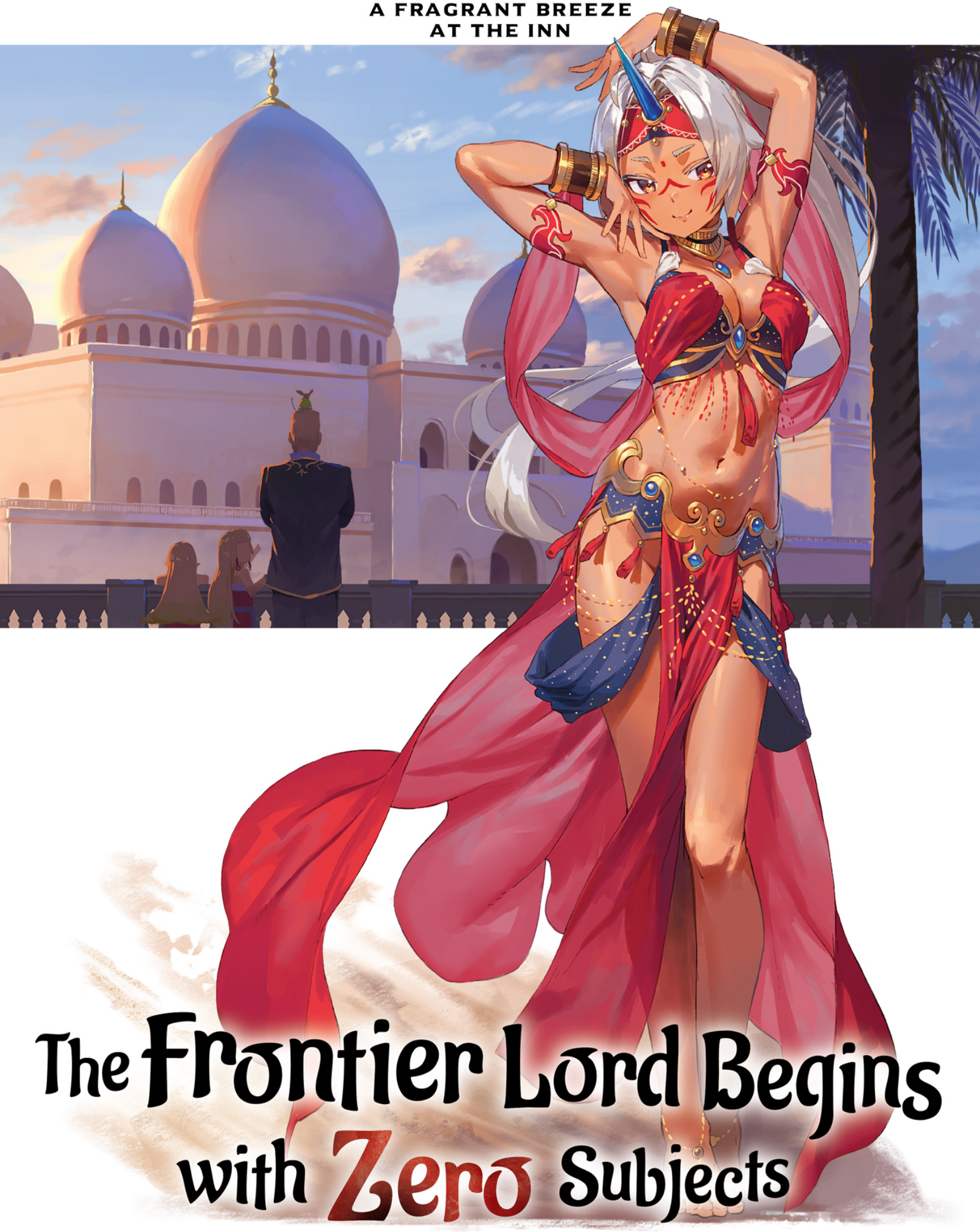
AUTHOR
Fuurou

VII

A FRAGRANT BREEZE AT THE INN

ILLUSTRATOR
Kinta



# The Frontier Lord Begins with Zero Subjects

AUTHOR
Fuurou

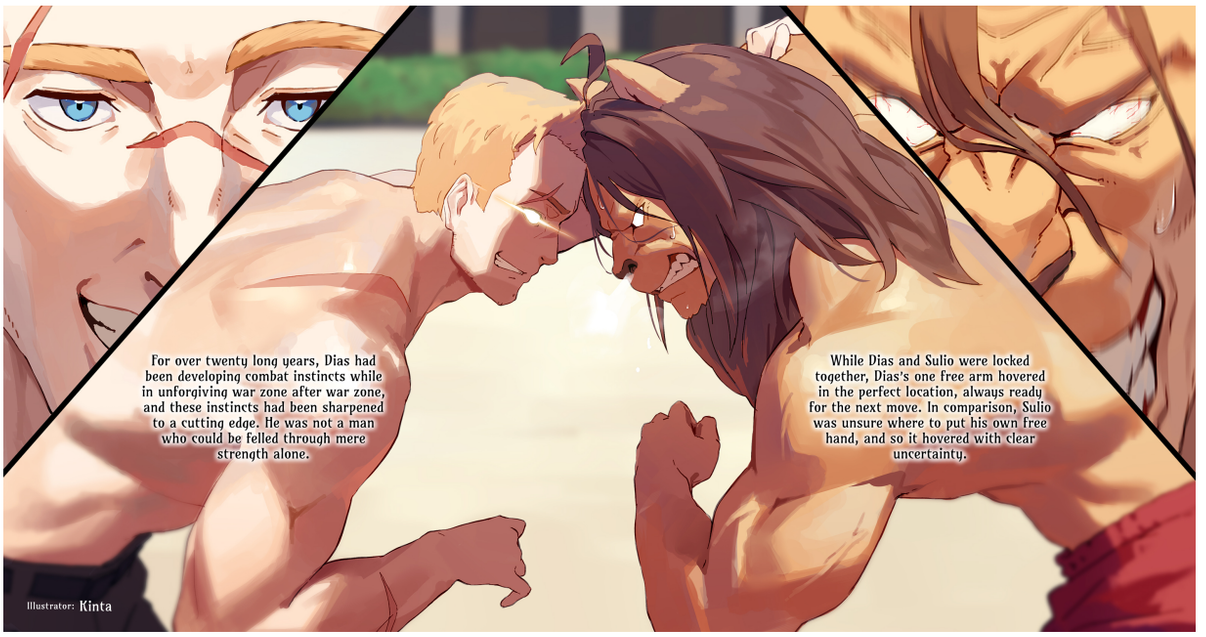
VII
A FRAGRANT BREEZE AT THE INN

ILLUSTRATOR
Kinta



# The Frontier Lord Begins with Zero Subjects


The Frontier Lord Begins with Zero Subjects


For over twenty long years, Dias had been developing combat instincts while in unforgiving war zone after war zone, and these instincts had been sharpened to a cutting edge. He was not a man who could be felled through mere strength alone.
While Dias and Sulio were locked together, Dias's one free arm hovered in the perfect location, always ready for the next move. In comparison, Sulio was unsure where to put his own free hand, and so it hovered with clear uncertainty.
Illustrator: Kinta



# 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.



## Sahhi

A young falconkin putting his experienced hunting skills to use as Senai and Ayhan's hunting falcon.

## Aymer's Report

# Residents: From 129 to 130!

With the help of the residents of Iluk Village, the Baarbadal domain lord Dias fought back and vanquished a flame dragon.

After that, the falconkin Sahhi became a resident of the village on one condition—he would be allowed to participate in a future dragon hunt. The falconkin was initially captured when the forestkin twins, Senai and Ayhan, thought he was just an ordinary bird.

Iluk's incredibly loyal civil servant, Hubert, learned that salt can be gathered from the wasteland located south of the plains. He was shocked to learn that such a valuable location for precious resources was abandoned and completely unmanaged. Hubert thus took Dias out on a survey of the area in order to make it part of the Baarbadal domain.

In the wasteland, they found a salt plain shaped like a bowl carved into the ground. The location had a strange energy, and upon investigation, Dias discovered an equally strange sword buried in the center of it.

In the midst of a snowstorm, Dias told the twins a tale of his time at war, describing the emergence of a place now known as the Golden Lowlands.

The story was really fascinating! Dias didn't just fight off his enemies—he and his soldiers tilled the lands and turned the former battleground into fields for farming.

Unbelievable... I hope to someday see these Golden Lowlands for myself...

One year has now passed since Dias was left to fend for himself here in the grassy plains. 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, salt plain, border station (under construction).

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## As the Spring Winds Blow

When the spring winds came, the snow seemed to melt before my eyes, and in a blink the wintry white landscape had vanished from the plains entirely. All the snow melted into water, which sunk into the withered brown grass beneath and grew fresh, lush green grass. Alna was back to her usual clothes now that she didn't need her warmer outfit, and she was pleased by the newly transformed landscape.

"It's the start of a new year!" she cheered.

And with that, she hurriedly began preparing for a banquet to celebrate.

In the rest of the kingdom, scholars looked to the stars to develop a yearly calendar, but on the plains people instead looked to nature...which is to say, they looked to the changing scenery to determine their calendar. The start of the new year, then, was when the winter snow melted and the fresh grass appeared in its place.

I reckon it was the baars and the other herbivores who were happiest to see the arrival of a new year; through the winter they'd only eaten dried grass and grass cheese, after all. And while both were nutritious and delicious in their own right, there just wasn't anything like the taste and texture of soft, fresh grass. When they pulled it from the ground and munched it up, it looked like it was just to die for.

When the baars saw the fresh, budding growth, they ran on over to it even though there wasn't even all that much yet. All the same they pulled up what little there was, chewed slowly, and savored every last bite. And when they finished they smiled contentedly under the spring sun, basking in the flavor they'd been missing all winter. They were the picture of joy, and they made grass look so delicious that I almost wanted to eat some of it myself...but then I remembered that I'd tried that before, and as far as my tongue was concerned it was mighty bitter. Those memories were enough to bring me back to my senses.

"I guess the only ones who can really appreciate the flavors of the grass are the baars, the horses, and the white ghee," I muttered.

I was on the plains with the baars in the early afternoon, after lunch. Like Alna, I didn't need my winter clothes anymore, so I was dressed in my usual outfit. I was keeping an eye on the plains around the village to make sure it was safe for the baars and other herbivores, and that was when the dogkin arrived with the horses and the white ghee. They were all just as excited about the grass as the baars, and they munched on it hungrily. The white ghee seemed fine with anything so long as it was edible—soft new grass, crunchy old grass, and, well, basically every plant in the general area.

We still only had the two white ghee, one male and one female, and they looked just plain happy to be together. The female's belly had ballooned, and it looked like she might give birth at any moment. I'd actually expected the baby during the winter, but even now it stayed in its mother's stomach. I was actually getting worried that perhaps it was waiting *too* long, but apparently this kind of thing wasn't uncommon among white ghee.

The white ghee were never in a hurry, so I guess it was just like them to be easygoing when it came to childbirth. The mother ghee didn't even seem to notice that she had a child weighing her down, and she just casually went about munching on grass. I found myself feeling all kinds of respect for her, having come all this way.

*Speaking of childbirth...*

"Hey," I said to one of the nearby dogkin. "How many geese do we have now? A bunch of our eggs hatched over winter, didn't they?"

"Uh, let me think..." said the dogkin, placing a hand to their cheek and tilting their head. "Together with the goslings, we've got around twenty now, I think. I think draping their pen in baar wool was good for them, because they were healthy all through the winter and never stopped laying eggs. The first goslings that hatched have gotten pretty big now... They're so big I don't even think we can call them goslings anymore."

"Whoa... Well, if we've got that many, then after we get just a little more I reckon we can cook a few of them."

The dogkin's eyes lit up immediately and they started smacking their lips.

"Then that just means we're going to have to make sure they're well looked after! We have to make sure they're healthy

and growing in number!”

The dogkin’s eyes couldn’t hide their excitement, and neither could their tail, which wagged like crazy. I figured that when some of the goslings properly matured and began laying eggs of their own, then we could maybe take one or two of them to use as meat for the village.

When the white ghee’s child was born, we could take a bit of the milk she produced and use it to make a variety of dairy products too. I had to say, we were looking at a pretty lavish dinner menu in the near future.

Thinking about it all made me want to help out with taking care of the geese and work hard for the meat they’d bring. But the truth of it was, I already had my hands completely full with all my other work; I had to set up the new privies, change the cloth for the yurts, till the fields, see to the reservoir... Yep, there was a mountain of work to be done, and I couldn’t add more to the list.

Well, actually, I also had to help Alna out preparing for the New Year banquet, and then Narvant and the cavekin needed me for armor sizing too. Things sure were looking busy at the start of the year.

All of that said, Iluk Village had come a long way in terms of sharing work, and everybody knew exactly what they were doing around the place. There was a bunch of stuff happening around the village that I didn’t have a hand in, which is to say that the work went totally smoothly without me lifting a finger.

For one thing, when it came to managing our money, trade arrangements, and negotiations with neighboring domains, I could leave all of that to Ellie. For the wastelands and the documents we had to submit to the king, Aymer and Hubert had it covered. Even when it came to our border station and the road from Baarbadal to Mahati, Klaus was overseeing things. I wasn’t involved at all, and when they came to me with reports about more detailed aspects of what they were up to, I’ll be honest, a lot of it went over my head.

All the baar wool work I could leave with Grandma Maya and her friends, and the dogkin happily saw to all the livestock work. I didn’t even have a good handle on things like how much wool we were gathering, how much fabric we were producing, or how many goose eggs we were getting each day. But even without me knowing the finer details, we’d seen through the days just

fine and made it through a whole year. Iluk was one year old…or I suppose you might say it was our one-year anniversary. We'd grown a lot over that time, and I felt like we were ready to move on to our next steps.

At the same time, we didn't have nearly enough residents, and all of us were working our feet off each and every day. The village was still a long way from really being complete. From here on out we'd need to get ourselves more citizens and all work together to make life easier for everybody. That sounded like happiness to me, and that was my goal as the domain lord. It was the ideal that I'd set my sights on. I decided to work even harder this year than the last, and just thinking of it filled me with enthusiasm. Francis and his family must have noticed it, because they bleated at me happily.

"Baaa, baabaa, baaa," said Francis.

"Baa, baabaa, baaa," added Francoise.

Before I could work out what they'd bleated, the dogkin accompanying them raised their voice.

"Oh, you're right! With the village entering a new year, that means everybody has gotten one year older. And Lord Dias and Lady Alna's marriage is just two years away! Wow! That's so exciting! Imagine the wedding! I bet it'll be an even bigger event than Klaus and Canis's wedding!"

The dogkin and the baars all chatted excitedly about it, and as I thought back on things, that first year and the promise I'd made to Alna made me feel all nostalgic. That was when it hit me, and I froze.

*If the last year passed in the blink of an eye, then won't the next two go by just as quick…?*

Thinking about how fast time had passed and how fast the future would come just made me realize how much more thinking I had to do over the next two years. Francis and Francoise gave me some real disappointed sighs, but I couldn't muster a response.

All of us celebrated the coming of spring in our own ways, but Francis and Francoise's children, who had practically been born in the snow, were especially enraptured by the new season. They'd never seen the grassy plains in spring before, with their luscious, soft, and endlessly delicious grass. That very sight was spread out before their eyes, and the young baars could eat to

their hearts' content. Nothing could have made the little guys happier, so they ran around under the spring sun munching, chomping, and chewing until their bellies were fit to burst. It was a luxury, and they were lapping it up.

The adult baars were tempted by all the new grass and it gave them bigger appetites than usual, but the young baars were on a completely different level. They ate more grass with every step they took, until at some point in their gluttonous rampage they stopped, bleated weakly, and crumpled to the ground.

I ran over to them, worried that something might have happened, but it turned out that they'd just eaten so much they couldn't even move anymore.

"There's no need to go crazy..." I muttered, kneeling down next to them. "These fields are going to be nice and green, and they're going to stretch off into the horizon tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, and all the way until fall."

I rubbed their backs while Francis and Francoise shook their heads, exasperated, and bleated at me.

*"This always happens with the young ones."*

*"I hate to be a pain, but could you carry them back to the village?"*

That's more or less what I gathered from the short bleats, so I nodded and took the six baars in my arms. I left the dogkin to take care of all the rest, and I headed back to Iluk with Francis and Francoise.

When we got back, the banquet preparations were in full swing. I could hear loud voices from over by the kitchen range, and all the little dogkin that had been born last year were running around in strange new clothing.

They wore flamboyant jackets that looked like they were buried in embroidered patterns, and they all sported matching hats.

*What in the world am I looking at?*

I mulled over the strange-looking dogkin while I brought the six young baars to Francis and Francoise's yurt to rest. That was when Senai and Ayhan leaped from our yurt, dressed in the same jackets and hats that I'd just seen the dogkin in. When they saw me, the twins beamed even brighter than they already had been.

"Dias!" cried Senai. "We turned seven today!"

"We're seven years old!" shouted Ayhan.

“Huh? You’re seven…?”

I tilted my head, confused. As far as I knew, we didn’t actually know how old Senai and Ayhan were. Their little cheers left me puzzled. Alna popped her head out from our yurt and read the look on my face right away.

“Those clothes of theirs are for celebrating and warding off evil,” she explained. “Up until a certain age kids are still connected to the world of the gods and their place here is unstable; you just don’t know when you might lose them. So we celebrate when kids truly become residents of this world, and at the same time the embroidery helps to ward off any evil that might look to take their lives.”

She continued, “Traditionally, the outfit is worn when a child turns seven, but…the dogkin kids are growing so quickly that it seems like they’re already grown-up. I thought it best we make them a part of the celebrations, so we did. As for Senai and Ayhan, well…neither of them broke out in any fevers over the winter, so I thought it was safe to say that they’d come of age too. They might actually be a couple of years either side of seven, but…I figure it’s better to give them an age than to leave them without one for the rest of their lives.”

“I see,” I said, nodding. Then I turned to the twins. “Happy birthday, girls! Those jackets and hats look so adorable!”

The twins burst into even bigger smiles. Their eyes sparkled, and they took off at top speed to show off their outfits to all the villagers. Alna chuckled and walked off after them, while I took the six young baars to their yurt and placed them on the mountain of blankets and cushions that was the family bed.

“Baaa, baa baa baa,” bleated Francis.

“Baa, baaaa,” added Francoise.

They told me that they could handle things from here and that I should go and help out with the banquet preparations. I nodded, left the yurt, and headed for Alna and the others. When I got there, I helped out where I could, and it was then that I was told that today’s banquet was going to be very different from those we usually held. Alna and the others had prepared all these tools and decorations that I’d never seen before, and they all gave off a very ceremonial vibe. I asked Alna more about it while we were standing at a corner of the village square.

“Until now, we’ve always thrown banquets when something good happened, or when we achieved something as a village, or

when we wanted to celebrate things we did," she said as she constructed something from wood we didn't need anymore. "But that's not what the spring banquet is about. It's about showing gratitude. To the winds of spring, to the sun, to the grass, to the lands upon which it grows. In tonight's banquet we'll show our gratitude to the world in which we live. That means thanking the baars, the black ghee and other animals that provided us food over the winter, and even the monsters for their gift of precious materials."

"I guess you could say that we're celebrating what you and Uncle Ben would call 'the gods.' We are just one part of the wider world, and that which lives in the world is a part of us, and so we celebrate the new spring it brings us and the transformation of the lands that comes with it. As part of that, there are a few small ceremonial proceedings, but...after that we'll enjoy our banquet like we always do. I know it might be a bit annoying, but do you mind indulging me?"

If that was how they did things on the plains, and if that was what Alna and her people had always done, then I only had one answer for her.

"Of course. And it's not annoying at all. I'll help you with it any way I can."

Alna smiled,nodded, and told me what I could do to help set things up. We put our timber to use by building pillars around the village square, at the top of which we put colorful fabric that fluttered in the spring winds. It was quite the sight to behold, and I was admiring the uniqueness of it all when Zorg turned up in a showy outfit made up of several layers of furs and carrying a great big torch.

"I've come bearing a flame to share," he announced. "As thanks, liquor and food will do."

So saying, he poked his torch into one of the pillars, which naturally went up in flames.

"Back in the past," he continued, "tribes would travel between villages sharing flames like this as a symbol of celebration. Sharing flame was a way to check on the safety of your neighboring tribes, to chase off the last of winter, and to purify winter campsites now that they were no longer of use."

I nodded in understanding, but he had more to say.

"Naturally our people had to stop doing it, seeing as we've only got the one village left, but this year things are different.

The chieftain and the other elders are so energetic you'd almost think they were in their prime again. This is a first for Alna and myself, and I've gotta say: It feels pretty good."

Zorg turned his head up at the flaming pillar with a look in his eyes like he was seeing something beyond it, and slowly all the villagers gathered for a peek. All of the kids dressed in their embroidered outfits came out too, and I guess Alna must have taught them what to do, because they all lined up and sang a song with an unfamiliar but pleasant tone. That was the beginning of our spring banquet.

Once the song was done the kids all ran back to their families, and then the Wives' Club all emerged from the kitchen range carrying all types of food—platters aplenty, big plates that they balanced on their heads, and even huge pots carried between two or three people. All of the food was laid out in the middle of the square, surrounded by the shared flames, and carpets were brought out for us to sit on. Only then did everyone start reaching for food and really getting into the swing of things.

Narvant and his family had been working hard on my armor, Klaus had been working hard on the border stations, and Hubert had been working hard at surveying the wastelands and hammering stakes to make our new border. To celebrate all of their efforts, Ellie brought out a big barrel of wine and placed it down near them and in a booming voice thanked everyone for their efforts through the cold of winter. At that, everyone erupted into cheers.

Narvant and his cavekin family immediately filled their cups to the brim and lifted them over their heads. They proclaimed thanks to everyone in the village, then emptied their cups in a single gulp. This was followed by more cheers, and the banquet grew livelier again.

While everyone was enjoying their food, Ellie came over to me while I was sitting with Alna, the twins, Aymer, Francis, Francoise, and the baar children.

"I can see that look on your face, papa," she said, "but everyone's been working very hard, so it's important they're rewarded for their efforts."

"Well, it was me who told you to get the cavekin their wine, so I'm not about to start grumbling," I replied. "But speaking of hard work, you must be exhausted from all the travel back and

forth between here and Mahati, no? If you feel like blowing off some steam, drinking up, and partying, then you're free to do so, okay?"

Ellie took a seat by the twins, wished them both a happy birthday, then turned to me to reply.

"All of us in the merchant team are treated like kings over in Mahati, so we won't go overboard tonight. That Eldan, he always welcomes us with sumptuous food every time we visit, and the dogkin have gotten very used to the luxurious meals we're treated to… Sometimes it's easy to forget what we're even doing over there!"

She then added, "Oh, speaking of which, Eldan's last payment for the flame dragon materials should arrive in the near future, so be ready for it, okay?"

*Wait…didn't Eldan already pay us for the flame dragon with food for winter, materials for the border station, and covering the labor for that same border station? He's already paid us more than enough, so what in the world could this one be?*

I asked Ellie exactly that, and her eyes narrowed with an exasperated look.

"Livestock," she said. "Live. Stock. They weren't in the list I gave you when we were in the midst of negotiations, but I *know* I told you we'd be getting some. As for why the livestock is coming *now*… Well, isn't that obvious? There'd be nothing for the extra livestock to eat if they came during the winter, so we planned the delivery for spring. Negotiations weren't exactly easy, but seeing as it's when the lostblood are set to arrive, I figured the timing was perfect."

"Huh? What do the lostblood have to do with it…? Oh, I see. *That's* what you mean."

Ellie looked over to the storehouses and the two wagons by their side that had gone largely unused…wagons that Eldan had given us quite some time ago. We'd planned for the lostblood to use one of them for trade, which meant that we'd be receiving some horses in return for the flame dragon materials.

"In total, we've got four white ghee coming—two male, two female—and six horses. They're not the fastest Eldan has to offer, but they come from good stock and have been raised well. We've also got a pair of donkeys coming. I figured it was worth seeing how we do with them. Oh, and I've already prepared for an extension on our stables too."

*Donkeys, huh?*

Donkeys were smaller than horses, and while they looked about the same they were very different animals. They were a very common type of livestock: durable, smart, friendly, and to top it off, hardy enough that they rarely fell ill.

"Ah, donkeys," I said. "That's exciting. I think we can put them to good use around here."

Alna had looked overjoyed at the news about the horses, but she looked a bit disappointed when donkeys came into the conversation. I could see it on her face. Her expression was an open book that read, *Why do we even need donkeys?*

"I know that donkeys are smaller than horses and aren't as quick, but they're stronger than they look, and they don't mind following instructions so long as you treat them right." Then my gaze drifted to where the dogkin were sitting. "Also, I think they'd make a good pairing with the dogkin—either with the carts they use now or any dogkin-sized wagons we make in the future. Horses are just too big for the dogkin to handle well, but I reckon they could ride a donkey just fine."

The dogkin could pull carts themselves, of course, and they were nothing if not excellent runners, but if they left some of that to the donkeys they wouldn't tire themselves out, and they'd be able to carry larger loads. With the donkeys helping them out, the dogkin would be able to do a whole bunch more stuff all on their own, and that meant they'd be free to try whatever they wanted, which I felt would only work in Iluk's favor.

"Donkeys don't need much food, and they're easy to take care of," I added. "Two donkeys won't make life any harder on us, so…how about we just see how it goes and take it from there? I have to say, though, Eldan sure went the extra mile, giving us a whole six horses."

Alna looked more understanding once she'd heard my explanation, but Ellie, uh… When I mentioned Eldan, her gaze grew distant and she looked a little tired.

"The extra mile…" she muttered. "Well, yes, he certainly did try to go all out. That's the whole reason that the negotiations were such a headache. I can't even begin to describe how difficult it all was…"

"That Eldan, he just got ever so enthusiastic about things. He started saying things like he'd ready twenty or thirty military-grade steeds and buy us a whole *ranch's* worth of white ghee. I

mean, yes we provided him with flame dragon materials, but you'd think he'd lost his mind. It took a good deal of convincing, but finally his retainers helped out and we managed to arrive at a fair deal. He's already given us food, grass, support for the border station… It's like his generosity knows no bounds."

Ellie then shook her head at the memory of those negotiations and heaved a great sigh. That was when a thought hit her, and she gasped.

"Oh, yes! There's one other thing I wanted to talk to you about! Papa, Alna, I think that after the livestock arrive and get settled in, and once all of your spring work calms, you should go and visit Eldan. You've got a nice wagon now, and you can have Balers and your horses pull it along while you display the new family crest in Mahati. Maybe spend a few days out there, and…think of it like a family vacation…? Eldan has been nothing but good to us all this time, and he and his people have visited us a lot, so I think it's time that you returned the favor."

"And fortunately, the village is at the point where you don't have to oversee everything, papa. Also, it's been some time since Francoise's pregnancy, so the baars can take care of themselves now too. There's also the border station being established, which means you'll want to thank Eldan yourself; it's important to let the people of Mahati know that our domains are on friendly terms even with a physical border between us."

"If anything happens here, Sahhi or one of his wives can come flying to you at breakneck speed. Someone from the border station could also help in that regard. In any case, I'm sure you could spare a few days."

I thought about what Ellie had said, and then I turned to Alna. She was grinning from ear to ear and her eyes were glimmering. The twins, too, wore similar expressions, their hands clenched tight with excitement. None of them spoke a single word, but I knew exactly what they were saying: *We want to go on vacation!*

"Well then," I said, scratching the back of my head, "how about we get things ready and then we'll all go together?"

Senai and Ayhan shot their hands skyward and whooped with joy.

So the holiday was decided, but it wasn't like we could just pack our bags and take off right then and there. There was a whole lot of work we had to do before that, and that meant that

the day after our banquet we were all running around the village seeing to all the tasks that needed doing.

First on the list was all the cleaning and washing. The yurts had been insulated for winter, so we took all the cloth walls off and replaced them, then washed all the old cloth and, when necessary, put up new yurts entirely. Doing this allowed us to brush away all of the dust and dirt and rubbish from inside the yurts and make sure we were all living in nice, clean homes. This was especially important for us in Iluk because we didn't live a nomadic life, so we had to take our time, making sure that all the village yurts were up to scratch.

Another big job we had to do was the washing of our winter clothing. We'd of course made sure that our clothes were clean during the winter, but there was only so much you could do with cold winds and colder water. Now that the weather was warmer, we could make sure that all the excess grime was neatly cleaned and all our outfits were washed so they could be used again next time the snow came around.

Firstly we gave the clothes a rough wash in the river, and then we hand-washed them in tubs—we scrubbed them, wrung them, and for a few we even stomped them. Grandma Maya and Alna had made some herbal soap, and we put it all to good use, washing and rewashing all of our clothes before hanging them up neatly where the refreshing spring breeze would dry them all. Once they were all nice and dry, we folded the clothes up neatly and stored them on shelves or in boxes together with some herbs that bugs couldn't stand to be around.

Next we had to build a home for Sahhi and his wives, put up the new privies, ready the fields for planting, and check on the state of the reservoir. Then we had to make sure we were ready to welcome our new livestock and the new lostblood residents, which meant getting ready to trade with Peijin, who would be bringing the new residents on his next visit.

Naturally, we were doing all of this while we were doing our daily chores, feeding the animals, taking care of the baars... We were so busy we barely had time to breathe.

Still, we had to make sure all of this work was done and dusted before we could go on any holiday, and for a time I was worried that the twins might kick up a fuss. After all, nobody had been more excited about the prospect of a holiday than those two. Fortunately, however, they weren't bothered in the slightest,

and they were even helping out where they could in an effort to see everything finished just a little bit more quickly. And wouldn't you know it, the young dogkin were inspired by the twins and took to enthusiastically helping us with the washing.

"I'm seven years old now!" said one.

"I'm a big girl now!" said another.

All of us adults saw the twins and young dogkin leading the charge, and it even gave us a little push. We all put our backs into it so that the twins could go on their vacation sooner rather than later.

## A Few Days Later, in the Domain Lord's Residence, Mahati—Eldan

"Did you just say that Sir Dias is coming here?! To Mahati?!"

It was early in the afternoon, and one of Eldan's aides had just returned from an inspection of the border station being built between Baarbadal and Mahati. As part of their report, they had announced that Dias intended to visit Mahati, and Eldan had shot to his feet, his words of shock spoken at such volume that they echoed through his entire home.

"Yes," said the aide. "It would appear he's mainly coming with his family on a vacation, but he would like to use the opportunity to express gratitude for all your support and make the friendly relations between our domains clear to the people. He has said that he intends to visit once they have finished all their early spring chores, and so while he is unable to pin down an exact date, it is a certainty that he will visit during the spring."

