with help from the bonfires and waved it in a circular pattern.

Klaus came running over stealthily with a group of soldiers, and with all of us on the scene we brought the encampment under our control.

By morning we had two encampments under our control and just had two more to the north to deal with. Klaus and his men had interrogated the captured troops, and we'd learned that the two northern strongholds were actually worthy of the name and were properly built out of stone.

One was under the command of a violent general called the Wild One, while the other was under the control of a cautious general called the Wise One. Our usual group—which meant myself, the village elder, Klaus, and three volunteer troops who'd served with us a long time—met in our cabin to discuss the best way to deal with these new threats. There was Joe, a former carpenter; Lorca, a former stonemason; and Ryan, a former blacksmith. I leaned on those three and Klaus—who himself was a soldier from the royal military—to provide me with knowledge I was lacking.

“Sneaking into the stronghold like the last two is one option,” said Joe, “but all the soldiers to the north have been trained more thoroughly. They also have elevated walkways, and their watchtowers are better equipped. It won’t be easy to get inside without being spotted. I think it’s better to try a different tack if we can think of something.”

“We can’t say anything for certain until we see for ourselves,” said Lorca, “but our intel indicates that the walls will be hard to break and the stronghold difficult to bring down. We could maybe do it if we built some siege weapons, but that would take both time and resources.”

“We have the food, equipment, and weapons from the southern encampments,” said Ryan, “so it *is* possible to take the strongholds by force. Doing so *will* incur damages, however...”

I nodded, taking in all of the information, then told them all what I thought.

“If we’re looking for a way to limit injuries and casualties...then what if I challenged the general to a one-on-one duel? I’m sure they want to avoid a large-scale battle just as much as we do, so if we issued the challenge, what’s our chances they would take it?”

A duel. If I won, they’d hand over their stronghold. If I lost, we’d give them our prisoners and all the equipment we’d acquired, then leave the hamlet entirely. Given that the enemy only had some fifty soldiers in that stronghold of theirs, I figured they’d jump at the suggestion.

“That might work for the general they call the Wild One,” said Klaus, “but I doubt that the Wise One will take the same offer. Our interrogations have revealed that he’s cautious especially because he lacks confidence in his own abilities, so I don’t think he’ll accept a duel no matter what the conditions are.”

I dropped into thought for a few moments.

“Then we’ll take down the Wild One first, and if the Wise One still doesn’t budge, then we’ll surround him and threaten to take his stronghold by force. If he’s as cautious as they say, then he won’t want a fight in which both sides take losses. If we pressure him, he might just surrender to us. We could make a racket every evening so his soldiers can’t sleep, or we can start constructing siege weapons within view of his watchtowers. If none of that works, then we’ll

move in.”

Klaus was the first to nod, then Joe, Lorca, and Ryan. The village elder, who’d been listening silently the whole time, nodded with a look that said he was just kind of sick of things now. In any case, with our plans wrapped up, all that was left was to execute them. I split three hundred soldiers between Joe, Lorca, and Ryan to watch over our prisoners and take apart the strongholds we’d captured, then took the remaining five hundred to the Wild One’s stronghold with Klaus.

The stronghold was built from stone, and there were big crossbows mounted along the walls to help in battles against monsters. We knew that all of them faced north, where the monsters would come from, but we were approaching the stronghold from the south. It would be a real pain for us if the imperials decided to shift the positions of those crossbows, but as we climbed a small hill north of the hamlet, we could see that the crossbows were still facing north.

Not only that, but they didn’t even have any guards on watch. It didn’t look like they were at all prepared to head us off if we decided to strike, and I had to wonder...did they not even know we were in the hamlet?

Either way, our plan remained the same whether they noticed us or not. We set up our troops just outside of arrow range, and I took to writing out my duel invitation on a piece of parchment. I had intended to deliver it in person, but Klaus stopped me and said he’d go in my place. He hoisted up a spear with our flag on it—which officially designated him as a messenger—and off he went to the stronghold.

If Klaus was attacked, then we’d move in immediately. We’d take the stronghold by force to rescue our comrade. Fortunately, however, Klaus delivered the parchment without issue. He waited at the stronghold while the imperials wrote their reply, then brought it back.

“I’m sorry I put you in so much danger,” I said upon Klaus’s return.

“Think nothing of it,” replied the grinning Klaus.

I took the reply from him and read the contents:

As long as you will accede to one more condition that we hereby demand, I will consider not refusing this duel of yours.

The writer wasn't really one for getting to the point, and in their meandering way they laid out their condition: If I lost, I was to give them my axe. Well, that's what I thought it said, because the handwriting was so awful I had trouble reading it. I couldn't help but feel a bit disappointed, but I raised my axe up high and swung it so the imperials in the stronghold could see me clearly. Then I drew a big circle with it to say I agreed to their demand.

As soon as I replied, we noticed movement in the stronghold, and after a few minutes the gates opened and a giant of a man emerged on horseback, together with a number of heavily armored soldiers. They rode out side by side to meet us head-on.

"Hmm..." grunted the giant, stepping out before his soldiers. "I was wary you might launch a surprise attack to overwhelm us, but it looks like even you savages have developed manners!"

With my axe in hand, I stepped out in front of our soldiers, and...well, I wasn't too sure what to say. I was never really good when it came to these situations, so I figured I'd just get on with it.

"Yeah!"

The giant alighted from his horse, took a greatsword from its side, and slowly removed it from its scabbard. I wasn't sure what purpose it had, but the man wore a steel helmet that covered his entire face, with a horselike mane and two horns styled after a bull poking out from it. His armor was of a similar design, and the most noticeable thing about it was the big spikes he had coming out of both his shoulders.

Don't tell me he tries to impale people on those spikes...?

Maybe it was supposed to be intimidating. Or maybe it was just for fun—I couldn't say. But the giant also had a big red cape attached to his giant pauldrons. It flapped in the wind, and it sure looked to me like it would get in the way of a fight. I didn't think that anybody in their right mind would fight a duel with a cape like that billowing around them, but when the giant man fully unsheathed his sword he lifted it up high and charged at me like a madman. When he got in range, he swung it down on me with all his might.

After all that talk of savages and surprise attacks, I couldn't quite believe that

the guy had launched a surprise attack himself. Still, I twisted my body out of the way and put some distance between us, then launched a counterattack. I wasn't really aiming anywhere. I just let the power of my swing carry me through. It just so happened that the face of the axe collided directly with the giant's ribs.

He let out a deafening, confused roar and flew through the air. Once he slammed back into the ground, he rolled even farther until the friction finally stopped him and he slumped against the dirt.

"Huh?"

The Wild One didn't move. All around me was complete silence. Neither enemies nor allies spoke a single word. With my axe at the ready, I walked over to the general. I didn't *really* think it could have ended in a single blow, but he really wasn't moving. I knelt down and poked him in the shoulder. Then I tried shaking him a little. He didn't respond at all. I took his helmet in my hands and slowly removed it. Underneath, there was a middle-aged man with his eyes rolled back into his head. Far as I could tell, he was out cold.

And so, my duel with the Wild One came to a disappointing and unceremonious end.

With the Wild One unconscious, the duel was ours, and the first northern stronghold fell. With their general defeated on the battleground, his soldiers no longer had the option of cooping themselves up inside. They couldn't fight back with our forces completely surrounding them either, and so, because of the sheer difference in numbers, they had no choice but to surrender.

With the enemy surrender official, we quickly investigated the stronghold to make sure there weren't any enemy soldiers hiding somewhere, then located their equipment and food supplies and tied up all the captured enemy soldiers. We took their weapons and their armor. Just for good measure we also tied up their general, who had yet to budge.

While we were doing all of that, a surprising thing happened: a messenger arrived from the remaining stronghold in the north, carrying a message from the Wise One. I took a look at it straightaway, and it basically said this:

I will concede my stronghold to you. You were able to take down my comrade in less than half a day. Utterly ridiculous. You overwhelm us in terms of sheer numbers, and I am not particularly interested in fighting battles in which I stand no chance of victory. We will do our best to accommodate whatever conditions of surrender you may have and will offer no resistance. I ask only that you treat us mercifully.

Anyway, we weren't about to look a gift horse in the mouth, so I took to writing out a polite reply as neatly as I could that described our conditions. They equated to the following:

All weapons, equipment, and food were to be left in the stronghold.

Upon leaving the stronghold, they were to head directly to the stronghold in the east.

In addition, they would take the prisoners we'd captured with them.

If they attempted to hide any weapons or headed in any direction other than towards the eastern stronghold, we would assume an attack on us and the hamlet and would respond without mercy.

I handed that letter to the imperial messenger, and then Klaus and I accompanied them partway to their destination. During that time, we put on a bit of a performance.

"Boy, I sure am glad that we didn't have to face any cavalry," I said. "We wouldn't stand a chance if we had to fight them."

"You got that right. We haven't even fought the cavalry once. We've been lucky enough to get away with our tails between our legs every time we saw them coming."

