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VIII
THE NATION'S HEROIC SAVIORS

ILLUSTRATOR
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Then, battle-ax in hand, I took off on my own, heading straight for the front doors. The enemy soldiers couldn't believe their eyes, but still they readied their arrows and fired...but anything that would have been a direct hit was bounced away by my new set of armor.
Illustrator: Kinta



Cast of Characters



Dias

Lord of the Baarbadal Domain, formerly Nezrose.



Alna

Onikin tribe member and Dias's wife.



Klaus

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



Senai and Ayhan

Twin sisters and forestkin with mysterious powers.



Eldan

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



Aymer

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



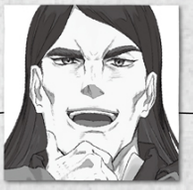
Ellie

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



Zorg

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



Juha

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



Narvant

Elderly cavekin and skilled blacksmith.



Hubert

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



Sahhi

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

Aymer's Report

Residents: From 130 to 158!

A year had passed since the Baarbadal domain lord, Dias, began his new life upon the grassy plains and established Iluk Village. The villagers threw a grand banquet to celebrate both the anniversary and the village's safe passage through the long winter.

Once all the spring cleaning and early spring work was settled, Dias decided to make his first trip outside of Baarbadal—and his first family vacation! He visited Eldan in Mahati and thanked him in person for all of his support. Upon arrival at a roadside inn on the way to Mahati, Dias and his entourage quite unexpectedly met Eldan's mother, Neha, who insisted on giving them all the warmest of welcomes.

All the food that Lady Neha prepared was utterly delectable! It was sumptuous, of course, but it was all carefully prepared to align with everybody's individual tastes and eating habits! I've so much to learn from her ways, that's for certain.

Upon actually meeting Eldan in Merangal, Dias was treated to yet another luxuriously warm welcome. The banquet was a chance for Dias to go head-to-head with the hot-blooded lionkin Sulio in a wrestling match, which Dias won in an impressive fashion.

Coincidentally, during this trip to Mahati, Dias stumbled upon Senai and Ayhan's secret and discussed it with the twins upon their return to Baarbadal. Though the twins were uncertain and hesitant about what to do, their parents' souls—residing in the trees in their garden—accepted Dias's heartfelt pledge to always watch over the twins and never take advantage of them. It was because of this that the twins no longer had to worry about only using their powers in secret.

The domain lord of Baarbadal maintains excellent relations, both familial and diplomatic, and his 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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Watching over Boisterous Twins at Iluk Village

A day had passed since the banquet to celebrate the flowering trees that held the souls of Senai and Ayhan's parents. Once I'd finished breakfast and gotten myself ready for a day of work, I found the twins. They were dashing around the village with energy like never before, likely thanks to the fact that their parents had told them they no longer had to hide any secrets from the other villagers.

The twins would of course keep their special powers hidden when merchants or foreign guests visited. But among the residents of Iluk, such secrecy was no longer necessary; the girls could use their powers to their hearts' content.

The twins planned to go to all the fields and all through the forest in order to be more helpful to everyone. They said they were going to "make things more lively," and it looked like they were itching to start. Aymer and some dogkin protection were with them, and they were working hard too—Aymer to ensure that the twins didn't use too much of their powers all at once, and the dogkin to make sure that nobody outside the village saw them casting their spells and whatnot.



That said, with Klaus and his folks at the border station and Sahhi and his wives watching the skies, we were sure to receive word the moment a visitor neared the village, so I wasn't expecting any surprises. In any case, all of that protection meant that I could go about my work without a care, and so I watched the twins as they raced off and I got to my usual tasks, which meant pulling up water from the well and organizing all of our inventory and such.

It was pretty much just another day in Iluk, but there was *one* noticeable difference, and that was the addition of the new military steeds and the eiresetter residents. We'd had to put up more yurts and extend the stable, and it was all that little bit more lively than usual. Oh, and I guess I should also mention my new hand axe, which was hanging from my belt in a leather sheath.

The hand axe was more convenient than my battle-ax, and I could use it very much like a makeshift knife of sorts. At present I had no real need to make use of it as a throwing weapon, but it was mighty well suited to that too. The hand axe couldn't repair itself like my battle-ax could, and that meant I had to be more careful about it getting chipped. Still, with Narvant and the cavekin making sure it was always sharpened to a razor edge for me, I didn't have to be *too* careful.

At the same time, the hand axe was designed as a throwing weapon. Using it that way meant it was inevitably going to wear out, so I wondered if maybe it was better to use it with the understanding that eventually I was going to break it.

In any case, I was thinking about that very thing when Uncle Ben walked over to me with Narvant, a bunch of dogkin, and a horse pulling a cart. I squinted my eyes to get a better look at them while Uncle Ben called out.

"Figured we'd build a hut where our water supply starts," he said. "I asked Narvant here to get things ready while you were away on your vacation."

"Oh. Uh…a hut?" I replied. "At the water supply, you say?"

"Yep," said Uncle Ben, pointing to the north. "We're putting it out there so we can protect the water that runs along the side of the village. We've got the wells, sure, but the stream is an essential part of life here; we need it to wash both our clothes and ourselves. We're going to do some building at the stream too—set

it up with some masonry work to ensure the water isn't blocked by mud or falling stones…and we'll put a hut out there while we're at it."

He continued, "With the hut out there, we'll have the dogkin start making the area between the hut and the village a part of their regular patrols. That'll help to stop any wild animals from sullying the water. That said, it'd be unfair to the local wildlife if we kept them from their drinking water, but I figure we can settle that by building another one of them reservoirs or otherwise a branching stream."

"Huh, I see…" I mumbled.

"Looking after your water sources is a part of good governance and flood control," Uncle Ben continued. "We really should have been on top of it a bit earlier, but there was a lot of other work we had to see to, and we had our hands so full that we've had to put off the water work until now."

"Once we've got the hut set up, we'll set about using more stones to build a new storage location. Apparently there's ice up in the mountains that still hasn't thawed, so the dogkin are going to help us make a stockpile of the stuff."

"A stockpile of ice…? But why?" I asked.