The extra information caused Eldan's hands to fly upwards as though he were trying to catch something floating in the air. His hands trembled as he spoke.

"P-Preparations..." he uttered. "We must prepare for his arrival immediately! We'll bring the whole town together— No, we'll put the whole *domain* together to ensure a warm welcome for Dias and his family!"

Those around Eldan—his wives and his advisors—all reacted with moderate shock. *Surely that is going too far*, they thought. It was then that Juha, who lazily leaned against one of the room's pillars, let out a loud sigh.

"Knock it off, Eldan," he said. "Dias isn't the type of person to

appreciate any such efforts, especially if he's coming on holiday with his family. I bet that what he really wants to see is Merangal in its natural state. Save any big welcome for when he arrives at your manor. That'll be more than enough. Treat him well here, and he'll be happy."

He added, "If you're looking to make an event of it, then know this: Dias isn't the type to get excited over gold and jewels, or lavish cuisine, or fancy dancers and musical performances... All of this is to say, you're better off looking to please Dias's family, not the man himself."

Juha had spent many long years by Dias's side during the war, and so upon hearing his counsel Eldan nodded his approval. He spun to look at Kamalotz, who had become good friends with Dias's adopted children, and without any ceremony Kamalotz was put in charge of overseeing Dias's welcome.

## A Few Days Later, in Prince Richard's Ballroom, the Royal Palace—Richard

"And so we begin the reform."

There was a self-sure glint in Richard's eye as he declared these words before the old knight who was his loyal retainer and the various members of the guild led by Narius.

"The nobility are given special rights in exchange for them acting as the king's sword and shield when necessary," he continued. "Those who came up with various reasons and excuses to avoid taking part in the last war and previous monster attacks do not even deserve to call themselves nobles. Therefore, as punishment we will confiscate their lands and whittle down their authority."

"All confiscated land will come under our direct control, and its profits will go towards strengthening our military and administration. As the nobility lose land they will also find it harder to perform successfully in their roles, and so the process will repeat: We confiscate more of their territory and use the proceeds on our military and bureaucratic influence. In this way, the nobility will have to outperform the military in order to maintain control...but I suspect that only a small number will be capable of that. That small number will remain, while the rest will fall. It is because they have grown so large that we must cull

them so."

Narius and his people broke out in cold sweats; none of them had had any inkling of the prince's plans. Was it really okay to take such extreme measures? Would the nobles simply allow such a thing to happen? Narius wanted to ask these questions, but his nerves left his words stuck in his throat. The old knight, however, who was already aware of Richard's plans, simply listened calmly.

"I know what you want to say," said Richard, "and there is no cause for concern. On the surface, the punishment will appear much lighter than in reality. The plan is to lead the nobles into thinking that their disloyal behavior will come at little cost. But a small number of the nobility will understand what this really means, and those who are intelligent enough to read the writing on the wall can be forgiven."

"Those who continue their shoddy work and do not see what is right before them—*they* are our targets. And when those nobles are stamped out and the lands see profits under the control of the military or behind the desks of our administration, will that not inspire the common people? This is what I intend: to prepare institutes of learning where those who fought in the war—the volunteer soldiers who gained experience and saw real achievements—can be lifted up."

"The temple is already our ally, as is your guild. And if we can add a number of skilled and talented commoners to our band of allies, then it will not even matter if the nobility attempt an uprising. It will amount to nothing."

Richard lifted his hand lightly upon high, then clenched his fist. Now it had begun. Now he could begin. From here on out, Richard was intent on marching the path that would take him to the throne. The glint in his eyes was like that of a child appraising their new toys. Narius and the others, faced with the pressure the man exuded, were rendered speechless. It was then that the calm old knight chose to speak, his expression never changing as he asked his question.

"And what do you intend for the regions to the west?" he asked.

The west... Or to be more precise, the expansive domains owned by the nobles Dias and Eldan. Richard flinched slightly at the question and took a moment to compose his answer.

"Leave them be," he finally responded. "They are far too

distant from the capital, and Dias did more than enough to prove himself during the war; if we were to make a move against him, it would likely only work against us. As for Eldan, he has made great efforts to govern his lands well, so we do not need to bother with him either."

"First, we consume the domains around us and we build an army under my direct control. Once we have that, neither Dias nor Eldan will be able to stand against us regardless. As such, they have two choices: obey us and be allowed to remain, or otherwise be crushed. That is all."

The old knight nodded. He looked satisfied with the prince's answer, and by speaking not another word he made it clear that he had nothing more to say. To see his most loyal retainer act as such made Richard more confident in his course of action and more resolved to see it through. He pulled out sheaves of paper, upon which were written his list of targets, and got to work immediately.

## As a Nostalgic Voice Echoes from the West —Dias

Several days had passed since we started on our big spring clean, and finally things were easing up. We'd finished all the work on the yurts, the washing, the privies, and Sahhi's home. It was like a box with a door, inside of which was a perch and a platelike bed—kind of like a birdhouse.

We'd just finished planting our seeds in the fields when one of the Peijins arrived from the west with a number of caravans in tow. They all stopped at the western edge of the village, and out hopped a grinning Peijin.

"S'been an age, ain't it? Long time no see, yep! It's me, Peijin-Do, and I'm back in action, with a whole treasure trove of spring items for y'perusal. Seems like me brothers handled things without issue while I was away, but all the same I apologize f'the bother."

It'd been a while since we'd last seen Peijin, and me, Alna, and Ellie were all there to greet him. There were also a whole lot of villagers just aching to do some shopping, but Peijin had to set up shop first, so they were waiting behind us eagerly. While Peijin's armored guards—or companions? I wasn't sure—set up the marketplace, the villagers watched on with faces that screamed, *Are they done yet? Are they done yet?* Still, for me, Alna, and Ellie there was a more important matter than shopping to address.

"Peijin," I said, "any news on the new residents who were supposed to be coming with you on your first spring visit?"

Peijin nodded knowingly, raised his hand, and sent a little signal to the carriage in the rear. Three young men approached us, each of them dressed not unlike Kiko when she'd visited; they wore brown cloth robes of a sort, held in place by strips of cloth tied at their waists. The boys all looked to be teenagers, and they gazed around their new surroundings for a moment before bowing politely.

All three of the boys had hair that was yellow, just like Kiko's fur, with bright red headbands. They had thin, sharp eyes as well,

and though their bodies were slender, by their gait you could tell that they were in good shape.

“I-It is an honor to meet you, Lord Dias,” said one. “We are here to begin our lives under your governance. I am called Seki, and I am Kiko’s eldest son.”

“I am Saku,” said another. “Kiko’s second son.”

“A-And I am Aoi,” said the third. “Kiko’s third son.”

They all stood in a line as they introduced themselves politely, and when they were done they bowed again. Seki had a set of ears just like Kiko’s. Saku’s arms were furry just like Kiko’s. As for Aoi, he had a bushy tail. I nodded to myself as I started to understand what it meant to be a lostblood, and then me, Alna, and Ellie all introduced ourselves.



“Am I right to think that you three are the only ones moving in?” I asked, because it was something I was mighty curious about. “I have to admit, I was expecting at least five or six people…”

Seki and his brothers all shared an awkward glance with one another, and then Seki—who appeared to be the one in charge on account of being the eldest—gave us an answer.

“Yes, about that… When our mother, Kiko, visited last, she was quite enamored with this village and you, Lord Dias… Since her return, she has been steadfast that we are not to cause you any trouble, and she doesn’t want you thinking of the lostblood as mere displaced persons. As such, she has been incredibly insistent on making sure that we are all thoroughly educated.”

“Her teachings cover languages, culture, poetry, the arts, and even basic board games. A wide array, to be sure…but also the lostblood must be taught the reading and writing skills necessary for trade by the Peijin family. The vast majority of lostblood have not shown sufficient skills in these areas, and so mother has yet to give them a passing grade.”

“We three have benefited from our mother’s education since we were young, and so we passed quite easily. Unfortunately, many of the lostblood live in much harsher environments, and so they will require a little more time before they arrive here.”

“Oh, I see,” I replied. “We’re happy to handle the education ourselves, and Ellie can teach you all the ropes when it comes to trade, so none of that’s an issue for us here…”

The three boys were silent for a moment before they all shook their heads.

“Once our mother is set in her ways, she will not listen to anyone,” said Seki.

And well, they *were* her sons, so I had to assume they knew her best. All I could do was nod. Alna and Ellie then told me that they were going to start trading with Peijin, which left me to show the boys around.

“These are called yurts,” I said, pointing them out as we walked, “and they’re our homes here. We’ve got everything we need to build some for you too, so just tell us how many you want and we’ll put them up. That there’s the village square, and those fields belong to Senai and Ayhan—they’re my daughters—and I think they’re busying themselves with a new field to put saplings in. Over there you’ll find the kitchen range, and you can

see that over there is where we keep the privies."

While we moved along I introduced the boys to any villagers we passed, and the boys looked around with great curiosity until they saw the privies, at which point that stopped them. Seki raised his hand.

"I have a question..." he said.

"What is it? You can ask whatever you like," I replied.

"Well, it's about those privies. Why are some big and others small?"

"Hmm? Oh, we built them to match with the different body types here. I figured it would be tough for the dogkin to use the regular privies because they're so much smaller than us humans. But also I just wanted to avoid people having to wait in line to use the toilet, so it just made sense to make more of them."

"You boys all look about the same as us humans, so you shouldn't have any issues with the privies, but I want you to tell me if you run into any inconveniences while you're living here. I want to make sure that everybody lives comfortably when it comes to daily necessities."

All three of the boys were a bit surprised, and they went pretty dang quiet. It struck me as a little strange, but because they didn't seem to have any questions, we headed on to the storehouses. In front of them were our wagons, their axles all waxed neatly. I put a hand on the smaller one, which was the one that Seki and his brothers would be working with.

"This here's the wagon you boys'll be using for your work here," I said. "The horses are set to arrive fairly soon, and we've got six of them coming so you'll always be able to let one or two rest while you go on your trade trips. Now, you're going to have to learn how to take care of horses and how to handle a wagon, and of course you'll learn about baars and their wool products too. Once you've done all that, you'll head off with Ellie to trade goods in Mahati and the Beastland Kingdom. You'll be paid based on how much you earn, but...you can ask Ellie about the particulars."

"Oh, and before I forget. We're planning to visit the neighboring region of Mahati pretty soon, and we want you three to join us. Ellie wants to introduce you to the merchants she's worked with over the winter, and I'm sure she'll teach you the ins and outs of trade while she's at it."

Saku and Aoi heard that and their expressions shifted. Their

cheeks went red and they gritted their teeth like they were trying to hold something in. When Seki started acting the same way, Saku and Aoi couldn't contain themselves any longer. They took off for the wagon, jumped in the driver's seat, and touched the wheels.

"Wow! Th-This is... This is gonna be *our* wagon!" cried one.

"Hey, look at these wheels!" cried the other. "They're so well-built! No broken or warped parts!"

They were all smiles as they shouted back and forth, delighted at the fact they'd have their own wagon. Seki, meanwhile, looked like all he wanted to do was be a part of the fun, but he held those emotions back and stood up straight.

"Um...Lord Dias," he said, looking me straight in the eyes. "We've only just met. Are you really going to just loan us the use of such a magnificent wagon? Have you not thought this through? Have you not considered that we might simply take it and run?"

"Hmm..." I murmured, thinking it over as I tilted my head. "If I started thinking and talking like that, then I wouldn't be able to trust anyone with anything. If you were to try and run away, then yeah, it'd be some trouble for sure. I'd be pretty sad about it too, but...I just don't think any child of Kiko's would try it. I'm choosing to trust you boys."

Seki heard that and his shoulders trembled, his feet digging into the ground. I couldn't work out why he'd even say something like that in the first place, and my puzzlement only grew with each passing moment. That was when Saku sneaked up to whisper in my ear.

"Lord Dias, for us lostblood, we've lived our whole lives being told that the reason we're like this is that we were bad in our past lives. People say that when you're a liar or a thief in your past life, you end up a lostblood in this one. And they don't just say it either—people treat the lostblood like they're criminals. Everybody looks down on you, nobody trusts you, and you get bullied from the day you're born. It's the worst."

"We're not used to people saying they'll do things for us or give things to us. That's why big bro is frozen like that—he's been so moved by the gesture he's in shock. So just give him a minute, and he'll calm down."

Seki's fox-like ears twitched.

"Saku!" he shouted. "Quit shooting your mouth off!"

“Dammit. The guy could hear a whisper in a tornado!”

Saku bolted at top speed. Seki was just about to run off after him, but when he noticed me watching with a smile he hurriedly straightened himself up again.

“Give me just a moment, please,” he said.

And then Seki was after his brother as fast as his legs would take him.

It wasn’t long before all three of the lostblood boys were smiling and as energetic as you’d expect for kids their age. I told them all about how we lived our lives in Iluk, and then Alna turned up, who I thought would still be busy with Peijin.

“Hmm, looks like you’ve got things covered here,” she said. “But I figured as much. I checked the three of them out earlier and they’re all strong blues.”

When Alna came over and said that, the boys all felt suddenly like they should give us some space, so they did just that.

“Do you mean you did a soul appraisal?” I asked, my head tilting to the side. “When did you do that? I didn’t see your horn glow blue at any point when we were all introducing ourselves…”

“I learned about other kinds of magic from Grandma Maya over winter, and she taught me a trick to tell if a soul is blue or red without the use of my horn. I haven’t perfected it yet, and it’s not as accurate as the usual spell, but I’m working on it. After all, it can’t hurt to have a way to secretly check a soul, right? Well, this time the accuracy wasn’t on point and I had to double-check with the actual spell, which shows I still have a long way to go. Still, when I do cast it, all three are blue. They won’t be a problem.”

While she spoke, Alna’s horn lit up three times—one for each of the lostblood brothers—and she nodded.

“That is… Well, that sure is something,” I said.

Alna didn’t think so.

“It’s really not…” she sighed. “It won’t work against the likes of Narvant or anyone who knows their way around magic. It also requires a lot of magic to cast, so I’m really going to have to work hard to make it more efficient and effective.”

“Oh, I see… Yeah, I think being able to use it anywhere would sure be swell, but don’t go pushing yourself too hard, okay? Anyway, how are things going with Peijin? I figured that you would be handling things like you did last time… I’m guessing you’re all done?”

“No. Peijin-Do has spent a good deal of time trading with the onikin now so he’s started to clue in to our soul appraisal. I left it all to Ellie to handle. Peijin-Do’s little brother Peijin-Re is young, so he’s an easy mark, but… Anyway, it’s all good. Hubert is going to meet up with Ellie, so I think they’ll be just fine.”

Alna looked over in the direction of Peijin’s market, then walked over to Seki and his brothers, who were fawning over their new wagon, to tell them what to be careful of on the plains. While she was at it, she also got their food preferences.

I watched the four of them talking, then turned my gaze to the markets myself. I figured Alna was right, and that everything would be just fine in Ellie’s hands, so I walked on over to the boys’ new wagon to join them.

## The Western Corner of Iluk Village—Ellie

While Dias was with Alna and the lostblood brothers, the eager villagers of Iluk had flooded Peijin’s marketplace and were having a ball going about their shopping. With the major negotiations largely settled, Ellie, Peijin, and Hubert put some distance between themselves and the marketplace. They now stood behind Peijin’s caravan to begin a discussion of a more secretive nature.

“So, y’says y’ve got an important matter to discuss then, yep?” Peijin probed, his eyes narrowing as he rubbed his hands together. “What are we talkin’ about?”

Ellie brought forth an envelope closed with a wax seal—in which was a letter she had asked Dias to write—and passed it to Peijin.

“In this is a letter written by my papa, which is to say Dias, the Duke of Baarbadal. We would be grateful if you would pass this to His Majesty the Beast King.”

Ellie spoke with as polite and well-mannered a tone as she was capable. Peijin’s eyes widened in surprise, but he remained cool.

“Ho-hoh… S-So Dias is a duke now!” he exclaimed. “And he’s writing to the Beast King! Now that certainly *is* a letter that carries some weight… But look, I’m just a merchant. I dunno if I can even get m’self an audience with someone so high up. Maybe if y’could give m’some inkling as t’what it says, I could work with my connections t’make sure it finds its way t’the king’s

hands?"

"Very well, I shall give you a brief summary of the letter's contents," replied Ellie. "In short, the letter is a request for the building of friendly ties between Baarbadal and the Beastland Kingdom. We are already working to help find the lostblood new homes, as well as trading with your family; we hope to continue with both to ensure a healthy business relationship."

She continued, "In the name of friendly relations—and to avoid any unnecessary trouble—we would also like to confirm the border between our nations. These grassy plains are our domain, and beyond them lies yours...and so we would like to take our time and discuss the matter so as to determine a border we are both happy with. For that reason, the letter also asks whether it would be possible for the Beastland Kingdom to dispatch a diplomat to begin discussions."

Ellie spoke with a voice that was slightly higher than usual, and certainly more polite. Peijin's expression remained calm and collected, but there was a glint in his eyes, and this did not go unnoticed. Ellie already suspected that Peijin-Do was no ordinary merchant, but she made no mention of this as her explanation went on.

"If we are able to confirm a border, we will construct a border station along it and make it our responsibility to ensure that no untoward types invade or intrude upon your lands. That said, we've had a long-standing trade relationship with your family, so you would of course be allowed to come and go freely."

"From there, we would look to build a highway and inns for traveling caravans—in short, measures and facilities to ensure safety within our domain. We want to make trade a much smoother and easier process."

"The letter concludes with the earnest hope that the Beastland Kingdom might consider investing in our future development."

These last words clearly shook Peijin-Do, but he managed to contain his urge to blurt out in shock. He took a deep breath and settled his thoughts, and only then did he speak again.

"An investment? Now that *is* a surprise, yep. Dias is a real bigwig now, ain't he? Wouldn't foreign investment get him in trouble with his nation's higher-ups 'n' all? And tell me this: Why would the Beastland Kingdom make an investment in a nation that may well become its enemy? Which isn't to say that I'm not

aware it's got value f'me as a merchant, but…"

Ellie flashed a relaxed smile, then whipped her hand around to point to the mountains to the north.

"We've recently found ourselves in the company of people who are very knowledgeable when it comes to mountainous areas, and their surveys indicate that the mountains over there hide within them great amounts of iron ore. Given our present circumstances, however, we don't have the manpower or the budget to develop our mining industry. We are thus considering outside investment."

"Naturally, we would be happy to repay the Beastland Kingdom's investment with the ore we mine…or, if the mine proves to be a bustling enterprise, then monetary repayments are another possibility."

"As you have already mentioned, foreign investment may indeed result in certain domestic challenges on our part. However, we believe it a risk worth taking for the sake of building and maintaining friendly ties. We hope you will take the message in this spirit. After all, bonds made through investment—that is to say, through money and contracts—are thicker than blood, and one might even call them unbreakable. We believe that this, together with the lostblood working as part of our trade activities, will only improve relations, allowing for a stronger connection."

Ellie's smile never wavered as she spoke, and though Hubert twitched when he noticed, Ellie had said her piece, and so she now took to carefully observing Peijin's response.

Having been inundated with a huge load of information all at once, Peijin was now in the midst of trying to sort through it all, and it showed on his face; the merchant had completely lost his cool. His veneer of calm had slipped, allowing one to see his thoughts in the details of his expression.

*I knew it. This frog's no run-of-the-mill merchant. That may be who he is at heart, but perhaps he runs intelligence on the side. Or maybe intelligence is his* real *work… There's certainly enough proof of that in the telescope, the surveillance equipment, and the map he left here on his first visit.*

*Given that he plays the role of a merchant, however, it's more important to talk in terms of risk and reward than papa's position and matters of foreign nations. Then again, it's true that in securing friendly ties we improve the state of trade too. Surely he realizes that*

*we went out of our way to leave Alna out of this discussion and make sure it was held in private; I hope that in realizing that, he'll respond to us in kind.*

Ellie's thoughts ran at lightning speed looking for her edge over the frogkin. She then jabbed the twitching Hubert in the ribs while Peijin was still out of sorts.

"Keep yourself together, man!" she whispered, her voice low and heavy. "This is important, and one of us had to do it!"

Peijin didn't hear a word, but Hubert stood up straight and, with a little effort, managed to wipe the look of concern from his face.

## The Day After Peijin's Visit—Dias

With all our trade neatly tied up, Peijin-Do clasped the letter that Ellie had asked me to write and promised he would be back soon. I had to assume that if he returned soon, it wouldn't be for trade but with whatever reply the Beast King had for us. In any case, before he left he promised to do his utmost to see the letter delivered as quickly as possible.

When it came to both the border between our nations and the border station we were proposing, we had to hash things out with the Beastland people to avoid stepping on any toes. With that in mind, I hoped that everything went nice and smoothly. Fortunately for me, my parents and Uncle Ben had taught me letter writing when I was just a boy—and, uh, Uncle Ben was *still* teaching me now—so the letter I'd written wouldn't have anything in it that offended any official who read it.

Well, I was pretty certain, anyway.

Our new residents Seki, Saku, and Aoi were all settling in just fine—so smoothly, in fact, that it felt like they'd been in Iluk forever. They were bright, enthusiastic, and nothing if not positive. The yurts that would be their new homes, the different foods to get used to in their new diets, the residents they would be working with here in the village—they were open-minded and positive about all of it. The villagers, too, were quick to accept the three boys, who were always smiling and always cheerfully greeted them. Only a day had passed since their arrival, but honestly it felt like we'd all been living together for months.

The three brothers would spend most of their time with Ellie, where they'd learn about trade in the kingdom, how to barter

and haggle, and what to watch out for. They called her “Sister Ellie” and really looked up to her. Well, on one occasion they called her “Brother” and Ellie exploded in a rage. It was a whole mess, but the boys were all quick to apologize and everything was settled without further incident.

With our spring trade done, our storehouses were jam-packed, and everyone looked happy with their own purchases. With our new residents comfortably settling in, our spring chores were just about done too. Everything was coming together, which meant it was time to prepare for our trip to Mahati.

In total, our traveling party consisted of me, Alna, the twins, Aymer, Francis, Francoise, and their six kids. Ellie, Seki, Saku, and Aoi were also joining us for trade purposes.

I figured that for traveling all I’d need to do was throw together a change of clothes, bring a couple of days’ worth of food and water, and make sure I had my axe, but it turned out things weren’t so simple when you were the lord of a domain traveling to visit a neighbor. You had to dress appropriately for the occasion, and you had to make sure your wagon had a banner on it that people could see clearly. Sometimes the people traveling with you had to get all dressed up too. Some nobles even dressed up their horses… That’s how important it was to let people know who you were.

I didn’t think we needed to go to all that trouble when we were just visiting Eldan, but it wasn’t just the people of Mahati who would see us on our travels; it was merchants and travelers from elsewhere on top of it. If we went to Mahati looking all drab and dirty, then it might be a bad look not just for us but for Eldan too.

When I thought back on it, I remembered that when Eldan had first come to the plains, he’d come in a fancy carriage and with quite the entourage. He’d been dressed really well to boot. It was my duty to respond in kind, so it wouldn’t do for me to turn up looking like something the cat dragged in.

That’s what Ellie was telling me about while we stood in the village square.

“That said, in your case, papa, you’re the hero of the common people,” she said, “so you could probably just turn up in your usual outfit. Anyway, it’s important that we all get ready to go on the double…”

And with that, Ellie spun and gestured for Seki and his brothers to come on over. They all looked a little puzzled but they did as they were told and...that was when Ellie dropped a simple baar wool cap on Seki's head. She followed that with a pair of wool gloves for Saku's arms and a special belt for Aoi that neatly hid his tail. Then she turned to me with a look that said, *Know why I did that?*

"I don't get it," I admitted. "There are lots of beastkin both here and in Mahati, so why bother covering them up now? Do we really need to hide Seki's ears, Saku's arms, and Aoi's tail?"

Ellie nodded.

"Of course we do. Beastkin discrimination might not be an issue here or in Mahati, but it still exists elsewhere. Even though we've never been farther than Eldan's domain so far, we're bound to run into discrimination just by virtue of the nature of trade. It'll be a real pain for the boys to have to deal with people looking down on them, and it's better to hide things outright. None of them are beastkin from the kingdom either; they're special. They're lostblood from a neighboring country, and revealing that could cause problems, right? I realize that it might hurt their feelings, but unfortunately it's something they'll have to bear with for the time being."

Seki was shocked for a brief second, but he quickly smiled and waved his hands to show that it didn't bother him.

"We don't mind at all, Sister Ellie," he said. "Back in the Beastland Kingdom there's more we have to hide than our heads, hands, and tails, so if anything this is a step up."

"And if it makes for better trade, then I'm all for it!" added Saku.

"You gave us our own homes, delicious food, and all the essentials we could ask for," said Aoi brightly. "You even prepared a wagon for us! If you told us to go over there and dance naked, we'd do it in a heartbeat!"

Seki and Saku promptly smacked their brother in the head together.

"Ow! What the heck was *that* for?!" asked Aoi, clasping his head.

"Watch your mouth!" shouted Seki.

"What if they actually *did* order us to go and do that?!" added Saku.

In the next instant, the three boys were rolling around and at

one another's throats. A bulging blue vein popped up at Ellie's temple while she watched them, and then she dove into the fray to break things up. That was right when Alna and the twins showed up.

"Well, I guess we'll be hiding our features for the time being," Alna said. "Not much we can do about that. But once we've asserted our authority and Iluk has grown in size, we won't have to worry about how people think of us or petty squabbles, and we'll be able to live without shame or reservation."

Alna had a gorgeous headband with her. It looked like she had embroidered it herself with unique onikin patterns, and it was also decorated with eye-catching jewels. There was a small hole in the center of it so that when she put her horn through that hole and tied the headband, the horn looked like it was just another part of the headband's decorations. When I looked a little more closely, I could see that the hole was designed especially for Alna's horn—it didn't leave any gaps or openings.

The twins, too, had shawls they could wear over their heads in order to conceal their ears. The girls really loved the patterns woven into each of their shawls and enjoyed touching the soft material with both of their hands. They were grinning from ear to ear, and they looked up at me expectantly.

"You two look wonderful," I said.

There was a strong glint in everybody's eyes then, and we all knew that from now on, we'd have to work even harder to ensure that everybody in our village could be who they were openly and that no matter what happened, they'd be protected.



The spring sun shone down upon us as we all got ready for our trip to Mahati, and a few days passed uneventfully. Then, one day just past noon, one of the dogkin working at the border station raced to Iluk to inform us that Kamalotz was on his way. We were informed that he'd brought the horses, the ghee, and the donkeys as promised, and he and his traveling party would arrive soon.

The dogkin and the three lostblood brothers heard that report and they started racing around excitedly and jumping up and down, trying to get as high as they could in the hopes that they might spot Kamalotz on the horizon, along with their new horses. The dogkin were overjoyed to have more ghee to take care of, not to mention the donkeys that I'd said they could use as they pleased. Alna and the twins, too, were excited about the new horses, and they were all smiles as they talked about what color they might be and what names to give them all. It was so lively that Grandma Maya and her friends came out and joined in. Then, when everybody looked about ready to explode, we saw Kamalotz's caravan appear in the distance.

Kamalotz was in the driver's seat, and with him were a number of guards. They ambled on towards us on the temporary road we'd built. The road still wasn't paved, and it really wasn't anything more than ground that we'd stamped down flat, but even then it looked more like a road than anything we'd had in the past. It also worked like a road—Kamalotz's carriage rode over it smoothly without any shaking, and much quicker than it had gone in the past.

Kamalotz's carriage arrived in the village and came to a stop, and as soon as it did the dogkin's excitement finally boiled over. Once they'd gotten Kamalotz's permission, they got to work in a flash, bringing out tubs of water for all the horses and applying animal fat to the carriage axles. Ellie had taught the dogkin to do this because in the future that's what we'd have to do for visiting merchants, and it left Kamalotz and his people as impressed as they were surprised.

"Lord Dias, it is a pleasure to see you after so long," Kamalotz greeted me as he walked over. "We have brought you the horses, cattle, and donkeys as promised. We have also brought a small gift to celebrate a joyous occasion."

He looked much brighter and happier than usual, and full of life to boot.

“Joyous occasion?” I asked.

“Indeed. Eldan wishes to give you the good news in person, so I cannot explain it in any detail just yet. Suffice to say, it is most wonderful and celebratory news, and to share in this joy we have prepared for you a small gift. Eldan is beyond overjoyed to welcome you to Mahati during such an auspicious time, and it is his wish that I escort you safely to his domain. As such, I hope you will not mind if we stay here until you are ready to depart for Mahati.”

“I see,” I said, nodding. “We don’t mind at all. We’re all ready to go, so we could even leave tomorrow without issue. But if you and your guards need a longer rest, we’d also be happy to leave in two or three days’ time.”

“Your kindness is appreciated. However, we would be more than happy to depart tomorrow morning. We’ll spend today handing over the livestock and giving you your gift, and we’ll also install the extension to your stable. The materials for the stable are quite heavy, so the carriage carrying them was a touch slower than us, but… Ah, yes, there it is.”

I followed Kamalotz’s gaze and saw another carriage rumbling down the road towards us. Kamalotz gave the signal before it even stopped, and his guards began the process of unloading boxes, and taking the reins for the horses and other animals. Or at least, they tried to. The dogkin were way ahead of them and already trying to get to the livestock, and they begged for Kamalotz to let them handle the animals. Kamalotz smiled and happily nodded, at which point his guards handed the animal reins to the dogkin, who were suddenly snorting and trotting with unbridled joy and swagger while they paraded the animals through the village.

“We did our best to select some of our finest horses,” explained Kamalotz, “but they have not undergone military training, so do be careful how you use them. The cattle are young and healthy, and the donkeys are easy for us to acquire, so should you require more, please don’t hesitate to say the word and we’ll get them to you posthaste.”

With that the official handover was completed, and Alna and the twins ran over to the horses to look at them more closely, introduce themselves, and generally get to know the new steeds. If things had been lively before, they were even more so now, and among all the hustle and bustle Kamalotz’s guards brought

over a big barrel and some wooden boxes. As was fitting for news worth celebrating, the barrel was full of wine. The boxes were full of commemorative crafts and the spices and tea that Mahati was most famous for. But as I perused the list of goods that Kamalotz had brought, I realized that sugar wasn't on it.