I didn't know if the messenger would pass the intel to the Wise One, but Juha had told us to spread the message, so we spread the message. We said the same thing in front of our captured soldiers and kept up the act as we gathered the prisoners inside of the northern stronghold we'd just captured. Then we sent the prisoners off, cleaned the stronghold, and sent all the weapons, equipment, and food back to the main camp.

By evening, a reply had come from the Wise One. He'd accepted all our

conditions, but just to be on the safe side, we armed ourselves and marched towards the Wise One's stronghold, our forces surrounding our captured soldiers.

There was a thin man with a neat beard waiting outside the front of the stronghold, and he looked exactly the way you'd think someone with the nickname "the Wise One" would look. Behind him were his soldiers, all of them unarmed. As promised, we handed over the prisoners, and at the same time we sent ten of our own to investigate the stronghold. For all we knew, there was a trap waiting for us inside, or maybe the plan was for the captured soldiers to attack us along with the Wise One's forces. But in the end there was none of that, and we captured the stronghold with ease. When we sent them off, the Wise One and all the other imperial soldiers raced for the big eastern stronghold.

I guessed he just knew that he didn't stand a chance. And well, he *was* called the Wise One because of his smarts, so he probably knew that as long as he was alive he could try and take the stronghold back or come up with some kind of plan. Better to live to fight another day, and all that. As for me, as glad as I was that we'd taken down the stronghold without even really needing to do any work, I couldn't help feeling a bit let down.

"Well, our real target is the eastern stronghold anyway," I muttered, "so I guess that's when the Wild One and the Wise One will put their brawn and their brains to use and fight back."

I watched the Wise One fleeing at top speed into the distance, and I turned around to face my soldiers. I took a deep breath, and then I gave them my best commanding voice.

"We're going to take all the weapons, equipment, and food back to the hamlet, and then we're going to celebrate our victories!" I shouted. "They packed their strongholds so full of food we've got ourselves a surplus! Tonight you'll all eat until your stomachs burst!"

Everyone raised their fists into the air and cried out with whoops of joy. Still, they knew they had a job to do, and they poured into the fort. The soldiers gathered up everything we needed at a blistering pace, and anyone who wasn't

carrying any goods went about taking apart the stronghold itself. My plan was for them to get to all of that the following day, but I let them have their way and talked with Klaus about who to leave to guard the stronghold that evening.

We thought of getting people to work in shifts so everybody could enjoy the banquet, but we knew nobody would be particularly happy to work guard duty. We discussed who we might ask who wouldn't mind doing the work, and suddenly Juha was right there next to us, butting his giant chin into our conversation.

"Why not leave guard duty to us?" he said. "Thanks to you taking down the strongholds faster than I expected, we've got ourselves a little more time. Which is to say, my troop can handle guard duty for an evening. But in return, we're going to hold a little banquet of our own, so be sure to leave us some food."

He'd come out of nowhere and said his bit, but it didn't really surprise me. I was used to Juha just appearing when he felt like it.

"Oh, in that case, please," I said. "How's your part of the plan going?"

"The real work starts now," Juha replied, beginning a long explanation of our next steps. "Until now we've been gathering intel and making sure that it's trustworthy. Gathering intel isn't enough; you have to be sure that it's true. Our preparations start from there."

"That said, we've got a pretty good read on things, so I can issue you some new orders. I want you to go east, past the hamlet's wheat fields, and you're going to construct a huge defensive structure, a wall, that runs north to south. Get to stacking dirt to build it as high as you can; I want it at least half as tall as you. Make sure the soil is packed together tight so it's good and solid, and that's your foundation. You'll be able to use the stronghold parts for any building materials you need, and whatever's left you can give to the hamlet or sell to the merchants. But try to make sure the structure is as sturdy as possible."

"Then you're going to have to make long spears. Enough for everybody. They're going to have to be longer than the usual long spears because we'll be using them against cavalry. Klaus is the guy who knows the most about that

stuff, so just follow his instructions.”

Klaus and I didn't have any questions; we both nodded. Juha nodded back at us with a smug grin. An instant later, he was rubbing his chin with a stern look on his face, and his tone of voice turned deadly serious.

“Based on the intel we have, the imperial army's main cavalry unit is out suppressing the rebellion and is expected to return in a month's time. The men you drove out and to the eastern stronghold aren't likely to try anything until then.”

“That means we've got a month, and only a month. So keep only the minimum on lookout and have everyone else working on our defensive wall. We *must* have that built by the time the cavalry unit returns. So make sure you consider the time when you're organizing rations...because it was *you* who decided that we're not allowed to loot or plunder.”

I shot Juha another firm nod, and he smiled before turning on his heels and heading to the soldiers he'd come with. He told them about the strongholds we'd brought down and that they'd be on watch that evening.

“We're on guard duty tonight,” he declared, “but this newly acquired stronghold is our party grounds!”

Then he raised both hands in the air and howled. Everybody got really excited, and Juha and his men strutted on in. I watched them go and nodded to myself, knowing that Juha could handle things from here. I called out to our soldiers working on dismantling the stronghold, and then we went and gathered the soldiers at the Wild One's former stronghold before returning to camp.

The elder and his villagers must have heard about our victory, because they'd set up a bunch of bonfires and had barrels of wine and large pots from the strongholds waiting upon our return. The whole place was filled with smiles, and singing filled the air along with the delicious scent of cooking food. I soaked in that atmosphere for a moment, then took off; we had to sort through all our baggage and equipment, and then we could help all the villagers out with the banquet preparations.

The day after the banquet, we got into dismantling the strongholds in full and building the defensive wall that Juha had told us about. While we were doing that, a week passed without anything of note occurring. The volunteer forces were all originally stonemasons, carpenters, and farmers, so this kind of work was their specialty. The work went smoothly, and things progressed even faster than we could have hoped. We had plenty of food, there was no fighting to worry about, and we even had help from the villagers. It also helped that the area was one where rain fell often, so we didn't have to worry about our water supply; it was nice being able to wash our clothes and our gear...and ourselves.

We worked hard, we ate well, and we could wash ourselves clean every day. The time we spent building that defensive wall turned out to be a well-timed, much deserved break. I was thinking about that as I walked the wall, which was just about at the right height, when Joe came running over.

"Sir Dias!" he called. "It's happening again! The young villagers are keen to help us out!"

"Again, huh? Tell them we're happy for them to help as long as they're not neglecting work around the hamlet!"

Joe nodded, spun, and headed back where he'd come from. There weren't that many, but by that time we had young villagers coming to us every day asking to help us work on the wall. They came to us so often I was worried that they weren't seeing to their work in the hamlet. At the same time, those young villagers were learning all about how to cut stones from the stonemasons, how to build with timber from the carpenters, and how to work metal from the blacksmiths...which was good, but if their fields withered away, none of those new skills would help them in the slightest. Some of those young villagers even went north to meet with Juha and...honestly, I had no idea what they were doing.

In Days Gone By: The Eastern Stronghold—A General

Damn it all... How much longer must I endure this hell? It's only been a week, but it'll be at least three more before the cavalry returns...

A great many unwanted thoughts swirled in the head of a man with a slender face, whose black hair, kept in place with aromatic oil, was beginning to thin. He was dressed in a well-made set of steel armor and was ready for battle at a moment's notice. By his side was his helmet, and at his waist hung his sword. Both were ready whenever he needed them.

The man was in an office of the stronghold—the entirety of it made of stone save for a lone window—sitting at a simple wooden desk, his chair creaking underneath his weight.

All of the surrounding strongholds have fallen. But no matter... I do not care so long as this stronghold remains. The soldiers who have fled here are all poorly trained...but that only means that our fighting force grows, and we have more that we can sacrifice. This is not an entirely bad outcome...

Except for those two! The damned Wild One and the damned Wise One! That they did not die... That they escaped to safety... What a tragic mess they've made of all of this!

The Wild One and the Wise One had received their positions thanks to the ranks of their families and the bare minimum of service. But the general of the eastern stronghold was *actually* capable, and he had *earned* his position on the back of his achievements. The would-be generals of the fallen encampments were no better than enemies, men of a completely different make. And yet, under imperial law they were all of equal rank. As such, he could not ignore them, nor could he remove them...nor could he issue them orders.

Their next steps, therefore, would have to be decided through discussion.

The emperor had appointed the stronghold to the general. The generals of

the northern strongholds had been defeated. They had lost what was theirs. And yet *still* he had to entertain their opinions, feign respect for them, and come to a consensus with them, all because the empire and the emperor's law were to be upheld at all costs.

The Wild One demanded vengeance against Dias, who had spoiled the honor of their duel by underhanded means, and wanted an immediate charge upon the enemy forces. The Wise One was adamant that the strategy he had devised was their best option, but said strategy was so convoluted that the efficacy of it was debatable at best. The general paid neither of them any mind; they clung desperately to their ideas even though they had lost their strongholds by their own hands.

The enemy force was made up solely of foot soldiers...and largely untrained volunteers to boot. Handling them simply meant sending the cavalry to trample all over them. Even if the general had fewer horsemen at his disposal now, and even if the overall number dropped due to the rebellion, the stronghold still boasted a fighting force of two thousand. And even in the case that only *half* of the cavalry returned, it would still be more than enough to destroy the enemy forces in one fell swoop.