"We can use it during the summer to help cool things. I figured it would be fine if we just had enough for ourselves, but Hubert and Ellie want to gather a whole heap of the stuff because we can sell it in Mahati, where it gets incredibly hot. So we'll put some of the stockpile aside for just that purpose. If all goes well, we'll stockpile ice during the winter for selling the following summer."

"It's one thing if it's just for us, but we're going to sell it too?" I wondered. "Is that even feasible? Won't it all just melt on the way to Mahati?"

"That's what I thought, but Hubert brought up something really interesting. He said that when you wrap ice up in baar wool, it melts a *little*, but it actually arrives almost entirely intact. So not only can the wool keep things warm, it can also trap the cold. Hubert's thinking that we wrap the ice in wool and leather because we can sell that along with the ice. And look, even if it all goes belly-up, it's just ice. We won't lose anything at all if it melts on us, so why not give it a shot?"

I answered, "Yeah, that's a fair point. If it doesn't sell, it doesn't

sell, and in that case we just keep what ice we gather for use here in Iluk."

After mulling it all over I nodded to myself, convinced by Uncle Ben's reasoning. Uncle Ben was satisfied that he'd told me enough and sauntered north together with the dogkin and Narvant.

Wait, don't monsters appear to the north? Will Uncle Ben and the others be okay on their own?

I was admittedly a bit worried, but it turned out that Uncle Ben had already given the matter a lot of thought. He'd asked Sahhi and the other falconkin to scout the area in advance, and so they were only going to take a route that the falconkin were certain was safe. If it so happened that there wasn't a safe route to the source of the stream, then the work would be put off until a later date, or otherwise they'd just ask me to slay whatever monster it was that was getting in the way.

Seeing as Uncle Ben had it all sorted out, I stopped worrying. He had Narvant with him and a bunch of dogkin too, and even Uncle Ben himself had the magic sword I'd given him. I figured they'd be...mostly fine, so long as it wasn't a dragon that blocked their way.

So there I was, watching Uncle Ben and his entourage heading off north, when Sahhi and his fiancées—Riasse, Bianne, and Heresse—came flying towards us at incredible speed.

"Stop!" Sahhi shouted. "Head back! There's dragons back there! Dragons!"

My shoulders slumped at those words. I just couldn't believe how perfect the timing was that monsters that needed intervention would show up right when they wanted to set out. I heaved a great sigh and gave my head a scratch. I knew things were about to get troublesome, so I shouted out to Sahhi.

"What type of dragons?! Tell me it's not flame dragons out there!"

"No, they're wind dragons! Five of them! They're not coming this way, but they're all hovering around to the north near the mountain!"

"Hmm..."

Wind dragons weren't especially strong—in fact, they were far more fragile than the other dragons I'd faced. I was pretty certain that I could take them out even with just my hand axe. At the

same time, the last time I'd fought wind dragons, I'd been cut by them, and those cuts had given me a fever that had knocked me flat.

I'd made it out of that thanks to the twins giving me some sanjivani, but it was a stupid idea to go into battle expecting them to have another herb ready and waiting for me. Even so, wind dragons were dangerous, and I couldn't just leave them to their own devices.

I was considering my options when Narvant suddenly looked at me with a sparkle in his eyes. He'd been silent this whole time, but all of a sudden his booming voice filled the air.

"Aha! Dragons, is it?" he cried. "Looks like it's finally time for that armor we built! Young Dias! You're coming with me! We've finally finished your armor and we're going to march to my workshop to get it so you can march straight back out here and take on those wind dragons! You'll beat them to dust and you won't even have a scratch to show for it, I guarantee it!"

Narvant didn't even wait for me to reply. He immediately spun and started striding towards his workshop. I glanced at Uncle Ben and Sahhi and all the others, who had decided to take a break at a nearby yurt, and before I chased after Narvant I gave them all a look they would understand.

"Give me a second, okay?"

In terms of weapons, I had my battle-ax and the hand axe that Neha had given me. I held the big axe in both hands, and the smaller one was snug in the sheath that Alna had made for me. In terms of armor, I had the full body armor and helmet that Narvant and the cavekin had crafted for me. That was the whole of my equipment, and it was how I was going into battle with the wind dragons.

Narvant had taken my old armor and used it as a base for building an entirely new set, and it ended up being a completely different thing. It covered and protected my whole body, and it was an incredibly tough, solid piece of work. Usually when armor was especially tough, it was also stiff and heavy and hard to move in, but that wasn't the case with my new armor. I could run, I could crouch, and I could bend over and it never felt awkward. No matter how I moved, the armor shifted smoothly and quietly

around me, as though each of its parts were an individual living creature. I was straight up flabbergasted by how well crafted it was.

The reason the armor all moved so smoothly was on account of the snake scale style construction that Narvant had shown me some time ago. Various metal plates which folded neatly over one another were held in place by rivets, which controlled just how much the plates moved and allowed them space to fold into. That meant that the armor moved with me and didn't scratch against itself. As such I didn't have to worry about the armor impeding my movements, and the constant squeaking from my old armor was no longer an issue. It was all so free-flowing and silent that, to be honest, I couldn't quite believe it was even metal anymore.

Taken as a whole, the armor set was one of considerable weight, but because that weight was spread evenly throughout the whole of my body, it wasn't nearly as cumbersome to wear as I'd thought. It was so wildly different from anything I'd known that it felt disrespectful to compare it to my previous armor.

But for all the compliments you could shower on the new armor—and there were many—it did have one weak point... It was an armor fashioned from steel, so it should have come in a comparatively plain color scheme, but instead it was so flamboyantly *golden* that at first I was hesitant to equip it. Not like a gold coin but something more unique and flashy—it glimmered when it reflected the light of the sun.

As it turned out, that unique color scheme—and the glimmering gold could almost blind you depending on what angle you viewed it from—was because of the strange stones that we'd been given by that strange baar that might not have been a baar at all. According to Narvant, the alloy they'd created by mixing the stones with steel had come out looking pretty much just like steel when it was first done—a kind of dull metallic color.

And while the alloy *looked* just like steel, it was much stronger. That made it harder to work with but not completely unwieldy. However, the new alloy had a strange power, or perhaps you'd call it a characteristic—it absorbed sunlight, and as it did it changed color. Now, if it had only absorbed sunlight, then the armor would have kept its dull metallic hue, but the alloy *also* absorbed the magical power of any who touched it. So as the metal absorbed

the sun's rays and the cavekin's magic, it had changed into a glimmering gold.