*Maybe it's not easy to come by in the spring?*

While I was mulling over the thought, a couple of guards very carefully carried over three boxes that were all sturdily reinforced with metal frames. They looked like the kind of thing that you'd keep jewels or a treasure in, so I figured they had to be something pretty special. That thought was made even stronger by just how cautious and nervous all the guards were when it came to handling the boxes. Then all the guards stood in a line and opened the lids of those very boxes. That was when Kamalotz—who had been running through his list to make sure that everything was as it should be—realized what they were doing.

"What?! You were supposed to *wait* before you...!"

He hurriedly tried to stop his guards but he didn't make it in time, and the lids were opened. Inside, the boxes were stuffed with soft silk cushions to ensure their contents stayed undamaged, and in the center were statues decorated in a most beautiful, vibrant, and high-quality paint.

"Oh... I see..." I muttered as I gazed upon the statues.

One of the statues was of a woman. She wore a stunning robe and was patting her big belly, a gentle smile on her face. Another statue was of a young man. He was painted in brown, his muscular form holding a baby in its arms. The last statue—and I'm not sure if that's the right term—was of a number of people all hugging one another.

Even someone as dense as me could work out what all those statues pointed to. It looked to me like statues of Eldan, his mother, his wives, and the baby that was coming down the line. It was pretty clear then exactly what the good news was that Eldan wanted to tell me in person...and I took one of the boxes from the guards and gently closed the lid like I had never gazed upon its contents in the first place.

"My apologies! It looks like there was a miscommunication!" cried Kamalotz, running over as his guards stood there, dumbstruck. "Those boxes contain confectionery meant for the residents of Iluk to enjoy after your departure..."

“Confectionery?” I asked. “These are made from sugar? I thought they were works of art…”

I’d only gotten a glance, but even then they were so detailed I could understand them in a flash. They were so vibrant and carefully crafted. That made me think that they were a new kind of ceramic or something like that… I’d never imagined they’d be made of sugar…

“Y-Yes,” said Kamalotz. “They’re crafted with sugar mixed with crushed tree sap and allowed to harden. The paint used for them is also plant-based, so it’s edible. Even just crafting them out of sugar alone would make them quite valuable, but it was Eldan’s order that we try a number of different processing methods. Uh, I would very much appreciate it if you could pretend you never saw what was in these boxes…”

“I will do the best I can,” I replied, “but I’m not a very convincing liar, so please don’t expect much from me. What I *can* do is not say a word to Alna or any of the others, and I’ll keep my own feelings of celebration tucked away so that when Eldan tells us, he’ll get the full brunt of it.”

There was a deep crease in Kamalotz’s brow as he nodded. I summarily took the three boxes and put them deep in one of the storehouses so they couldn’t be easily discovered.

When all the boxes were cleared away, Kamalotz and his men set about putting up the stable extension. All the horses got settled in, and our white ghee didn’t seem bothered by their new pals; they just munched on grass like they always did. The donkeys, however, weren’t quite used to the new environment and looked a bit uneasy. Still, with the dogkin being so nice and gentle, they started to relax, and it looked to me like they’d be all settled in in a matter of days.

The rest of us villagers went about our work as per usual, made final preparations for our trip to Mahati, double-checked what people would be up to while we were gone, and set up communication lines. That last one meant making sure Sahhi or one of his wives could fly out to us. When night fell, we held a small banquet to celebrate the new animals, which Kamalotz and his people all enjoyed.

Early the next morning, I took the largest of our wagons and attached four of our horses to it: Balers, Karberan, Shiya, and Guri. Then I took two of the new horses—Buri and Lanne, both

of which had brown coats—and attached them to a slightly smaller wagon. Finally, I loaded our wagon with my axe (just to be on the safe side), a few days' worth of food, and some gifts for a special occasion. All I had to do then was just wait for the others to come, so I stretched a bit and gave the horses some good pats along with the dogkin who'd helped me out.

## In the Family Yurt—Alna

Alna put on a special bilesha, one longer and more ornately embroidered than what the onikin traditionally wore, and tied it tightly to her body at the waist. Grandma Maya softly draped a cloak over her shoulders, which Alna took and fastened, then tied Alna's new headband to her head. Finally she took a long look at Alna from head to toe, taking Alna's face in her hands and turning it right and left to make sure her makeup was all applied correctly.

"Very good, no issues," she said. "It's your first trip across the border and your first diplomatic voyage as the wife of a duke. It's natural to be nervous, but there's no need to worry when it's Eldan you're going to meet. Take good care of young Dias out there."

Alna nodded resolutely.

"See you soon," she said as she left the yurt.

## The Fields in the Village Square—Senai, Ayhan, and Aymer

With their holiday right around the corner, Senai and Ayhan were busy telling the dogkin (who always helped them with their garden) *everything* that needed to be done while they were away.

*"Do this when this happens, do this when that happens, and if this should happen then you'll have to do this..."*

The twins were exhaustingly thorough. They were so thorough, in fact, that not all of it made it through to all of the dogkin on the first go, though fortunately Aymer was there on Senai's head to explain it all in an easy to understand manner. Also, the dogkin had heard all of these instructions every day since the twins' holiday was confirmed, and so with each instruction they repeated what they were told like a loyal chorus.

The dogkin were smiling and confident, and they puffed out their chests.

"Leave it to us!" they barked.

The reactions were a great relief to the twins, who looked at each other and nodded, satisfied that their gardens were in safe hands. Then they turned to the two saplings in their garden that, truth be told, were now so thick and round that they probably should have been called trees.

"See you when we get back!" said the twins.

The dogkin all tilted their heads, confused as to why the girls would say goodbye to trees. It was then that a spring breeze drifted through the village, and the dogkin heard two voices upon it.

*"Have a great time!"*

*"Be safe!"*

The dogkin's ears shot up and they looked this way and that, but try as they might they saw nobody, they smelled nobody, and they heard nobody in the immediate vicinity. This left them all the more perplexed. So while the dogkin were practically bent over sideways out of confusion, the twins dashed off with Aymer, smiling all the way to the wagon.

## In a Storehouse—Seki, Saku, and Aoi

"So as you can see, Mahati is most well-known for its sugar, its spices, its tea, and its paper. I've heard that tea and paper are both produced widely in the Beastland Kingdom, so in terms of trade you'll be focusing on sugar and spices."

"You can sell sugar based on its sweetness alone, but people who aren't used to spices can sometimes find their scents off-putting. With that in mind, it might be best to push their medicinal benefits over their flavors. You can tell people that they warm the body by improving blood flow, that they help keep meat from going bad, and that they help ward off illness. It might be important to take that angle first, at least until people get more used to the strong flavors and aromas."

Ellie was taking some time to teach the lostblood brothers about Mahati. All three of the brothers sat up straight, none saying a word as they listened intently.

"It's important to have knowledge of all of our products," Ellie continued. "The world isn't so kind that you can just buy goods

and sell them just as easily. You have to look at where something comes from, then explain that the price reflects where and how it was made. You can go on to describe how the quality is excellent because of how the production method differs from other regions. On top of that, any good merchant knows how to negotiate by observing their customer and determining their personality, how much they have to spend, and what they have in mind."

"For papa and his family, this trip is a holiday, but for us we're going to be looking at all the things I told you about and making inroads with all the merchants you'll be working with. So please don't forget that this is a very important job you'll all be doing. Anyway, it's almost time for us to head off, so I'll explain all the rest in the wagon."

Her lecture finished, Ellie left the storehouse, and the brothers all let out sighs and relaxed.

"Another lecture in the wagon, huh?" chuckled Seki. "Sister Ellie made it this far all on her own, so we're all really lucky she's teaching us everything she knows."

Saku nodded and looked off distantly towards the west.

"Mother tried to ensure we'd live without inconveniences, and she gave us food, clothing, and shelter, but even then we were looked down upon the moment we left the house. Everybody criticized or doubted what we did, and it never felt like we were enough…but there's none of that here. Everyone treats us like we're one of them, and they're as good to us as they would be to anyone else. They even share knowledge with us. That, and they're as strict with us as they would be with their own family."

"Yeah, that's true," said Aoi, finally speaking up a little hesitantly. "They're nice enough to feed us delicious food and even give us our own homes. But it's just as harsh here as it was there. Everybody works, and everybody works for the village, and if you're sick and you need to rest that's fine, but you can't just slack off for no good reason. Heck, even the most important person in the entire village, the domain lord, works from morning to night without rest…"

Aoi added, "But if we don't prove ourselves out there, and if we don't get good results, then what will Sister Ellie say? And what will Shep and Marf and Sedorio think? They might call us freeloaders. That bad reputation might stick."

Seki and Saku went pale and began to tremble. They were

studying under Ellie’s tutelage, but as of yet they still hadn’t achieved anything of note. Neither Dias nor any of the villagers had said anything about it, and they didn’t seem too bothered either. But perhaps, the brothers thought, that was because they’d only just arrived.

All three of them had been provided their own yurts, along with baar wool towels and daily necessities. Dias had told them that they didn’t need to pay for any of it; all they had to do was contribute to the village, and that was enough. The village had welcomed them with open arms, but the brothers felt that if they did not live up to Dias’s expectations, then not only would it harm their standing in the village, but it might also impact how future lostblood were treated when they moved in.

The brothers trembled once more at the thought, but they knew that shivering with fear would get them nowhere. For their futures, for their home, and for Iluk, they would give this life everything they had...and that meant studying their new jobs and meeting the merchants they’d be working with.

The brothers all stood up straight and ran to join Ellie and the others.

## To the East of Iluk Village—Dias

First came Alna with the baars, then the twins and Aymer, and finally Ellie, Seki, Saku, and Aoi. We all got into our wagons and were ready to go. All the grandmas, the dogkin, Sahhi and his wives, and Narvant and his family came out to see us off and tell us to have a good time. Some of them shouted for us to bring back some souvenirs…and I'm pretty sure I heard Sanat shout for us to bring back a lot of booze too.

Hubert, Uncle Ben, and all the baars staying in the village came out a little later. Uncle Ben flashed me his shortsword and gave me a grin that said he'd keep the village protected while we were away. He was the acting domain lord while I was gone, and Hubert was his second-in-command. With those two at the helm, I knew I didn't have anything to worry about. To be perfectly honest, I thought it was possible that Uncle Ben might even do a much better job of overseeing things than I did.

I was thinking about that while all the villagers shouted "Safe travels" and "Take care" and "Have fun!" I looked out at all the villagers and replied:

"See you soon!"

I got settled on the driver's seat, took the reins, and followed Kamalotz's caravan east to Mahati and to Eldan. Our wagon had a tarp roof over it, and we'd tied our banner—sporting the Baarbadal crest—to the side of it, where it flapped in the wind. Alna and the others were relaxing in the back of the wagon while we rumbled along over the makeshift road between Baarbadal and Mahati.

Kamalotz's two carriages were in the front just ahead of our wagon, and Ellie's took up the rear. The nice thing about the hood over our wagon was that it wasn't heavy, so it wouldn't tire the horses. Not that it mattered just now; we didn't have all that much luggage, so the horses trotted along nice and easy. Ellie's wagon was carrying a big load, but even her horses didn't look to be struggling in the slightest. We all trundled along peacefully, and occasionally I checked on Alna and the girls to make sure they were comfortable.

One reason that Ellie's horses weren't tired was because she

didn’t have any passengers—she’d told the lostblood brothers to ride with Kamalotz, and that’s what they’d done. As for why, she’d wanted them to get to know Kamalotz and to learn more about Mahati. Kamalotz and his people were all fairly high-ranking individuals, so it was important for everyone to be on good terms.

It was also really important for the brothers to know just what a place Mahati was and what to be careful of while they were there. After all, as far as Ellie was concerned, their work had already begun.

We rolled through the grasslands, and eventually the forest came into sight. We went on ahead, of course, as our path ran straight on through. Eldan and his crew had cut their way through the trees long ago, but now it was looking more like a proper road. It was wide enough for Eldan’s personal carriage to travel along, which meant it was easily wide enough for our wagons too.

Naturally, as soon as we entered the forest, the twins got all excited and were enjoying the fact that they didn’t have to do any walking. Francis and the baars, too, started bleating at the new sights. They were asking the twins about this and that and what they were looking at, and the twins leaned out the sides, pointing as they answered the questions.

“Make sure you don’t fall, girls!” I called.

“Okay!” cried the girls in unison.



Alna made sure she was close to the two of them and wrapped her arms around their waists to support them and make sure they didn't lose their balance. Funnily enough, this only made things *more* fun for Senai and Ayhan, and they got even *more* lively. And it was with this spirit of chatter and laughter that we noticed some of the dogkin working under Klaus come running over.

"Lord Dias! Welcome!" said one.

"Welcome to the forest border station!" said another.

"We're doing our best out here!" said a third.

"Watch out when you're out in front of the wagon," I said as they ran circles around us.

We kept our pace as the border station that Klaus and his guards were building came into view. They were putting their hearts and souls into it, and it was so much more than I'd been expecting. It had sharpened logs sticking out of the ground like pillars, and it had walls secured tightly to those pillars with rope, which in turn made for a solid support for a very impressive wooden gate. Past the gate and a little ways off the road were the yurts that Klaus and his people lived in, a few huts they'd made, a privy, and a well. They even had a simple stable for the horses to rest in.

"Wow," I exclaimed. "I never imagined you'd have built something so impressive so quickly. I know you're planning to replace this with a stronghold eventually, but you've already gone above and beyond here."

I couldn't hide how awestruck I was by it all. Kamalotz gave us the signal to slow down and brought his horses down to an easy trot. I followed suit, and after a time we came to a complete stop. As it turned out, there were dogkin waiting by the side of the road for that very moment, along with some of the laborers Klaus had hired from Mahati. They dashed out, unhitched our horses, and took them to the stables to rest. But that wasn't all; when the dogkin returned they jumped right into doing maintenance on our wagons and carriages. They looked like they had things totally under control, so I headed over to a hut where Klaus and Canis were waiting for us.

"Klaus!" I said. "Look at all this great work you've done in such a short time! It's even more than I could have hoped for."

Klaus and Canis were beaming.

"Yep!" said Klaus, speaking for everyone at the station. "We're

a long way from being finished, but we've at least managed to get it on track! Next we'll build watchtowers and put some proper work into the rest area. The plan is to make sure the facilities are good enough that people will be happy to pay a toll to pass! Down the line I'd like to start reinforcing the place with stone, but...that's a while out."

The border station wasn't just going to manage the flow of people coming and going from the domain; it would also be a place for the collection of taxes and toll fees. Upon paying said fees, visitors would essentially become guests of Baarbadal, and our dogkin would treat them the same way we'd been treated upon our arrival. That meant visitors had the right to safety, security, a resting place for their horses, and cart maintenance.

Well, that's how it was explained to me, anyway.

The money we received from taxes and such would go towards maintaining the road between Baarbadal and Mahati that was yet to be built, and also constructing facilities along the way to Iluk—more rest areas and wells and such. The way Klaus put it, if we didn't make it worthwhile, then nobody would want to visit Baarbadal in the first place.

Given our present state, and regardless of whether we had a border station or not, Baarbadal wasn't going to get any visitors save for the curious and the eccentric. But when we started gaining some renown for our baar wool, and when our population grew even bigger, that would make our home a worthwhile visit for merchants. In turn, that would mean we'd see a whole influx of visitors.

Well, that's how it was explained to me, anyway.

In any case, that's why we'd have our border station, our highway, and our rest area. Klaus and his gang were working around the clock to make it happen, and I was all but certain that they were going to do a bang-up job. By the time we had people coming to Baarbadal, I didn't think they'd have any complaints.

Once we'd finished talking about the border station, Klaus and I discussed recent events, and I made sure he wasn't having any issues or lacking in anything he needed. While we were chatting, Alna and Canis got lost in their own conversation, and the twins took the baars out to explore the immediate area.

"We're going to teach them which grass is good to eat and which grass will make them sick," said Senai.

"But the forest is full of delicious grass!" added Ayhan.

I didn't really see a problem with it as long as they didn't go far. They also had plenty of supervision with Aymer and the dogkin accompanying them, so we whiled the time away and made sure all of our horses were well rested.

Kamalotz told us that once the horses were happy and ready to go, we'd leave the border station, pass through to the other side of the forest, and head for a roadside inn, where we were scheduled to stay the night. There was no need to rush to Merangal, where Eldan was, so the idea was that we'd take things slow and really enjoy our vacation. We could have rushed there if we'd wanted, but we only would have ended up pushing all the horses too hard.

In any case, there really wasn't any reason to hurry, so we were all happy to go along with Kamalotz's proposed schedule. We'd give ourselves a nice, long break.

The horses got their fill of food and water, and then it was time for us to get back on the road. The twins happened to come back right around that same time. They were full of life and looked like they'd had a blast exploring the forest. Behind them were Francis, Francoise, and...

"Bwahuh?!"

...the moment I saw the six baar kids, I let out the strangest of guffaws. They must have found some *really* delicious grass out there, because their mouths were so stuffed they couldn't fit all the grass they'd picked up. Even though they were struggling to chew it all they had smiles bright as the sun, and they tried to bleat about how good it was. But with their mouths still full, all they could say was "Bwaaohmgn," and it was such an unexpected sound that we all forgot about the journey ahead for a moment and broke down laughing.

After all the laughing we got ourselves prepared, said goodbye to Klaus, and entered the Mahati domain. The forest continued for a while even in Mahati, but it was thicker and denser than on the Baarbadal side, probably because Klaus and his people hadn't done any logging out that way.

The farther we went, the more the trees thinned out. Eventually we exited the forest entirely and found ourselves looking at plains on either side of the road. The grass was shorter than what we had where we lived, and there was quite a lot less of it; you could see the dirt. That impression only got

stronger the farther we went.

Eventually we saw a big mountain covered in green trees, and a fast flowing river. It was really unlike anything you'd see in Baarbadal. We followed the road straight through all the sights, and as the sun began to set, we started seeing man-made constructions like small villages, strongholds, and watchtowers made from stone.

Kamalotz's carriage veered off from the road to Merangal and we followed them along for a time. Then a magnificent stone building came into view. At the entrance sat a set of stone gates decorated with beautiful carvings. Within those gates was a sturdy wooden door that allowed for the passage of wagons and carriages. On either side of the gate were walls that looked nigh impenetrable, like something straight out of a proper stronghold. At the ends of the walls were round constructions that looked to me like watchtowers.

*Yep, now* this *is a stronghold.*

Kamalotz and his people went right on through the doors while I was busy staring, and so I hurriedly remembered I had the reins and got our horses to follow after them. Once we were inside the stronghold, though, the view was so much more lavish than anything I might have expected.

Four walls surrounded the place, and rooms had been built into the walls, each of them with balconies and unique archlike windows. It was like a number of box-shaped houses had been lined up and placed on top of each other. I couldn't quite believe my eyes; I'd thought it was a stronghold, but it had dedicated living spaces.

That wasn't all that took me by surprise. In the middle of the stronghold was a central square with a fountain, a pond, and trees and plants all around it. There was even a wide field at the back that looked like it was designed for horses to rest in, along with a finely built stone stable.

I just kept staring and taking it all in and wondering just how much money and work had to go into making such a place. Then Kamalotz began to slow down, and I did the same. When we came to a stop, a bunch of people came running out. I wasn't sure if they worked here or if they lived here, but they were all dressed in robes similar to what Eldan wore. A young dogkin man with black fur came over to us.

"Lord Dias," he greeted me. "Welcome to Caravan Casta,

Mahati's finest roadside inn! We are honored to be hosting *the* heroic savior of our nation, and we're all here to make sure you have a marvelous time! Please leave your horses, wagons, and baggage with us; we're aware you've been traveling for a while, so please relax in the comfort of your rooms! The entire inn has been reserved especially for you and your traveling companions, so you may stay in whichever room you like. The black door past the stables leads to the staff quarters, the yellow door goes to the dining room, the red to the baths, and the blue to the guest rooms. Please be careful not to get mixed up!"

The dogkin gestured with a well-practiced elegance as he explained things. While he spoke, other staff members appeared and ran over to Kamalotz and Ellie and began unloading all of the luggage. Some even ran to the twins to ensure that they alighted safely.

"A roadside inn...?" I uttered, still ogling the place. "*This* is a roadside inn...? All the roadside inns I've ever seen are...well, you know, pretty much houses by the roadside. Ellie and the others said they want to build a roadside inn in Baarbadal, but...could they really mean that they want to make something like *this*?"

I handed the wagon reins to the young dogkin as I stepped off the carriage. Ellie must have heard me as she was walking on over, because she took it as a chance to answer my question.

"No, no, there's no way we can manage anything like this place," she said. "Some roadside inns are indeed built like stone strongholds to protect their guests and their luggage or cargo, but the scope of this place is just beyond immense. Anything like it would look completely out of place in Baarbadal, and besides, we don't *need* to build anything like it. I mean, we couldn't anyway, but still."

I nodded. "Yep."

Ellie was telling me more about the roadside inn when the twins came up to us, their eyes practically sparkling.

"If there was a place like this in Iluk, it would be really popular with everyone, right?!" said Senai.

"Look! There's water flowing up from the ground! How does that work?!"

"That's called a fountain, girls," Aymer explained, sitting on Senai's head, "and it works by utilizing natural forces and water's unique flow, along with a little magic..."

I wasn't sure if the twins were listening to Aymer or not, but

they ran over to the fountain anyway, just bursting with wonder. They couldn't contain their awe. The three lostblood brothers all ran after the twins, and I wasn't sure if it was because they wanted to watch over the girls or if they just wanted to run around with them, but in any case they joined up. They all quickly made the inn feel like a lively, bustling place.

"Hmm... To think there's a building like this out here," said Alna as she alighted from the carriage to join me and Ellie. "There's definitely no way any ordinary bandits would stand a chance against this place."

She fiddled a little with her headband because she still wasn't used to it, then went on.

"By the way, what is all of *that*? Looks like pieces for a box carriage..."

She pointed to a corner of the square—or maybe you'd call it a garden?—in which there really did appear to be carriage pieces. They looked a bit slapdash, because there was no loading bay and no wheels. Not only that, but there were also finely engraved wooden boxes piled up next to the carriage pieces. I figured they were inn supplies or something, but then Kamalotz walked over to explain.

"Firstly, those parts you see are for renovating your wagons. Preparing the interior took longer than we expected, but now that they're ready, we'll install them for you while we're here. The boxes contain changes of clothes. We don't mind if you wear some of it over your usual garb, but we prepared them in the hopes you would wear them to Merangal. Your outfits of course look wonderful on you all, but they're rather...uncommon among the nobility. Eldan is worried that some may look down on you for dressing differently from their expectations, and so he ordered outfits to be prepared."

"Oh, I see. So that's what all that stuff is. Well, I'll put it on tomorrow before we leave, then."

What Kamalotz was saying—in his own kind and roundabout way—was that my clothes weren't really suitable for a member of the nobility. He looked a bit sad and sorry to be the one to have to tell me, so I was quick to accept it. I sure loved the outfit that Alna had made for me, and above all I'd worn it in so I was really comfortable in it, but...I had to admit, it wasn't the sort of thing a noble wore to a special occasion.

Alna had made my clothes from baar wool and hide, so it was

high-quality stuff, but...yep, it just didn't have the noble flair. Eldan of course had his own circumstances to think about, so it was only natural that, as his guests, we dress accordingly.

Kamalotz accepted my words with his kindly smile, and Alna and Ellie hurried excitedly to the boxes to see what clothes Eldan had prepared for everyone. And I could understand them being curious about the new clothes. After all, there was also the matter of whether they fit or not. I decided I'd just leave all of that in Alna's hands.

Finally, the servants worked to help the baars out of our wagon, all of them looking around with the same sparkly and curious eyes that the twins had had earlier, bleating in awe and wonder at every new sight. The baars were especially enamored with the fountain, and they dashed straight over to it. Francis and Francoise looked puzzled at how it even worked and occasionally bleated scoldingly at their kids, who were trying to drink the water and eat the plants.

All the staff were rather shocked watching the baars, who showed great intelligence in all their actions and bleats.

We all went into the spacious walls of the inn and had a look around. Once we'd seen enough to get a feel for everything—and being that we had the whole inn to ourselves—we decided on a room on the first floor near the entrance.

Inside, the room had carpet covering the floor, with tables and chairs and other finely crafted furniture neatly arranged about it. There was also that same interesting arch shape that I'd noticed when I looked at the rooms from outside. The stone arch wasn't all that high, and I had to hunch over a little to pass through it, but when I did I found myself in a room with a stove in it. It felt completely different from the previous room.

I worked out that the arches essentially acted like doors between the rooms. Past the arch from the stove room to the entrance was an arch that led to some beds, and on the right was an arch that led to a dining room. To the left, however, was a mighty puzzling space indeed.

There wasn't a single piece of furniture in the left room, or any carpet. On the floor was a strange rectangular-shaped space made from brick with a hole in one corner. I rubbed my chin and wondered what this room was for, and that was when the twins came running into the room with Aymer.

“This is a room for bathing,” said Aymer. “You’ll find rooms like this in Eldan’s manor too. I’ve used them a number of times. There’s a metal fitting over the arch entrance where you hang a curtain or piece of fabric for privacy, and then you use the water that is brought to you to wash your body. That water goes down the hole over there and joins the flow of sewer water. The hole is connected to a flow of water underground, so it goes straight to the river.”

“Well now…that is quite the contraption,” I said. “And is that underground water flow a natural occurrence?”

I knelt down by the hole in the floor and tried to peek down to get a better look while Aymer filled me in.

“Oh, no, it’s man-made, just like the wells. It’s probably best to think of the water flow as a well dug sideways. It starts at the mountain, which is the source of water, and travels all the way through the ground to provide drinking water and water for farming. The water pulled from the mountain is a different channel to the sewer water. This ensures that the drinking water stays hygienic and safe to drink.”

She continued, “This place also makes use of wind power, so to speak. The flow of the wind helps to power devices called windcatchers. Look, you can see them on the four corners of the wall. They essentially ‘catch’ strong gusts of wind and send a cool breeze from the basement through to the other rooms. It’s a cooler season at present, so the holes that connect to the wind catchers are closed, but in summer it’s truly amazing how much cooler they make a room.”

“Wow, I see!” I said, smiling.

I said, “I see,” but the truth was I didn’t really understand it…particularly the last part of it. But anyway, I at least knew that in summer the room used the power of the wind to stay cool. I gave up on understanding all the rest of it. That was when Alna walked in with the baars, who were sniffing at the air.

“Ah, so that’s why there are weird holes underneath the carpet and the furniture, then,” said Alna.

For some reason, she had a dagger in her hand.

“What’s with the dagger?” I asked.

I was a little taken aback by Alna openly flaunting a weapon, but she reacted like *I* was the weird one.

“Isn’t it obvious?” she asked. “Kamalotz may have brought us to this place, but whenever you enter a home for the first time,

you owe it to yourself to see if anybody is hiding somewhere or if there are any traps around. You can't overlook a single thing. That means checking in the furniture and under the carpets."

"Once you're fast asleep, it can be hard to snap back to your senses, so you have to make sure you check out your sleeping quarters before anything has a chance to happen. You have to be ready for anything, at any time, so you should never be without your dagger, *ever*."

"We don't have to worry about things as much in Iluk, but the moment you take a step outside of it? You have to keep your guard *up*. I've already told the girls to make sure they've always got their knives close at hand, and while Aymer can't exactly *handle* a knife, she's always carrying an especially durable needle with her. Right? Aymer, where's your needle?"

Alna looked over at Aymer, who held up the leather-bound book she took with her everywhere and tapped it with a hand. In other words, she was letting Alna know that her needle was safely sitting between the pages of her book. Alna nodded, the smile on her face showing exactly how pleased she was.

Alna then moved with the baars to investigate another room, her eyes darting to and fro with the utmost caution. The twins must have felt it too, because they put their hands to the daggers they were both hiding and slunk after Alna.

*Hmm. Being cautious of traps and unwanted guests, huh?*

I'd never really thought about that kind of danger before because I could always feel it instinctively the moment I entered a room. But when I thought about the fact that I had women and children with me, it made more sense to be doubly sure.

*Which means having a weapon I can keep on me in case of emergency...*

My battle-ax wasn't really designed for that kind of thing...and while I figured I could handle things with my bare hands if the situation really called for it, I started thinking that maybe I really did need a weapon on hand.

*And the answer that jumps right out at you is a dagger...*

I'd carried a dagger back during the war because Juha had insisted on it, but I didn't feel really good with a knife. Even when something happened I felt like I ended up fumbling and then just throwing it.

*A hand axe... Huh, now there's a thought. Maybe I should get myself a hand axe that I can carry around.*

I had hand axes on my brain as I took a look around and focused my senses. I felt something in that moment, so I followed my instincts and left our room. I went out to the central gardens and looked up to the top of the wall, where there were walkways. Kamalotz's guards were up there keeping an eye on things, and higher up in the sky above them were a number of doves a bit bigger than the usual size… When I squinted my eyes I noticed that they were dressed, which meant they were probably friends of Geraint, the dovekin.

All of the guards and the dovekin let me know that Kamalotz really was putting in the effort to make sure we were all safe. We had the big, sturdy walls all around us, guards on the walkways, eyes in the sky… It was pretty clear that no enemies were going to get to us from outside without being spotted.

But even when I turned my focus to within the inn's walls, all I noticed was the inn staff rushing about hurriedly. None of them were moving in any way that was suspicious, and none of them had a strange aura about them… In fact, the only thing I got a real sense for was the delicious scent of spices as they were cooked from somewhere off in the distance.

I let out a sigh of relief. I knew now that there really was nothing to worry about. But as I made to head back to our room, one of the dovekin noticed something. Then one of the guards on lookout caught the same thing. Both of them looked a bit panicked. Seeing them put me back on guard, but something was off about it all.

The guards on the walkway weren't acting as if they'd seen an enemy. They weren't shouting to anybody within the walls to indicate anything dangerous; they were just staring off into the distance, wide-eyed and without words for what they were seeing. These were guards who sometimes even acted as Eldan's bodyguards, and so when Kamalotz saw how flustered they were, he raced up the stairs to check on things himself.

The guards started pointing, and then Kamalotz was suddenly just as flustered as all of his guards. He practically jumped down the stairs and came racing towards me.

"L-Lord Dias!" he exclaimed, panting to get his breath back. "My humblest of apologies, but it would seem we have a guest arriving most unexpectedly!"

"Who in the world could arrive so unexpectedly that it would ruffle *your* feathers, Kamalotz?" I asked.

“It’s Lady N-N-N-Neha!” he replied. “Eldan’s mother is on her way here in her personal carriage! We’ve known for some time that she was most eager to make your acquaintance, but never did we think she’d be so bold about it… She would have had all the time in the world to meet and speak to you tomorrow, after all…”

Kamalotz’s arms were trembling as he spoke. I had heard from Eldan himself that his mother was a wonderful person who was hearty and generous, if a little too free-spirited. Thinking about it that way… Yep, she was exactly as Eldan had described.