However, the armored cavalry were the general's forces, which meant that if he were to order them at the enemy, then neither the Wild One nor the Wise One would receive any of the glory, and so the dark stains upon their reputations—of losing their strongholds to the enemy—would remain. It was for this reason that the two had shouted and thrown tantrums and continued to get in the general's way.

It may be better just to kill them both and be done with it. Leaving them alive will only bring further losses to the empire. They offer our nation no benefit. And as long as it happens here, in this stronghold, covering it up will be all too easy. If my report says that upon losing their strongholds, they died in battle, none will bother investigating the matter any deeper...

The situation within the stronghold was awful at present. The soldiers—both those originally here and those more recently arrived—were anxious about the dwindling food supplies, and every day brought with it arguments, abuse, and confrontations. If stable leadership were not instated, a few soldiers could well

find themselves put to death, but the general would not allow his two “allies” to have their way.

The general did not need the other two. They were unnecessary for both the elimination of the enemy forces and the stable governance of the area. The general had made up his mind, and it was then that he heard them, arguing incessantly as they walked the corridor to his office, both so passionate when it came to their pointless squabbles—squabbles that allowed them to shirk their responsibilities. Neither was interested in victory for the empire; both only cared to save their own skin.

Their bickering only served to strengthen the general’s resolve, and he stood from his chair to meet the Wild One and the Wise One as they arrived at his office.

In Days Gone By: With the Wall Almost Completed— Dias

Once we'd piled up the dirt to the height Juha had said the wall should be, we all marched along it to tamp it down to a good, solid shape, then brought over the old stronghold materials to fortify it all. We got that wall such that it looked like it would be good and sturdy against even a cavalry charge.

We were about two weeks into work on the wall when Juha and his soldiers appeared in the empty, barren lands beyond it. He hadn't shown himself in a while, but here he was digging up the ground as he headed south. He was completely focused on his work and didn't even glance in our direction.

"Ah, I see," uttered Klaus, standing by my side. "So that's what he's doing. He must have found a source of water somewhere, and he's digging a river from there to here."

"A river?" I said, tilting my head to the side. "What's the point of making a river?"

"Well, when he digs the trench, it'll fill with water, and I think he intends to make the ground out there muddy. Soft, muddy ground is going to impede the movements of any soldiers on horseback...and if a heavily armored cavalry can't charge, they lose a lot of their inherent power advantages."

"Oh, okay. Yeah, I get it. And while the cavalry are stuck and slowed down, we'll poke at them with the spears Juha told us to make. If we can knock the cavalry riders from their horses, we might really have a shot."

Klaus smiled and nodded, then looked at everyone working on the wall and shouted for them to keep up the good work. I watched the people building the wall, and I watched Juha and his soldiers digging, and I wondered: What if the empire's army just avoided the muddy area completely? Did we have a plan for if they decided to take the long way around? We had a big defensive structure running north to south, but cavalry were mobile, and that meant it was possible

they'd just...go around. Then they could attack the hamlet.

If that happened, all of our preparations and hard work would have been for nothing, so I wondered what Juha had planned for that eventuality. I thought about it long and hard, and even worried about it some, but I knew Juha well, and I knew that he had a plan for everything, so it wasn't really that long before I decided to stop thinking about it. I spun back around, knowing that we wouldn't have anything if we didn't have our wall, so I threw myself back into my work.

In Days Gone By: By the Cover of Night—Juha

The voices of two men could be heard in the darkness of the night, at a designated meeting point. One of those voices belonged to Juha, the other to a man dressed in the armor of the imperials. The armored man gave a report.

“Huh. Is that so?” said Juha. “Well, that works in our favor, even if it *is* entirely unexpected. So their discussions devolve into murder, and *he’s* the one who makes it out alive... I’m glad for how much easier this makes things, but why won’t the world just go the way you expect once in a while?”

The armored man then asked a question.

“No. Any longer and you’ll lose your opening. Run somewhere; go into hiding. When it’s all over, I’ll take care of you. You’ve done a good job, and I will ready whatever you want, whether it be money, a house, or fields of your own.”

The armored man raised a concern.

“Look, I *know* that you don’t want to lose your life to a reckless, thoughtless idiot issuing reckless, thoughtless orders. But if we see you on the battlefield, do not expect mercy. Leave now, or return to the stronghold and pack your things and run; I don’t care how you do it, but don’t stay too late.”

The man hesitated. He took a deep breath as he looked at Juha in his black cloak and considered his words. He had never thought that he would be pushed up against the wall like this, made to decide on a course of action that could determine whether he lived or died. He labored over what to do, looking from Juha to the stronghold in the distance and back, and settled his resolve.

He turned his back on the stronghold that had been his home, and he fled, disappearing into the darkness.

Juha nodded, satisfied with how things had played out, and the hint of a smile flashed across his face. He looked out at the bonfires in the distance, their steady light illuminating the eastern stronghold. There were more bonfires than there were guards on watch, and it seemed that inside they were celebrating

the coming battle, as he heard rough, lively voices echoing into the night sky. Juha watched for a time, then shook his head, let out a sigh, and walked away.

In Days Gone By: One Afternoon at the Completed Wall—Dias

Another week passed, and with it the month in which Juha had told us to prepare, and we had, by hook and by crook, constructed ourselves a wall. We'd piled up the stronghold materials, then covered those with timber and made holes through which to thrust our spears. We'd even made some new watchtowers.

You couldn't *really* go as far as calling what we'd built ramparts, but it was just a step down...or maybe a few steps down in terms of how defensively sound it was. But I had a good feeling it would fare pretty well even against cavalry.

We'd considered that the enemy might avoid a full frontal assault and try to circle around, so we'd built a wall around our fortifications too, but we'd only used stone for the main wall, so everything else wasn't nearly as strong. In any case, if the cavalry went around, we'd rush off to defend the village, which would render our fortifications useless anyway...but all the same we'd put up the surrounding wall just to be on the safe side.

We'd gotten a message from Juha that morning. The enemy's armored cavalry had made it back to the stronghold, and he predicted that they would rest for a few days before marching out to attack us. According to Juha's intel, the enemy had some fourteen hundred cavalry troops along with some eight hundred foot soldiers. We were set to face them down with our own force of eight hundred.

Yep. Eight hundred.

You see, Juha and the four hundred soldiers he'd taken with him were still off doing work somewhere and hadn't come back. The young villagers had thrown their lot in with us, but...they didn't really add much to what we had, so eight hundred was pretty much our full fighting force.

I was admittedly a bit worried as to whether our forces could take on such overwhelming numbers, but I knew that Juha was off working to help us succeed, and we'd built up our fortifications to give ourselves a good fighting chance. All that was left now was to believe in ourselves, and believe we did. Klaus and all the others seemed to be on the same wavelength as me, because their faces were bright and raring to go. Everyone was so lively you could almost forget we had a battle looming over us.

The merchants had been mighty generous—they'd brought us things like seasonal fruits and good flour, so morale was at an all-time high. I'd be the first to admit I had food on my mind when our soldiers started shouting from their watchtowers.

"Enemy incoming! Enemy incoming!"

"The foot soldiers are leading the charge with the cavalry behind them! They're like a flood, there's so many!"

"It looks like they've brought out everything they've got!"

The rest of us quickly sprung into action. Anyone who wasn't in their armor got it on in a hurry, while the merchants and villagers retreated to take shelter. Everyone had their usual weapons on their belt or back and had their long spear in hand. Then we all spread out along the wall in one long line, ready to attack as soon as the cavalry got to us.

"Huh?!" shouted someone from a guard tower. "It's the foot soldiers! The foot soldiers are leading the charge!"

"The cavalry are following slowly behind them and...they seem to have stopped moving, like they're waiting for something!"

"Ah! It's that general with the gaudy armor! That weirdo who fought with Dias! You know, the guy with the spikes?! It's him!"

We all waited at the wall while the reports came down from the towers.

"It doesn't matter if it's foot soldiers or cavalry!" I shouted. "We respond as planned! We're going to put this wall to use and run our enemies through! Don't back down! Believe in our might! Stab! Stab! Stab! We will not falter no matter the enemy's plans! No matter what they've got up their sleeve, Juha will

be ready to thwart them!”

The fortifications were so vast that my voice alone couldn’t reach everyone, but those nearby passed my words down the line, repeating them until everybody was clear on our strategy. As the message traveled, the soldiers erupted into battle cries.

We were ready, and as the enemy neared, we thrust with our spears.

In Days Gone By: In the Middle of the Imperial Forces—The Self-Proclaimed Wild One

“The foot soldiers lead! The foot soldiers! Imperial war *must* adhere to the rules of aesthetics! The foot soldiers collide first with the enemy, and when the enemy grows weak, our undefeatable cavalry ride in to stomp all over them! There is no other way! We do not concern ourselves with the smaller details! Foot soldiers! March onwards!”

The man shouting from his horse swung his sword with great gusto.