When the alloy turned gold, it became much harder to work with on account of the fact that it would expel magical power when it was under attack. It released bursts of magic, and this incredible power was the reason that it had taken so long for Narvant to finish the armor—it would react whenever they hammered at it or put it in their furnaces. No matter how they swung their hammers or heated the furnace, the alloy kept on bouncing the impact and the heat away.

Eventually, as the alloy ran dry of magical power, it returned to its original metallic color, and then the cavekin family could hammer it and heat it safely...except that it immediately started absorbing sunlight again. Once it was refilled, so to speak, it went right back to bouncing and bursting and blocking up the cavekin's work.

The cavekin had learned through much trial and error that whenever the armor didn't have enough sunlight or magical energy, it lost its special abilities. Once they had that worked out, they'd hurriedly built a new place to work with brick and timber and covered it all up real carefully to ensure that no sunlight got in. Then they'd gotten to work both in their new workshop and by the darkness of night, and through their efforts they'd managed to bend the alloy to their will.

"We've been smithing for a long, long time, but none of us have ever seen or heard of an alloy like this'n," Narvant had said as he fitted me in the armor. "But now that we've got it where we want it, it's as protective as protective equipment can get, I can tell you that. And if we were to put a name to the stuff, then I'm thinkin' we take an ancient term and call it orichalcum."

"As long as the sun's in the sky and you've got a magic wielder by your side, then this set of armor will knock back even a flame dragon's fiery breath, I guarantee it. That said, spend too long in the fire and your armor's power runs dry and then you'll be burned to a crisp, so I wouldn't go thinking that it makes you invincible. Best use the armor's strengths to leap to safety or otherwise leap into range, you know?"

I'd mulled over his explanation and thought about how the world was full of weird and wonderful things, my two axes

included.

As for my helmet, it was constructed in a way that was a far, far cry from the complexities of the rest of my armor. It was basically just a rounded object that covered my head and cheeks. It didn't even have a visor and, instead, just had a strip of metal that followed the bridge of my nose. Both sides of the helmet were adorned with horns resembling a baar's, but all in all it was dead simple.

Narvant had told me that orichalcum was so hard to work with that he and his family had really struggled even just putting my armor together. But now that the armor was done, they would take their time and craft me a helmet to truly match the rest of my equipment.

"What type of helmet, you ask? Ain't that obvious?" Narvant had said. "We'll make one that suits you, young Dias, and we'll craft it after a baar's face. Your temporary helmet has some horns, and that's because it's only right that the lord of Baarbadal has a fitting piece of headwear."

Admittedly, I had my doubts that a baar helmet was really fitting of the armor set Narvant had made me, but all the same I figured that a friendly baar's visage was much nicer than something that was menacing or intimidating. Given that the armor was so extravagant, I didn't expect to be using it for everyday life anyway. I'd don it if a war broke out or something like that, but otherwise I didn't think people would see it all that often. And if that were the case, then the exact design of the helmet wasn't something I had to be all that worried about after all.

In any case, that's how I came to be walking northwards in an unbelievably, blindingly glimmering suit of armor complete with a horned helmet. I hadn't brought Balers with me this time because the horse didn't have armor, and I knew that even a scratch from the wind dragons could be fatal. That was also the reason that Alna and the others were waiting back at Iluk. I figured the mastis could probably hold their own, what with their dragon scale cloaks and all, but I had them in Iluk because we needed people at home to protect everyone too.

Narvant, his family, Ellie, the lostblood brothers, Uncle Ben, the twins, the baars—everybody was back at Iluk. It was just me striding to the north, and with me was Sahhi, trembling on my

shoulder.

There were a number of reasons that Sahhi was here with me. For starters, the falconkin knew just where the wind dragons were. Then there was the fact that we needed someone to inform the village quickly if anything were to happen to me. But more than any of that was the simple fact that Sahhi had made it *crystal clear* that he was coming with me. Sahhi's family had long been known as hunters of dragons, and it was something they took very seriously.

If Sahhi were to slay a dragon, then his story would be that of a hero, and it would be passed down through future generations. A successful dragon slaying would also mean he'd be welcomed back home with open arms. On a personal note, it would also allow Sahhi to hold his head high when in front of his three fiancées and marry them without a hint of embarrassment.

"But let me be clear," said Sahhi. "I've no intention of returning to the nest! From now until the day I die I'm going to give Iluk my best, for you and all the rest of the village! But, look... I can't just demand that of Riasse and the others. And think of how pitiful it is for them to have to go back to their parents having married me, an outcast. And what if we have kids? As a man, I've just gotta do it! I've gotta make a name for myself!"

He must have read my face and my thoughts through my helmet, because the trembling falconkin answered the questions I'd been silently carrying. Actually, he'd been shaking like that since the moment we left. I couldn't tell if he was raring to go or terrified, but either way he showed no signs of running, and he stayed there steadfast—if still shivering—on my shoulder. I was impressed.

I had my armor to protect me, but Sahhi had no such thing. All he wore was the bone necklace we'd made for him not so long ago to commemorate his becoming a resident. You needed a whole lot of courage to walk into a battle with wind dragons empty-handed.

"If you ever find yourself in danger, get behind me," I said. "Cling tight if you have to. This armor will knock back pretty much any attack, so you won't get hurt."

"Y-You got it. That was my plan anyway. But I mean, that strange knife we found in the salt plain, this armor of yours... You have a real knack for attracting mysterious artifacts, huh?"

The falconkin tilted his head curiously as he spoke, and the two of us settled into regular conversation as I trudged onwards. Eventually we arrived at a plain at the base of the mountain north of Iluk. In the air I could see a pack of wind dragons. They weren't heading anywhere or doing anything; they were just hovering in the sky. They zipped left and right, up and down, and I told Sahhi to hop off my shoulder as I glared at them. Then I shoved my battle-ax into the ground, unsheathed my hand axe, funneled some power into it, and took aim.

One thing I'd learned from playing with the hand axe was that it would come back to my hand with a thought even from a great distance. That meant that I never had to worry about losing it. I could go wild throwing it with the knowledge that I could always will it back to my grasp. I didn't even have to worry about my aim all that much—I was ready to throw my axe as many times as it took, and so I simply focused on launching it as fast as possible.