“Well, uh…if Eldan’s mother wants to visit, then we don’t mind,” I said. “We were going to meet her tomorrow anyway, but I guess we’ll just meet her earlier. That’s that.”

Kamalotz looked at me then with a smile I’d never seen before. It was like my answer had saved him from something.

“In, uh, in which case, we must get ready to welcome her to the inn, so please excuse me!” And with that, Kamalotz disappeared through the inn’s yellow door. I decided to head back to our room to let Alna and the others know what was going on.

The roadside inn gates opened, and Kamalotz and all his men panicked to line up neatly. They were just in time, because a grand carriage rolled in as soon as they got in place. It was a beautiful piece of work, painted entirely white, from its roof and its walls to its windows and even its wheels. It came to a gentle stop before Kamalotz and his guards.

The guards who had been running alongside the white carriage opened its doors, then removed some stairs from the back of the carriage and placed them before the doors. Soon after, a large elephant-like—no, *elephantkin* woman came walking down them, the steps creaking under her weight.

The woman had a large trunk and ears just like Eldan’s. Her hair was tied up at the top of her head, and she wore an incredibly gentle expression that showed great intellect and consideration for her own strength. She was dressed in a showy red dress decorated with golden embroidery, she wore great big earrings, and she had a long shawl across her shoulders. Her big leather shoes, which were inlaid with gold, were a beautiful match for her big legs.

“Ah, I see it,” said Alna. “Eldan inherited her eyes.”

We were both standing behind Kamalotz and his guards. Senai and Ayhan were blown away by the whole package—the carriage and the dress—and they couldn't tear their eyes away from Neha. The baars, meanwhile, couldn't really muster any enthusiasm, so they yawned and took to grooming themselves.

"Lady Neha, thank you ever so much for making the trip all this way. However, what reason could have—"

Before Kamalotz could finish his greeting, however, Neha cut him off.

"Kamalotz, given your age, I'd much prefer it if you stopped going on all these outings and simply stayed by Eldan's side. However healthy you may have gotten of late, people have limits. You are to take things easier, whether by Eldan's side or with your family. You've people around you who can handle your duties now, no? Isn't it time you left things in their trustworthy hands?"

Kamalotz was left speechless, but Neha left him and went on to the next people in line.

"Oh, it's been such a long time, hasn't it?" she said. "For some reason or another I haven't seen any of you in a while... Keral, I've heard that since you got engaged the sense of relief has left you slacking when it comes to how well you actually treat your better half. Hardly admirable behavior. Karnata, how many times do I have to tell you that too much liquor is bad for both body and mind? When will you learn? Andora, you'll never find a partner if all you care about are dancing girls. You're a grown man, so act like one. Kralge, you call yourself a watchman? It took you far too long to notice that I was coming, wouldn't you say? I think we can both agree that you weren't paying attention."

"Oh, come now, don't give me those looks! You think I *want* to be saying all of this in front of our esteemed guests? It's because you're all *avoiding* me that I have no choice—no choice!—but to say this the moment I am given the opportunity. Each and every one of you is the face of Mahati, and a mirror to my son Eldan. I expect you to act like it!"

All of those who'd felt the direct touch of Neha's wrath were, just like Kamalotz, rendered speechless and left staring at their feet. When none of them offered her even a single word, Neha motioned for them all to get out of her way. Kamalotz and his guards split neatly in half, allowing Neha to approach us.

“How dashing, how brave, how commanding and well-built you are! You are exactly like all the stories I’ve heard! It’s like you’ve stepped right out of my dreams and straight into real life! How *wonderful* it is to finally meet you! Why, I feel as though I should thank the fates themselves! It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Lord Dias—no, Duke Baarbadal. I am Neha… Neha Mahati, the mother of Eldan, Duke of Mahati, who governs these lands. Words cannot express how delighted I am to meet you.”

Neha was clearly filled with deep emotions, and they flowed from every step she took and every word she spoke. She smiled kindly, her eyes moist with the tears that made her many thoughts clear.

In return, I put a hand to my chest and introduced myself as the Duke of Baarbadal. Then Alna introduced herself as my fiancée; Senai and Ayhan as my children; Aymer as their tutor; Seki, Saku, and Aoi as my attendants; and the baars as…well, baars. Neha’s joy only seemed to grow with each introduction.



“Oh, I’m so happy. I’m *beyond* happy. What could be more joyful than this? Not only am I able to finally meet *the* Lord Dias, I get to meet his family and my neighbors. Now that I know my boy is blessed with such good company, I can rest easy. Alna…may I touch your face?”

Alna’s head tilted curiously, but she gave her permission. Neha wrapped Alna’s face in her two hands and then touched her cheeks with her own as if it were a common greeting. Then she knelt and did the same to the twins before collecting herself.

“And blessings to all of you,” she said.

I didn’t know what any of it meant, but it looked like something special, because Kamalotz, his guards, and Neha’s guards were all a bit flustered having to watch. Neha then turned to them all with a sharp gaze.

“Kamalotz, what exactly do you plan to serve our esteemed guests for dinner this evening?” she asked.

Kamalotz stood up straight.

“We are in the middle of preparing the very best that this roadside inn has to offer,” he answered, his voice shaking with his nerves.

“The *roadside inn’s* best? No, that won’t do. It won’t do at all. I won’t stand for anything less than the *domain’s* best. First impressions are everything, and if we make any misstep here it’ll follow us around like a horrid stench.”

“Honestly, I don’t believe it… I came out all this way because I had a bad feeling, and it looks like I was right on the mark. Ready some pots for me; I’m going to have to do this myself. I’ve already prepared the spices and the meat—I’ll need only the vegetables you were going to use. I’m going to get started immediately, so let everyone know.”

“Yes, my lady,” replied Kamalotz. “However…exactly how much meat did you prepare…?”

Kamalotz looked hesitant to ask, but he looked over at Neha’s carriage. There were a number of bags strapped to the back of it, but it was obvious that they all contained clothing and accessories. They weren’t the sorts of bags one carried meat in, and even if they were, it would never be enough to feed everyone.

“The meat will arrive shortly,” Neha replied calmly. “We happened across someone on the way here who was looking after some very quality livestock. I asked them to dress it all and

bring it here for us. And yes, I paid them generously for their efforts, so don't go worrying yourself about *that*. Being that it was all very sudden, I paid them double the usual market rate. Naturally, we didn't have time to stop at any markets on our way here, so we couldn't acquire any vegetables. But I'm certain that *you* did, didn't you? I'm going to make use of them."

Kamalotz was downright lost for a little bit, but he pulled himself together and marched calmly to the kitchen, issuing orders as he went. Once Kamalotz was on the move, so was everyone else. Neha nodded happily at the group going about their business, then turned to us.

"Lord Dias, I'm certain you must be famished after your long journey all the way here, but please wait just a touch longer. I intend to serve you a mountain of food flavored with spices I put together myself. It will be warm and delicious, and it'll blast any and all that ails you to another dimension. Alna, Senai, Ayhan, you're all truly lovely ladies with wonderful skin, but you *do* look a touch thin. Make sure to eat up and eat well so you become well-rounded beauties. Oh, and for you baars we've already prepared a most wonderful fodder. You're going to love it. Eldan and Kamalotz have told me all about *all* of you, and I haven't forgotten a thing."

Neha then flashed a smile that reminded me of a gentle mother regarding her children and rushed off to follow Kamalotz into the kitchen. Just like that, the air calmed and everything grew quiet. As the dust began to settle, so to speak, Seki—who had been silent this whole time—spoke up.

"No *way* did I think we'd meet an elephantkin out here," he said, a certain nervousness in his tone.

Me and Alna turned to him with curiosity written all over our faces. Seki rushed to cover his mouth, then apparently made up his mind about something. He gestured to his brothers to keep an eye out for people, then came up close and spoke in a low voice.

"In the Beastland Kingdom, elephantkin are...*special*," he whispered. "They're like nobility. They're big, they're powerful enough to overwhelm virtually anyone in a melee, and their skin is so thick it deflects arrows. At the same time, though, they have bigger, gentler hearts than anybody else. The Beastland Kingdom doesn't have an aristocracy like the kingdom here, but even then elephantkin are seen differently. They're revered."

I nodded and thought, *Well, I guess that's a thing.*

"In any case, what say we head back to our rooms for a bit?" I offered.

And that's exactly what we did. We took things easy while we waited for dinner, and eventually one of the inn staff came to get us. We followed them through the bonfires lighting the way through the central gardens and headed for the dining room.

The dining room was especially huge—maybe two or three times bigger than any of the guest rooms—and in the middle of it was a beautifully made stone table surrounded by chairs. On top of the table were equally impressive candleholders and flower vases, and the vases were of course filled with stunning flowers. You couldn't help but just stare at it.

"In this region, it's very common for people to lay out carpet to use instead of chairs," explained Kamalotz, who had been waiting for us at the door, "but this inn is accustomed to serving a variety of visitors from all across the lands, and so they designed this dining room in the manner of the kingdom's east. This is true of many of Merangal's inns and drinking establishments, but once you leave the main city, the people are more used to eating either sitting on a carpeted floor or otherwise standing. Please keep this in mind if you're ever traveling throughout the region."

He led us to a table and seated us in order: me, Alna, the twins, Aymer, Ellie, and then the lostblood brothers. The baars were brought to a carpet that had been prepared close to the table, on which they happily folded their legs underneath their woolly bodies and got comfortable.

As soon as we were seated, Neha appeared carrying a steaming pot. She put it on the table, and then began serving our food. The way she did it let her work at blistering speed, and it was flustering to watch; not only were Neha's hands whipping quickly back and forth with the food, but her trunk also dexterously wrapped around utensils and other things to set the table. Her trunk was longer and more powerful than her hands, and it didn't have to worry about joints either. It was dizzying just trying to keep track of it.

Usually, preparing food for so many people was a more time-consuming affair, but seeing Neha serve our food made me think that she'd probably made use of her trunk when it came to cooking it too. That extra limb, so to speak, probably let her work

faster than anybody with just two hands at their disposal.

"I have prepared for you all a stew with vegetables, meat, and fruit," Neha announced when she was done. "I also simmered rapeseed oil, honey, melon, apples, apricots, grapes, and sour mandarins to prepare a sauce to go with it, and the spices have all been prepared personally."

She beamed happily as she went on.

"I only added a little water to the stew in order to bring out the natural juices of the meat and vegetables. The bread will be ready shortly, and it tastes divine with the sauce I mentioned. Now please, eat up!"

The look on her face, and her eager gaze, told us all that she was excited for us to try what she'd made and tell her what we thought of it. While Neha had been serving our food, Aymer had been served a selection of nuts and berries, while the baars had all been served their fodder. We nodded our thanks, picked up our cutlery, and started to eat.

"Wow, this is great," said Alna. "It's not even all that spicy considering all the spices. The sauce, too, is a wonderful mix of sweet and sour."

"Yeah, it's delicious all right," I replied. "I didn't know you could use spices like this."

The twins, who weren't especially good with spicy foods and were a little hesitant about their dishes, heard Alna's comment and gingerly tried out what they'd been given...

"This is amazing!" cried Senai.

"Super delicious!" cried Ayhan.

"Very tasty indeed," added Aymer.

The baars, too, took this moment to bleat their approval. Ellie, meanwhile, remained silent as she elegantly ate from her own plate, whereas the lostblood brothers were all filling their stomachs with such speed you might have thought they couldn't eat fast enough.

As she watched us all enjoy every bite, Neha's smile grew even wider. She went back and forth between the dining room and kitchen, bringing out white flatbread, fruit juice, and wine. She did not for a moment sit to try any of the food herself and was constantly making sure that we were all being served appropriately.

I don't know quite how to put it, but...I felt just like I had as a child, when my mother was looking out for me. My mother and

Neha weren't anything alike, not in body or in looks, and there wasn't any one thing you could point to that linked the two, but even then Neha had a certain something that reminded me of my mother. It made me feel a sensation deep down, and I could see that it had the same effect on Alna and the twins, because when they finished their meals, they had the same look in their eyes that I did.

Neha smiled kindly at us all, and then instead of going to the kitchen, she slipped out to the gardens, to where her carriage was. When she came back, she was carrying a big wooden box. The box was decorated with jewels and shut tight with a big lock. It was reinforced with steel here and there, and so well-built that if you wanted to force the thing open, you'd probably need my axe. It seemed pretty clear to me that the box held something important.

"Today is a special day, and I have prepared a commemorative gift for you in the hopes that you will never forget it," announced Neha. "That said, the item in this box is something that my son and I found in a lake whilst bathing. Nonetheless, I feel certain that you, Lord Dias, are a man capable of making use of it."

"Oh, and please rest easy! I made sure to get Eldan's permission when getting it ready. Yes, I'm talking to you, Kamalotz! Wipe that look off your face! Even *I'm* capable of at least that much consideration!"

Whatever face Kamalotz was pulling, we couldn't see it with him standing behind us near the baars. But Neha shot him a glare, then walked to my side. She deftly unlocked the lock on the box with her trunk and opened it to show a golden axe about the size of a knife.

It was a hand axe...I think. The handle was thin like a plate and curved. The blade, too, was as thin as the handle, and it had a unique curvature, poking upwards as if the entire axe were trying to form a circle of sorts. There were also three holes near the edge of the blade and a roaring catlike beast carved into the handle.

"That wild beast is called a tiger," said Neha. "Based on the weapon's unique shape, it appears it was made for throwing, but neither my son, Kamalotz, nor I could wield it effectively. But as I said, I am certain that you can master it, Lord Dias."

And with that, she angled the box so the axe faced me and urged me to take it in hand. I did just that, and when I did I felt

that strange sensation…the one I got when I held my battle-ax. It was a strange feeling that I was now very used to.

“Ah…” I muttered.



At that exact moment, Alna clutched my shoulder.

"Dias, not here!" she hissed. "Not while we're indoors! If that thing erupts like the wand, you'll blow the roof off this place!"

She'd read me like an open book and quickly reminded me of our fire starter. I nodded, my shoulders tense, as I focused on not letting any of my energy flow into the axe in my hand. The twins, however, had heard Alna say "erupt like the wand," and because they knew what she was talking about too, their faces filled with excitement.

Aymer and Ellie had also cottoned on to what was happening, and their glares were easy to read. *Don't you dare even think about it*, they said. The lostblood brothers, meanwhile, sat puzzled, because they had no idea what was going on.

A strange tension filled the dining room, and it was then that Francoise frowned and bleated something I guessed was roughly *"Best to know what you're dealing with, so go outside and give it a test."*

That made sense to me.

"I'm going to get a feel for this," I said as I headed outside.

Pretty much the whole inn came outside too, and they watched as I settled myself in the middle of the central gardens. All the guards on the walls were drawn in by the commotion and they watched as I lifted the hand axe up and sent my energy flowing into it.

But...nothing happened.

Well, that's not entirely true. The blade did seem to glimmer, but that was it. There was no fire like with the wand and no mending like with my battle-ax. For a second I wondered if the problem was that Alna hadn't put any of *her* magic into it, but then I got a strange feeling from the axe, like I wasn't using it properly.

I stared at the axe for a time, and then I remembered what Neha had said about its design. The axe was made for throwing. So I made sure I wasn't going to throw the axe at Alna, the others, or anybody patrolling on the wall and let a little more energy into it before giving it a light throw.

The axe reflected the light of the moon and the bonfires as it arced through the air...and then, unbelievably, came right on back to me.

"Whaaat?!" I cried out in surprise.

I reached out my hand and caught the axe upon its return. I

couldn't believe that I'd done it. I knew that thrusting my hand out towards a spinning blade was dangerous, and irresponsible to boot, but...it hadn't felt to me like the axe was spinning all that fast, and I'd been able to see the handle clearly thanks to the light of the fires. I'll tell you what, it was easier than catching a rain of arrows, that's for sure.

With the axe back in my hand, I tried throwing it again, this time with way more power. But just like the first time, it came right on back to me, like it was the most natural thing in the world. I tried it again, and again, but the results were always the same. Then I had an idea and decided I'd throw the axe at the ground. I found a section of earth where it wouldn't matter if the axe sunk into it, and that's where I launched it.

The axe stabbed into the ground, just like you'd expect, but then after a moment, when I sent a message from my mind for it to come back to me, it spun right back to my hand. I couldn't work out how it did it, but it did it.

Throwing the axe through the air and having it come back was one thing, but having it return from the ground was another thing entirely. I was shocked, Kamalotz was dumbstruck, and it knocked the socks off all the guards. Neha, however, looked supremely satisfied.

"I knew it..." she said. "I *knew* the heroic savior of our nation could do it."

Now that I had a strange throwing axe that, for reasons unknown, would return to me no matter what, Alna was the happiest person in the entire inn.

"Think about it!" she said. "That battle-ax of yours is no good on horseback. But with this new throwing axe you can hold the reins and still fight! You can even use it from the driver's seat of a wagon!"

Alna was smiling from ear to ear, and as soon as we got back to our room she took out her leatherworking tools—which she must have packed before we left—and some thread and got to work making a sheath.

"Wow, you brought your tools with you too?" I remarked. "You brought a whole lot, huh?"

I was brushing the baars in the bathroom when I made my comment. Alna was sitting cross-legged on the sofa in the main room.

“Of course I did,” she replied. “How else are we going to mend our clothing or shoes while we’re on holiday? But if I’m being honest, I wanted to bring everything—the yurt and all of our things, I mean. We onikin don’t have a concept of ‘holidays’ in our culture, so when we go somewhere, it’s only natural that we bring everything with us: our yurts, our livestock, our tools, and everything considered valuable.”

She continued, “When you’ve got too much in the way of valuables and you can’t walk with it all, you make it into smaller jewels or gold and silver threading, or otherwise you wear it in the form of hair accessories, necklaces, bracelets, and clothing. Do that, and the moving part of nomadic life gets much easier. If your enemies appear suddenly, it’s that much easier to take all you have and run.”

“There aren’t many homes like that anymore, but…in the past, when the onikin were a wealthier people, everybody had some clothing woven with gold or silver thread. Everybody had jewelry to wear.”

“That, uh… That sure does simplify things.”

“For us, that’s just how things are done. The whole reason we can leave our things in Iluk is because we trust Maya and Uncle Ben. But if I’m being honest, I can’t help feeling antsy and agitated about it all the same.”

“I see…” I responded. “But look, if anything happens, Sahhi and his wives will be here to tell us as soon as they can. Ben’s got his shortsword, and with the cavekin around to back him up, there’s no need to worry. While we’re out here on vacation, try not to worry about that stuff too much. You’ll have more fun if you ease up.”

We chatted like that until I finished brushing the baars. Alna also completed the sheath for my hand axe, and the twins did some studying with Aymer. After a while some of the inn staff arrived with tubs and soap and hot water and whatnot, and we each took our bath in turn. The inn staff had even brought us pajamas, so we put them on and hopped into bed. The twins were tossing and turning because the bed was foreign to them, but I told them stories about the old days and before long we were all off in a world of dreams.

## The Next Morning, in Bed at the Inn

I woke early the next morning as the sun filtered into our room. Alna and the twins were already up and dressed, so I quickly got up, dressed myself, washed my face, shaved, and got ready to start the day. While I was doing that, Alna and the girls looked after the baars and took them outside.

All the inn staff, Kamalotz, and his men were all up and talking among themselves, and right around the time I was getting peckish a person arrived to tell us that breakfast was ready. We all headed to the dining room, and with each step our mouths watered more and more. We were following the aroma of stewed vegetables, spices, and meat. It was a different smell from dinner, but it whetted our appetites in just the same way.

Neha was waiting for us in the dining room with a great big smile.

“Good morning, everyone!” she said. “For breakfast, you’re having hot pots filled with meat and vegetables stewed lovingly and painstakingly over a low flame! This makes the stew very soft and tender, and even those of you with weaker stomachs can still enjoy it!”

Neha had us all take the same seats as the night before, and then she began serving us our meals. Each of us was served a small pot placed on a thick piece of cloth, and when the lids were taken off, we looked down at huge pieces of meat and big chunks of vegetables. The smell of it was just drool inducing. The meat and vegetables were just like Neha had described, and the slow-cooked spices gave it all a beautiful color.

All I could think about was how tasty it all looked, but when I looked over at Alna, I saw she had a different expression. She actually looked apologetic.

“You went to all this trouble for us before the sun was even up… We’re so very grateful,” she said.

Neha, for her part, replied with a gentle smile. It was then that I realized that the only way Neha could have slow-cooked all of these meals was if she’d sacrificed her own sleep. I didn’t know when she’d gotten up to start cooking us breakfast, but if Alna felt the need to say something, then it must have been *real*

early—well before any of us had woken up, that was for sure. Neha had gotten up while it was still dark, and while we were all fast asleep, just to make sure we had a fine breakfast to start the day.

When that fact dawned on me, I said thanks to Neha too. But Neha simply shrugged it off with the wave of a hand, and she urged us to eat. After she'd gone to all that trouble, it would have been rude for us to let the food go cold or to not touch it at all, so I nodded, took my fork in hand, and shoveled some of the meat into my mouth. It was warm and tender, and it was *bursting* with flavor, but at the same time the flavor was very homey. She hadn't used quite as much in the way of condiments compared to dinner the previous evening, and so the natural flavors of the meat and vegetables really shone through.

"So good!" cried Senai.

"Delish!" cried Ayhan.

I looked over at the twins, and that was when I noticed that all of us—right down to Ellie and the lostblood brothers—had different ingredients in our hot pots. The amounts and the ingredients were different for everyone; Neha had taken into account all of our body types and our preferences and prepared us all our own unique breakfasts. I couldn't believe that she'd gone to the trouble of watching us last night and keeping an eye on things so she could tailor breakfast for each of us.

I was still staggered as the inn staff brought out freshly baked bread. But even the bread was tailored to each of our tastes in terms of size and baking style. Neha must have learned about the twins from Kamalotz, because their bread had walnuts in it. I wasn't sure if there was a word stronger than "shocked" to express my amazement, but I was that.

Aymer's breakfast featured all of her favorite nuts and berries, and even the baars were served freshly cut, luscious-looking green grass.

"The bread is very good on its own, but it's just as tasty when dipped in the soup," said Neha. "We'll be serving tea after breakfast, so enjoy it at your leisure and take things easy. Once your stomachs have settled, you can head off for Merangal."

She then added, "Please don't forget to change into the clothes that Eldan provided for you. Kamalotz will be seeing to the renovations to your carriages, so you don't have to worry about a thing. We've also taken the liberty of making sure your

horses were well looked after, but if you find anything amiss or are lacking something, don't hesitate to say the word, and we'll prepare it for you while you're on your way to Merangal."

I sat there with my jaw hanging open in surprise, but Neha only flashed me that motherly smile of hers. Our breakfast thus flew by without any issues to speak of, because Neha and the inn staff were there to see to everything. That included after our meal when we were getting ready to leave, and when we were being told about the new walls and roofs that were being added to our wagons in place of the hoods, and when the horses were being hitched, and even when we were putting on our new outfits.

Senai and Ayhan had fallen totally head over heels for Neha, and Neha made sure to rub her cheeks against theirs in that special way of hers. They certainly didn't look like they were family, but in every other way you could have easily been fooled.

"We'll be heading to Eldan's manor shortly," said Neha, "and I look forward to seeing you there!"

Right up until the very moment we left the inn, Neha made sure that everything was *perfect*.

Our wagon had been transformed into a proper carriage, and it even had seats inside of it that faced each other. Alna placed a cloth over the seat before sitting down herself, and as for the driver's seat, one of Kamalotz's guards was all set to take care of that for us.

I was in the carriage and dressed to the nines; my pants were the same as always, but aside from that I wore a somewhat pointlessly puffy shirt, a black jacket complete with overly lavish embroidery, and very classy leather shoes. To cap it all off, I had a cloak to wear over my upper body. Alna, the twins, and Aymer all had similar stoles in vivid reds, yellows, and greens.

From my belt hung the sheath that Alna had made for me the previous day, and in it was my new hand axe. My battle-ax was also by my side, leaning against the wall, ready for me to wield the moment I needed it.

Most of our luggage was loaded on the carriage roof, or otherwise in the dedicated baggage space, but I had to keep the axe on me because Juha had asked that I do so in a letter he'd written, which had been waiting for me with my new clothes.

In Juha's letter, which was written in the man's unique,

lackadaisical way, he said he wanted to make something of a show of the meeting between Eldan and the heroic savior of the nation. The kicker was, my face and my person weren't really all that well-known throughout the lands. If I rolled up to meet Eldan looking the way I always did, it would take a lot of the impact out of our meeting. People were coming looking for a reason to get excited, and if I was a letdown it would take all the wind out of their sails. For that reason, I'd been given a fancy cloak and told to carry my axe because, unlike me, my axe was common knowledge.

I wouldn't have been all that keen on the idea if I'd been just doing it for Juha, but Eldan had been nothing but helpful to us since I had arrived. I was more than happy to do what was being asked of me if I was doing it for him. Alna and the others were similarly more than happy to help because they knew how good Eldan had been to us.

"So, uh...let me go over this one more time," I said. "First the carriage will stop, and then the driver will open the doors and set the stairs. Then I'll alight from the carriage with my axe and make sure Alna and the twins get out safely. Aymer will either be on my shoulder or in Alna's hands. The baars will remain in the carriage until we enter the manor. Eldan will handle the rest for us, but I can't forget that we'll share a firm handshake and that I should refer to him as Duke Mahati or Eldan, Duke of Mahati."

I read the explanation from the letter Juha had written, and Alna and the twins, who were staring out the windows, glanced my way and nodded before going straight back to sightseeing.

That was another thing about our new carriage; it had glass windows. Great big pieces of fine glass were installed on both sides of the carriage, neatly held in place by solid frames, and you could look right out to the world outside the carriage. That's why Alna, the twins, Aymer, and even the baars were just lost in gazing outside. The six baar kids were all pushing and shoving one another to climb up on the wooden box by my side to get a good view.

Sometimes the baar kids that lost in the struggle toppled from the box and back onto the seat, and sometimes they even fell to the carriage floor. I tried to tell them not to hurt themselves, but I could see by the look in their eyes that they were all far more concerned with getting the best seat in the house, as it were. My warnings went in one ear and straight out

the other.

That said, I couldn't blame any of them. Eldan's domain, Mahati, was completely different from Iluk, and so it felt like there was always something interesting to look at. At first, we simply passed through empty, barren plains like on the road to the inn, but then suddenly the landscape filled with vast plains, forests, grassy fields, huge rivers…and countless other travelers sharing the wide roads with us on the way to Eldan's manor. There were carriages of varying sizes, travelers on foot, travelers on horseback, travelers on donkeys, travelers on oxen; there were so many people and so much to look at.

As I suppose was fitting for Mahati, the place was filled with all manner of beastkin. Some walked with such powerful gaits that the ground trembled with each step, and some raced across the roads even faster than a horse. I could have watched them all day.

All those people couldn't help but be curious of us as well, surrounded by guards in our carriage, our baar banner wafting in the wind. Travelers looked at us in wide-eyed wonder while the twins waved and smiled. They loved being able to interact with the locals.

Our carriage rumbled on past noon, and the farther we got, the more stone and clay buildings we saw by the roadside. There were also outdoor stalls with roofs held up on wooden pillars dotting the way. That was when our driver—a middle-aged man with blond hair—spoke to us. He did this through a special window installed between the driver's side and the carriage interior that could be opened to allow for ease of communication.

"It's been a long journey, but we'll enter Merangal soon. It won't take long to get to Lord Eldan's manor from there, so please make sure you're ready. And I'm sorry to spoil all the fun you're having, but please keep the carriage curtains closed until we arrive at Eldan's manor. Juha wants to build up anticipation among the people, and that means leaving them wondering who's inside the carriage. But not to worry, Lord Eldan or Kamalotz are sure to give you the full tour of the city a bit later."

"Got it," I said.

I untied the curtains and covered the windows. Alna and the twins followed suit, though they did so pretty reluctantly. Francis and Francoise also moved away from the windows and sat down

on a blanket that Alna had placed on the floor for them. The six baar kids, however... Well, they kicked up a right fuss, and they were intent on peeking out the windows through whatever openings were available. Alna and I had to catch them, pat them, tickle them—and when they were least expecting it, we wrapped them in a blanket of baar wool and put them in a basket by Francis and Francoise's side and closed the lid.

The baar kids had all eaten well and drunk their fill of water, and they'd had a bathroom break along the way, and the whole time they'd been bundles of energy. That's why, when we wrapped them in soft baar wool and put them in the darkness of that big basket, they fell fast asleep in seconds. They didn't put up any sort of a fight, and though we couldn't hear what was happening in the basket because of all the noise outside of the caravan, I could practically see all the "zzz"s floating up from it. That made me smile.

After that, we all took to checking our clothes over to make sure we were all sorted. No creases, no dirt, no clumps of baar wool—that kind of thing. We wanted to be ready to alight from our carriage as soon as we were told.

We all felt the carriage start to slow down, and then we heard armor shuffling as guards ran to and fro. Then the carriage came to a halt, and the driver moved from his seat. A little after that, the carriage doors opened. Blinding sunlight streamed inside, and we could clearly hear the excitement of the people outside. I squinted at the light, took my axe in hand, and put my counsel Aymer on my shoulder and tried to look dignified as I stepped outside. I'm not sure if I actually looked stately or not, but I kept my chest out so as to at least try and leave a good impression.

Our carriage had come to a stop in the middle of a wide road, to the side of which was a line of stunning white stone buildings. Surrounding the carriage were a huge range of people all standing along the roadside. I wanted to look at all the people and the city around us, and I wanted to scan the buildings to see which one might be Eldan's manor, but I kept those feelings tucked away and focused on doing things the way Juha had instructed, which meant turning back to our carriage.

I took Alna's hand as she silently and elegantly made her way outside, and the twins, who were so taken by the sights and sounds that they'd forgotten the plan, hopped out of the carriage with great big smiles and eyes sparkling with

excitement. Alna and I made sure they didn't get too far.

Once we were all out of the carriage, the driver put away the stairs, closed the doors, and began leading us towards a great big fortress built from white stone. In front of it were people standing in a line, some in armor and others in formal dress. Juha was there too, dressed in oddly formal clothing himself, and in front of him stood a young man.

The young man was tall, thin, and wiry, but he stood tall and proud. Ellie had already told me, but even so I couldn't quite believe how much Eldan had grown. In fact, I still couldn't believe it even with him right in front of my eyes. He was dressed in his usual formal attire. From his belt he wore a sword in an ornate sheath, and he also had a gold bracelet too.