“It is because the enemy worries about their ‘strategies’ and their ‘minimizing casualties’ that they grow crazy with worry and their thoughts grow muddled!” he roared. “All we need to do is prove to them the superior military might of the empire! Rebels and enemies alike have no choice but to kneel before us!”

“So they have attempted to build fortifications! We will crush them head-on! Crush the fortifications, then crush the enemies within! This is what it means to be the pride of the imperial forces!”

Doing this, and indeed, simply being *able* to do this, filled the man with such joy that his energy felt boundless. That other general, the one the king had assigned to the eastern stronghold, had come at the man with sword in hand and had been cut down for his efforts. The Wild One, seeing no better opportunity, had seized the momentum and cut down the Wise One too, leaving him the only man left to lead the imperial forces.

Nobody else would get in his way, and nobody else would defy his orders.

And to think that he was now blessed with the opportunity to demolish the

empire's enemies! Achieving such a glorious feat would surely see him showered in rewards.

It was true that in the uproar that had followed the murder of the other two generals, some imperial soldiers had fled. Nonetheless, the Wild One still held the numerical advantage, and in battles over flat ground, it was the larger force that always won, and never more so than when it was foot soldiers against armored cavalry. The Wild One was assured of his victory before the battle had even begun.

Yes, he had found himself facing a spell of bad luck, and yes, he had struggled, but now things would be different. Now his time had arrived, and so he continued to bellow at his soldiers as he swung his sword every which way.

The imperial foot soldiers arrived at the enemy fortifications, and the sounds of battle echoed through the air. Roars and screams and other voices indiscernible filled his ears, and all the while the Wild One shouted and swung his sword, basking in the pleasant exhaustion that reverberated through his body. It was the rapture of war, and it was in the midst of this ecstasy that a number of foot soldiers came running with reports.

“Enemy morale is high! They haven’t let up their attacks and we can’t break the wall!”

“We’ve received reports that the ground is wet and muddy! The captain of the armored cavalry recommends that you avoid using the cavalry in these conditions!”

“The enemy forces are equipped with especially long spears! They’ve seen through our tactics! They’re ready for the cavalry!”

The Wild One froze as he listened to each report, then shot each foot soldier a fearsome glare. He had been made a general by the emperor himself...and he was a man who had, in but one day, suddenly and violently killed two others of the same rank...and now he held these soldiers’ lives in his hands. The soldiers were frightened and seemed to have shrunk to half their size at the anxiety they felt at having to bring their general a less than favorable report. And yet, the Wild One smiled.

“Thank you for your report!” he answered.

The foot soldiers let out relieved sighs. The Wild One, meanwhile, took a deep breath, knocked his clenched fists together, and lifted his arms up high.

“Foot soldiers!” he shouted. “Retreat! Send in the cavalry! When the cavalry charges in, the rest of us—including the retreating foot soldiers—will follow after them! We care not for mud! We care not for anticavalry strategies! It is destined that the cavalry will emerge victorious! This is how the empire has won for decades...no, centuries! We may be halted, and our riders may not be able to run, but with the strength of the horses’ hooves and the cavalry spears our enemies will be made dust! You who ignore these undeniable truths of battle, you cowards who flee, know that you are enemies of the emperor and for that you will be punished!”

The soldiers who had come with their report, and the soldiers around them, all began to move in a frenzy. Though they questioned the Wild One’s methods, they knew his words to be an unmistakable truth. It was the history of the empire’s war. They won by overwhelming numbers, and they would not be defeated by an enemy force that was weaker in both ability and morale.

With these thoughts of their country’s great history emboldening them, the foot soldiers and armored cavalry began their march into battle anew. The sun began to set as the sounds of neighing horses and thundering hooves filled the air of the muddy battleground.

In Days Gone By: At the Wall, with Spear in Hand—Dias

We all heard the cavalry’s approach. They charged at us at incredible speed, but when the horses sank into the mud, their momentum was lost. Horses were heavy in and of themselves, but when you put a person on one, and when you put them both in heavy armor...well, you had a lot of weight riding on those horses’ legs. When the cavalry stepped into the mud, it was nothing like when the foot soldiers did it. Their feet sank *deep*.

Their powerful march was barred, but the cavalry slowly approached us all the same, fighting against the mud. It was a sight that once again impressed upon me the sheer power in a good horse. When the cavalry made it to the wall, I issued my orders.

“Now! Attack!”

Klaus, Joe, Lorca, and Ryan all repeated my orders down the line, and hundreds upon hundreds of spears pushed out from our wall. The spears had been hastily put together and couldn't penetrate the heavy armor of the cavalry, but we *could* aim for the spots between the armor, and we *could* knock the cavalry soldiers right from their horses.

“Don't stop! Keep up the attack!” I shouted.

Our spears thrust out from the wall over and over again. Soldiers tumbled from their horses and collapsed into the mud. The combination of the shock of impact, the weight of their armor, and the depth of the muddy ground meant it was impossible for the enemy to quickly regain their footing. Anyone who was pushed from their horse was thus considered out of action, and we moved our spears to new targets.

“Don't you dare underestimate the imperial forces!” shouted an enemy.

The shouts came from a number of cavalry that had made it out of the mud and onto the rampart. They pushed against the fence, trying to break down our fortifications with their spears and their swords and even their horses' hooves. They were incredibly destructive, raining attacks down from on high, and I knew that if we'd met them on equal ground we would have been trampled to a pulp. I also knew that the fence wouldn't be hard to break. Not only that, but the walls were easy to scale. If thousands of them poured over at once, our forces would crumble.

“Hold the line!” shouted Klaus. “Focus your attacks on anybody who makes it to the fence!”

His voice split the air between angry roars from enemy and ally alike, and those of our men who had shrunk back in fear found it in themselves to hold their positions and thrust their spears.

Soldiers continued to fall from their horses, allowing us to maintain our position, but it was then that the foot soldiers made their second charge at us. Behind them was that guy in his spiky armor, and he ordered a full frontal assault. The foot soldiers met with the cavalry, and the combined pressure from them felt overwhelming. The fortifications began to crumble under the attack,

but we still gave them every inch of our spears. I lifted my head with the brief second of respite I had to look around, but Juha was nowhere to be found.

I saw no signs of any traps for the enemy, and so imperial morale grew stronger with every passing moment. That was when I made up my mind to buy us some time for Juha to arrive. I released my spear and picked up my axe, then swung it about and let loose my best battle cry to intimidate our enemies. It would frighten the weak and force those stronger to protect them, but it would also cause a brief pause in their momentum.

In that pause I saw my chance and leaped from a broken part of our wall straight into an imperial squadron. There was no time for thought now, only time to let my axe do the talking. I saw nothing, and I heard nothing—every movement was instinctual. When I felt the enemy coming in I swung, and when I sensed anything I swung again. I did not care for where I hit or whether I hit at all; I trusted that with the battlefield filled with enemy soldiers, the axe would eventually find its mark.

When I felt danger I leaped away, and when I felt an attack I let my axe or my armor take the brunt of the blow. I did not let the pain register, and I did not stop when I felt something hitting my body. This was war, and I was in the thick of it—I did not have time to stop and consider every little detail. I did not have time to think. Thought brought fear and pause. Pause brought hesitation, and hesitation stopped my attacks.

So I swung my axe, and I kept swinging it, and I let the power rush from my legs through my body to my arms so I was spinning like a pinwheel powered by the wind. When I finally felt my body hit the peak of its exhaustion, only then did I stop to survey my surroundings. I heaved great breaths and opened my eyes, and soon sound returned to my ears. No enemies stood nearby. I was surrounded only by the bodies of the fallen, all lying in a huge gaping hole in the battlefield itself. Fear gripped those beyond the slain, and none spoke.

A strange moment hovered between us all, the only sound that of my labored breaths, and it was then that I heard the sound of a destructive force from the north and turned to face it. Everything appeared ordinary, and it was just as it had been since the battle started, but I could not shake an *ominous* feeling. Goose bumps flashed across my skin, and I dashed back for the wall. There were

no enemies around me, and our own soldiers had pulled down part of the wall to make a path for me. As soon as I was over the wall and back, they just as quickly threw parts at it to build it back.

But the fact that they could do that just showed how poor a state the wall was now in. It was almost entirely useless as a defensive structure. The way I saw it, we had two choices: desert the fortifications and run, or charge into the fray. Just as I was considering the two options, an unusual sound echoed across the battlefield.

“What?! What’s going on?!” cried an enemy soldier.

His cry was one of confusion, because the horse he was riding neighed something fierce, like it was trying to match my battle cry from before. Its ears shot skyward and it turned its gaze north.

All of the other horses soon followed suit until every horse on the battlefield faced north, their ears shooting up straight. They reared up and lifted their front legs, let out neighs that sounded terrified, then spun around and, ignoring the orders of their riders, took off running. They did that even if it meant throwing the cavalymen from their backs.

“Wh-What in the world is going on?!” shouted the spiky man. “Why are you all fleeing the enemy?!”