When I really felt that the axe was loaded up, I let out a roar and sent the axe hurtling through the sky. The axe spun beautifully as it cut through the air, and coincidentally—perhaps fortunately—it sliced one of the five wind dragons clean in half, and its body fell to the ground.

The wind dragons hadn't been ready for the surprise attack, and they buzzed around in a panic as they separated, scanning their surroundings until their big old eyes landed on me. I got a better look at them myself, with their transparent wings, their purple bodies, and their big jaws. Yep, they looked just like dragonflies all right, and even the way they flew was just like them.

"Dias," whispered Sahhi, who came to a rest near the back of my head, "I don't think those dragons know that your axe can make a return trip. How about seeing if you can land another strike as you call it back?"

I nodded as Sahhi once more took to the air above me, then settled my gaze on one of the dragonflies as I called the falling axe back to my hand. With its strange power, the axe flew through the air, following the same path it had taken earlier, colliding directly with a dragonfly that was focused entirely on me.

The axe wasn't moving quite as fast as when I'd initially thrown it, but all the same it landed flush and hurt the monster. The axe whipped back to my hand, and I quickly let it fly again, still aiming

for the same dragonfly, which was clearly hampered from my first strike.

"Ha ha!" cried Sahhi triumphantly as another of the beasts was sliced in half. "That's two down! What a throw!"

"I can't throw a spear or fire a bow to save my life, but for some reason axes work well for me," I said. "I usually hit what I'm aiming for, even with my battle-ax."

"Huh? You actually *throw* that thing?" asked an incredulous Sahhi. "Why in the blazes would you ever think *that* was a good idea?!"

Before I could answer, two of the remaining wind dragons sped towards us, having observed us long enough. I knew that my hand axe wouldn't get back to me in time, and so I put my faith in my new set of armor. I threw away thoughts of defense and evasion and reached out, grasping the handle of my battle-ax. I quickly had it in hand and started to swing it, but the dragons were quicker and coming straight at my eyes, their mouths opening to take big bites out of me.

At that same instant, a flash of light emitted from my armor. Blinded and shocked, the dragons screeched as their bodies were hit by the impact and sent backwards. They hurriedly flapped their wings in an effort to stay stable, but I already had my axe hurtling upwards towards one of them and split it in two.

I brought the axe back down to take out the remaining dragon, but the monster zipped away safely, then turned its attention on the falconkin at my back. Sahhi, however, had seen this coming, and he used me as a shield as he flew back and forth, evading the dragon. The monster was careful not to strike me, knowing that it would get blasted for its efforts, and when it couldn't get close it hovered in front of us.

The last remaining dragon had been watching everything from a distance, and it suddenly let out a loud sound that made me think of metal pieces being shaken in a leather sack, or maybe something hitting or squeezing that same sack. It was a high-pitched sound and I didn't like it much, and it echoed across the plain.

All of a sudden, the dragon in front of us started to move in a more panicked fashion, like it had been scolded or threatened, and even though it didn't want to, it flew right at us. When I saw

that, I focused my gaze and raised my axe, then brought it down with everything I had.

The dragon saw my attack coming and easily evaded my strike. It swooped in to attack me now that I'd left an opening, but once again my armor burst with light and pushed the dragon away. As the dragon reeled, I let go of my battle-ax—which was now buried in the ground—and took hold of my hand axe, which I'd called back to me a few moments earlier. But I just took a swing with it this time.

The dragon once again evaded my strikes, at which point I once again launched the axe, using the opening to grip my battle-ax and wrench it from the ground. The momentum drove me into another strike at the same time as I called my hand axe back to me. With an axe in each hand, I threw and I swung and I assaulted the dragon with a combination of strikes.

I knew that in times like this, it was best not to think too deeply about things and instead focus on the enemy at hand and let my instincts drive my attacks. And given that my armor was handling the bulk of my defense for me, I could put everything I had into offense to either wear the dragonfly down or keep the pressure on until it slipped up.

The more I let my instincts handle the work, the faster and more accurately my body moved. As I launched strike after strike, the monster began to wilt, and it tried to fly up so as to make some space to take a break.

"Not on my watch!"

The voice belonged to Sahhi, and it was then that I realized the falconkin was above us. He'd picked up a big old rock somewhere, and it collided with the dragonfly. Not that he threw it or anything; he simply dropped it and let gravity bring it straight down on his target. The beast wasn't hurt by the rock, but for a moment it faltered, and that was my chance. I launched my hand axe at one of its wings.

The dragonfly began to plummet to the ground, and when it hit I summarily crushed it with my battle-ax.

"Phew, perfect timing, Sahhi," I said. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it," replied the falconkin, settling once more on my shoulder.

We'd taken down four of the giant bugs, and I was glad for

Sahhi's support, but the falconkin was still petrified—or maybe itching for more—because I could hear his trembling claws scratching against my armor. When I thought about it, the scratching was a kind of attack of sorts, but all the same my armor didn't react to it at all.

Hmm… I wonder exactly what kind of standard this armor uses to determine what's an attack and what isn't? If it could distinguish friend from foe then it wouldn't have reacted to Narvant's hammering, so maybe it's a matter of how much force is at play?

While I thought about my armor, the last of the dragonflies, which was still hovering up in the sky, let out that strange shriek again, but it was a touch different from the last time.

"What in the world is it doing?" I muttered. "Is it trying to intimidate us? Or is it trying to call for reinforcements?"

"Who knows? Given the circumstances though, its best bet is to flee. Is it just going to stay up there all day?" said Sahhi. "I don't like it one bit though. Gives me the creeps, thinking that while its friends were fighting, that dragon simply stayed up there and watched the whole thing play out."

I took a breath as I slid my hand axe back into its sheath.

"Monsters controlled by miasma can't flee even if they want to," I said, taking a firm grip on my battle-ax with both hands. "The miasma won't let them. That's what Narvant told me once before."

"Forced to fight even if there's nothing they want more than to flee, huh? Seems like a waste given that it can fly and all. That's its strongest attribute…but now it's all for nothing."