The driver led us up to Eldan and made it clear that he would handle the rest. We stood still and ready for the next part of the ceremony to start, but the twins, who as I mentioned had forgotten the plan, practically shouted like they didn't even know we were surrounded by masses of people.

"So cool!" said Senai.

"And so pretty!" said Ayhan.

*What are those two girls talking about?*

I wasn't sure, but their voices reached the crowds and suddenly everyone went quiet. An awkward silence filled the air, but not for long. Eldan immediately strode forwards and spoke in a booming voice that was even louder than the twins had been.

"Thank you for the compliments!" he said. "It is an honor to receive such kind words about our city from the daughters of the heroic savior of our nation! Duke Baarbadal, I see you are as healthy as ever..."

The voice didn't sound like the Eldan I knew, nor did the choice of words, but I didn't worry about it; I figured it was because he was in front of his people, and so I accepted his ceremonial greetings with a silent grace. When he'd finished, Eldan beamed and held out his hand, which I shook. Awed voices rose from among the watching crowds, and then people started applauding.

I was a little puzzled by it, because all we'd really done was say hello, but as I was thinking that, all the people behind Eldan started to move, and Eldan led us towards the fortress. As he did, the huge doors to its entrance slowly opened.

“We’ve so much to catch up on,” said Eldan, speaking over the sound of the doors, “so please, let us continue the rest of our discussion inside my manor. Right this way, if you please…”

*This* fortress*…is Eldan’s manor?*

I could scarcely believe it. Alna, meanwhile, looked back at our carriage and our horses. Sensing her concern, the driver rushed over to them, which relieved Alna, who looked at me and nodded. Together, we followed Eldan through the doors and into his manor.

“Long time no see, old buddy old pal!” greeted a jovial Juha, coming up to walk by my side and flashing a dubious grin.

“Indeed,” I said. “You haven’t changed a bit.”

That was my way of saying *you look as devious and free-spirited as ever*, and Juha picked up on that right away. His smile twisted out of shape just slightly, but he kept pace with me and acted in such a way that anyone watching us would have thought we were close friends.

“In any case, I’m glad to see you looking well,” Juha said. “I know it’s you we have to thank for Eldan’s sudden improved health, and…as your neighbor now, I have a single favor to ask. Oh, and don’t worry at all about your carriage and the rest of your traveling party; Kamalotz is taking care of things as we speak. He’ll have you all together in no time.”

When he was sure we were out of earshot of the crowds outside, he lowered his voice and went on.

“Listen. I’m new here, and I’m a human, and that puts me in something of an inferior position among the top brass. But the people here are grateful to you, they respect you, and some of them are even in awe of you. So look, even if it’s merely for show, can you act like we’re friends? My reputation is at risk here.”

I felt a kind of disgust hearing him out, but Alna had been listening even though she’d also been gazing at the manor grounds and keeping a tight hold of the twins’ hands to make sure they didn’t get lost.

“If that’s all he’s asking, then why not?” she said. “Do that, and we’ll have him on our side when we need him.”

Juha broke into a smile and spun to look back at Alna.

“Yes, yes,” he said loudly. “As your wife has said, I’ll do everything in my power to ensure that you aren’t inconvenienced during your stay. Leave it to me!”

That didn’t sound like the Juha I knew—not a single word

sounded like it belonged in his mouth. I felt a shiver down my spine, but Alna responded with a smile even brighter than Juha's.

"Well, that sounds most wonderful," she responded enthusiastically. "When we have a little more time, there's a marketplace I'd love to visit. I don't suppose we can ask you to take us there, can we?"

*A marketplace? What's she talking about?*

"Oh, but of course," replied Juha. "I'd be happy to cover the payments for you too."

"My, you'd go that far for us? We're *ever* so grateful. I was just thinking that I'd love to get a few more horses like our Balers… Your assistance would be *most* helpful."

Then Alna took me by surprise. I thought Juha felt the same, because his smile froze. A moment later, I noticed it twitching.

"More importantly," said Alna, "best keep your eyes ahead, Dias, or you'll miss the wonderful view."

I turned my gaze back around just as we passed through another gate, then through a dim corridor. Eldan's fortresslike manor wasn't unlike the inn we'd stayed at the previous night, but the scale and the construction were on another level. The pillars in the corridor, the floors and ceiling, all of them were decorated with intricate carvings that felt leagues above what the inn had to offer.

The walls and floors were made from a different kind of stone too, likely something very high quality. I figured they used incense as well, because the air had a pleasant scent about it. Even the breeze that drifted through the corridors felt new in its own enjoyable way.

We exited the corridor into a courtyard garden. But to be honest, it was such a near-otherworldly space that the word "garden" just didn't do it justice. There was a gorgeous, extravagant fountain that completely outdid the one we'd seen at the inn, and it was surrounded by trees and plants in vibrant, vivid colors. There were even plants I'd never seen before. All of them were arranged beautifully and kept extremely well, and it was just breathtaking to look at.

I took the whole place in once more, and though it was built in a similar fashion to the garden at the inn, it was a different thing entirely. A different *world* entirely. Everything was done with such excellence, such beauty, and such care that you could scarcely compare it to anything else.

Eldan must have known I'd feel this awe, and I couldn't help wondering if maybe it was part of his plan. Maybe that was why he'd wanted us to stay at the roadside inn first. In any case, the twins were just as awestruck as I was, and their eyes were about to pop out of their heads. Aymer had been here before, and so she looked the way she always did. Alna wasn't particularly excited either.

"Sir Dias!" Eldan called. "Please come this way! Let's chat over tea!"

He was sitting by the fountain on a lavish carpet. I was still gawking at the gardens as I walked on over to him. That was when we heard the familiar, adorable bleats of the six baar kids, who came bounding out of a different corridor from the one we'd taken. Ellie and the lostblood brothers were with them, and they all joined us. Behind them was Kamalotz, who helped us all along. Me, Alna, the twins, and the baars sat with Eldan, while Ellie and the others sat at a carpet a short distance away with Juha and Kamalotz.

I noticed then that there were guards posted at all the doors and even at the fountain. There were beastkin walking along the open halls of the second floor, which we could see from where we sat. Perhaps it wasn't common for guests to visit from afar, because I could feel we were the subject of all of their gazes.

Above the second floor, on the open roof of the manor, I spotted Geraint and a number of dovekin. Geraint nodded at me when he saw me looking his way. I settled my gaze back on Eldan and flashed him a bright smile.

"I am astounded by this wonderful manor of yours," I admitted. "And look at you, Eldan. I almost didn't recognize you. I haven't been this shocked since I was first sent to the castle."

Now it was Eldan's turn to look surprised, but he quickly flashed me a brilliant smile of his own.

"Thanks for the kind words!" he said. "But I've only been able to strengthen my body thanks to you, Sir Dias. All of us—my wives, my retainers, and of course, me—we're nothing but grateful to you."

"No, no," I said. "You worked hard, Eldan, and these are the results. But the way you spoke when we arrived, that sounded so different from how you usually speak. Did you have to practice a lot for that?"

"Well, just like my body, it's because of you that my voice has

changed. My usual voice came about as a result of my illness; since birth the condition of my throat has made it hard for me to form certain words, and so I spoke in an effort to hide that…which made things quite difficult when I had an audience with the king."

"However, since overcoming my illness and growing stronger…my voice also grew more powerful too. Both, as I said, are thanks to you."

"Oh, so that's it. But why are you speaking to me the same way you always do?"

"Well, I've spoken like this for as long as I can remember, and so it's just a part of who I am now. I've decided to speak this way when I'm with family and those I'm close to."

"Well, that might be for the best. That way you'll always sound like you, Eldan."

Eldan smiled happily, and he looked really glad to hear my thoughts on the matter. From there, our conversation took off. We talked about recent events and Eldan's mother, and then I introduced him to Fran, Franca, Frank, Franz, Framea, and Frannia. I also introduced him to Seki, Saku, and Aoi. Once we'd gotten all up to speed, things calmed and Eldan raised a hand, at which point a woman walked over.

I recognized the woman, having met her once before. She was one of Eldan's wives. This time, however, she wasn't wearing the veil that concealed her features. She was a large-ilk dogkin with big ears and brown fur, but she was a lot different from Canis back at Iluk.

"This is Patty," said Eldan as she took a seat by his side, "one of my treasured wives. I'm happy to announce that she's pregnant. This, too, is thanks to you, Sir Dias, and we are all so very, very grateful. Me, Patty, my other wives, my retainers, all of us have nothing but thanks for you."

I already knew about this on account of Kamalotz and his men having accidentally revealed the news to me, but it wasn't going to do any good for me to try (and fail) to act all surprised. Still, it was something well worth celebrating, so I gave them my greatest, biggest smile.

"That *is* wonderful news!" I said. "I couldn't be any happier for you. Congratulations to the both of you. I'll be praying that you give birth to a healthy, happy child."

It wasn't Eldan or Patty who spoke next. Instead, the twins

leaped to their feet and ran over to the soon-to-be parents.

"Congratulations!" they cheered in perfect unison.

Senai and Ayhan brought out some neatly folded fabric and passed it to Eldan and Patty.

"This is a gift!" said Senai.

"We worked really hard to make it!" added Ayhan.

Eldan and Patty were surprised at the twins' sudden announcement, but they smiled and gave their thanks. Patty took the fabric and opened it. It was a piece of embroidery that the girls had made, and the image was one I was very familiar with—it was the same baar that flew from the banner attached to our carriage. Under the baar's face, they'd also woven a message: *Congratulations!*

Eldan's big news was supposed to be a secret, but the twins already knew about it. I could tell by the contented smile on Alna's face that she'd known too. I wasn't sure exactly when the girls had found the time to make their gift, but perhaps they'd already had the baar face done and only had to add the message to it. Maybe they'd found time during our breaks or while we were at the inn to make it with Alna's help.

"Oh my, this is so adorable," said Patty. "It's a picture of one of your baars."

She beamed as she opened the fabric to show Eldan, and it was then that a very familiar-looking leaf dropped from it onto Eldan's knee. The moment Eldan and I saw it, we both cried in shock.

"Wha?!"

I knew the shape of that leaf, and I bet Eldan knew its scent. We knew what we were looking at, but Eldan was quick to compose himself, scooping the leaf up and, without any panic whatsoever, putting it in the fabric and folding it neatly.

*That's a sanjivani leaf.*

It was smaller and a more vivid green than the ones I'd seen before, which meant it had probably grown during the spring. I remembered then that the twins were growing a sanjivani plant in their garden. I had kind of forgotten all about it, or at least never really paid the matter any mind, but the twins must have been growing it diligently and brought a leaf today for Eldan and Patty.

That said, it wasn't a bad thing at all, and actually it was really good if the end result was making sure Patty was healthy during

her pregnancy. Being that it was such a big gesture, though, I sure did wish the twins or Alna had mentioned something to me beforehand. Then again, I knew that the sanjivani would shrivel up the moment it was used for money or personal gain, and I'd already decided to leave its use in the hands of the twins, so I guess all was well that ended well.

"Thank you so much for this wonderful present," said Eldan. "We owe you two much thanks for the last time you helped us, and our gratitude for you two is endless. In return, we are going to treat you like princesses while you are in our care."

Eldan smiled his friendly smile, but a thin line of sweat ran down his brow while he spoke. He raised his hand once more to signal to his people. At the order, his lavish tea set—which I'd seen a few times now—was brought out along with long, thin slices of bread, roasted meat and vegetables, and plates piled high with fruit. Trays of fresh grass were brought out for the baars, and suddenly the air was vibrant and lively. Perhaps hoping to support the change in mood, Eldan jumped into a new topic of discussion: the flame dragon materials and its magical stone, which I'd entrusted him with.

Eldan explained that his aides had traveled to the capital to deliver the stone to the king. The stone had been offered as a token of thanks for the king's kind decision to allow us a tax exemption...and the king had been terribly pleased with the gift. As it turned out, Eldan had also offered the king a number of gifts to go along with the stone, and as such the jealousy directed at us for our tax exemption had lessened.

At least, according to Eldan.

Eldan told me that there were lots of nobles who were immensely jealous of us, but by offering the king a flame dragon's magical stone, I'd offered him a gift worth far more than the taxes we would have ordinarily paid. This gesture had helped to appease those jealous nobles.

It was well known in the capital that the Baarbadal plains (formerly Nezrose) had no real produce to speak of, or a population, so we couldn't collect taxes even if we wanted to. So although the magical stone I'd sent to the king was damaged, it was still worth far more than anyone could have expected. That and the earth dragon's magical stone more than made up for a three-year tax exemption. Some less trustworthy nobles had actually been considering some kind of harassment, but our gifts

left them with no real reason to do so.

"But Eldan," I said, "that's all well and good for us in Baarbadal, but that doesn't completely solve the jealousy towards you, does it?"

Eldan's domain was far larger than Baarbadal. It had a thriving population and lots of specialty products to boot. Mahati was flourishing, but even then Eldan had been awarded the same three-year tax exemption, which made me think people would be even more jealous of him than they ever were of me.

"Oh, the king worked things out masterfully in that regard," said Eldan with a grin. "The king wants to thank you in turn for the flame dragon materials, but you are so far away, and keeping in touch over such long distances is very difficult. The king has no idea what he could possibly give you."

He continued, "With that in mind, he has ordered that I give you what you want on his behalf, as your closest neighbor. It is both the honor and duty of a duke to act on behalf of the king as necessary, and such orders cannot be refused. This royal decree helps to assuage the nobility because it means I will have to spend a considerable amount of money to meet the king's expectations. I wanted to wait until we had a chance to speak face-to-face to go into this particular matter, and as it turned out, your visit here was the best opportunity."

Eldan thus went into further detail regarding this particular royal decree. An official and direct order from the king was a hefty responsibility, and that meant bestowing a gift or gifts of significant scale and/or value. This was not something that could simply be left to Ellie or Kamalotz, who had traveled back and forth between our domains a number of times, but rather something that had to be discussed between Eldan and myself. We'd share thoughts and opinions, and I'd settle on something that I wanted.

Eldan would then supply me with the gift, but it had to be such a massive gesture that word of it would spread across the lands and all the way to the royal capital without any need for a report.

At least, according to Eldan.

"Now I realize that this is all very sudden," said Eldan, "and that you probably can't think of something right away. So with that in mind, think things through while you're here on your holiday, or even let me know at some point after you return

home. Either way is fine. Once you've sent us word, we'll ready things immediately."

Having laid everything out for me, Eldan chose to take a short break and sip from the cup of tea by his side. That was when Alna decided to take a moment to poke me in the ribs.

"Horses," she whispered. "We want horses. Military horses of good stock that are well trained. The type people would empty their coffers for. This is a prime opportunity to get ourselves those horses."

The twins seemed to catch Alna's words, because their ears twitched and smiles bloomed on their faces. Aymer, who was on my shoulder, also nodded to indicate she thought this was a good idea.

*Horses, huh...?*

Eldan had just sent us six horses as thanks for the flame dragon materials we'd given him, and we'd also just arranged for Juha to buy some for us. Alna was well aware of this, but even then she persisted. When I thought about it, the six horses we had just gotten would probably go to Seki, Saku, and Aoi for their trading journeys, so they would spend a good deal of their time outside of Baarbadal. And given that ordinary horses and military grade horses were different, I figured that maybe Alna was onto something.

Military grade horses were more powerful than their civilian counterparts, they were as brave as they were obedient, and if you issued orders to one they didn't hesitate for an instant; they'd go anywhere, tackle any enemy, and never flinch in the face of danger. Their charge was overwhelming, and even without a weapon you could have them just trample all over your enemies... They'd do it fast, to boot.

"Well-bred horses will give us equally good offspring," Alna whispered. "If we just left them to roam the plains they'd multiply, and then we'd be able to sell them. That would give us another product for the region. The more horses we have, the more we've got in terms of both wealth and power. We could handle even one or two hundred. In fact, even one or two *thousand* wouldn't give us any issues on the plains. Even if we were to have *ten thousand*, taking care of them wouldn't be a problem. That's assuming, of course, that no wolves or monsters get too close."

"Please, Dias, let's ask for horses. Just based on what we saw

of this place on the way here, they've got more in the way of deserted land than they do grassy fields; it's not well suited to breeding horses. So if *we're* the ones doing it, that's a good thing for both us *and* Eldan."

I thought about what Alna had said, and when I looked over at Eldan he offered a very subtle—but also very *clear*—nod.

*Oh, that's right. He's got excellent hearing.*

Which meant that he'd heard all of Alna's whispering, and he was more than fine with her request. That was enough for me, and I was just about to say as much when Ayhan decided to speak up all on her own.

"You're wrong, Alna," she said. "It's not that this place is lacking in grass. It's that they're keeping the grass from growing on purpose. I can feel the power of the earth here, but they're just not letting it grow. Probably it's so the horses can't go walking through those parts of the land. If horses don't have grass and water, they can't last very long. They can't pull carriages, they can't carry your bags, and they'll probably be useless in a fight too."

"Hmm?" I murmured, tilting my head.

Eldan's eyes went wide with surprise, as did his wife Patty's. All the beastkin watching over the meeting started whispering among themselves. Right then, a huge crack echoed through the garden as Juha suddenly slapped his hand against his knee.

"What a shock!" he said, his voice full of genuine admiration, which was rare for him. "Duke Baarbadal's daughter is an incredibly bright one! Horses are indeed very convenient, but they eat lots and they drink just as much! Without nourishment on the road, they quickly lose their usefulness. By intentionally leaving parts of the region arid and by keeping a tight control over our waterways and wells, we can ensure that enemy forces will only approach from a direction that favors our defense!"

He added, "Now, naturally an enemy force could prepare the necessary food and water ahead of time, but that becomes baggage that needs to be carried, and it'll only wear your forces down further. I am beyond impressed. I feel like I've learned a lesson today!"

Something about Juha's manner felt exaggerated and put on, as though there was more to what he was saying than he was saying. That, or he was trying to play things down, and so he spoke up loudly to draw all the attention to himself. Next to me,

Alna’s horn glowed ever so faintly red, and her eyes narrowed as if she’d sensed something.

However, based on how he was acting, I didn’t feel like Juha had anything against us, and he didn’t see us as an enemy. The sense I got was that he’d had no choice but to lie. We’d spent a whole lot of time together, and I knew the guy well enough to know it wasn’t malice behind his words. I turned to Eldan and sat up straight to issue a request on the behalf of our domain.

“Well then, Eldan, I really would like some military steeds, so can I ask that you prepare some for us? As for the exact quality and number, I’ll leave that to you, so just make sure it fits what is expected of a royal decree.”

Eldan nodded and smiled, as did all those around him, and all the whispers that had run through the air just moments ago dissipated, and the atmosphere turned to one that was joyous and bright.

## In a Corner of Eldan’s Lively Garden—Juha

*I don’t believe it.*

*She’s just a kid, so there’s no helping it really, but announcing to a crowd of this many people that you “feel the power of the earth”? That’s just beyond careless.*

*If people were to learn that the legendary forestkin were alive in these parts, that would make for all sorts of trouble, and that’s the last thing we need right now.*

These were Juha’s thoughts as he stood leaning against a pillar in a corner of the gardens, where preparations were being readied for the party’s entertainment.

The twins were those legendary forestkin, with long ears and the ability to feel the energy of the earth itself. Through this sensitivity, the forestkin boasted a certain control over nature, which allowed them to draw medicinal benefits from plant life.

Juha had heard about Senai’s and Ayhan’s ears. He had learned of the fields they grew on the plains and how they had played a part in curing Eldan of his illness. He recognized that the twins were forestkin, but he had kept this fact from Eldan, and so it remained a secret.

*According to an old tome in the castle, the forestkin have incredible powers and can even grow forests at will. They can also, just as easily, make those same forests wither. The area to the south of Mahati is said to have once been a place of lush greenery, but that’s nothing but desert now. Many lived there, but they had incurred the wrath of the forestkin, and the lands turned to sand as a result.*

*I’m skeptical that the entirety of that story is true, but there’s no getting around the fact that the twins are capable of using a plant of myths. That alone makes them very much a handful in their own right.*

The sanjivani had been passed to Dias with a preposterous condition: If it were used with wicked intent, the plant would wither and die. So he had given the plant to his daughters, and it had continued to grow without any signs of decay.

But just who in the world would do such a thing, and for what purpose?

If things tipped in the wrong direction, then the plains, and perhaps even the entirety of Mahati, could be reduced to sand and wastes. This was not entirely out of the realm of possibility, and so Juha remained alert to ensure such a thing did not occur. He thought it wise to find some time to share this information with Dias later.

A small shiver ran down Juha's spine then, so slight that nobody caught it.

*Damn it, this is terrifying. A power far too great for human hands… How could you* not *be scared?*

Juha's face filled with a bitter grin. Dias sat there chatting with Eldan in such a carefree manner that it almost disgusted him. It was then that a figure passed him by, a lionkin dressed in not formal wear but rather leather armor, dyed in blue. He was a young man by the name of Sulio, and something about his expression struck Juha as out of the ordinary.

Sulio was big and strong, with limber arms and legs and the face and mane of a lion. When he opened his mouth, he revealed a suite of large, sharp teeth. He had ears just like a cat, and his upper body was protected by his leather armor. As for his lower body, he wore ordinary pants so as to give him better ease of movement, which in turn made him very quick. His tail drifted through the air from a slit at the back of his pants.

Sulio was easily among the strongest of the beastkin, and when Juha saw the strained look on his face, his first thought was that his target was the twins. He readied himself for anything, then realized that Sulio's glare was in fact directed at Dias. When he noticed this, Juha relaxed, because he no longer cared.

No matter what feelings Sulio held in his heart, and no matter what it was that he was planning, Dias could easily solve things through force, if that was what it came to. A smile crept to Juha's face as he considered the possibilities, and he stroked the chin he was so very proud of.

## Walking Straight for Dias—Sulio

The young Sulio was widely regarded as the strongest of the lionkin, and it was no lie to say that he held in his heart a deep respect for Dias. After all, Dias was the heroic savior of the nation. He was Eldan's friend, and he had even saved Eldan's life.

On top of that, he was powerful in his own right and boasted a body that seemed built beyond the norm for humans.

Sulio was grateful to Dias. Sulio respected Eldan more than anybody else in the world, and not only had Dias given Eldan courage when he most needed it, he had also been the impetus for Eldan to take back his own physicality. To Sulio, Dias was hugely important, third only to Eldan and his family.

This feeling only grew stronger as he watched the man speak, listened to the kindness in his voice, and smelled the generosity that wafted from him. All of these sensations swirled within him along with the strong desire to also *topple* the great Dias.

But this feeling was not driven by hate, nor by a desire to maim or injure.

Rather, it was just what Dias had done. He was the lord of the neighboring domain, and in just one year he had slain dragons. It was this that drove Sulio to feel the way he did.

*You could never understand the depths of our despair during those times…*

*You could not know the filthy stench of that room, or the wretched days of wanting to bite off your own tongue, or the suffering the beastkin endured… The walls of that room were like a symbol for my despair, refusing to yield no matter how I clawed at them.*

*And then, one day, the walls were gone. It was like a literal breath of fresh air. Nothing had ever felt so refreshing. I was filled with a hope the likes of which I had never known…and a hope that you couldn't possibly understand.*

*It was Eldan who gave that to me. It was Eldan who saved us and Eldan who gave us our freedom! His deeds should be echoing across the nation, to the edges of its very borders. Everybody should know his name, should respect him, should revere him…!*

It was only natural that this would occur. It was only natural that Eldan be admired everywhere…but then Dias had appeared. The man who had saved the nation, who had saved Eldan, who slew dragons… He'd even cultivated the grasslands—a feat all had thought impossible.

And all of it had happened right next door to Mahati…which lessened Eldan's achievements and quieted the voices that would have spread his name. The shine he deserved had been overshadowed.

Sulio knew that without Dias, Eldan would not be who he now was. He knew that the fortunate economic climate was thanks to

Dias and the dragon materials he had acquired. He knew this, and yet at the same time he could not accept the reason… He could not bear it. And so he would challenge Dias, defeat him, and make it known that the invincible hero was in fact fallible.

*I do not want to hurt him! All I want to do is see him fall, here on the carpet reserved for guests among the beautiful plants in this garden! All I want is for people to know that he has been beaten and that he is not invincible! Then, with Dias's name dulled, Eldan's glory will have its chance to shine! His merits will be recognized! His name will be known in countries far and wide!*

Sulio marched to Eldan with his resolve clear on his face, though it was Kamalotz who noticed him first and rushed over. Eldan soon noticed the tense manner in which Sulio held himself as well, and spoke up to ask what was on his mind.

Dias's two daughters looked up at Sulio in wonder and with great interest, either because they didn't see lionkin often or perhaps because they were taken by the valiant manner in which his mane drifted on the breeze. Dias's wife sat by her husband's side with her hand gripping something hidden in her outfit, clearly on guard and ready for anything. The woman on Dias's shoulder, meanwhile, let her hair bristle in an attempt at looking menacing.

Dias himself, however, was so nonchalant and jolly that it was infuriating. He held a thin slice of bread in one hand while he asked around as to whether some of the party's entertainment had already begun. In but a single instant, Dias had read Sulio's body language; he knew that the lionkin did not mean to murder or kill anyone. Sulio once again felt a rush of deep respect for the man, but he thrust it out of his mind as he looked Dias straight in the eyes.

"Lord Dias!" he said. "I would be honored if you would allow me a round of wrestling!"

Dias responded with surprise, but with his bread in one hand he put his other hand to his knee and hefted himself to his feet.

"As long as we're just testing one another's strength and we're not out to hurt one another, I'd be happy to," he replied.

This was exactly what Sulio had wanted. He had dreamed of this moment and expected Dias to say exactly what he had. He was so moved by the moment that he trembled, but a moment later he filled the whole of his muscular body with magical power, preparing himself for the test ahead.



## Watching the Central Garden, Surrounded by Cheers—Juha

Eldan's garden was surrounded by his manor, which was crafted from marble. And in a corner of that garden, where the thick grass made for a ring of sorts, Dias and Sulio stood, both men shirtless and locked in a struggle to get a hold of the other's arm. The rules for their match were simple: If either man fell, placed a hand on the floor, or stepped out of bounds, they lost. Hitting, scratching, or injuring your opponent would result in disqualification.

As Dias and Sulio squared off, testing one another's strength, those watching cheered and cried out in support.

*Get him! Throw him! Push where he's weak! Just pick the guy up and toss him!*

Showered with all the cheering, the two warriors smiled—Dias's grin a quiet one, Sulio's bold. Dias's family and friends all stood at the edges of the ring, crying out and cheering like all the other onlookers, while Eldan and Kamalotz sat on the carpet not far from them, far less excited by what was taking place.

*Well, thankfully it's Dias he's dealing with. Dias isn't bothered by this at all. On the contrary, he's enjoying it just as much as the crowd. And knowing Dias, he's not about to go complaining about anything regardless of how things go.*

The crowd went on cheering as Juha mused, enjoying the show without a hint of worry. He let the sight and sound of their battle wash over him as he thought over some other issues.

*I don't think it's bad at all for Mahati's top brass here to see Dias's strength for themselves. He may be called the heroic savior of our nation, but some here have it in their heads that at the end of the day, he's only human. Quite a few, in fact. But if they come to see Dias in a different light, then they'll come to view* me *in a different light too.*

*Frankly, they all take Dias far too lightly. Sulio no less than them. Dias spent twenty years on the front lines of battle; he's a man with a wealth of experience over a long history of war. Sulio may have the physical advantage. He may be stronger, and he may last longer, but until recently he was just a slave, as were many of those around him. He doesn't stand a chance.*

Sulio seemed to prove Juha's thoughts true right before his eyes, as he was slowly pushed backwards by Dias. In a battle of mere strength, Sulio was easily Dias's superior. He was a lionkin, born with incredible strength and a body bigger that Dias's own. He was also at his peak, young and bursting with energy. He ate well every day and continued to work on building his body.

That was why, were it only a matter of raw strength, Sulio would have easily won. But this was a wrestling match. One had to consider where and how to push their opponent, how to avoid their opponent's strength, and how to avoid revealing an opening while looking for one in which to throw the opponent. It was a contest of strategy as much as strength, and so it was far more complex.

For over twenty long years, Dias had been developing combat instincts while in unforgiving war zone after unforgiving war zone, and these instincts had been sharpened to a cutting edge. He was not a man who could be felled through mere strength alone.

While Dias and Sulio were locked together, Dias's one free arm hovered in the perfect location, always ready for the next move. In comparison, Sulio was unsure where to put his own free hand, and so it hovered with clear uncertainty.

Dias looked into Sulio's eyes, saw how he breathed, and felt where he placed his weight and strength. Through this he read what the lionkin was thinking and knew what he was trying to do. But Dias did not think deeply about any of this and instead felt all of it in each moment that passed as second nature. He had never been a man of deep thought, and so he let his intuition take control, elevating him to a level far beyond that of a master of combat.

When Sulio used all of his strength to push Dias back, Dias deftly eased his force. Just as Sulio was thinking to take a deep breath, as he was thinking to ease off and reset himself, Dias saw the opening and responded with an overwhelming strength of his own.

When Sulio tried to push back and assert his own strength once more, Dias relaxed, causing Sulio to tumble off-balance. While Dias was always at ease and in control, Sulio was left unable to relax for even a single moment. But Dias wasn't just calm and collected. He was actively using his advantages over Sulio to keep his breath steady.

*He's not even taking this seriously. He's matching Sulio's pace, either to help the young lionkin rise to a new level or to simply strengthen the people working under Eldan's command. This would have been over a long time ago if that was what Dias wanted.*

*Sulio hasn't noticed, and he's still giving it everything he's got… But no matter what you want to say about it, the problems for Sulio started when he selected the rule set. If he really wanted to win, then his only shot was in making use of the lionkin advantages…which means their claws and fangs.*

*Fighting so as not to injure or kill…it doesn't allow for the lionkin to demonstrate their true prowess. Thinking he could beat Dias while handicapped wasn't just wishful thinking, it was utter stupidity. That said, even in a fight to the death Dias still has* that *in his arsenal…*

Juha's thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the voices that loudly cut through the air.

"Now! Throw him all the way into another domain!"

"Fight, Dias!"

"Go! Push! Push!"

"You mustn't relax your guard even for a second!"

The voices belonged to Alna, Senai, Ayhan, and Aymer. Behind them, and cheering just as loudly, were Ellie, Seki, Saku, and Aoi. Juha watched them as a wry grin spread across his face.