On my forces’ side, we all knew that this was the work of Juha, so we poured on the attack and thrust our spears at the enemy soldiers. Thanks to a combination of our work with the spears and the sudden change in conditions, around eighty percent of the cavalry were now without their horses; the rest had been whisked away by their fleeing steeds.

At the wall we had foot soldiers, the spiky man, and the horseless cavalry. We didn’t know why their horses had run off on them, but we knew to strike while the iron was hot. I grabbed my axe, and I was just about to jump over the wall when a loud gong rang out from the north.

“Huh...? Is that a war bell?” I asked. “It was only hit once, which means...a standby order?”

Klaus and the others who were thinking exactly the same as me paused when

they heard the bell, and readied themselves for whatever might be coming next. I had an ominous feeling I just couldn't shake, so I took a few steps from the fence to give myself a little room, but that didn't feel far enough, so I held my axe out like a shield. That was when the ground started to tremble like an earthquake had hit. It was a rumbling even more overwhelming than all those horse hooves earlier.

But it wasn't an earthquake that came our way. Instead, it was a muddy torrent of water.

It came from the north, gathering mud and rocks as it swelled. Eventually it swallowed up the enemy forces at the wall. It came with a lot of force, but it wasn't all that much water; at first it was only as high as everybody's ankles, but then it rose to knee height. Suddenly the enemy soldiers were stabbing their weapons into the ground to help them stay standing, but eventually they couldn't hold out and were swept away by the flood. Everyone was caught up in it—the foot soldiers, the cavalry, and even the spiky man.

If I were any closer I would have been too, and it left me a bit gobsmacked.

“That Juha is always up to something...” muttered a soldier nearby.

And so the battle came to a close because Juha and the soldiers he'd taken with him, in a destructive show of dominance over nature, had carved a whole new river connected to a number of lakes that lay farther north.

The enemy forces were defeated. We rescued whomever we found who had survived the flooding and took them prisoner. As for those who'd passed on after being washed away...we buried them at the rocky outcrop to the south, and it ended up being quite a lot of graves. Of the riders who took off with their horses, a portion just ended up running off somewhere else entirely, but those who went back to the stronghold found a trap Juha had sprung for them and ended up prisoners as well. Juha also knew that most of the horses would flee without their riders, and he'd set things up for them to end up in his lap, so to speak.

All of this meant that Juha could pressure the eastern stronghold into surrendering, and the place fell without any resistance. I mean, we had a whole

lot of horses, a whole lot of equipment, and a whole lot of prisoners; the holed-up imperials didn't stand a chance. In exchange for the stronghold, we agreed to give them their men back. Given that the stronghold had only a bare-bones crew working it, they had no choice but to accept our conditions.

And so the enemy soldiers and our former captives left with a little food we'd given them, and our forces took control of the stronghold.

A few days after we'd won the battle, we started taking down our fortifications. We didn't need them anymore. I watched over the men at work as Juha walked over to me, rubbing his cleft chin with an ear-to-ear grin.

"There was a hefty amount of rations in the stronghold, some equipment, and a whole heap of gold and silver," he said. "On top of that, almost nothing in the way of losses on our side. It has to be said: my abilities are so astounding I could only call them godlike, and even I could fall in love with my charming self. In any case, the way things stand, we're going to be camping out here for the next couple of months."

I tilted my head, curious.

"We have food, equipment, and money, but we're going to stay?" I asked. "Shouldn't we march on now that we've got this momentum behind us?"

"Well, it's been easy for *us*, but that hasn't been the case with the other units out there," replied Juha. "We're going to have to wait for the rest of the army to catch up to us. If we plow on ahead, the rest of the army could find themselves up to their necks in trouble."

He continued, "Our surplus of food means we don't have to worry about running this place dry just by staying here. Also, this war is far from over, and I think we've earned ourselves a bit of a break."

"Well, all righty then," I answered, scratching my head. "A couple of months, huh? I guess that gives us time to do something about those lakes you made a mess of."

Juha's eyes narrowed.

"You think I didn't factor everything into my plans?" he asked, jutting his chin

at me. “Water and flood control is just fundamental governance, and many think of it as the basis of state management. You think the likes of someone as incredible as me would do a half-assed job? I calculated an amount of water that would clear away our problems *and* provide for reclamation. You don’t have to do a damn thing about those lakes.”

“Oh, I see... So it’s going to be a *boring* couple of months, then.”

“Boring? Think again! There’s a lot of training we can do in a couple of months, and we’ve got to keep our eyes open for any imperial movement! Then we’ve got to spend all this excess gold of ours on dancing girls and bards, which means we’re going to have to drink and dance and sing until we’re sick! And don’t you *dare* tell me you’re against that kind of fun as well, yeah?”

“Well, even if I was, I don’t think I’d be able to stop you, so have your fun. Still, a couple of months, huh? That’s a good chunk of time. Hmm...life out on the hamlet... With all this free time, I think I’ll take up a bit of farming.”

I was just thinking out loud, but Juha’s eyes went wide with surprise.

“Pray tell, just how in the world did you land at *that* as a way to kill time?”

“Huh? Oh, I mean, just look at the place: Everything is soaked in water, and it’s all muddy; it’s perfect for digging. And I know life is about having fun, but I think it’s just as important to remember the feel of everyday life too. I think it’ll be good for everyone’s spirits to cultivate the lands and work the fields, just like people used to do before all of this war business got out of hand. It’s something soothing for the soul, you know?”

Juha’s eyes narrowed at me again, and he muttered to himself with a look like he’d just swallowed something very bitter.

“Well, the water *did* wash away junk and rocks *and* bring in nutrients, and with all of our manpower we *could* cultivate a huge swath of land in no time...and given how good a reward those fields will end up being, I have to admit that it *is* a good idea...”

Once he was done with his muttering Juha sized me up like he was looking at me for the first time, then finally shook his head and cheered.

“Ah! The heck with it! You do whatever you want, Dias! You’re not going to

wear yourself out working a hoe in the fields, so why not do the whole place instead of the usual training? But don't forget that we're not staying long enough to plant the fields or harvest what's grown! You can ready the lands for the future, but you'll have to leave that future with the people of this hamlet!"

And with that, Juha strode off for the stronghold. I turned to everybody working at the wall, and I relayed all the plans for the coming months.

All the soldiers just burst into big smiles and began throwing around the parts of the wall they'd removed while they cheered with each other. They were happy for all sorts of reasons. Some wanted the rest, others wanted to party, and others still wanted another taste of everyday life. I didn't see a single sour look among any of our soldiers.

We ended up spending five whole months in that hamlet, partying our hearts out with bards and dancers, drinking our guts out with everything we could fit in them, and resting our battle-weary spirits cultivating the lowlands. We enjoyed that time to the fullest, waiting for the rest of the military to catch up with us.

With the Blizzard Still Going—Dias

“And, uh...yeah. I guess that’s about the long and the short of it.”

It had been a trip down memory lane for me, and the twins who had been lying on the ground listening started to giggle along with Aymer, whose ears had been moving this way and that throughout the story. They all started talking to each other in whispers and Aymer must have seen the confusion on my face. She turned to me as though she were the little group’s representative.

“Well, it’s quite likely that those ‘ordinary lowlands’ you speak of were, in fact, the famed ‘golden lowlands,’” she said. “Once you and your soldiers had cultivated the soil, they would have planted and grown wheat. Looking out over endless fields of wheat wavering in the wind would look just like glimmering gold.”

She continued, “I know that controlled flooding is one way to enrich soil, but to think you did that whilst vanquishing your foes to boot. Why, it strikes one as the very height of audacity... But it doesn’t quite sound like that’s exactly what you were aiming for, so I suppose it was in many ways also a stroke of good luck, yes? I bet the grain that was harvested after you left also went on to support your forces.”

“Aha,” said Alna, nodding along. “I’ve never seen wheat in the quantities you speak of, but I bet it’s just like looking over the new grass in the plains in the spring. It’s such a soft green, and because the baars are so happy to eat that grass, for us and for them it means even more to us than gold ever could. And if I think of grass like that one day spreading across the southern wasteland, I think I can imagine how it might have felt to look over those golden lowlands.”

“Yes indeed,” agreed Aymer. “If you work hard enough, you can often harvest wheat twice in one year. It’s hard work, and you have to make sure the lands are well nourished for it, but I’m certain the people of that hamlet would have made it work. By helping Dias and Juha with their work, the villagers would have acquired skills, knowledge, and experience, and I bet many became

craftsmen of their own.”

“Oh, I see, yes, I can see that,” said Alna. “And it’s true here that by spending time with people who are good with bows and horses, one becomes better themselves.”

Eventually the giggling twins raised their voices and joined in. Everybody was talking and laughing. That was when a fierce wind blew outside, and some of that chill seeped in through the yurt’s openings. The twins dashed over to Alna, who was ready with a big baar-wool blanket. She wrapped them up along with Aymer, and then they made their way over to me and suddenly we were a big old bundle of warmth.

“Can’t it be warm already?” asked Senai.

“Isn’t spring here yet?” asked Ayhan.

The girls were writhing about in the blanket while they complained, and Alna looked up at the yurt’s ceiling.