That was when the last dragonfly finally made its move. But it didn't move *towards* us, and instead it looked to fly right *over* us. Sahhi took to the skies in a second, and I hurriedly got my hand axe out and let it fly. Monsters under the influence of miasma couldn't ignore the living creatures they faced, but this one had its eyes looking *beyond* us, to those who lived in Iluk Village.

Sahhi realized immediately, and I put it together a few moments later. The monster saw us after it and zipped through the air in a way no bird ever could to meet Sahhi's attack with one of its own.

"You don't even know who you're dealing with, bug!" screeched Sahhi.

And just like that, the skies erupted into a fierce battle. Sahhi

and the dragonfly chased and dodged with movements that I could barely keep track of, their dips and dives cutting audibly through the air as Sahhi struggled to avoid being struck. It was a one-sided attack and the dragonfly refused to let up. Within a few seconds Sahhi was fighting just to stay alive. It looked to me that this was exactly the situation that the monster had wanted to create—it had moved to deliberately separate Sahhi and me. I knew that if things kept up Sahhi was a goner, so I ran to stay underneath him and launched my hand axe into the air.

"Sahhi!" I shouted.

I knew that Sahhi would know what I was thinking and move accordingly. And indeed, the falconkin dodged my axe, but so did the monster. The axe began to fall to the ground, so I called it back and threw it again. I did that three times but never got any closer to hitting my target. I knew then that the fifth dragonfly had been watching its brethren in battle very carefully, and it had taken note of the ways in which they'd been dispatched. This one knew how we fought, and so it had no trouble dodging my axe, on both the attack *and* the return.

The dragonfly kept moving as it chased down Sahhi, who struggled to keep his distance so I could launch my axe. But whenever Sahhi or I tried to make space for ourselves, the monster turned for Iluk again. It wasn't making things easy for us at all.

"Dias! Aim for me!" shouted Sahhi, understanding our predicament.

The brave falconkin intended to keep the dragonfly in place so my axe could finish it off.

"It's no use!" I shouted back. "Grab the axe on its way back!"

I threw my axe at the dragonfly with all my might. It was the most effort I'd put into a throw since the battle had begun. But even then the monster zipped out of the way, so as the axe began to fall I called it back to my hand. The axe was slower on the return, and it didn't travel at nearly the speed of my throws. It flew and it spun at a slower pace, and this was why I could catch it upon return…but I expected that *Sahhi* could grasp it too. Sure enough, Sahhi got a good grip on the handle and whipped it around to fight the dragonfly off.

Sahhi's beak and claws were sharp in and of themselves, but

they weren't strong enough to tear open the dragonfly's carapace. That was why Sahhi had attacked with a rock earlier, but now, with a hand axe that could easily slice a wind dragon in half, he could fight far more effectively. The axe wasn't as powerful when it wasn't spinning, but it could still hurt the dragonfly's body or even take out one of its fragile wings outright. The dragonfly must have noticed this too, because it took very obvious evasive action.

Sahhi knew that when the dragonfly prioritized evasion it was gearing up to attack not Sahhi but instead the hand axe, so he quickly dropped the axe and rose up higher, kicking off the monster's back and scratching it on the way through.

"Ha ha!" cried the falconkin. "First blood!"

The scratching of his claws hadn't actually caused any real damage to the dragonfly, but all the same Sahhi shouted triumphantly. His boasting voice clearly enraged the dragonfly, and it headed straight for the falconkin, but my hand axe was back in my grasp already and I once again launched it at the monster at tremendous speed.

I hoped that I might catch the dragonfly off guard while it was infuriated, but it still had the wherewithal to dodge my axe. As I called it back again, Sahhi once more gripped it tight, whipping it through the air like one might a knife. But whenever he found himself in trouble he let it go or sometimes even threw it at the monster, at which point I called it back to my hand and launched it once more.

Sahhi and I were coordinating better with every throw, and our constant pressure saw the dragonfly's movements start to dull.

"Those four wings sure are helpful, but it's tiring work to keep them going all the time!" shouted the falconkin.

Sahhi was dead on the mark—the dragonfly was growing weary, its movements clearly slower now than before. It could no longer keep its distance from me while it fought, and so I was able to finally get close enough to start whipping my battle-ax around as I had the first time I'd gone head-to-head with wind dragons. I didn't have to worry about losing the axe now that I had this armor looking after me—if the dragonfly tried to attack me up close, my armor would send it flying. I also intended to have at it with everything I had at my disposal—my gauntlets, my boots, and even my knees if it came to that. All I was concerned with was

making sure that Sahhi got support.

I was spinning around readying myself for a big throw, and I couldn't see clearly, but the dragonfly was growing slower still. Sahhi wasn't going to let the opportunity escape him, and so he attacked the monster with my hand axe, slicing open the dragonfly's back, then followed that up with another few hits. As the monster fell from the sky, it fell right into the path of my battle-ax.

I'd had to hurriedly change the angle of my throw so…it wasn't exactly a clean blow. Instead of the blade hitting the dragonfly, the *handle* hit it at full force, and the monster kind of exploded, its carapace falling upon the rocky plain in pieces. I stood there for a time sadly watching the rain of dragonfly bits, and I thought, *Well, I sure messed that up.*

I took off my helmet and gauntlets and let them drop where I stood, then wiped all the sweat from my face. I had to run my hand through my hair a few times because it was absolutely drenched with sweat, and when I was done I let out a sigh. While I was doing all of that, Sahhi returned to me with my hand axe. He plonked it in my palm, then landed on my helmet.

"I can't even believe we made it out of that without even a scratch!" he remarked. "The ending wasn't exactly perfect, let's say, but *damn*! That teamwork, I tell you!"

Sahhi spread his wings wide—both of which were a bit of a mess on account of the fierce fighting—and took to preening them.

"Yeah. Uh…great work, Sahhi," I said. "But that last dragon… I really wasn't expecting to blow it up like that… All that material and its magical stone… I don't know if we'll be able to salvage a single thing from that."

Sahhi narrowed his eyes as he replied.

"How about you put the material and the stone aside for the time being and just be thankful for the fact that we took on five dragons and emerged victorious without even a single injury? And look, I get that the last wind dragon was bigger than the others, and it's a pity how it ended up, but…more importantly! Think about it! *I* killed that last dragon! *Me*! That's no exaggeration either! Now I can finally marry my three fiancées with my head held high!"