*She doesn't dislike all the commotion, and she's not shrinking away from it either. She's right there, ringside, in the thick of it. Then again, any woman engaged to Dias has to have guts…and she's got guts in spades. They're a good match, I have to say. There's something very cunning about her, not to mention the magic I sense from her. And the two of them have an ace up their sleeves in those two forestkin.*

*Even if Dias wasn't occupying the domain next door, we still wouldn't want to make a hasty move on it. It's best to remain friendly. It's pointless to take it with manpower and tactics just for land and authority. Best instead to make them our allies and make them a part of us that way.*

*Eldan and Dias are both dukes. Their positions are equal. But everything can be neatly tied up if one of them takes a step higher, bringing the other in as a close ally.*

*But a step higher than a duke, huh…?*

*Dias isn't the type to take the throne no matter what. Had things gone differently, he likely would have turned down the position of duke too.*

*But if Eldan were to…*

Right then, however, a roar echoed through the air, louder than even the watching crowd. It was Sulio. At every attempt he'd been bested, his position weakened, and one more step back would see him lose. Up against the ring's edge, he brushed Dias's arms away so they were no longer grappling, and he rushed at Dias with his claws out and his teeth bared. As he launched a real attack on Dias, his roar cut through the air.

Eldan and his aides noticed this immediately and screamed out for the lionkin to stop. Alna and Dias's other companions failed to notice a thing and continued to cheer. Juha, meanwhile, sighed at Sulio's utter stupidity.

At the same time, Dias's features hardened, the visage of death itself in his very gaze. It was an aura unique to the man and unlike anything anyone else he knew was capable of doing. Juha had spent as many years on the battlefield as Dias, and in terms of swordsmanship he was certain he was at least Dias's equal. Juha, too, had an instinct for battle that rivaled Dias's own. But unlike Dias, he could not look upon his enemies with that same foreboding of his opponent's death.

And yet, when asked how he emitted a spirit so terrifying, Dias himself could not answer; he was not even aware he was doing it. It was a gaze so sharp, and so cold, that it seemed to drain one of their blood in an instant, sapping the will to fight from even the strongest of foes and freezing them where they stood.

Juha believed that Dias's ability to survive through those long years of war was at least in part thanks to that unique, terrifying glare. In battles of life and death, even a single moment of pause was often fatal…and Dias was not the sort of man to let such an instant slip from his grasp.

Sulio was enveloped entirely in Dias's gaze and unable to avoid it. His eyes went wide in a moment of confusion as he froze completely, his claws raised high and his fangs bared. At a glance, it might have seemed as if Sulio were suddenly hesitating, unsure as to whether or not he wanted to hurt Dias.

But when Dias saw that he had Sulio completely immobile, his hardened features softened into a smile, and his clenched fist opened so as not to hurt his opponent. His fingers stretched out, and he pushed the lionkin's chest. It was a gentle touch, but it was enough to send Sulio out of the ring and onto his butt.

And with neither combatant harmed, Dias emerged the victor.

## With the Wrestling Match Over—Dias

The moment my wrestling match with Sulio ended, the garden erupted into noise even louder and rowdier than before. I heard lots of different voices in it all. There was the celebrating of Alna and the others, the cheering of the onlookers, and Kamalotz telling Sulio off for getting too serious at the end.

In and among all of this, I reached out a hand to Sulio, who gritted his teeth and took it as he slowly rose to his feet. When he was standing, he clenched his teeth again, then opened his mouth as if to say something. Before he could, however, a voice burst out from among the crowd at a volume none could ignore.

“Lord Dias! A masterful display! Why, I’ve never seen someone so powerful and yet so merciful and kind in their approach to fighting! Even with a brash youngster looking to pounce on you unexpectedly, you handled it all with grace and dignity! A true hero if there ever was one! How can anyone deny that you are worthy of your promotion to duke?!”

The ground shook as Eldan’s mother pushed through the crowd. Once she was done praising me, she was quick to turn her gaze onto Sulio.

“But you! Sulio! What in the *world* were you thinking?! Lord Dias was surely tired after his long journey, but you didn’t even make him break a sweat! All you did instead was cause him trouble! And don’t think I didn’t catch what you were thinking at the end there either! You would *usually* be in for a world of punishment for that, but…seeing as Lord Dias reached out with a hand of forgiveness, I’m simply going to make you my servant for the immediate future! You are going to work under me, and you are going to *learn*! I’m going to make sure that you’re a truly upstanding young man, and then I’ll send you back to Lord Dias to beg for forgiveness!”

Sulio’s face twisted with sheer despair, his fur flattening and his ears and tail all drooping sadly. But it wasn’t just him; everybody had shrunken a little under Neha’s shouting, which left only a stunned silence in its wake. Some people looked down at their feet and others looked up at the sky, but all felt a deep sympathy for Sulio’s predicament. Even Kamalotz, who had been

scolding the lionkin, looked suddenly sorry for him, and Eldan's stern glare had turned to a look of sorrow.

As for me, Alna, and the others, we could only watch on with our mouths agape as Neha took a hold of Sulio's shoulders. She flashed me a smile and said a brief word of thanks, then dragged the lionkin down one of the manor's corridors.

I didn't have any hard feelings for Sulio, and I didn't think he needed to be punished and all that, but...I wasn't about to go poking my nose in when I was a guest in somebody else's house. And besides, I thought maybe it might even be good for Sulio to spend some time working under Neha, where he might learn all sorts of things. I thought maybe once he'd matured some we could do another round, even.

"L-Lord Dias," said Eldan, breaking the long silence. "We're very grateful for your excellent display in the ring. It is something we can all learn from! I imagine you must be tired from your exertion, so please take a seat, rest your body, and enjoy some of the fruit we have prepared!"

He then announced, "If anybody is feeling worn out and ready for rest, please just say the word and Kamalotz will see you to your rooms. We have prepared food and drink for this evening, along with song and dance to enjoy at the same time, and all of that will be readied momentarily!"

Eldan clapped his hands and gave a signal to somebody elsewhere, and just like that the garden was alive with energy once again. At Eldan's beckoning, I walked over to Alna and the others and sat down.

"A manly show of power, Dias!" said Alna.

"You did really good!" cried Senai.

"That last bit was so cool!" added Ayhan.

"I'm just glad neither of you were injured!" said Aymer.

Everybody was bright and happy, and in fact there was something like pride in their smiles as they all spoke. A little ways away from me, the baars all bleated cheerfully through mouthfuls of grass, and I replied with a grin. After that, we were all back to chatting again.

My throat was parched, so I drank some of the fruit juice Eldan's servants had brought out, and before long the entertainment started. We were treated to bright, lively dancing and song, and then I heard someone come dashing over. Their mouth was held firmly shut, their big, bushy eyebrows covered

their eyes, and they had droopy ears and glossy brown fur. It was almost like looking at a smaller masti, but this small-ilk dogkin was dressed in a round hat and the sort of clothes that were common in Mahati. They came right on up to me, sat on down, and began to talk.

## Watching Dias Talk with the Dogkin—Juha

Though it could not be seen on his face, Juha was completely gobsmacked to see the leader of the eiresetter clan run over to Dias and happily engage him in conversation. Juha had heard that the small-ilk dogkin that had moved to Baarbadal were doing very well and that they had performed admirably during all the trouble that Diane had caused. Eldan had thus seen fit to revise his estimation of the small-ilk dogkin under his rule and had since been working hard to ensure that their conditions improved. They had also been given work suitable to their species in the hopes they might perform just as well in Mahati.

And though the Mahati dogkin had not performed to the same level, there had nonetheless been noticeable progress, and they had taken to their work with great gusto. But even then Eldan had thought that more could be done and that the dogkin of Mahati should surely be capable of the same heights as those in Baarbadal. So he had put even more effort into improving things for them. However, things had simply not gone quite the way he wanted, and he'd had difficulty creating a bond of trust like that between Dias and the Baarbadal dogkin. The situation was unable to improve any further, and because nobody knew why, it was like facing an impenetrable wall.

The small-ilk dogkin were grateful to Eldan for his efforts and did their very best to work hard in turn, but nonetheless there was a certain sense of restraint to them, as though they were consciously keeping a certain distance between themselves and Eldan. They were not quite as loyal as the dogkin who lived with Dias, and they did not work quite like those same dogkin either. Exactly why they acted this way and exactly how they felt about things was unknown, and asking the dogkin directly gave them no clear, direct answers.

This was the situation Eldan faced, and so Juha had analyzed the eiresetters. He saw them as far more stubborn and headstrong than the three clans that now lived in Baarbadal. And

yet, the leader of the eiresetters appeared to have abandoned that notion entirely in front of Dias. He looked just as faithful and sincere as Dias's dogkin. The eiresetter leader seemed to be *charmed*, even, and so Juha wondered: Why in the world was this happening?

He knew for certain that Dias and the eiresetter were only just meeting for the first time. Juha did not believe that Dias had done any sort of favor for the eiresetters or that the eiresetter leader felt any debt towards the man. The idea that the eiresetter was acting this way because Dias was a guest was also completely out of the question. The stubborn eiresetters were extremely cautious and typically stayed cooped up in their rooms when first-time guests arrived, keeping their guard up, often until the guests left.

Juha also did not think that the eiresetter's behavior was due to alcohol or the whimsy of a strangely good mood. If that were the case, he would have seen or heard about it with regards to their relationship with the large-ilk they worked with or even Eldan himself. There was no reason for the dogkin to run straight for Dias. And besides, he didn't drink.

In which case, Juha pondered, did the reason lie not in the eiresetters but rather in Dias? Was he born with a particular nature that made him appealing to the small-ilk dogkin? And if so, exactly what part of him drew them in? Why would they like him more than Eldan, the man to whom they were indebted?

It was possible that they saw a certain strength in Dias, and yet Juha did not find this line of thought very convincing. When Dias went all out, he was indeed strong beyond belief, but he had not displayed this power in his wrestling match with Sulio. In fact, Sulio and Eldan alike had already displayed feats of strength far greater than the efforts Dias had given in the match.

*But what else could have drawn them in…? Could it have been the deadly gaze Dias shot at Sulio? Did it hide something the dogkin could not ignore?*

But Juha did not find this convincing either; he was fairly certain that the Eiresetter clan chief had not even been among the crowd watching the wrestling match. It was in their nature to hide in their rooms when guests arrived, and Juha believed that today was likely no different. In which case, was it possible that Dias's deathly glare had reached the eiresetter in his room and drawn him out of it?

*But how? Why would the gaze have such an effect?*

As Juha's thoughts raced, Dias and the eiresetter leader continued to chat away, and for some reason they joyfully shook hands. The eiresetters could barely tolerate anyone, Eldan or otherwise, getting close to them, much less making physical contact. Why would the leader let his guard down like this for Dias?

Juha was puzzled, his thoughts losing clarity and clouding further and further the more he thought. He could not even bring himself to enjoy the song and dance that he usually so loved. All he could do was stand in place and sigh.

## On the Way to the Guest Rooms—Dias

I had a chat with Colm, the leader of the eiresetters, and while we were talking Eldan kept the good times rolling. Before we knew it, night had fallen, and we all headed off to our rooms to rest. Eldan's manor and its guest rooms were pretty much the same as the inn we'd stayed at, except that the ceilings were taller, the rooms were more spacious, and the furniture looked even more expensive. Basically, it was another level of luxury.

Our bags had been placed in our rooms, and Colm decided to stay by my side all the way to our room. He sniffed the air to make sure it was all safe inside, then with his tail wagging away he told me he'd come and see me tomorrow too. Then just to be on the safe side, Alna did another security sweep of our room, and only then did the twins start getting ready for their baths and the baars get comfortable on the rugs laid out for them.

In any case, we'd done everything we had to do today, and that meant the only things left to do were wash up and sleep. When it was just the family in the room, the twins and the baars felt like they could finally relax. I guess we all must have been more tired than we thought, because we started dozing off real quick.

"Come on now," said Alna, her voice carrying on the quiet night air. "You're all going to wash up and get changed before you go to bed. And don't forget to clean your teeth and drink your herbal tea."

So Alna took the twins off to wash up, and that was when a knock came at the thick, engraved door that was the entrance to our room. We all wondered who it was, and then the person

knocking spoke.

"It's me, Juha. Do you have a minute, Dias?"

I looked over at Alna, nodded, and walked to the door, thinking it better that we talked elsewhere. As I did, Aymer leaped from Senai and hopped her way across the room, from the floor to the furniture and finally onto my shoulder. The two of us left the room, and it was clear by his bearing that Juha wasn't going to come in with Alna and the girls in there anyway.

The three of us walked down a corridor decorated with lavish carpets and lit by hanging lamps. Juha had a lamp of his own too, and he led us to a door with a sign on it that read "Sir Juha's Office" in really awful handwriting. He opened the door and lit the lamps inside, then invited us in.

As expected of an office, the room was simpler than our guest room, and it actually really did look like somebody's workplace. There were bookshelves against the walls jam-packed with countless books, and there was even a shelf with diamond-shaped openings made especially for holding old scrolls. There were desks for cutting parchment and working with canvas, and in the middle of the room was a large carpet, on top of which were a low table, elbow rests, half-read books, half-written papers, and bottles of alcohol. The wooden box that held the bottles was also sitting messily nearby.

Juha took a seat among all the clutter like he was very used to it all, then urged me to join him. I took a seat across from Juha, and a serious expression crossed his face as he explained exactly why he'd wanted to talk to me.

The next day, I got ready for the day ahead, ate breakfast in the dining room with Eldan (a dining room that was just *way* too big, I should add), and then headed outside. We were going to tour the city and do some shopping, and the baars, Ellie, and the lostblood brothers were set to join us.

There were lots of people out and about, even though it wasn't as many as when we'd arrived, so it was really lively. There were all sorts of different people of different races walking around, having fun, working, chatting, and playing. We walked down the main street just taking in all the sights.

Kamalotz was our guide for the day, and he was with three guards, all of whom had weapons dangling from their belts. Colm was with us too, and he'd brought along a number of

young eiresetters who all ran around us, sniffing the air and keeping watch over things. They were even more on guard than Kamalotz's guards.

"So you're out to buy horses," said Colm. "Horses sure are great. They're gentle but they're powerful, and boy can they run. I recommend sheep as well. Sheep are great too. They listen when you speak to them, and they're just soft and adorable too."

Colm never let his guard down as he spoke, always sniffing the air and looking this way and that. He'd gotten to be good pals with our baars, and they bleated at him.

"Ah, I see," Colm said. "So you don't need sheep with you baars around, huh? Yep, yep, I should've seen that one, you're right. In which case, you can't go wrong with cows and poultry—they're essentials."

Colm went on with his recommendations, and I nodded at him and smiled, but I was honestly thinking really hard about things. Actually, there was a reason I had to think so hard, and it was because of the talk I'd had with Juha the previous evening.

He'd told me about the forestkin, a legendary and renowned people. I'd heard the name from Moll before, but I guess they must have been known in the capital too. Juha had told me that the twins were actually forestkin. He'd said the reason our fields were growing so well, and the reason we had trees and could raise our own sanjivani plant, was because of them. He'd explained that it was imperative we protect the twins and keep it a secret that they were forestkin.

I'd been confused and surprised because it was all very new to me, but if they were as special as Juha said, then I was going to do my best to make sure they were safe. I had made up my mind to talk to the twins about it as soon as I could, but...

"Wait just a moment, please," Aymer had said, speaking up.

As it turned out, Aymer had actually known that the twins were forestkin for some time. She'd also been out with them when they used their power, and had seen it firsthand. She'd even offered the twins advice on how to use it.

When I'd heard that, I'd wondered why Aymer had never told me about it, but she'd said that Senai and Ayhan's parents had told them to keep their identities secret. Before they died, they'd told the girls that they couldn't let humans know they were forestkin, and so the girls and Aymer had kept their secret together this whole time. They hadn't told me, or Alna, or even

Grandma Maya.

“I believe that the time will come when they have to bring the truth to light, but…please don’t do it now. We’re on holiday, and they’re having such a wonderful time. I think it’s best if we leave such talks until we return to Iluk.”

“Once we get back we may be able to do something about the words their parents left them with. I’m always careful to ensure that they don’t say anything that will give them away, so please…don’t do or say anything while we’re here. And because your thoughts are always written across your face, Dias, please try not to think about it at all.”

Juha was plenty satisfied so long as Aymer was watching over the twins and helping them, and he had said he’d leave the rest for us to work out as a family.

“Not that this lout can keep any kind of secret, though,” he’d added, with a mean smirk.

The guy couldn’t have been ruder if he’d tried. But I knew that I was capable of keeping a secret, and I even had a trick in mind to do it. The trick was to not think about the secret at all. All I had to do was forget about the forestkin entirely and think about something else.

So when I took a step I would mutter “horse,” and then when I took another I’d mutter “cow,” and then “bird,” “meat,” “table,” “fruit,” and in doing so create a chain of things to think about. Thanks to that, I took in all Colm had to say with a smile and a nod, thought really hard about it, and put myself to work not thinking about anything else.

It might have made me look a little unnatural, but it worked a treat. And in any case, the twins were interested in so much more than boring old me. They were looking at the passersby, the lines of houses, the huge towers like what we’d seen at the inn, the different facilities, and the big walled place that looked like a huge tub of water. Their eyes were darting everywhere, and they never stopped asking Aymer questions.

All I had to do was keep this up until we got back to Iluk, and then things would work themselves out. Unlike the twins, however, Alna noticed my behavior immediately, and while she clearly had some thoughts about it, she didn’t say anything, so problem solved…I hoped.

After some walking, the city’s biggest market came into view, and it was full of even more people than we’d ever seen. It was a

cacophony of people's voices, animal cries, and movement. Colm's ears swayed this way and that as he pointed to a corner of the market.

"That's the livestock market," he said. "Only the rich and those with authority are allowed inside, but that's not an issue for you, Lord Dias! Lady Alna, you're sure to find the steed you're looking for inside!"

Kamalotz was supposed to be our guide, but Colm had essentially stolen the position from right under his nose. Alna and the twins all looked mighty excited when they heard what Colm said. The lostblood brothers, too, looked very intrigued.

With that, we all walked eagerly towards the livestock market.

Ordinarily, people set up their shops in a designated part of the market, and from there they sold their wares. The livestock market worked differently, however. It was guarded by soldiers carrying spears and axes, and the people managing the place and organizing the sales all looked very much like public officials.

The market was surrounded by a sturdy wooden fence, and deeper inside was a roofed area, beyond which were stables not unlike what we had in Iluk. There was also a big building that looked out of place in the market, which was also heavily guarded. Just like Colm had said earlier, there was something like an inspection process for anybody who entered.

The main entrance of the livestock market had some mighty impressive gates with guards posted right outside, and they were locked up tight. A little bit off to the side sat a smaller set of gates. We stood in front of the main gates taking it in as Kamalotz gestured for the guards to ready them for opening. Then he turned back to us and started explaining everything.

"As you can imagine, areas where livestock gather get quite dirty, so we try to limit entry as much as possible. The smaller gate is where people can buy smaller livestock and also where people can leave livestock they wish to sell. We erected fences and employed a great number of guards firstly as a way to prevent theft, but they also act to stop any animals that become rowdy. The last thing we want to see is a wild horse rampaging through the streets, and as such many of the guards and staff are skilled animal handlers as well."

He continued, "Eldan manages the livestock markets spread across the region personally, and he does not charge citizens to

use them; by doing so, he aims to encourage more people to use them, which will in turn encourage the production of livestock."

When it came down to it, livestock like horses and cattle were a fundamental part of daily life; you rode them to get places, they carried your things, and they helped you with farming. Increasing their number would make it easier for people to get around and also bolster the farming industry, not to mention improving supplies of meat and other food. Basically, livestock went a long way to enriching the lives of the people.

Now of course, increasing the number of livestock also meant you had to take care of them all, which wasn't always easy, and it added the challenge of keeping up a solid supply of fodder, but all the same Eldan was intent on increasing the number of livestock in Mahati. To that end, he'd set up livestock markets in the various cities and towns across his domain.

When Eldan had given us Balers and the other horses, we'd given him some dragon materials, both as a kind of thanks and as payment. In doing so, we'd funded Eldan's livestock venture; that's why the gates to the markets were decorated with a dragon crest. The crest I was looking at featured a tough, imposing dragon that didn't actually look much like an earth dragon at all. In any case, when Kamalotz had finished explaining everything to us, the guards slowly pushed the gates open.

Colm and Kamalotz led us inside, and we walked slowly through the marketplace looking at all the different animals and absorbing the lively atmosphere. There were geese, chickens, sheep, donkeys, and cows. There were also white ghee, which were called mountain oxen in these parts. I also saw some kind of animal with a long neck and a hump, and even some rabbits which were a little bigger than the normal types.

All of the animals were in boxes, fenced partitions, or little huts depending on their sizes, and though the cattle were all simply tied to stakes in the ground, they stayed placid while they happily and calmly chewed on the fodder they'd been given.

"While it may seem like there aren't many animals here, many are kept in the stables and in the grazing area and can be brought out if necessary," said Kamalotz. "A great many horses are kept in the grazing area, and we also brought a number of valuable horses in advance of your visit, so I think you'll find the range quite satisfactory. If you are curious about any of the

horses in the grazing area, just say the word; the attendants also have notes on each horse and its characteristics, which may be a handy reference for you. You won't find any of them here, however, so let's head to the roofed area and the building farther down."

We kept on gazing at all the livestock as we walked. Alna heard Kamalotz talking about the horses and her eyes immediately lit up. She looked on further, deeper into the marketplace, while the twins happily talked about how cute and adorable every single animal was, no matter what they were looking at. Aymer happily taught them about the animals they didn't already know, and the baars stared around with a curious interest at the whole place. Seki, Saku, and Aoi, meanwhile, worked their hardest to evaluate all the animals they saw and assign them price tags. Ellie let her eyes do a broad sweep of the marketplace before settling on the sheep in their little enclosed area.

"Alna," she said, "why don't we try raising some sheep, like Colm mentioned? I know you and your people already have the baars, but the plains are so vast. Sheep are sure to help with things like clothing, food, and our living spaces. Raising some strikes me as a good idea, and unlike baars, we can also use them as a source of meat, no?"

Ellie was careful not to mention the word "onikin" aloud. Alna had her gaze on the building farther into the marketplace while she answered.

"Sheep? Well, they're not a bad idea, per se, it's just...their priority always drops when you've got baars. Sheep wool is good because it protects you against the cold, but it's easy to get dirty and difficult to clean. And if you're not careful when you do your washing, sheep wool shrinks. That's why sheep wool tends to be less hygienic and makes you more prone to illness. Back in the past, when...we had a little more luxury in the way of freedom, some families raised sheep along with their baars. The thing is, those families always got sick."

"That started us thinking a lot more about the grime on our bodies and clothing," Alna continued, "and so we came to place great importance on the use of herbs and herbal concoctions. It's how we got to where we are. As for the meat side of things, we've got the black ghee, the geese we're feeding good fodder to, and the white ghee. Isn't that enough?"

“Ah, I see, so your people have already tried it in the past, huh?”

The baars, who were listening to Alna and Ellie speak, held their noses up high, each of them looking very proud of themselves while they bleated. Baar wool protected against the cold, was more durable than sheep wool, didn’t shrink in the wash, and was very easy to clean and maintain to boot. That really was the whole reason they’d become a symbol of our village and were front and center on the Baarbadal crest—baar wool kept us healthy through our lives on the plains.

You could hear the pride in each of Francis’s bleats, and Francoise and the kids quickly added their own to the mix. The sight brought a smile to all of our faces, but it didn’t last long for Alna; she was so intent on seeing the horses that she picked up her pace with each step. The rest of us were left struggling to keep up.

We came to a series of pillars erected in a half circle, upon which sat an impressive roof. Underneath it were a bunch of different horses, all lined up. Alna took one look at them and her excitement extinguished in an instant. She was ready to take off and head straight for the building farther into the marketplace.

“Alna, are you sure you don’t want to look?” I asked, stopping her. “There look to be some fine horses here…”

Alna heard my question, stopped, and decided to explain things to me.

“The horses here are all in good shape, but none of them are *military* grade,” she said. “You can tell they’ve all been trained to pull carriages and wear saddles for people to ride them, but you can *also* tell that they’re lacking. For example, take a look at their jaws and necks.”

“A well-trained military steed keeps its chin tucked, and the line from its neck onwards is shaped like a beautiful arc. Granted, this is not an exact rule among such horses, but even then we can’t have horses with skinny legs like the ones back there—they’ll break in an instant.”

Alna tucked her chin and gestured with her hand to the line from her neck through to the back of her head while she explained it to me. I looked from her back to the horses under the roofed area, and I noticed then that none of the horses had their chins tucked. They just looked at me curiously with their big, round eyes. They were quiet and adorable, but…when I

more properly looked at them, they *did* have skinny legs. Compared to Balers, they all lacked a certain sense of presence.

"I don't think I mentioned this before, but Balers could easily be used for military work," Alna added. "Whenever I'm looking after him, his chin is always tucked and he's always standing tall. Balers has that spirit in him; he's ready for battle the moment he's called upon."

I took Alna's words in, and it struck me then that Balers had never once felt that way when *I* was taking care of him. It was confusing to me, and so I tilted my head as I thought about it. The horses around me were all watching me and then *they* tilted their heads too. The twins loved it, and they burst into laughter.

Alna wasn't going to bask in the moment, however, and she walked on. We all followed her to the building farther back, and when we entered it we found ourselves in a strange, spacious, circular space. In the center of it was an open area, and around it were stone platforms rising up like stairs.

*Is it like an amphitheater for performances? Does that mean they hold competitions on the stage in the center? No, wait. This is a marketplace, so of course they wouldn't.*

Kamalotz must have seen me looking puzzled, because he took to explaining it for me.

"This is the trading floor for military grade horses," he said. "The horse is displayed in the space in the center, and the customers—merchants, mercenaries, Lord Eldan, myself, and others—sit on the surrounding stone steps and bid on them. Raising a military horse is no simple feat; it requires great care and effort, and the price of the horse is a reflection of this. A good military steed can be considered as valuable as building a good house, and to encourage those who raise, care for, and manage such horses, the auctioning method is a necessity."

Put more simply, the better the horse, the fiercer the bidding war. The breeder earned a hefty windfall for their efforts, and so everybody tried their best to breed the best horses. Customers here, too, often felt pushed to purchase horses or even drive up the numbers to avoid seeing them fall into the hands of their enemies or rivals. A single horse could mean a great deal of losses, but it could also mean potential bragging rights and even a drastic change in reputation. According to Kamalotz, this served to make the bidding that much more intense.

A good military steed was as much an asset as it was a

weapon, and so the breeding of them was big business. In some domains, such trading and bidding was banned completely, and in others all military grade horses and livestock ranches were the property of the domain lord by default. However, this killed competition between breeders and customers entirely, and in the case of breeders it destroyed any desire to raise truly exceptional horses. In these places, excellent horses were few and far between.

"The only exception to this," said Kamalotz, "are the horses raised by the royal family. Their breeders have served for generations, and they are very proud of their heritage. Even though competition does not exist between breeders, they nonetheless raise excellent horses. As I mentioned, however, this is the exception and certainly not the rule. In these lands, bartering has been encouraged for generations, and as a result, Mahati is known as the go-to location for military steeds. Some come from as far as the royal capital to purchase them..."

Because the horses were of incredible value, horse thieves were a constant threat. This was why they put walls around the livestock market, constructed the trade floor very deep into it, and made sure the animals for it were always secure. The auction floor was the most heavily guarded location in the whole market.

"Today is a special case, which means there won't be any bartering, but we'll be paying rates similar to what Lord Eldan pays when he participates in bartering himself. The only breeders with horses to show today are those who agreed to the nonbartering conditions, but fortunately almost all of them were happy to participate. It would appear they are eager to show off their wares, Sir Dias, as you are quickly making a name for yourself. I'm sure many hope to make you a regular customer and would like to make your acquaintance."

As he finished, Kamalotz had us take a seat on the stone steps while he walked over to the large doors at the far end of the trade floor. For breeders, more participants at the trade floor meant better prices. That they wanted to meet me meant they were thinking of a future in which I would one day take part in the auctions that took place here. It was a matter of trust too; they all knew Eldan paid well even when he wasn't competing for it.

"Hmm," I murmured as I mulled over it all.

Alna, Colm, and all the others followed me as I took a seat, waiting while Kamalotz and the others got prepared on the other side of the doors.

"By the way, Alna," I said, thinking of something while we waited. "After we buy these new horses, who's going to ride them? We've got Balers and Karberan and the others already. Are you thinking we'll want to swap between horses every now and again?"

Alna was all too excited to answer my question.

"Well, we'll be able to use all our horses for different purposes depending on the situation, but we're a long way from that luxury. The first thing we'll do with the new horses is spread them around to the people that don't have any yet. That means giving Klaus a few! He'll need them for going back and forth between Iluk and the border station, not to mention chasing down any uninvited guests, should they appear. He knows his way around a horse and how to take care of one, so we can leave him to care for quality military steeds without worry. Also, if Klaus is seen riding around on a truly exceptional horse, it will boost his reputation as much as it will the whole domain's!"

There was a great strength and energy tucked into each of her words.

"I see," I said, nodding.

Colm nodded too, and then Alna nodded at the both of us, supremely satisfied as she went on.

"Once Klaus has enough horses, next we'll supply Narvant and his family too! If we want to get serious about those baar wagons, they'll need good horses. They'll also need good horses for when they get busier at their workshop. But by giving them horses, we're a step closer to having them develop and build tools and armor for them!"

Then she said, "We just need enough horses to get started. We'll breed them, feed them well, and make sure they're making even *better* horses. We might even find that *we're* selling horses here in the future!"

Alna was more and more excited with every word, enough that she was getting the twins riled up. The six baar kids were bleating happily about it too, even though they didn't completely understand what was going on.

Ellie was looking around the building with her game face on, and the lostblood brothers were all following her around and

keen to learn from her. All of us were up to our own things when Kamalotz returned and opened up the doors. Behind him was a giant of a man holding a set of thick reins in hand. The reins were connected to a horse just like the ones Alna had described to me earlier—it had its chin tucked and a thick neck. There was something rough and rowdy about its breathing, but it was completely composed, and each step it took towards us was full of power and confidence. I was looking at a true military steed, one with a black coat, a beautiful mane, and white feet that almost made it look like it was wearing shoes.

"Ha ha!" Alna cried. "Would you look at that?! Now *that's* a horse! Am I right or what?"

She couldn't have wiped the beaming smile off her face if she'd tried. I chuckled and nodded, then looked back at the horse as I answered her.

"Sure is gallant. Fearless, by the looks of it. And just the look in its eyes is completely different from the horses we saw earlier. Happy to be led by the reins too... Hmm, so this is military grade, huh?"