“I have a feeling that this is the last blizzard we’ll get this winter,” she said. “Once winter leaves, spring will just be aching to move in and roam free. We get through this and it will be waiting just around the corner. The grass will start to grow and a new year will begin, and then we’ll be looking after the livestock, redoing the yurts, washing our clothes and sleeping gear, collecting herbs... Oh, and we’ll have to hunt the excess black ghee while we’re at it. We’re going to be so busy we might not even have time to sleep.”

The twins poked their heads up from the baar-wool blanket and looked up at the ceiling just like Alna. You could tell they were just aching for the day to come.

“Spring, spring, hurry on your way,” sang Senai.

“The fields and the forest, they’re waiting for us to care for them,” sang Ayhan.

The twins sang their little improvisational tune up at the ceiling, where the thick cloud cover continued to blot out the sky beyond.

One Early Afternoon Day, Staring Out at the Vast Fields— Gordon

The winter snow had begun to melt, and the wheat beneath it was starting to grow. The land upon which the wheat fields sat had once been enemy territory, but the so-called “golden lowlands” were now the kingdom’s largest grain reserve. Wheat fields stretched out as far as the eye could see, in every single direction, and come harvest time, the wheat glimmered like gold.

It was here in the lowlands that the knight Gordon watched the locals hard at work in the fields, nervously listening to the young woman before him. He was dressed in a knightly surcoat, and by his side was a distinguished older gentleman—Duke Sachusse, the governor of the lands—who stood with an incredibly straight back for a man of his age, his long white hair tied neatly in a ponytail.

“I love domestic governance,” said the young woman. “It’s just so very wonderful. The more you do it the more the people benefit with wealth, which in turn does the same for the nation as a whole. Everybody’s happy. I don’t think there’s a person in this world that doesn’t like the idea of governance. Anybody with a standing wants nothing more than to govern from the moment they live to the moment they die, if you ask me.”

“That said, a country can’t get by with just governance alone, and that I *don’t* like. With wealth comes people who will look to take that wealth, by force or otherwise. That’s why a king must be strong. The leader of a nation must be strong enough to protect both people and country.”

The young woman wore clothes that, it had to be said, were very much beneath a member of the royal family. Her body was wrapped with cloth, and over that she wore a loose, plain shirt, a comfortable pair of pants, and a pair of long boots. The clothes were rather dirtied because of all the work she’d been doing in the fields until this moment, together with its residents.

This woman was none other than First Princess Isabelle, Prince Richard’s younger sister.

“My brother Richard is not a bad person,” Isabelle continued, “but as a king

he lacks one...no, two—actually, three, or perhaps even four... Suffice to say, he is lacking in a number of areas. And that is why I myself will aim for the throne and block his path to it.”

“If he is crowned king without any kind of struggle, then isn’t it entirely possible that we are left with another weak king, just like my father? A truly strong king needs a worthy adversary and trials to overcome. He must be made to struggle before he can call himself worthy.”

“To be honest, I wouldn’t mind if it *wasn’t* my brother. Even if it were somebody I did not even know in the slightest, I would accept them if I knew that they would be a truly strong leader. But there is no point to that if it means our nation is left broken and beaten by the end of it. And so I have set my sights on my older brother, together with Duke Sachusse, who shares my vision.”

The girl stood on the path between fields, facing away from Gordon and Sachusse, her legs spread and her hands on her hips as she gazed out across the fields. Her long silver hair was tied messily above her head, and she paid no mind to the grass stuck in it as she went on.

“My brother is in a strong position, yes, but this alone is not enough, and one cannot call him a truly strong king. Not yet. I don’t think him strong enough to protect these fields. And so I think I will bother him just a little more. Fortunately, as a woman I am able to marry and place my partner in line for the throne... I can forcefully establish a rival. But who? Perhaps a man who has been tested in battle, or perhaps a man so ruthless he’d kill his own father to become a domain lord... Sachusse, Gordon, your thoughts?”

When she finally finished, Isabelle spun and leveled her stern gaze upon the men before her, aiming it first at Sachusse, then at Gordon. Sachusse quietly lowered his eyes and dropped into thought.

“As long as you are making the choice, Princess Isabelle,” the duke soon answered, “then I think it important to consider your feelings and whether the man is worthy of the throne. If you have any particular preferences or requests, you need only say the word and I will select a number of candidates matching your conditions, all of whom will be suitable for the position of—”

Isabelle vigorously shook her head, and the duke fell into silence once more.

“I don’t *care* about any of those things,” she said, her tone clearly as fierce as her stance on the matter. “All that matters is that he be a man who can block my brother’s way to the throne or otherwise make him a strong king. I know that if something were to happen to my brother, and...if he were to fall to ruin, we would have to search for a suitable king, but we can cross that particular bridge if we come to it. All we need now is a new piece to play in this game of ours, and one that will ensure my brother develops the strength to become a truly formidable king.”

“My feelings and my preferences... I ask that you purge such unrelated factors from your mind. I see the question on your face. What if the man I marry becomes unnecessary, yes? Then I divorce him. Simple.”

There was a great deal of power in Isabelle’s voice, filled with determination and ambition. It was a different power from the type that Richard wielded, but Gordon nonetheless felt himself gulping nervously under the pressure of it. In the past, Gordon had been able to observe Isabelle’s younger sister, Diane, up close, but Isabelle had a power about her that made one doubt that she and Diane were sisters in the first place. There was a strength of will in her eyes, and Gordon knew that she would not waver no matter what occurred.

“I will set about selecting a number of suitors who best meet the needs of what you ask,” said Sachusse. “I ask only that you give me a little time.”

Gordon remained silent, his face covered in a nervous sweat from the sheer pressure of Isabelle’s person. She looked somewhat unimpressed but nodded and turned back to look at the fields.

“In any case, there truly is nothing like a practical education. By working like this for a day and getting my hands dirty, I’ve come to understand how truly fertile this land is. And the reason for that lies with the streams from the north. It’s not just water they bring but soil and other nutrients, and because these are scattered over the fields they never wither.”

“So it is not just the livestock fertilizer but also this which brings the harvests we have all seen... Yes. Truly remarkable. The farmers of the city all say that they learned such skills from Dias and his soldiers. The men who took this place when it was enemy territory but did not loot even a single grain and instead

chose to help cultivate the lands and teach its people skills and worthwhile knowledge. That decision is why the city over there now exists. Once nothing more than a hamlet, it has grown into a full-blown city over just a few short years. Good governance is truly an extraordinary thing, isn't it?"

"Dias likely understood this when he, too, worked the lands himself and got his hands dirty... Truly a man worthy of the title of our nation's heroic savior."

The princess merely spoke her thoughts, and she did not expect a reply. Sachusse and Gordon, both of whom knew of Dias from their own time in the war, did not offer any comments or remarks of their own. Had they been asked what sort of a man Dias was, both could have answered in a heartbeat, but it would not be until further into the future that Isabelle would come to learn the steadfast way in which Dias held himself.

Iluk Village—Dias

A few days after the blizzard the cold began to ease up, just like Alna had said it would. The rays of the sun shone powerfully down on the snowy plains, and it really felt like spring was coming. There was still a lot of snow everywhere you looked, but it was all beginning to melt, and it looked like most of it would be gone in just a few days.

We all welcomed the warmer weather, and so work around the village grew more lively. The energy was clearest in the kids, who were running around so much you almost could have convinced yourself it was practically already summer. You had Senai and Ayhan in the lead, and behind them were the older dogkin kids, then the younger ones born in the fall, and the six baar children took up the rear.

The younger dogkin kids and the six little baars were learning to communicate with every passing day, and now they were playing pretty complicated games that until now had been too difficult for them. Nothing was more fun for them than playing their games, and so they played until they were well and truly exhausted.

The adults felt the change in seasons too, and seeing all the kids so energetic seemed to help energize the rest of us. Yep, everything really was going nice and smooth.

For starters, our basic border station was up. That meant there was a big gate, a place to talk with anyone who wanted to enter, a location to inspect the baggage and carriages that came in, a roof to cover all of it, and also some huts for the laborers to rest in. It'd be a while yet before it became the border station that Klaus envisioned, but even then it at least functioned exactly the way it was supposed to.

Hubert and his survey group had also finished the map of the wasteland. They made two copies of the map—one to send to the royal capital with a report regarding our acquiring the new territory and one for safekeeping. This made

the territory officially ours, but to finish things off we still needed to put up a mining station at the salt plain and a sign asserting that the wasteland was now part of the Baarbadal domain.

The plan now was to incorporate the wasteland into the dogkin patrols and for Alna to head out there when she had some time to set up her sensor magic. Doing so would ensure the new part of our domain was well protected.

As for the cavekin and my armor, well... I mean, that seemed to be going pretty smoothly too. There *were* difficulties however, and Narvant said that mixing that unknown stone in with the steel made it “horribly stubborn to work with.” What that meant was they’d need a little more time still. Even so, they were adamant that they’d be done by the time spring came, and I got to thinking maybe we should hold a banquet to thank them for all their hard work.