Sahhi was getting more and more excited the more that he

talked, and by the end his usually narrow eyes grew as big as plates, he was so excited. All I could do was nod. That last dragonfly had already been plummeting when my battle-ax hit it, so perhaps it had already been dead by then. And even if it hadn’t been, Sahhi could have easily landed the finishing blow himself by that point. So I had to agree with him—it was safe to say that he’d killed it.

When I told Sahhi as much, he burst into a big old falconkin grin.

Upon a Plain Littered with Dragon Materials

With the battle over, Sahhi and I rested for a time, and once Sahhi got some energy he took off to give the village a full report. It wasn't long before Narvant and some others—the cavekin family, the eiresetters, and Sahhi's fiancées—followed him back with a horse and cart to gather up all the dragon materials.

In the end, Sahhi and I were left watching everyone gather everything up. I wanted to help out, but I was told that I'd done enough simply fighting the dragons and I should relax. So I decided that I'd stay on guard in case any monsters or wolves turned up. I was killing time standing guard when Narvant came up to me, some magical stones in his hand and a big grin on his face.

"Ho ho! I've gotta say, that armor looks real dang good on you! And judging by the state of it and your fine health, it looks like all the effort we put into crafting your armor was worth it too! I see you've been sweating a bit though, so leave the armor and the helmet at our workshop when you get back and we'll see to cleaning it for you. And the magical stones, my boy! The *stones*! We got five of them, and they'll keep our magical furnace running for quite some time!"

Narvant's smile only grew the more he talked.

"You got *five*?" I asked, my head tilting with disbelief. "I burst one of them monsters into paste with my battle-ax, and I figured that the magical stone inside of it would have shattered because of it…"

"Well, it's true that the biggest dragon's *carapace* is a right mess, but lucky for us the magical stone's barely got a scratch on it. Have a look for yourself—this is it."

Using both his hands and his beard, Narvant gestured to the largest stone, which was just as intact as he'd claimed.

"It's a rare thing to find stones of different sizes like this in the same dragon types," he said. "Makes me wonder if perhaps it was in the middle of transforming into a monster variant of some sort.

There's a lot we still don't know about monsters, so you can't ever take 'em lightly... In any case, you made it through this battle unscathed, so there's no use worrying about what might've been. So, uh, young Dias, these five stones... You think it's okay for us to make use of all of 'em?"

Narvant's eyes glimmered as he asked his question, and Ohmun and Sanat—who had arrived not long after Narvant—had the same light in their eyes.

"Uh..." I murmured, mulling it over for a time before glancing at Sahhi.

"The choice is yours, Dias," said the falconkin.

"You can do what you want with four of them," I finally answered, "but do you mind if we send the biggest one to the king? I know he never said that we have to send him stones and such, but that's what we've been doing when we come across them, and I'd like to keep it up. The king always seems mighty pleased to get them, so we can ask Eldan to take care of it and pay him a portion of our materials as thanks."

Narvant's smile never faded. He nodded his agreement, and when he spoke I could hear that he wasn't slighted in the slightest.

"Yep, all good, all good," he said. "Big stones, small stones, they all burn the same in a magical furnace, and we'll happily take a four-for-one deal any day of the week. We'll pick out some of the cleaner materials to send to your neighbors, so I don't see any issues there either. That said, what do you want to do with the rest? Think you'll sell it to the merchants?"

"Oh... Actually, I'm right in thinking that wind dragon materials are very light but very durable and tough at the same time, yeah? If that's the case, do you think you could whip up some armor and weapons for the falconkin? Something for their claws and beaks, and maybe helmets too...and if possible, I'd love something to cover their wings to deflect damage."

Narvant reacted to my request with surprise, and Sahhi's beak dropped open like it'd been dislocated—the falconkin couldn't believe it.

"Weapons and armor for falconkin, huh?" said Narvant. "Well, it's certainly possible, I can say that much, and it'll be a whole heap easier than making your armor, I can promise you that. And how about you?" he asked, turning to Sahhi. "Think you'd like to try out

some new equipment?"

Sahhi snapped back to his senses and snapped his beak shut. After a moment's hesitation, he replied.

"Well, I *did* use Dias's hand axe to fight off that dragon, but it was heavy and unwieldy—not really suited to me. I'd be really grateful for some lightweight armor and weapons. For us falconkin, it's all over the moment we break the bones in our wings. We live with the knowledge that damage like that means death, so armor that could save us from that fate? Yeah, we'd feel all the more secure if we had it."

He added, "Armor that covers our wings might be a bit of a nuisance, but we falconkin aren't like your everyday bird. We've got brains, and we might be able to put that armor to good use by gliding on the wind. I'm all for new equipment, and I think we should put our heads together to develop it."

"Then it's settled," declared Narvant. "You falconkin can teach us all about how you soar the skies, and once we cavekin have our heads wrapped around that, we'll craft you some excellent gear. We'll be using materials from monsters that fly anyways, so I don't reckon it'll take too long."

The cavekin then spun on his heels and left to put the magical stones in his cart. Ohmun and Sanat, who were carrying some other stuff, followed after him, and then the young eiresetters ran up to me. They'd been busily running all about the area picking up all the dragon pieces scattered everywhere.

"You did *this* to a dragon?!" cried one. "That's astounding! We really made the right choice moving here!"

All the other dogkin were in agreement, and they were all smiles as they loudly chatted among themselves. They soon ran off to follow Narvant and the others at the cart, and when everything was loaded (together with a few dogkin) they all headed back to Iluk.

Once they were gone, Riasse, Bianne, and Heresse—who had been using their keen eyes from high above to locate all the scattered dragon bits—came down and landed next to Sahhi, who was sitting atop my helmet. When they looked at their fiancé, there was a blazing fire of passion in their gazes.

I could understand why. After all, Sahhi had successfully slain a dragon. He'd gone toe to toe with the greatest of threats, fought

valiantly, and protected his home. I might have landed the killing blow, but in my opinion Sahhi was the only reason it had been possible.