"Yep. If you don't raise them right they'll run riot and go wild, but I don't think we have anything to worry about with this one. A beautiful coat, a shine in the eyes, powerful legs, and look at those hips; it's a glorious one, isn't it? They say that when you look to the skies on the back of a truly good horse, the sky looks an ever deeper blue. I bet this horse will deliver exactly that experience!"

Kamalotz walked over to us while we were talking and passed us a sheaf of papers. The papers gave us information on the order the horses would arrive in, who had raised them, how they had been brought up and trained, and all sorts of other details too. Alna peeked over to look at the papers, and once she realized what was in them you couldn't tear her away. She wanted to know everything, so with a chuckle I handed them over.

With the papers in hand, Alna looked down at them, then at the horse, then back down at her papers. She looked completely consumed but also like she was having a great time appraising the steed that stood before us too. In fact, she took total control of proceedings from there, deciding on which horses to have brought out and which ones we should buy. The rest of us were just spectators.

Alna looked at every single horse real close, and when she thought one was up to her expectations, she added it to the buy list immediately. With Juha footing the bill, she even splurged on an *especially* pricey horse. When Alna mentioned his name, Kamalotz and the people who knew him were taken completely by surprise. Alna was quick and casual with her explanation.

"We saw him the other day and he said it himself, loud and clear; he'd show us around the markets and even pay for our shopping trip. It's a pity he couldn't do the first part, but a man of his caliber is surely generous enough to cover such a purchase. To think that he would be so generous and kindhearted upon meeting an old friend after so long! Dias truly is a man who surrounds himself with good people!"

*"So look, even if it's just for show, can you act like we're friends? It's for my reputation."*

Alna still remembered what Juha had told me when we first arrived and was playing her part to help. Kamalotz looked a bit skeptical, but he clearly decided that if Juha had given his word, then we must have had an agreement. He looked down and scribbled something on his papers—probably a note along the lines of "Juha will cover the payments for this horse."

For a second, I felt like maybe I should step in and say something, but then I remembered it was Juha who'd made the promise to Alna. The man had made his bed, and Alna was going to make him lie in it. I decided not to say a word and continued to watch over proceedings. I would have stopped Alna if she'd tried to get Juha to pay for *everything*, but I felt that by limiting Juha's spending to a single horse, Alna was showing generosity of a sort. Besides, knowing Juha, he'd have enough money to cover the purchase without issue.

Well, that's what I assumed, anyway.

Back in the day, Juha had made himself something of a fortune by selling the equipment we took from the enemy, as well as buying things like wheat and thread from one place and selling it to another. I figured it was a given that he was doing the same thing here.

In any case, while I was thinking things over, the last horse was brought out. It was black from head to toe, with just a splash of brown around its mouth. It was a giant of a thing, with deep, heavy breaths and a sharp gaze. Of all the horses we'd seen, this was easily the most wild, the most ferocious... I even

got the impression that it was a level above Balers in terms of sheer power.

When Alna saw the horse, a hint of something bitter flashed across her face. Until now, she'd made each and every one of her decisions in an instant, but when it came to this particular horse, she was hesitant and unsure. Instead of making a buy or pass decision, she fell into silence.

For a time, Alna simply stood staring at the steed and didn't say a single word. Kamalotz and the handler saw Alna like that and got a little confused. I decided I'd speak up on their behalf.

"Is that horse not up to your standards?" I asked.

"It's in tremendous shape," she replied, not taking her eyes off the horse, "but something about its eyes...its personality... I get the feeling it's scheming something. The aura of it tells me it doesn't respect us. Aisha used to look similar, but with this horse, it's much clearer, much starker... That's a strong military steed we're looking at, and when one of those goes on a rampage, it's a mountain of trouble to deal with..."

"Hmm, so maybe we should pass on it?"

"But it's a *good* horse. It's thoroughly trained and it obeys the reins... Kamalotz and the others put a whole lot of effort into bringing us all the horses we've looked at today, and I feel like if we let any chance go then it might not come our way a second time. And while it's my instincts talking, I'm not sure we should just shun this horse and see it disappear entirely..."

And with that, Alna dropped into another thoughtful silence. Kamalotz heard what she'd said and smiled kindly as if to say it was absolutely fine for us to take our time and labor over the decision. And if he was fine with giving us time, then I figured it was fine for us to take it, and I dropped into a silence of my own. All that was left was to wait for Alna to think things over and come to a decision that she was happy with.

I was thinking to myself about how even if we never met that horse again, and even if it went on to become famous for its work or achievements or escapades, well, all of it was just fate when it came down to it. That was when the horse suddenly went tense, its eyes growing wide as its neck shook up and down.

The man holding its reins was well-built, and he felt the horse starting to panic. He took a step back and tried to calm it with the reins, but that only made the horse open its mouth and

chomp down in his direction. The man flinched away, and it was exactly what the horse had been waiting for; it raised its front legs and its whole upper body along with them and pulled the reins free of the handler's grasp.

There was nothing keeping the horse in place now, and it started going wild. Alna and I were on our feet in a flash, and we ran to the horse hoping to stop it. Kamalotz and the trading floor guards were quick to move too. We all wanted to calm it down so it didn't hurt itself, but Colm moved quicker than any of us.

He sped to that horse as fast as his four legs would carry him, took the reins, and in a few deft movements climbed the horse and settled on its back. The horse went into even more of a rampage then, intent on bucking Colm right off, but for as small as Colm was, he was shockingly good at staying in place. All the more shocking was how good he was with the reins.

"Hey now!" he said, his voice bold and confident. "There you go! There you go! You scared? What's got you so scared now? It's okay, relax, there's no need to be scared! The whole reason everyone's looking at you is because of your wonderful body! So relax now, there are no scary wolves here! Calm yourself now!"

The horse neighed angrily and it stomped hard against the ground, but for all its jumping and spinning Colm just went on talking to the horse with a commanding tone of voice that the whole floor could hear. He was a skilled rider, and he never looked like he was going to fall. He kept his grip firm so the horse didn't go too crazy, and little by little the horse began to relax. First its legs stopped kicking, and then its breath grew ragged. It was sweating up a storm too.

When the horse was finally silent, its handler ran over in a panic. He took the reins from Colm, who gave the horse a couple of gentle pats along with some kind words and dropped from its back. Given that the situation was no longer conducive to buying and selling, the horse was taken back out the gates. But now that things were calm, Alna and I turned to Colm, whom we'd been watching from nearby.

"Now that was incredible," remarked Alna. "You jumped on that wild horse without a moment's hesitation, kept in control, and calmed it right down. Not everyone can do that, right, Dias?"

"Yep, it was an amazing show of skill."

Colm watched as the horse was taken away, his tail wagging as he turned to us.

“I just love horses,” he said, “about as much as I love sheep! When I have time at Lord Eldan’s manor, I like to help take care of the horses! That horse just now…it was so scared, and it struck me as so pitiful in that moment that I just couldn’t help myself. I’m a little embarrassed that you all saw that.”

Colm scratched the back of his head with a paw and smiled at us.

“No, no, there’s no need to be modest,” I said, genuinely impressed. “You were really incredible. So much so that I’m a little jealous of Eldan. I mean, we’re going to be increasing the number of our horses back at our village, and I just can’t help wishing we had someone as skilled as you there to help with them.”

Colm’s eyes went wide, and he broke out in the biggest smile I’d ever seen on him.

“If that’s how it is, then leave it to me!” he said. “I’ll make sure you’re satisfied with my work! And not just me but the whole Eiresetter clan too! We’ll support you every way we can!”

“Bwuhuh?”

It was all so sudden that all I could do was tilt my head.

“Your sign calling for residents. That offer is still valid, yes? If so, we’re all set! Ever since yesterday I’ve been thinking about how much I’d like to work for a true and proper person, and now that very opportunity has dropped into my lap!”

Kamalotz had heard the whole thing, and now his head was tilted right on over like mine. The whole thing had come completely out of nowhere. All I’d meant to do was praise Colm for his skills, but Colm had taken my words as an invitation to come and live at Iluk. And he wasn’t going to come alone. He was ready to bring his whole darn clan.

I was happy at the idea that we’d have more residents, but it also felt a bit like I was poaching citizens out of Eldan’s domain, and I looked over at Kamalotz. I wasn’t sure what to say, so I just gave him as apologetic a look as I could muster. Kamalotz, however, chuckled in such a way as to let me know I had nothing to worry about.

“It’s best if they decide for themselves what they most want,” he said.

I nodded. I knew that I’d have to talk things through with Eldan, but I figured it was best to accept the eiresetters. I never could have seen it coming, but that was how Iluk got itself some

new residents.

## Upon Return to Eldan’s Manor—Dias

Including Colm, there were twenty-five eiresetters in total, and all of them were coming to Iluk. Even though I’d accidentally poached them right here in his own domain, Eldan wasn’t bothered in the slightest. He pretty much said that if that’s what they wanted, he was happy to give them permission. In that way, it was settled; the eiresetters would join us on our trip home to Iluk.

The eiresetters would be set to work mainly as our horse handlers, and after Colm had displayed his skills at the trading floor I felt totally safe leaving the job in his hands. Alna was also happy to have him work for us in that capacity, especially because he’d noticed the horse was scared when she hadn’t. Senai, Ayhan, Aymer, the baars, Ellie, and the lostblood brothers were also happy to have more people moving into Iluk.

Even Eldan and Kamalotz were happy. For them, it was important that the eiresetters put their skills to work in the place they most wanted to be. At the same time, however, they couldn’t work out what the big difference between us was, and they wanted to know why the small-ilk dogkin were so gung ho in Iluk. They took to asking Colm about it, to which he said:

“Because Dias is a true and proper person.”

It was the same term he’d used back at the livestock market, and according to Alna it was something the dogkin in Iluk sometimes called me as well. We decided to ask Colm exactly what a true and proper person was, to which he said:

“A true and proper person is a true and proper person.”

That was the only answer he’d give, and in the end none of us really figured out what he meant. If you took the words at face value, it could have meant something like “a person who doesn’t lie” or “an honest person,” but the truth was I was still hiding things from the twins. I was trying not to think about it, but I was clutching a secret in the shadows, so to speak, and I didn’t know if you could call me either of those things. Truth be told, if Alna had done a soul appraisal on me I would have come up red… So I had to wonder; what part of me was “true and proper”?

But ask as I might, Colm never gave a clear answer, even

when I reworded the questions I was asking. In the end I decided not to push the point, because it wasn't like he meant the term in any bad way or anything. So, while that mystery still lingered a little in me, the fact that we had more residents was great news. On top of that, we had a trustworthy horse handler coming to Iluk, which was just fantastic. We decided not to worry about the true and proper stuff and just welcome the eiresetters as warmly as we could.

In the end, Alna purchased a total of eight horses, and one of them was none other than the last horse we'd seen—the one that had gone wild. Apparently, when horses went wild like that it lowered their value and made it harder to find buyers, but Colm had told us that he'd take good care of it personally and wanted us to buy it for that very reason. That was enough to convince Alna to go ahead and do it.

Colm had shown how well he knew his way around a horse, and as much as Alna loved and studied horses, she was still new when it came to raising them herself, and so there were a lot of areas in which she was still inexperienced. She thought there was a lot she could learn by having Colm and the eiresetters around. In fact, she got started immediately, going straight to Eldan's stables with Colm to learn how to better read horses and soothe them.

As for who paid for that horse, well...that one went on Juha's tab too.

According to Juha—who had let loose an ear-piercing shriek when he saw how much was owed for the horses—he didn't have that kind of money on him. The salary he received from Eldan had all been spent on the likes of bars and girls. He ended up going to Eldan in tears because it would take him decades to pay for those horses otherwise. As a result, Eldan took on Juha's debt and paid on his behalf.

That said, Juha held off on revealing the whole truth of the story and went around telling people that he was such good friends with me that he'd even bought me a couple of military steeds. But, given that he was paying for our good graces, so to speak, I was content just to let him do what he wanted.

That sure was a busy day, though, and if anything it was too busy. But like all days, it came to an end, and we were greeted by another morning.

Ellie and the lostblood brothers headed off on their own to

visit and speak to merchants, and the rest of us joined Eldan on a tour of Mahati. We visited a number of locations and Eldan gave us an introduction to Mahati's famous attractions... Well, that's what he said it was, but actually I got the sense that Eldan had another plan in mind. He knew that I was still lacking in knowledge, so the tour doubled as a crash course on domain management.

First we went to the Mahati guesthouse, which was a stunning manor the likes of which I felt I'd seen in the royal capital. In the past, the manor had been a mead hall, and it was where visitors from afar were welcomed and treated to food and drink. The guesthouse was used to host visitors such as esteemed nobles or even the king himself.

Eldan's manor doubled as an important military base, and it was also where his family lived, so he preferred to keep it private. Letting people he didn't trust stay at his manor brought with it great risk. The guesthouse also helped to stave off awfully troubling incidents, such as higher-ranking people laying their hands on Eldan's wives. To avoid any such issues, a guesthouse was a necessity.

It turned out that the reason we'd all been allowed to stay at Eldan's manor was because of how much he trusted us. Even Eldan's distant relatives weren't so easily permitted to stay in his manor.

Next we visited a stone stronghold, which was the central base of Mahati's patrolling squadrons. The place was packed with soldiers and steeds, but the organized units were always on the move, going from one stronghold to the next or otherwise passing through the larger cities. Only Eldan and his top brass knew exactly where all the squadrons were going and when they were scheduled to move.

The patrolling squadrons didn't have set routes, and so they were constantly going all over the place. Sometimes they were groups of ten, sometimes twenty, and sometimes a hundred.

This addition of an unknown variable acted as a looming threat over any who would think to break the law. You might try to steal something and have twenty soldiers surrounding you before you got anywhere. Or, you might successfully steal something and run only to find a squadron of a hundred chasing you down. With that kind of security in play, the patrolling units went a long way to preventing crimes before they occurred.

But it wasn't just about safety within Mahati's borders. If a foreign army attacked Mahati, that army would not be able to easily ascertain the exact number of Mahati's forces or how many reinforcements were on their way.

Next we went to look at the underground water system, which Aymer had explained to me at the inn. Given that the water system flowed to each part of Mahati, it was well guarded, and we followed a staircase down from a hut to the water system proper. The staircase had been built for the purposes of managing the waterways and cleaning.

The waterways and rivers in Mahati were all under Eldan's control, which allowed him to direct the flow of water as necessary or even stop it completely. Water was a necessity for survival, so water control was extremely important. That power fell into the hands of the domain lord, and while no threats were ever made, all of Mahati's people knew who controlled the water and what might happen if they were to turn against their leader. Eldan was doing his utmost to make sure he never ever had to use the water system for that purpose, but he was ready to do so if that was what it came down to.

"I know it might sound strange for me to say such a thing, having started a rebellion myself, but should the need arise I will show no mercy. A revolt will only harm the safety of our nation, throw our citizens into great suffering, and, depending on how things go, allow an opening for foreign nations to invade. Such a thing would only result in greater turmoil, and I must have the resolve to ensure that never comes to pass."

It was just us in the underground waterways, which had been carved out of rock. In the dim tunnels, his face lit only by the light of a nearby torch, Eldan's profile revealed an insight and intelligence well beyond his years. The expression carved into his face was that of an outstanding domain lord. I was impressed; I didn't know if I could ever wear that same expression or make that same decision.

"I see… You're amazing, Eldan."

My comment was so simple that it was too simple, and even *I* felt like there had to be more I could have said, but that's all that came out of my mouth, and Eldan smiled in response.

Finally, Eldan brought us to the southern region of his domain to show us the sugar reed farms. The fields which produced that sweet sugar were a nutritious salvation to many and played a

core role in Mahati's economy. The farms were, in fact, Eldan's favorite part of his whole domain.

We'd arrived right in the middle of the sugar reed planting season, and ridged fields stretched out as far as the eye could see. Countless people stood in those fields, all of them planting seeds, or maybe they were stalks. Humans and beastkin worked side by side, and the different races were all singing the same song together while they worked.

Planting the sugar reeds was backbreaking work, but it was also a source of income, and though it made for sweaty work, it also made people rich. The reeds would be harvested and wrung out, and delicious sugar was the result. That's why the song the people sung told a story of working through the hard times to harvest a mountain of sugar reeds, and their cooperation making it possible.

It warmed my heart to see all those people smiling as they worked, enjoying the grind, and something about it really charmed me. We all stood there with Eldan and just watched for a time, saying nothing at all.

The next day, I woke up and got dressed, had breakfast with Eldan and the others in the dining hall, and went back to our room to prepare for another day of touring Mahati. Well, that's what I *thought* we'd be doing, but I quickly noticed that something was off about the twins.

They were all fidgety and agitated, and I sensed a sorrow in them somewhere. In their faces and their manners it was like they were missing something and trying unsuccessfully to look for it. Sometimes they'd cry and other times they'd hold their chests like something hurt inside of them.

Alna couldn't work out what was wrong, but I'd seen those same symptoms countless times when I lived at the orphanage and also during the war. I nodded quietly to myself, sure of what was wrong, and I knelt down by the girls.

"Yep," I said, rubbing their heads. "I guess it's about time we went back to Iluk, huh?"

This calmed the girls, and smiles crept to their faces as they nodded. Aymer cottoned on to what was happening and ran over to them, and then Francis and Francoise joined her. Alna tilted her head, even more confused.

"They're homesick," I said.

Alna didn’t know what that meant, and at this point her confusion was written all over her face. I took to explaining to her that homesickness hit you out of the blue, without warning, when you were far from your family and your home. It was a lonely feeling that made you hesitant and uncertain, and you couldn’t fight it. It made you weak in body and mind just like an illness would.

It was especially easy for children to get it, but that wasn’t to say that adults didn’t. Some people got over it quickly, and some people never got over it at all. You might have thought it wasn’t possible for the twins to feel this way, what with me here, Alna, Aymer, all the baars, Ellie, and Shiya and Guri right over in the stables. But they couldn’t get the unique scent of the plains out here in Mahati, and they didn’t have the overly excited, lively voices of the dogkin, or Grandma Maya and her friends singing together filling the air. They couldn’t go out hunting with Sahhi and his wives either.

The usual sights, smells, and sounds that filled Senai’s and Ayhan’s days were gone, and it struck them in the form of loneliness, sadness, and pain. It wasn’t something that either of them could simply shrug off. The best solution, then, was to go back to the place they called home—the place they’d grown most familiar with. And when I thought about how the girls had already lost a home once before, it felt all the more important.

“I see,” said Alna, nodding when I’d finished explaining everything.

She walked over to the twins, wrapped them in a big hug, then turned to me.

“I’ll talk to Ellie and the boys, so you go see Eldan and inform him of our plans.”

We shared another nod, and I headed out to the corridor and asked a servant to take me to Eldan. I was led to his office, which was decorated with great big windows to let the breeze in and gorgeous carpets adorning the floor. It was also filled with books and documents. Eldan was sitting at his desk, using the little time he had before our tour to see to his official clerical work.

I took a seat in front of him and explained our situation, to which he simply smiled and nodded. He of course wanted us to stay a little longer, and he was sad about us leaving, but he didn’t try to stop us. He called for a servant immediately and told them to ready our carriages for us. I thanked him for everything, and

his smile as he replied was gentler than any I'd seen on him yet.

"Think nothing of it," he said. "We are, all of us, susceptible to homesickness. When things calm down you can always come visit again. Mahati has much to offer both in the summer and in the fall, and there is much to see, do, and enjoy. I truly do hope that you and your family will visit when you next have time."

Well, after that I had to thank Eldan all over again, and Eldan's smile only grew wider. We chatted about nothing in particular, enjoying each other's company while we waited for the carriages to be readied. It wasn't like a grand discussion between dukes or domain lords—just a talk between friends. It was just the usual, meaningless back-and-forth about favorite foods and dishes, and Eldan's physical training of late, and things of that nature.

After a little while, Neha arrived because she'd heard that we were leaving, and with her was Sulio. Only a few days had passed since I last saw him, but now Sulio was rail thin and seemed to have lost his spirit. Anyway, Neha told me she was sad to see us go and that she hoped we'd meet again, and then she wrapped me in an incredibly tight hug.

I did my best to thank Neha in kind, and then she spun on her heel and dragged Sulio along with her to our room. She took off running—actually, maybe "charging" is more accurate—and it was pretty clear she was intent on saying goodbye to Alna and the girls just like she had to me. Kamalotz tried to stop her, and the servants by Eldan's side took off frantically to chase after her. I stood up and went after her too, and together we managed to convince Neha that she didn't need to be quite so passionate about her goodbye, and a light, gentle hug would be just fine.

So, Neha said her teary goodbyes, and when we were left alone we set to packing for our return trip. Once we were done, we swept through the rooms and made sure they were all clean. Then, with our luggage in hand we met with Ellie and the lostblood brothers and went to the carriages. They were all at the back entrance this time, rather than the front entrance like when we'd arrived.

At the back entrance of Eldan's manor, there were stables, spaces for carriages, and a dedicated spot for carriage maintenance and repairs. There were also small huts which I guessed were for the stablehands and the staff who looked after the carriages. It was like a scene straight out of the city streets and quite different from what we'd seen in the manor.

Just like when we came to Mahati, Kamalotz's carriage took the lead because he was going to escort us home. Then there was the family carriage, followed by Ellie's carriage, and some of Kamalotz's men had the eight horses Alna had bought ready to join us.

The carriages were all ready to go, so we loaded up our luggage, said hello to Balers and the others, greeted the new horses, and looked over the carriages to make sure we were all set. Finally, we did a final sweep of our luggage to make sure we hadn't forgotten anything.

Eldan, Neha, and some others came out to see us off, so we each shook everyone's hand while we said our thanks and goodbyes and promised to come back. With that done, we left the driving of our carriage to one of Kamalotz's people and climbed in. I gave the driver the sign to go, and we slowly rolled along towards the open gates and the roads beyond.

We ended up on the same road that we'd taken to get there. We stopped at the roadside inn, changed our carriages back to the usual wagons, and put Mahati behind us as we traveled in reverse order to get ourselves back home.

## On the Way Back to Baarbadal

The eiresetters were split between all of our carriages, where we got to chat, get to know each other, and tell the new residents about Iluk. It was also a chance to answer any questions they had about their new lives and a chance to gather some information about what kinds of things they wanted.

Senai and Ayhan, meanwhile, kept their eyes mostly on the floor, their arms wrapped around the six baar kids. But then their long ears twitched and their noses twitched along with them as they lifted their heads and peered along the road ahead. In the distance was the forest, and on the wind drifted its sounds and scents. It was a place the girls loved, and their faces and eyes brightened noticeably as their senses were hit with it. They knew then that the forest wasn't too far away, and that beyond it were the plains, and in them was Iluk Village. The knowledge that home was just around the corner, so to speak, helped to quell the worry in their hearts.

Now that they had some energy back, the girls started getting excited and fidgety, and our carriages entered the forest and traveled along the makeshift road while the atmosphere and aromas of the forest grew thick. Around us we heard branches shaking, insects, birds, streams of water, voices unknown, and the strange sounds of the owners of those voices doing something.

The forest had a unique liveliness unlike that of Merangal, and we rode through it to the entrance to the border station. The dogkin and the laborers all reacted a little differently as our carriages came to a stop. We rolled slowly through the border station gates and to the area where the yurts, hut, and well had been set up.

When the carriages came to a complete stop, Klaus and his people came over while the eiresetters leaped out to see to the horses. The twins also jumped out and ran over to the dogkin, and the area erupted with noise. Now that they weren't holding the baar kids, the girls instead wrapped the dogkin in their arms.

One of the dogkin realized that the twins were sad about something, and it let loose a howl. The other dogkin responded

immediately and dashed on over. All at once they dove on the twins and hugged them tight. It was like a big ball of fur writhing and squirming, and we couldn't even find the twins in it.

"Lord Dias, you're home earlier than expected," said Klaus. "Did something happen?"

Klaus glanced over at the giant mass of fur as he asked his question. I put Aymer on my head as I stepped out of the carriage, followed by the baars and Colm.

"The girls came down with a case of homesickness," I said, letting myself stretch after the long ride. "I had a nice long talk with Eldan and did most of what we set out to do, so I figured it was a good time to head home anyway."

When Klaus heard the twins were homesick, it all made sense for him.

"Ah, I see, so that's it. In which case now's a good chance to let the horses rest before setting out for Iluk."

I nodded and introduced him to Colm and the other eiresetters. Klaus was surprised at how early we'd returned, but he was glad to meet the new residents and happy to welcome them to their new home. The border station grew even louder with cheer as everyone set about introducing themselves to one another, and then Alna arrived after having talked with Kamalotz.

They came to us together, and Kamalotz said he was going to head back to Mahati. He'd escorted us this far and brought us the military steeds, and there really wasn't any need for him to see us all the way back to Iluk when Klaus and Colm could oversee the moving of the new horses.

"Thanks for everything, Kamalotz," I said. "You were nothing but helpful. You're always welcome here in Baarbadal."

Alna then got some help from Kamalotz's men and brought over the eight new horses, and Klaus was shocked to see them.

"Klaus," Alna said, "four of these horses are yours to use as you like. Pick whichever ones you like."

Alna had said it so casually that it didn't really register right away, and he stood with his mouth agape for a hot minute. After a time, his gaze went from Alna to me, then over to the horses. All of the eight horses were strong, steadfast, and ready to gallop into battle at a moment's notice. It began to dawn on Klaus that four of those horses were now his, and his fists clenched as he took a deep breath and filled his chest with as much oxygen as he could.

“Thank you so much!” he shouted, his voice deafeningly powerful.

Klaus dashed over to the horses and looked at each of them more closely. He knew that such steeds were expensive things and that even one could be worth as much as a whole home. But *four*? To do with as he pleased? Klaus couldn’t have been happier.

In truth, the horses weren’t Klaus’s personal property, and the intent was they’d help out at the border station and be used by everybody, but…Klaus was in charge of the border station, and in that sense they did effectively fall under Klaus’s command.

Four horses made a huge difference; there was travel between the border station and Iluk, of course, but also the pressure they exuded was enough to make anybody up to no good think twice before trying anything. Plus, if a skirmish were to ever break out, the horses would only add to our forces. When you thought about how they could also carry items and help to remove unnecessary trees and such, there were a whole lot of ways the horses would improve conditions at the border station, for both work and general life.

Given that the horses were trained for military purposes, there were things you had to be careful of when it came to handling the animals, but that wasn’t going to be an issue for Klaus, who had experience from back when he was part of the kingdom’s military.

While Klaus was carefully analyzing the horses, Kamalotz and his group took their leave, and the twins were healed—or perhaps warmed—as they played with a gigantic mass of furry dogkin. Some of the dogkin came up and said hello to me, then joined Klaus to admire the new horses, and some of the dogkin who’d met the eiresetters in Mahati ran over to Colm and chatted with him.

There was a fun, lively mood in the air as the remaining dogkin came up to us with the twins, who were now covered in enough fur to make more dogkin. Senai and Ayhan looked up at me with eyes that told me just how badly they wanted to go home. The dogkin had done a whole lot to lift their spirits, but there was still a longing in them, and it had only drawn them more to wanting to see the village. That was written into their expressions, and so I bent down on a knee and chuckled wryly while I looked them in the eyes.

“Hold on just a little longer, okay?” I said. “We have to let the

horses rest first."

I gave Senai and Ayhan a pat on the head, and I used that as an excuse to brush some of the fur off the both of them. The girls then flashed me somewhat forced smiles as if to say, *We can absolutely hold on!*

Well, I chuckled at that too, and then I noticed Canis come out from one of the huts and walk over to us. She said hello to Colm, whom she was already acquainted with, then headed over to Klaus, who was still hemming and hawing over the horses, and smiled at him in such a way as to say with her gaze: *Hurry up please; there's still work to be done before sundown.*

Klaus met the gaze of his beloved wife and grew tense. Sweat began to bead on his forehead, but even then he was drawn more strongly to *really* getting to know the new horses, and somehow he managed to shrug Canis's pressure off by doing his utmost not to look in her general direction. It was a very silent resistance I was seeing.

Klaus kept on looking at the horses and he just couldn't make up his mind. In the end, Canis had to spell it out for him.

"Lady Alna picked out all of these horses *herself*! Why are you worried about anything at all?! Every single one of these horses is guaranteed to be exceptional!"

"My goodness," replied Klaus, "you're right!"

And without any more hesitation, he picked out four horses for the border station. He did so extremely simply, by just taking the biggest four... In any case, those four were taken to the nearby stables, and Klaus went on to start worrying about what names to give them all. I saw Canis's eyes grow wide, and so the rest of us decided to clear away and give them space. Colm and his eiresetters took care of the remaining four military steeds, Ellie and I hopped into the driver's seats of our respective wagons, and our traveling party once again hit the road.

It wasn't long before we were back on the plains, and even though it had only been a few days, the breeze that hit us was as refreshing as the sight. The fresh green grass was pleasantly nostalgic to my nose and eyes alike, and I could tell that it was the same for Alna and all the others. It was a feeling of relief unique to coming home, and we basked in it as we traveled the road to Iluk.

Along the way, a few of the patrolling dogkin poked their

heads up from the grass and let out cheerful howls. A few moments later, we heard the flapping of wings and the sound of something settling on the hood of the wagon. I held out my arm, and the falconkin Sahhi deftly landed upon it.

"Welcome home!" he said.

"It's good to be back," I replied.

"We're home!" cried the twins happily, while the baars bleated around them.

Soon after, we saw Iluk Village pop up in the distance, and just looking from afar was enough to reinvigorate the twins. They were cheering and laughing like they'd never been homesick in the first place.

When we got to Iluk and slowed down, we hadn't even stopped before they were out of the wagon and running through the village. They ran to all the grandmas and dogkin they met on their way, saying hello and wrapping them in hugs. Seeing the twins back to their usual selves was a big relief for all the rest of us, and we brought the wagons to a stop at the storehouses, where we made sure the horses were cared for well after their hard work. Then we took to unloading our luggage, introducing the eiresetters to everyone, and setting about putting up their yurts. Everybody in the village helped out, and we got all the work done that needed doing.

We were all moving about seeing to this and that, and we barely had a chance to rest. Narvant turned up to say hello too, even though it looked like he was just as busy. I took him to the storehouses where we had the military steeds waiting, and I rubbed one of their noses while I explained to him why we had them.

"These horses are for all of Iluk," I said, "but we've got Balers and the other three already, so basically the horses you see here are yours to use as you like. I think they'll come in handy for moving materials around or maybe for your baar wagons, so don't hesitate to put 'em to work."