The work that I was mostly involved in myself—the new privies—was going well too, and all I had to do was just wait for all the snow to melt. My study into nobles and the aristocracy was coming along, as was all the studying Alna was doing into new magic. Then we had the new baars, who were all settling in nicely. A couple of times some people came down with fevers, but it wasn’t really anything serious, and it looked like we’d make it through to spring without any real worries to speak of.

If you pushed me to find *something* to worry about, then there was Sahhi—or more accurately, Sahhi and his three wives. Sahhi’s wives were traveling back and forth between Iluk and their nest, and all the while they were trying to cultivate a relationship of love and affection, but Sahhi just couldn’t help feeling hesitant and uncertain about the whole thing, and he just couldn’t really adjust to his new married life.

Riasse, Bianne, and Heresse all liked Sahhi and they did their darndest to make him see that, but Sahhi still felt like he just wasn’t worthy of them. He was of the mind that he wasn’t a good enough husband to support the three of them. They were all better hunters than he was, and he just couldn’t match them when it came to their drive to work hard for their families back at the nest. As far as his wives were concerned, he’d already done a bang-up job, what with him finding them a place to work at Iluk and setting them up with regular payments. Unfortunately, Sahhi didn’t see it that way, and he was mighty

troubled by the situation.

All the rest of us at Iluk were grateful to Sahhi and felt he was pulling his own weight with his mapmaking support and his regular patrols, but...this looked to be a problem that only time would properly fix, so I thought it would probably find its own way to a solution come spring. I saw Sahhi's three wives worriedly discussing things with Alna quite a bit and decided that I'd make some time to be a shoulder for Sahhi if he needed someone to lean on.

Fortunately, it wasn't like Sahhi and his wives hated one another. Quite the opposite, in fact, so I was pretty confident that eventually things would come right. In any case, that's what was on my mind while I did a final check of the privy materials in the storehouse. That was when the younger dogkin came running in. Their eyes were all alight with excitement, their tails were wagging furiously, and they were panting wildly while they searched for something fun to do or some fun game to play.

When I saw the dogkin, I stopped my work and got down on a knee to talk to them all.

"Now look here," I said. "How many times have I told you that the storehouses are no places to be playing your games? There's lots of dangerous stuff around here, and you could get hurt if you run around in here. Now head out and play somewhere the twins can keep an eye on you. Listen to what they tell you and have a blast, and you'll have a delicious dinner and a warm bed waiting for you tonight."

The dogkin must have felt like I was scolding them all because their ears and their tails all drooped right there on the spot.

"Wait, wait, don't get it wrong," I said. "I'm not mad at any of you. I just want you to make sure you choose the right places to have your fun so you don't get yourselves hurt."

I gave each of their heads a pat, and in a flash they were back to their wide-eyed tail-wagging selves, jumping up and down to get more pats. So I gave them what they wanted as I led them all outside, where we were met by a refreshing breeze that felt like it came from the clear blue skies above. It was followed by a warm, really strong wind that smelled a lot like soil. That wind knocked over all

the dogkin and I just couldn't help but laugh.

"The spring winds are finally here," I said to myself.

Extra Story: Hunter of the Azure Skies

The spring wind blew, and the winter snow melted. The blue skies above looked vast, and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. It was getting warmer, and on one such early afternoon, Senai and Ayhan were dashing around the village square as if they had more energy than the whole village combined. The twins, it turned out, had in this moment truly felt the coming of spring.

"It's like they've got the spring wind in their sails," I said.

The twins were overjoyed at the change in season, and Alna and I were even more relieved at the fact as we watched them. They ran around taking great big gulps of the spring air, and then finally they came running over to us with Aymer doing her best to keep up behind them.

"Dias! Dias! The flowers are blooming! They're blooming!" cried Senai.

"We wanna go see them! The flowers! We wanna see the flowers!" begged Ayhan.

I looked at Aymer with a glance that said, "*Huh?*" Aymer, in turn, looked up at the yurt as if to say, "*Ask him.*"

Sahhi had been on the yurt taking a little break, but he flapped his wings and glided on over to me. I held out my arm for him to use as a perch, and as he landed I noticed something of an apologetic look on the falconkin's face.

"Uh... So I was flying near the forest just a little while ago and I happened to see these beautiful flowers, you see...so I told Ben about it, but the twins happened to be within earshot. It was a certainty that when they heard about it they'd want to go, and... Well, look, I slipped up. I wasn't really thinking about it..."

"Ah, okay," I replied. "Now it makes sense. Well, if that's what's happened, then let's all go take a look at the flowers, shall we? I don't really have much on my plate today, and it's such a beautiful day too. It'll be a nice trip to the forest and back."

Sahhi was relieved to see my reaction, and the twins were all smiles. They ran around the village telling everybody who would listen. Still, because we'd decided on the trip so suddenly, not everybody could join us. In the end it was me, Alna, the twins and Aymer, Sahhi, and Francis and Francoise with their kids. We all readied our things, and then we strolled towards the forest. The twins were in the lead followed by the six little baars, and the rest of us behind them. Sahhi, of course, was up in the sky keeping an eye out for danger.

We reached the area where the forest met the plains, where you couldn't really tell one apart from the other. All the snow around the area had melted away completely, and it made for an area of vibrant green grass and, in the center of it, so many cute little white flowers that you couldn't possibly count them even if you tried.

"Wow... Now *that* is a right pretty sight," I said. "I'm guessing some flower seeds drifted out of the forest and found themselves a home here?"

Senai and Ayhan ran to the flowers as quickly as their legs would carry them. They knelt down, brought their faces in really close, and took a real deep whiff. The six little baars ran in after them and copied the twins. While the eight of them were breathing in the flowery aroma, Francis and Francoise walked up, then Alna and Aymer, and in time they broke off into two separate groups, each enjoying the flowers in their own unique way.

Senai and Ayhan picked some and started weaving them into flower crowns. Alna was very interested in how the twins made them, and she started telling them how the flowers could be dried for use in helpful medicines.

Elsewhere, the six little baars were basking in the scent of the flowers and...apparently the taste as well. They must have been plenty delicious, because the baars ate them heartily with big ol' grins on their faces the whole time. Francis and Francoise looked just as happy as they joined their kids in the feast.



I was watching it all from a distance with Sahhi resting on my arm. The falconkin must have noticed something, though—he looked off towards the north for a time, then whispered to me.

“Dias...did you hear that just now?”

“Huh? Nope, I didn’t hear a thing. Is something up?”

Sahhi’s eyes narrowed.

“I only just barely picked it up, but I heard the howling of wolves,” he said. “I’m guessing that with the coming of spring, they’re out on the prowl for easy prey. And based on the way their howls carried on the wind, they’re heading this way. When the snow melts you get fresh grass, and with it flowers that baars and the like can’t resist. This kind of place brings all sorts of herbivores, and that makes it a good hunting ground for wolves.”

“Well then, should we head off to take care of that pack together? We might not be able to hunt them, but I reckon we’re plenty enough to send them packing.”

I reached back to get a firm grip on my axe, but Sahhi shook his head.

“No, you stay here and watch over everybody. I can handle scaring them off on my own. And besides, we don’t know if another pack of wolves or even bandits might show up. The twins’ll be worried if you up and leave them, no? Look at how much fun they’re having out there. I don’t want their day ending in disappointment, so I’m going to take off while they’re preoccupied and deal with things all quiet-like. That’s the responsibility of men like you and me.”

And with that, Sahhi raised his beak and struck a pose with his wings. I was a little worried about sending him off all on his own, but...he *was* brimming with confidence. I thought it best to put my trust in him, so I nodded my assent; Sahhi nodded back and then took off, soaring to the north.

Even as I watched him go, I kept my grip tight on my axe and my eyes peeled. It was just like Sahhi had said—this was the job of men like us.

Soaring the Skies—Sahhi

Sahhi had taken off in high spirits and covered ground quickly on his way north. It was not long before he spotted the pack of wolves, walking in formation with their ears alert and their noses always searching for scents as they proceeded through the snow.

There were a total of eight wolves in the pack. Sahhi could have hunted one or two alone, but eight was beyond his abilities...especially when the wolves' senses were primed for the hunt.

As he soared high above the wolves, Sahhi considered his options. The best-case scenario was that he would attack once, and that would be enough to frighten the wolves off their path. Sahhi didn't think it was likely such a thing would occur, however. That said, if he had to attack another two or three times, the wolves would then be aware of his position, and there was a good chance he'd eat a counterattack for his troubles.

One strike from a wolf's claws or fangs would be enough to tear Sahhi a new one, and the thought of such a thing left Sahhi almost succumbing to his fear... But he shook the creeping feeling off, stirred up all the courage he had in his heart, and settled his eyes on his prey.

Sahhi was a proud falconkin, and he was a warrior who desired to one day hunt and slay a dragon. If he could not handle a mere pack of wolves, then he would never have what it took to go head-to-head with a dragon.