Sahhi, Riasse, Bianne, and Heresse all lived under the same roof, but even then Sahhi had kept a certain distance. Now, however, he'd cleared his final hurdle and achieved what he needed so that he could accept his fiancées as his wives. As such, they all looked at him with new eyes, and, uh…new love…

Surrounded by his suddenly, uh, assertively romantic fiancées and feeling trapped, Sahhi dropped from my helmet and tottered away. He looked towards me as he did so, with a certain plea for help in his eyes, but I made sure not to meet his gaze as I knelt down to pick up my helmet, pull my battle-ax from the ground, and follow after Narvant and the others.

A Few Days Later

A few days had passed since Sahhi and I fought the wind dragons, and in that time Uncle Ben and his gang had finished building their small hut by the source of our stream. Sahhi had also officially made Riasse, Bianne, and Heresse his wives. But they hadn't just gotten married—the three falconkin women had also become official residents, because until now they'd simply been staying in Iluk as part of their efforts to earn money for their tribe. Upon their official marriage, the falconkin wanted to redo their simple home in the village, and so the renovations began.

Doors were installed with knobs that could be opened with falconkin beaks, and the house itself had a number of perches, as well as new boxlike rooms in which the falconkin could make their own nests. There were three of the rooms in total, one for each of Sahhi's wives, and each night Sahhi chose a room to sleep in…which is to say that Riasse, Bianne, and Heresse had already discussed things between themselves and worked out a schedule, and realistically Sahhi didn't have any say in the matter. But seeing as Sahhi himself had accepted his situation, I didn't see any harm in it.

Most of the wind dragon materials had gone to the cavekin, with a portion being kept for Eldan. Another, smaller portion went to Ellie and the lostblood brothers, who all then left to get the

brothers some hands-on experience bartering with visiting merchants.

Seki, Saku, and Aoi had all been blown away to hear that me and Sahhi had vanquished a group of wind dragons. At the same time, Ellie was on the verge of giving them the go-ahead to start trading on their own, and each of their faces had been a picture of determination and enthusiasm. They'd been real excited as they left for Mahati, talking about how if dragons kept on coming then they'd just turn them into another export for Iluk.

The lostblood brothers had met Mahati's merchants now and learned the essentials from Ellie. All they were waiting on now was Ellie's permission to start trading on their own, and that was the reason for their newest trip. For her part, Ellie had come up with a plan to make trade real easy for the boys, and as long as that plan came to fruition in time, there was no way the brothers could fail…at least, as far as Ellie was concerned, anyway.

Ellie had put her plan in motion quite some time ago, but she still didn't know if it would go quite the way she hoped. I hadn't asked her for any of the particulars so it wasn't like I could comment on things, but I thought that nothing would be better than the boys having an easy time trading, especially seeing as they were still getting used to the kingdom's ways.

"So, I wonder when they'll be back, then…" I murmured.

It was a little after noon, and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. It was the perfect weather for hanging out our winter clothes and the yurt cloth. That was exactly what I was doing when, speak of the devil, a masti from the border station came bounding over to let me know in a booming bark that Ellie was on her way home.

The masti was panting like crazy because he'd been real intent on informing me as soon as possible, so I knelt down and gave him a good pat. The masti was so happy that his eyes closed with joy…and then he remembered that he hadn't finished his report.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "And there's a visitor with her! An acquaintance of Ellie passed through the station with her, and he's on his way here. His name was… Wait, I've got this… Sir Gor…illa?"

I was a bit dumbfounded for a time (the masti also looked pretty confused), wondering just what kind of a name Gorilla was. That was when a number of the sheps—all guards for Ellie's caravan—came dashing over. Soon after, Ellie appeared like a small

speck on the horizon.

I saw her caravan rolling along the makeshift road (that pretty soon would be a proper one), and by the caravan's side was a powerful horse. Riding that horse was a loosely cloaked man with closely cropped reddish-blond hair and a scruffy beard. He looked about the same age as me, and he was in real good shape. I nodded to myself, figuring that he must have been the Sir Gorilla the masti had told me about.

"Hmm…" I murmured to myself as they neared.

I felt like maybe, just maybe, I'd seen that Sir Gorilla somewhere before. I even thought that maybe I'd heard a name like his before. I took a few steps to more readily meet Ellie, and I stared closely at the cart and Sir Gorilla as they all rolled into the village square. Sir Gorilla split from the cart and stopped in front of me, then hopped off his horse and flashed me something of an exasperated grin.

"Been a while, eh?" he said. "You dumped everything on me and left, and in decades you never once sent word. I don't know if a man could be any more awful, if you ask me."



I felt like I had heard that voice somewhere before, and his smile only grew just looking at me. That was when I finally realized who Sir Gorilla really was. When it hit me, all I could do was muster a bashful grin and scratch the back of my head. While I was doing that, everyone slowly came out to join me—the falconkin who'd been on patrol, the baars who'd been basking in the sun, Alna, the twins, and the dogkin children too... The man took a look around at everybody gathered in the square, and it was then that he burst out laughing.

Sir Gorilla, whose name was actually *Goldia*, was a guy I'd worked with way back—the two of us had managed the orphanage, in fact.

Goldia was shorter than me but just as wide, and his mass was mostly muscle to boot. Under his cloak I could see that he still had the scar along his right arm from our escapades when we were younger.

"No matter where you go, it's always the same story," remarked Goldia. "It's only been a year and already you've got yourself a family. I went to a lot of trouble with preparations thinking I'd need to rescue you, but I can't keep up with all the growing you've been doing out here, I tell you!"

With that, Goldia threw off his cloak. He was wearing a cheap shirt, and pants held up by suspenders. It was the outfit that he'd always worn, ever since we were kids, and in the next instant he raised his powerful arms and charged at me. Well, I had no choice but to respond in kind, and just like that the two of us were locked together in a test of strength.

We were pushing and grappling with all the power we had, both of us fighting to get our opponent to either drop to a knee or fall to his back. It was a battle in which we pushed each other, shunted each other, and pulled each other to make our foe trip and fall. In the midst of it all, sweat beaded on Goldia's forehead and he went on speaking.

"Here's the deal... I made Seki, Saku, and Aoi members of our organization... They're all guild members now, so they can go anywhere they want in the kingdom without worrying about a thing. I also went and put a guild branch in Mahati...and by that I mean...that's pretty much where our headquarters are now. Come visit and we'll buy anything you have to sell, you hear? Aisa and Ely

are in charge of things, and they'll be around in due time to say hello."