Then I added, "As for a stable, we've asked some of the craftsmen working with Klaus to put some materials together, and we're expecting that'll arrive at some point down the line. I'm hoping we can leave the actual construction to you and your family, though. Would that be okay?"

Narvant looked shocked for a moment, but his surprise quickly melted into a grin.

“I almost don’t believe it…” he sighed. “These are some truly fine horses, but I’m as grateful as I am surprised. Don’t even really have words for it. And look, if you went to the trouble of preparing these horses for us, then you can leave the stables and such to us.”

“Thanks, Narvant. Those new residents over there, the eiresetters, they’re going to look after all the horses, including these steeds here. They’re good at it too, so if you need some help, I want you to call on them. Oh, and one of the horses has a bit of a wild streak in it still, but the eiresetters have promised they’ll see to it.”

“Ho-hoh, you’ve brought new residents, huh? Here I was thinking you were going off on a simple vacation, and you come back with the gift of a bigger population. That said, you’re back earlier than we expected. Did something happen while you were out there in Mahati?”

“Oh…” I murmured.

I told Narvant about the girls and their homesickness.

“But by the looks of things,” he said, his eyes narrowing as he stroked his beard, “that wasn’t the *only* problem, was it?”

Perhaps it was the instincts of the old and wise, or maybe Narvant had just read it in my expression. Whatever the case, he’d figured out that there was another problem that was still unaddressed, and I really didn’t know what to tell him. Narvant stroked his beard again, then neatly tidied the beard hairs at the corners of his mouth.

“Look, if you’re not that worried, then it’s not that big a deal,” he said, as though he were giving a child advice. “And anyway, there’s no need for tricks or putting on an act. All you have to do is just sit down and talk things through with the girls. So get to it; the twins are bound to pick up on that long face of yours if you leave it too long.”

It was as if Narvant had seen right through to my soul, and all I could do was bashfully scratch the back of my head and walk over to the village square to see things through. On the way I called out to Alna and asked her for the rug we used for sitting outside, and I asked Aymer to join me.

We prepared things so we could talk to the twins in front of their own fields. First we put the rug down, then a tray, and then Alna put a pot of tea on that. Finally, once we also had a bowl of walnuts at the ready, we called out for the twins, who came

running over.

"What's up?" they both asked cheerfully.

I sat down on the rug and motioned for the girls to join me. Once they sat down, they looked from me to Aymer on my head, and by the looks on their faces and the tilting of their heads, they were wondering why I'd readied the rug and everything. I looked at each of the girls, then cleared my voice as I readied myself to talk to them about their heritage.

"Senai, Ayhan," I said, "I want you to be still and just listen to me, okay? While we were in Mahati, my friend happened to tell me about your powers. He told me what you can do, and your race, and he told me why it's important that we keep those things a secret. Aymer happened to be with me when I had this talk with my friend, and she told me more about it... That's why I wanted to talk to the two of you here, today."

I spoke slowly and calmly because I figured it would come as a great shock to the girls, and I wanted them to understand my intent. Sure enough, the girls were shocked and confused. They didn't know what to do, and they were so unsure of what was going on that fear started showing up in their eyes. They kept looking back at their field, to the two saplings growing there.

"I heard all about your amazing powers, and I heard that you made a promise to your parents to make sure you kept them a secret. Now that I know more about them, I can see it's only natural that you'd want to do that. My friend didn't know anything about your promise, and he didn't tell me about it out of any ill will. It was more like an accident, and it's not a thing where it was anybody's fault."

"So I don't want either of you two to think that you did anything wrong. You didn't break your promise to your parents, and I don't think they would be mad at you about it either. Even still, I know that you two must be worried and scared right now, so I want to make a pledge to you."

"I promise that I will not use your power myself, and I will not talk about it to anyone. Just like Aymer, I intend to keep your secret and protect you two. The village agreed to leave the sanjivani plant in your hands, and I'm happy to do the same with your powers. I promise that I won't tell you what to do with them; you can just use them as you see fit."

"So how about it? Do you accept my pledge?"

I reached out my hand for a handshake, to make my words

official. The girls had looked about ready to burst into tears as I made my promise to them, and so all I really wanted, first and foremost, was to put them at ease. The truth of it all was that I didn't have any interest in using their powers for my own gain anyway. On top of that, I didn't have anybody to tell in the first place.

The twins had used their powers in secret until now, and I was fine with them doing things that way from here on out too. I understood what it was like to live by your parents' words and to want to keep your promises, so I thought it was fine for them to keep doing it. What I wanted to do was support them in that endeavor, and if that meant some hard times, well, I didn't think they'd be hard at all if I was doing it for the girls. That's how I felt about it, plain and simple.

My thoughts were always like an open book, written right on my face, but I was just as happy to have Alna come over and use her soul appraisal too. I watched the twins with those thoughts in mind, and the twins wiped their eyes, then sat up straight, and they reached out to grip my big hand with two of their little ones.

"You have my thanks," I said. "I will keep this oath to you from now until the day I die. I promise."

The two girls nodded resolutely, but even then they seemed a bit hesitant and a bit gloomy, like there were clouds in their hearts that just wouldn't clear. I didn't think it was because the girls doubted my words; I was certain they believed I would protect their secret just like I'd said. That was why they'd shaken my hand.

I think they were scared because even then, it was like they'd broken their promise. It wasn't like they'd made it happen or they'd made a mistake and their secret had come to light, but even then they felt like they'd done their parents wrong...

I gave the girls' hands a tight squeeze, and then I turned my gaze to the saplings, which Aymer had told me were where Senai and Ayhan's parents' souls resided after they'd died of illness. I took a deep breath and started talking to the twins' parents.

It felt a bit strange talking to saplings, but apparently that was the type of people the forestkin were. They left their hearts in seeds, which they passed on to their children. The children looked after those seeds and raised them, and when they grew older and had children of their own, they too became trees to

watch over their children. In that way, whole forests grew… That was the forestkin way.

It made sense then why the twins adored the forest so much. But when it came to their powers, they used them quietly and secretly, all to help the people of Iluk. With that in mind, I figured it was fine for things to stay that way; they could use their powers whenever they decided it was right. And if they were ever unsure and couldn't make up their minds, they could discuss things with Aymer just like they'd done until now, or otherwise with Alna, or the dogkin, or Sahhi and his wives. They didn't ever have to come to a human like me. Even if they were to someday run into trouble with the fields, the village could still do things like we'd always done: get by on our own with the skills and knowledge in our possession. That was how people in the kingdom, and people across the continent, got by each and every day, and that was fine by me.

When the girls had used their powers in the past, it had been like a spontaneous stroke of good fortune, and I wasn't going to start thinking about their powers as a given or as something we would rely on. I just wanted to be grateful for all the help they'd already given us.

That's the long and short of what I said to those two saplings, but they didn't respond. The spring breeze passed by, and the saplings didn't say a thing. I waited, but nothing happened, and I'll admit I was a bit shocked. The girls stared up at me, then placed their hands on the thin little trunks of those saplings.

"Um, only forestkin can talk to forestkin trees," explained Aymer, "so the twins are going to pass your message to their parents now."

I cleared my throat.

"Oh…" I muttered. "I see."

The girls looked at peace as they touched the saplings. It was like they were asleep. They didn't use words—it was like they were communicating from inside of themselves. Some time passed while I watched the twins, and while I did I remembered my own parents. I thought about what they'd given me and the past year on the plains, and I thought that… Yeah, I was sure they'd have been proud of me. If I could talk to my parents like Senai and Ayhan were right now, I could stand tall and tell them all I'd done.

I wondered what my parents would say to me if they could.

My memories of them were slowly fading, so I could scarcely imagine it, but I liked to think it would be something nice. I thought that the twins' parents, too, would have nice things to say to their daughters.

After all, the twins had been good girls since they arrived in Iluk. They'd kept their promise to their parents, and they'd worked really hard on a lot of things, not just their fields. All of us in Iluk were nothing but proud of the girls, and I felt certain that their actual parents would be so proud they couldn't even put the feeling into words.

So yeah, I was certain that Senai and Ayhan's parents would forgive them because it wasn't through any fault of their own that people had found out about their powers.

*All that said, I'm not sure that they'll be quite as accepting of* my *words, but then again, knowing the twins…*

Right as I was thinking that, the twins let their hands softly drop from the saplings. They turned to face me with slightly puzzled looks on their faces.

"Um, they said it's okay what happened with the promise," said Senai.

"But they said they'd reply to you themselves…" said Ayhan.

When I heard that, my head tilted so far to the side out of confusion that poor Aymer almost toppled right off. After all, it was supposed to be impossible for me to communicate with the girls' parents—which meant that they couldn't reply to me either.

*So what did they even mean when they said that?*

The girls looked just as puzzled as I did, and I could even feel Aymer's body tilting on top of my head as she tried to work it out too. We were all sitting there blankly, none of us saying a word, and all of us with our heads tilted sideways. We all stared at the saplings, and then…we noticed a slight movement in their branches. It was so slight that if you weren't looking for something you wouldn't have noticed, but it was something swelling from a branch on each sapling. Little by little they grew until there were two buds.

Those two buds grew bigger and bigger, as if time were moving faster than normal, and days were moving as fast as seconds, until leaves came from the buds and then two beautiful roses bloomed. One of them was red and the other blue, and it was then that I realized the flowers were the reply the twins' parents wanted to give me.

“Well…those are some beautiful flowers,” I remarked. “Does that mean your parents accepted what I told them?”

“Yes!” cried the twins happily.

I looked at Senai and Ayhan, who both wore gentle smiles, their cheeks flushed red. They were filled with such joy about their parents’ acceptance that I felt certain they were going to jump to their feet and start dancing. I gave them both a pat on the head.

“Girls, that’s wonderful!” cried Aymer.

She jumped over to Senai, then Ayhan, smiling at the two of them and rubbing her cheek against theirs. The girls started laughing then, and the sound of it brought the villagers over to us. I hadn’t actually told any of them what I was planning, but they’d all sensed that we needed some space and they’d given it to us. But when the twins burst into happy laughter, they all knew we were done and began to gather. The village square was bursting with liveliness in the blink of an eye.

“Wow, those flowers are utterly stunning,” said Uncle Ben. “I’ve never seen anything like them.”

“Nor have I,” added Grandma Maya. “I wonder what they’re called?”

“And they smell amazing!” commented Shev. “This is the first time I’ve smelled something so nice!”

Alna and Ellie came along, then the lostblood brothers, then Francis, his family, and all the baars. After that, the dogkin all piled in and Sahhi and his wives dropped down from above… Everybody surrounded Senai and Ayhan as they marveled at the two flowers. No matter where you looked, you saw a villager, and on all of their faces were smiles. This made the twins about as happy as they could possibly get, and you could hear it in their laughter.

The dogkin who were closest with the twins ran in and hugged them. The baars, not to be outdone, pushed themselves closer to the girls. The adults, meanwhile, came around in turns to give Senai and Ayhan pats on the head or to clasp their hands for a moment. Nobody knew what we’d talked about, but everybody wanted to let the girls know that we were on their side and that we were all family.

All the eiresetters were there too, and while they didn’t actually know what was going on, it looked fun. So they joined in, talking and laughing with whomever was nearby, until they

reached the twins. Everybody was so squeezed up together it was almost uncomfortable, and the twins enjoyed every single moment with contagious smiles.

It was a beautiful sight, unlike any other, and it truly warmed the heart. I felt certain that Senai and Ayhan’s parents were happy for their daughters, who took deep breaths and then bellowed as loud as their lungs would let them.



“We love you!”

“Every one of you!”

Everybody smiled so hard our jaws were bound to really feel it in the morning, and then the two flowers grew even bigger, emitting a calming scent that was even more aromatic than before. I breathed that scent in, and I watched over the fun until the twins finally calmed down.

## The Domain Lord’s Residence in Merangal, Mahati—Eldan

A few days had passed since Dias left Mahati for his home of Baarbadal, and Eldan was in his office seeing to his work with renewed fervor. His heart was nourished and full after all that had happened of late. For starters, he had been able to host his friend Dias at his manor and seen him well looked after and entertained. Then of course there was the pregnancy of his wife and the wonderful gift of life they would soon share. Eldan’s passion burned so bright that his pen barely stopped moving.

However, Eldan was not alone in this enthusiasm. Things in Mahati were better and more prosperous than they had ever been. Merangal and all its neighboring cities and towns were bustling and lively, and much of this was thanks to Eldan’s hard work. The tax exemption, too, allowed him to use his resources to ensure that each part of his domain was constantly growing and developing. Then there was the excitement that had rippled through the lands with the arrival of Dias, the heroic savior of the nation, and the strong bond of friendship he’d shown the people with his visit.

Eldan had done his best to let the people know of Mahati’s strong ties with Baarbadal, and while it was common knowledge, many had viewed the relationship with some skepticism. However, when these same people saw Dias and Eldan interacting like brothers, right before their very eyes, the impact had been undeniable.

Dias had acquired rare dragon materials on many occasions, but he never stored away the riches he earned upon selling them. Instead, he always spent his money on things like erecting a kitchen range, building a border station, or purchasing expensive military grade horses.

All of those who had traveled to Baarbadal for work came back well paid, well-fed, and well looked after. When the merchants thought of how upstanding Dias was, and how close he was to Eldan, they saw a chance for good fortune to roll their way, and the chance to acquire a customer only too happy to

spend money. It was only natural that business was bustling.

The cultivation of the Baarbadal lands was also proceeding smoothly. Dias was increasing their livestock at an astounding rate, and not only were they well on their way to having a stable production of their own unique exports, word was quickly spreading of how they had already expanded their borders and acquired more land.

It was possible that at some point Baarbadal might even become a part of the western trade market which Eldan controlled, and to prepare for such a day Eldan was already investing in the necessary merchants to make sure they had everything ready, in turn stirring up a special procurement of goods for cultivating new lands.

It would still be a long time before Baarbadal produced enough of its wool to have an effect on the market, and so naturally it would be just as long—if not longer—before any talk of joining the western trade market began. Eldan expected it would be some years, perhaps even decades, but all the same the desires of the merchants knew no bounds, and Eldan used this to his advantage by promoting internal development, which in turn brought the region more prosperity.

*It's possible that in just a few years, Dias may grow his domain to the point he may want to become a part of a wider trade market... I can scarcely believe that this is real. It feels more like a dream. I'm as overjoyed as I am terrified...*

And so, as he mused upon these thoughts at his desk, Eldan flowed through the various documents before him as though working down a river, and it was then that Kamalotz arrived, having received a regular report from one of his aides. Eldan noticed the troubled look on his face immediately.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Eldan put his pen down to listen as Kamalotz ran through the matters he himself had just heard.

"A few concerning reports have come in," started Kamalotz. "Firstly, a number of envoys are on their way here on behalf of First Princess Isabelle and Second Princess Helena, though it would seem their destination is Baarbadal. They are expected to arrive here in a few days. Their exact motives remain unclear, but given what happened when Diane visited, we'd best keep a close watch."

"Yes, that is...concerning news indeed," replied Eldan, rubbing

his chin. “The first and second princesses are not as foolish as their younger sister, however, and as far as I am aware they keep the company of more sensible nobles. Hmm… Let’s just keep an eye on them for the time being.”

Eldan paused to think for a moment, and then something hit him.

“Though *we* have the luxury of simply keeping an eye on things, Dias may not. It has only been a few days since I talked to him of the importance of a domain guest house, and while he may well be able to erect a tent in an instant, he’s not anywhere near ready to entertain a party of such high caliber. He will need to put up a tent, fully furnish it, and have a welcome dinner ready for the envoy, but can he do all of that in time for their arrival…?”

He made up his mind and gave his order. “Kamalotz, once you’ve finished your report, I’d like you to arrange whatever you think is necessary and head to Iluk. Given that the princesses keep good company, it’s all the more important not to slip up, or things could quickly get very troublesome.”

Kamalotz nodded confidently before continuing with other matters.

“In the past I’ve mentioned the guild in which Lord Dias’s relatives, Ely and Aisa, are members. The leader of said guild, Sir Goldia, has arrived in Merangal and has requested an audience. It would appear he wishes to move the guild’s base of operations from the royal capital to Merangal and is seeking your permission to do so.”

“He wants to move from the royal capital…to here? I have heard of the guild’s achievements, and given their relation to Dias I’m happy to welcome them, but…why make this move? Hmm… It looks like that is a topic I’ll have to dig into when I talk to Sir Goldia in person.”

As Eldan once again dropped into thought, Kamalotz looked down at the documents in his hands. Among the mostly inconsequential intelligence and rumors was a report that explained that a particular man had gone missing—one who had stirred up nothing but problems within Mahati. Kamalotz looked over the details and let out a silent sigh, then shivered slightly.

He had a very bad feeling about it.

**????—????**

The man was after vengeance.

To others, the rage that drove the man was unreasonable—unfathomable. And while it was a desire for revenge that drove him, he had yet to achieve his ultimate goal. Instead, he had met with failure at every turn, which had led to the downfall of those he'd relied on. His finances had dried up and he had been sent to the street, a pitiful shell of what he had once been.

The man had never completely given up on his revenge, but without a means to mete out his own justice, he'd lost his way. It was hard enough just to find sustenance with each passing day, and the vengeance he sought grew hazy in his mind. With his heart on the verge of breaking completely, he found himself teetering on the edge.

And yet even then, the man did not stop moving forwards. He drifted, aimless, and completely by coincidence he found himself at a very particular place—a strange place that many called a relic. It had been constructed some thousands of years ago, perhaps tens of thousands, and none knew who had made it or why. The relic was so old that not a single record of it remained.

The man stood now before the relic's massive, ancient gates, shut tight as though they'd long rejected any attempt to open or break them. And though the man knew he would fare no better than any before, he reached a hand out to push against them.

Without so much as a sound, the gates began to move. They opened as if welcoming the man inside, and his eyes grew the widest they had ever grown since the day he was born. He did not think about what dangers might await him. He merely stumbled through the gates, until he was swallowed entirely by the darkness within.

He walked on.

# Extra Story: A Fragrant Breeze at the Inn

After Juha told me about the twins and their forestkin background, I had a chat with Aymer about how to handle things. It was a little tiring, so when we finished, I trudged on back to our room and opened the door, only to find Alna and the girls all in their pajamas after having washed up. They were all excited about some pieces of fabric they'd laid out on the table.

I had figured that the twins would be in bed by now, and I immediately panicked and did the best I could to take everything Juha had told me and thrust it out of my mind. I walked in trying to think about all the different food we'd eaten since we arrived in Mahati and how it all tasted. As I walked over to them I realized that it was a bad idea to think about food so close to bedtime, and it was with some regret that I looked down at the fabric on the table.

Alna looked up at me with a smile and held the fabric out wide to show it to me.

"Welcome back! We found this mixed in with the clothing that Eldan had prepared for us, but get this: It's got accessories on it. It's so fancy in the way that it's made that we all noticed it right away. There are golden bracelets and a golden belt, or at least I think that's what they are...and there are decorations like these chains too. It's not just gold either—there's jewelry here, and the material is a very nice silk. The dyeing is top-notch as well. It's a real surprise, this thing."

"Wow, that's real strange," I said, "putting the decorations and the clothing all together like that. Judging by the size, it looks like it's for you, Alna? I haven't seen anything like it, so I guess it's not a kingdom thing but rather cultural or traditional Mahati wear?"

Aymer jumped off my shoulder to take a closer look at the clothing, and with the twins' help they spread the material out so Aymer could get a better sense of things.

"This is a dancer's outfit," she explained with a nod. "The decorations and the shawl are connected so that the shawl can be used for big flowing movements. The flow of it is very gorgeous, or perhaps you could call it showy. That's what the shawl is for."

“The gold and the chains jangle from different parts of the dancer’s body and sparkle as the light hits them. Sometimes you’ll even see bells attached so you get a kind of ringing, percussive sound to enchant and excite the audience.”

“A dancer’s outfit,” I replied. “Wow… I don’t really know much of anything about that kind of thing. Hmm…so you wear it while you dance and…it’s good because…it’s lightweight?”

“Well, I guess I’ll just put it on and see how it feels to dance in,” declared Alna.

She folded up the material, took it in hand, and walked into one of the other rooms.

“I’m going to help!” cried Senai, running after her.

“Me too!” added Ayhan.

Aymer hopped off to join them, and I took a look around, realizing that I had to wait until they were done. I walked on over to Francis and his family, who were all clumped together on some cushions, and I gave them all a good pat. Francis then rolled up to his feet and went over to a shelf on the wall. He pulled a brush from it and came on back to me.

I could tell exactly what the baar wanted by the way he poked the brush in my direction, so I got a good hold on it and made sure all the baars got their fair share of brushing. I took my time to make sure that I brushed out any clumps of wool, and with my spare hand I picked out any rubbish or grime I found. After a time, the baars all had a nice sheen, and they were practically sparkling by the time I finished.

Once I was done, I gave all the baars some more pats until they were all satisfied, and right as I was wondering just how much longer Alna and the girls were going to take, Aymer came hopping out with Senai and Ayhan. Senai was holding something in her hands, which she placed on the table with a soft clang.

When the object was on the table, they took the lid off it and Ayhan put some stuff in there from a pot she was carrying. I watched them go about their preparations with a puzzled look, and fortunately Aymer was there to explain it all to me.

“That’s an incense burner,” she said. “It was on the shelf down there, and I thought that if Alna was going to dance, then it would be nice to make it even more fun and put the incense burner to use.”

“As you already know,” she continued, “Mahati is famous for

its spices, and so they also make good incense. It can be used for a lot, from creating a nice atmosphere to warding off insects and illnesses. Tonight you'll get to enjoy some of Mahati's premium luxury incense!"

While Aymer was talking, the twins finished their preparations and they turned their gazes to me expectantly. After a few seconds of not knowing what they wanted, I realized that the incense needed a light, so I took the lamp from the wall and transferred some of the flame to the incense burner.

A white smoke began to waft around the room, and I caught the scent of something soft and sweet, like nothing I'd ever smelled before. Senai, Ayhan, Aymer, and all the baars were utterly entranced by it.

"Yep, that's premium luxury products for you," I said. "Just smelling it is enough to almost taste the sweetness, and boy is it calming. It's not sweet like sugar, but more like...flowers, or a refreshing fruit. This is very new to me, so I'm not even sure how to describe it, actually."

Just as I finished speaking, we heard a metal ring in the air, and then Alna came out in her dancer's outfit, her hair done up at the top of her head.

"So cute! So cool!" said Senai.

"Wow! So pretty!" marveled Ayhan.

Francis and Francoise bleated their approval, followed by the baar kids.

"Oh my," said Aymer, clapping as she spoke, "when you lay it out on the table it's one thing, but the true beauty doesn't reveal itself until you put it on. You look absolutely stunning, Alna."

Alna smiled in response to all the compliments, then looked at me.

"Uh," I uttered, clearing my throat. "You look very pretty. Yes, very beautiful indeed."

I just said what was on my mind, but Alna's smile grew wider, and she came on over to me, took my hands, and pulled me to a space in the room where there was no furniture. She held up my hands and—just like she'd done once before at Klaus and Canis's wedding—she took them in her own so we could dance.

"Oh, um, that outfit isn't meant for that kind of dancing," started Aymer, who then shook her head and said, "Actually, forget I said anything at all."

The mousekin's words never made it to Alna's ears, and she

just kept on looking at me while I looked back at her. The twins then started to clap their hands and sang, “La la la,” with their beautiful voices to encourage us to stay that way. It wasn’t long before Aymer had joined in, and then the baars too, and so Alna and I moved slowly in time with their music, reminiscing on the last time we’d danced. All the while, the breeze from outside gently pushed us along. There was only family here and there were no special rules we had to follow, so our dancing was pretty free-flowing.

The chains on Alna’s outfit glittered as the light from the lamp hit them, and the shawl drifted this way and that, and all the while that sweet, fragrant incense was carried on the air, making for a right unique sight. I took in the movements of Alna’s arms and legs, the beauty of her outfit and the decorations, and the feel of the breeze, and I think Alna must have noticed it because she let go of my hands, took a few steps back, and spun and jumped as if to really show it off. She just found new ways to bring out the stunning beauty of it.

There was no other word for it but beautiful, really, and I was really taken by it. The twins, too, when they just couldn’t bear it any longer, ran over to us while they were still singing and looked at us with eyes that said they wanted to dance too. They ran around Alna and, when the breeze took her clothing and made it dance on the air, they grew even livelier.

With the twins so excited, Aymer couldn’t contain herself either, and she bounded over with great big hops. The baars weren’t about to be outdone, so they started stomping their hooves and showing off their shiny wool. Alna took all of it in with a smile and continued to steal center stage.

I watched it all with a quiet smile, and we stayed like that until everybody’s throat and body grew tired from the singing and the dancing. This was a totally new experience we wouldn’t have gotten anywhere else, and we soaked it all in until we couldn’t anymore.

# Afterword

As always, I'll start with words of thanks.

Thanks to everyone who has followed the story all this way and all of you still giving it your support on Shosetsuka ni Naro. Thanks to everyone who sent fan mail, to all the editing staff, to Kinta for the illustrations, and to the book designer. Thanks to Yumbo for handling the manga version, all of their assistants, and all of the manga editing staff.

Really, thank you all! It's because of you that volume 7 is here!

Volume 7, incidentally, marks Dias's first trip outside of Baarbadal. He visited Eldan, who has always been very good to him, and the trip was full of interesting experiences... Mahati isn't exactly a foreign country, but the volume offered a different stage compared to that of the usual plains. The cover and insert illustrations all offered something a little different. Did you enjoy it?

Was the most eye-catching part of it Alna? On the cover? Kinta wanted to draw Alna as a dancer, and when he did I felt inspired and wrote this volume's bonus story. I'm not sure if it's a very dancer-esque story, but I think it was at least very Alna- and Dias-esque.

Many of Kinta's ideas have inspired scenes and characters for me, so I get more from them than just illustrations. I couldn't be happier! When I see the illustrations and think of the story, new ideas just float up into my mind—more than I could imagine all on my own. So I really am beyond grateful.

I hope you'll keep supporting my writing ways and the work I'm producing!

Speaking of my writing, the publishing company that releases *Frontier Lord*, which is to say Earth Star Novel, is releasing my new story, "Oedo Kobold: The Fantastic Adventures of a Beastkin Dog in Edo," in December!

The story has a different setting from *Frontier Lord* and has a beastkin dog slipping from another world into an Edo city under the governance of Shogun Tsunayoshi. What happens when Edo

encounters such a creature? How does it change? The story follows the main character and the kobold as Edo becomes an entirely different place over time.

You can read a sample at Earth Star Novel, so please check it out if you're interested!

And with that little bit of self-promotion out of the way, let's talk volume 8!

With their first holiday in the books and the twins' secret having come to light, Iluk Village is quickly developing over the spring. But as it grows, various people—whose names have already been touched upon—will visit, making Dias even busier than he already is.

Perhaps we'll even get to see him looking more like an actual domain lord...maybe?

Things are about to get even more lively and fun than ever, so there's a lot to look forward to as the villagers of Iluk work together for the future!

I hope to write you all again in volume 8!

Fuurou, December 2021

# Bonus Short Story

## Riding into the Distance

One morning, Alna suggested we take the horses and go hunting. I grabbed my hand axe and hopped on Balers while Alna hopped on Karberan with her bow and arrow, and the two of us took off east.

Everybody else at the village was, in a rare turn of events, completely occupied, and not a single other person was available to join us. So, it was just me, Alna, and our horses looking out over the plains under a clear blue sky, looking for something to hunt. But the only thing we saw was the grass blowing in the wind.

Until now, hunting on horseback had been a real pain with my battle-ax, but I was sure that the hand axe I'd received not so long ago would make it easier. Sure, it wasn't quite as effective as a good bow and arrow, but I figured I could make it work. I looked to the skies and all across the plains in search of prey, but there wasn't a single animal to hunt.

For all the running around we did you'd think we'd at least have found a fox, but nope. There wasn't even a bird in the sky. I looked over at Alna as we rode, wondering what was going on. But she wasn't looking around at anything. She had her eyes right ahead as she took the reins of her horse, leaned forwards, and kept on running.

I was watching her as I rode by her side, and she glanced my way. Her eyes were sparkling with joy from just galloping through the plains, and she had a bright smile on her face to go with them. She turned away and faced straight ahead again. Karberan felt what she wanted through the reins and picked up the pace.

Alna didn't care a single lick about hunting anymore. All she cared about was enjoying the ride. I adjusted my grip on Balers's reins and gave him a message with them: *Let's have ourselves some fun too.* Balers got my message loud and clear, and he took off at such a tremendous pace that he wasn't just going to catch us up to Alna—we were going to fly right past her.

We caught up to her in no time, and she gave us another big smile right before she picked up her pace. We raced through the plains, speeding up every time one of us overtook the other. As you can imagine, all that running took us quite a ways from Iluk and all the way to parts of the plains I'd never been before. I mean, it was still the plains, so the view was exactly the same as when we were in Iluk, but as I looked out at it all I was reminded of just how vast the plains were.

Eventually, Karberan started to run short of breath, followed by Balers, and the horses started to slow. Their speed started to drop and their body language told us they needed to rest, so we slowed to a trot until we found a stream. It wasn't as wide as the one running by Iluk, but we stopped at it and let the horses have a drink.

Alna and I jumped off the horses so they could properly rest and gave them pats for all the hard work they'd done. I did that for a while, just letting Balers know he'd done great, and just as I was about to sit down for a moment I saw Alna take a bag dangling from Karberan's saddle. Inside of it were a blanket, some utensils, and a pot, along with bread, jerky, and fruit. She pulled out everything you'd want in a hearty lunch, then spread the blanket and laid everything out.

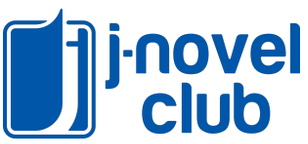
"We have to let the horses rest," she said, "so let's take a break here for a while. Yep, by the looks of things...we won't be home until late afternoon."

It wasn't like her to speak so shamelessly, and with such a bold look on her face no less, but I couldn't do much more than just let out a sigh and nod. I thought back to the morning and how I'd thought it was odd that Alna was so much more energetic than usual, and I realized now that she had been making sure she could be away from the village most of the day without having to worry about her chores.

But all the same, if she'd gone to the trouble of making time for us to be alone together, then I didn't think that was all that bad of an idea anyway.

"All righty," I said, nodding to myself. "Then let's just take things easy and have some tea."

So I picked up the pot and filled it in the stream, then went about gathering some firewood to boil the water.



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# Copyright

The Frontier Lord Begins with Zero Subjects: Volume 7
by Fuurou

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