The twins leaned on him, and they looked after his wings. Senai and Ayhan had become like little sisters to Sahhi, and so he would not allow his fear to control him. With his resolve settled, he changed the angle of his wings and began a lightning-fast dive. He picked up speed, his talons at the ready, and the wolves still had yet to notice him. Before they knew what they were fighting, the battle between falconkin and wolf pack began.

Standing at the Ready with Axe in Hand—Dias

"We're done! Flower crowns!" announced Senai.

"Here you go! This one's for you, Francis!" shouted Ayhan.

The twins spoke at pretty much the same time, softly placing their flowery

crowns on Francis and Francoise's heads. The two baars bleated happily as they accepted their new headwear, but in the next instant their demeanor changed and they began sniffing incessantly.

The flowers were a pretty decoration for Senai and Ayhan, but for the baars they had a most tantalizing aroma, and when that aroma was placed so close to their noses, Francis and Francoise could barely contain themselves. They sniffed, and they sniffed some more, and when they were about to drool a whole river they shook the crowns off of their heads and began chomping on them. And boy did they look happy to be chewing up those flowers.

"No! No eating!" giggled Senai.

"Look at what you're doing to those pretty flowers!" laughed Ayhan.

Alna smiled as she watched them, and Aymer watched too with a flower clutched in her grasp. The little baars, however, paid no mind to anything around them and continued to happily munch away at the flowers nearby. It was a rowdy sight, but it was a peaceful one too, and it brought a smile to my face to see it. That was when I noticed a shadow drifting into view.

I looked up and saw that it was Sahhi. He'd made it back safe, and I stuck out my arm for him to perch on. He came to a rest on my arm and got a good grip with his talons. His feathers had been all neat and tidy when he left, but now they were a mess and Sahhi himself was panting.

"Chased those wolves away, yes I did," he said.

I heard the strength and the pride in his voice. He wasn't injured, but his feathers were all out of sorts, and he was missing a couple off his tail. It looked to me a bit like he was lucky he'd made it back alive, and I was just about to say something to express my concern, but instead I swallowed those words and I chose new ones instead.

"You did good, Sahhi. Thanks."

Sahhi flashed me a grin that said, "*You know it*," and then looked out at the twins having their fun with the flowers. He slowly got his breath back, then groomed himself back into a more presentable state. Then he lifted his head, puffed out his chest, and continued to watch over the area like a silent

protector.

Afterword

As per usual, I'll start with words of thanks.

Thank you to everybody who has followed the story all this way, to everyone supporting my efforts on Shosetsuka ni Naro, to all of you who wrote me letters, to everybody on the editing team, to Kinta the illustrator and the book designer, and to Yumbo for adapting the story into manga, their assistants, and the manga editing staff.

Thank you all so much! We made it to volume six!

Volume six is mostly focused on our new character Sahhi and the wasteland that's been hinted at a few times in previous volumes. Boy, I just can't tell you how happy I am to finally have those two things appear in the story.

Falconry and barren lands are a part of nomadic life and have a deep connection to the region that I modeled Baarbadal on. I was aching to include both in the story, and so I've been honing the ideas and jokes and scenes all the way up until now. I really hope you enjoyed it.

Also, winter has finally come to an end and spring is in sight, which means...Dias is reaching his second year on the plains. Quite the milestone. Dias first met Alna in the spring, and now their second together is almost upon them... There's a lot to look forward to in the story from here!

In this afterword, I'd like to take a moment to write about the fan letters I received. A few have arrived from readers offering support for my efforts, and they made me really happy. They were such wonderful letters and great sources of encouragement, so I filed them away safely so I can check them every now and again, but...I still haven't written any replies.

The reason I haven't written any replies is partially because I'm not sure whether it's okay to or not, but more than anything else it's that my

handwriting is awful. Like, you wouldn't believe how bad it is... I find myself wondering why would you even write a reply with handwriting as bad as mine, and so I haven't written back.

You might be thinking it's odd that I have awful handwriting even though I've published a book, but the truth is that it's been years...maybe even decades since I last wrote a draft in pen or pencil. I don't have to write by hand at my workplace either, so...yeah, that's kind of how it is.

Those are the circumstances behind my lack of a reply, but let me say that whenever I get stuck writing this story, it's your fan letters that encourage me to keep pushing on.

As I said earlier, I filed the letters away so I wouldn't lose them. That's how happy they make me and how grateful I am for them. So I guess I'm using this space to say that. That's what I would have written in a reply, that I'm so appreciative of you all for writing me. So thank you all so much!

And it's not just the fan letters either. Thank you to all of you for the kind messages across social media. I hope you'll keep supporting me as the story goes on!

Well, now that I've gotten that off my chest, let's talk about volume seven. With spring in the air for the next volume, the twins are the happiest out of everyone, but the good weather also means that a certain merchant family is set to return. But it's not just merchants, there's also returning characters and an especially joyous occasion in Mahati... So perhaps we'll finally see Dias venture out of Baarbadal...maybe?

Things are bound to get more exciting with Dias's second year approaching, and so there's a lot to look forward to. Iluk is set to be the heart of a lot of new events! I'm getting all set to give it my best so that you all have a great time reading about everyday life on the plains!

And that's that! I hope very much that I'll get to write to you all again in volume seven!

Bonus Short Story

When Wives Brag About Their Husbands

As a Gentle Breeze Blows by the Kitchen Range—Alna

Most of Iluk Village's food was prepared in a large communal kitchen range. For Alna and many of the village's other women, it was also their place of work. Their territory, as it were. When the women finished their chores for the day, they often gathered at the kitchen range in the afternoon, where it doubled as a place for them to chat and relax.

Some brought chairs, some brought rugs, and others had tea and snacks to share while talking about whatever gossip was on their tongues that day. The men had come to respect this time, and so did not approach the kitchen range even though the women wouldn't have minded the company. The children had learned from the men and thus kept their games to other areas of the village.

And so it was that today, too, the kitchen range was abuzz with excited chatter.

The women usually just talked about everyday life, along with plenty of things that didn't really matter one way or the other, but sometimes their discussions wandered into the domain of romance and marriage. Today was one of those days, and Alna, Canis, Riasse, Bianne, and Heresse were all boasting about their husbands.

Alna's husband—that is to say, her fiancé—was Dias.

Canis was married to Klaus.

Riasse, Bianne, and Heresse were all married to Sahhi, although he certainly didn't act very husbandly quite yet.

The women talked about their favorite things about their husbands, and what the men were good at. Then they praised one another's husbands, continuing

to get more excited as they talked more.

“But Lord Dias really *is* a most wonderful husband,” said Canis. “He’s sincere and kind, and I don’t know if he even *has* any weak points, so to speak.”

Alna nodded happily and saw fit to share a list of his good points.

“He’s also manly, conscientious, and he never complains when you ask him to do something. There’s the whole ‘engagement’ thing he’s fixed on, sure, but if I see that as a sign of his diligence then I can accept that as part of the deal.”

“Ah, yes, I see,” said Canis. “He never would have said to wait three years if he wasn’t so diligent about things. I first saw it as a kind of postponement, but yes, now I see... Such loyalty must make you so happy.”

The falconkin all agreed with the praise, and the conversation flowed on.

“We’ve only just started life as a married family,” said Riasse, “but we want nothing more than to have a wonderful married life just like the two of you.”

“On that we all agree!” said Bianne. “I don’t know if Sahhi took a page from Dias’s playbook, but he really could be a little more aggressive.”

“Yeah, I really think that’s it,” added Heresse. “But he’s serious about us, that much is certain.”

The women did not usually use this space to air their grievances or complain. All of the married couples were, relatively speaking, recently married, and none had been in anything that could be deemed a real quarrel. In fact, Dias and Klaus were nothing if not the epitome of earnestness, and so their relationships were simple, smooth, and straightforward.

The falconkin had only just begun life as a married family, but Sahhi was giving it his everything to be the kind of husband who was worthy of his three wives. There were no real problems to speak of between the four of them, and little by little they were building the bonds that would make them inseparable. In this way, and because all the couples were happy in their relationships, the mood stayed bright and happy no matter how long they all talked.

It was then that the woman who had been watching silently and smiling placidly decided to speak up. She was a woman that all the village respected

and revered, for her family was one filled with a love and ease of being that surpassed even Alna's relationship with Dias.

"Baa, baabaa, baaaaa, baa baa."

Once Francoise had spoken her piece, all the other women replied in unison.

"Ah..." they sighed.

It was no exaggeration to say that Francoise and Francis had the tightest relationship in the village. They'd already had kids, and Francis had always been there whenever Francoise needed him, both during the pregnancy and afterwards. As Francoise praised her husband, it left the others mostly speechless. She had the ideal family, the ideal husband, and she was happily raising six children. On top of that, the love she and her husband shared was only growing.

"Baa baa baa, baa," she continued.

The baar joked that it wouldn't be long before they had more children, but there was a certain ring of truth to that particular joke, and the listening women couldn't help but feel a certain envy grip their hearts.

"One day..." they all said as one.

With hopes and dreams for the future on their minds, the women continued to praise and brag about their husbands until evening fell and it was time to prepare dinner.



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The Frontier Lord Begins with Zero Subjects: Volume 6

by Fuurou

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