"But Aisa and Ely have a family and jobs of their own to worry about, don't they...?" I replied as I pushed Goldia back.

"The two of them were worried you'd say as much..." said Goldia, pushing back against me. "But their kids can look after the home, and they've trained up a few youngins to handle their work, so there's no need to worry. They haven't thrown away their lives; they've just taken a step into a new beginning *dagnabbit argh*!"

Goldia's last words were on account of the fact that his knee was starting to sink downwards, and I was pretty certain I had him dead to rights, but he wasn't ready to give up just yet. He pushed back again and he kept on talking.

"More importantly, what are *you* doing about your guesthouse, dammit?! You haven't lifted a single finger, have you?! You've got bigwigs coming from the kingdom in a few days; how are you going to be ready in time?! Huh?! That young domain lord next door told you to build one, didn't he?! Don't tell me you plumb forgot, Dias!"

I gasped. I remembered then that Eldan *had* told me all about the importance of having a proper guesthouse, and he'd even gone as far as taking me on a tour of his own... I'd made up my mind to build one, and I'd meant to get started, but upon my return to Iluk, well...you see, I'd just plain forgot all about it.

But I knew that if there were important types visiting soon, then I had to start getting things ready as soon as possible. Making up my mind like that filled me with a newfound strength.

"Raaargh!" barked Goldia. "Dang it, Dias, how are you still so strong?! Does your body not know age?!"

Goldia let out a roar, and while I was internally thanking the twins and the sanjivani plant, Goldia's knee touched the ground, which meant that the victor in our battle between friends was me.

Once our little bout concluded, I let everyone in Iluk know that Goldia and I went way back and that we were practically family. Everyone warmed up to Goldia in what felt like the blink of an eye.

He was always good with kids, and he'd been like a brother to me when I was young, so it was no surprise that he and the twins got on like a house on fire. He put them on his shoulders one at a

time to cart them around while he checked out the village, and when he was done he came back to the square and took everything in again—both the facilities and the residents.

"Well, I think I've got a pretty good grasp on things," he said. "With these cloth houses—yurts, right?—I think you can build a fine guesthouse."

As the leader of a guild, Goldia had been all over the kingdom, and he'd visited a lot of domain lords on those trips. He knew what a guesthouse needed and was well equipped to give good, solid advice.

"Hmm, is that it, then?" I asked. "Sure will be simple if all we have to do is just put up a yurt…"

Goldia knelt down and let Senai off his shoulders, then put Ayhan on them and stood back up, looking at me like he was about to give me a lecture.

"Think of your guesthouse as the entrance to your domain, or a window of sorts. It should show your visitors what your domain is all about. Make something too extravagant and people will think that's exactly what the rest of the place is like—I can tell you right now that it's a path that leads to nothing but trouble and annoying guests. But you make things too modest and you'll have people looking down on you, which leads to its own problems. The best thing to do, then, is to build something that meets the scale of what you have."

"Anybody with a decent set of eyes and a good head on their shoulders will see one of these yurts and realize that they're the homes you all live in. They'll know you have a climate here suited to your homes, and they'll put it all together, which is why a guesthouse yurt is the way to go."

"That said, anyone visiting your guesthouse will be coming from afar, and the long journey will have worn them out. You'll need to prepare something to help ease their exhaustion."

As he finally finished, Goldia did a bit of a stretch and then took off running around the square to make sure Ayhan was having a good time. Then he put a couple of dogkin kids on his shoulders and went on talking.

"Naturally you'll need a well, a restroom, and a stable where horses can rest. You'll need a yurt for receiving guests and some yurts for sleeping in, and you'll have to have some food made with

local produce along with some alcohol."

I couldn't help but cringe a little at that last thing, and he grinned as he remembered that about me.

"I know you don't like alcohol much, Dias, but a whole lot of people do. After a long journey, people are going to have empty stomachs and parched throats. They'll be aching for a drink, and telling them point-blank that you don't do booze is about as cruel as it gets, my friend. Some people even think that hospitality without booze isn't hospitality at all. Look, you don't have to drink any alcohol yourself, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't serve it. All you have to do is give people a drink and a local souvenir, then send them on their way."

"Sometimes when people visit you've got to show them who you are, which means local produce, livestock, and military power. For that last one it's weapons, soldiers, and horses, but I'd advise against that in your case."

Goldia let the dogkin down from his shoulders and took to giving the six baar kids a good pat, and his explanation went on.

"Here's an example: These baars of yours are important to your village, and more than that, they're like family to you. But visitors might see them and think they're just livestock. If they're just milling around the place, your guests might be all like 'If you've got so many, let me have a few. They're only livestock, aren't they?'"

"Word is spreading about baar wool, you see…and that means people will want some baars themselves. Best to keep them out of sight. Beastkin and demihuman types are sometimes mistreated in rural areas, so…I reckon it's best to keep them out of sight too."

"Being that you have so much you don't want others to see, you don't want to build your guesthouse too close to your village. Your ideal locations are near the border station, near the forest, or at the midpoint between the forest and your village. Once the location is settled, you'll want the guesthouse, a well, a privy, and yurts for cooking and sleeping in. Add a stable for horses, and I reckon you're about ready."

I gave all of Goldia's advice a good think and muttered to myself, "All righty then… Well, we've got the well and the privies, so as for a location…"

Just as I was about to say the border station was the best spot

for it, Alna broke her silence.

“We’ve already got a well and a privy out between the forest and Iluk, so it’s best we put the facilities there. With the main road on the near horizon, I’ve already asked the onikin craftsmen to work on some rest areas for us, so we can put the guesthouse in the same area. It’s a nice spot and there’s enough space for everything we need.”

“Not a bad idea at all,” replied Goldia. “Easier to manage all your visitors when they’re all in one place. Construct a market exchange in that same location and anybody you don’t want visiting the village can settle their business there and be on their way.”

Goldia had Aisa and Ely preparing the furniture and decorations, and he said they would be making another visit to Iluk with all of that soon.

“That said, you’ll need to put up all the necessary yurts and set up some caretakers and servants for your guests. Can’t have the domain lord himself carting out food for visitors, and it won’t be a good look to make Alna or your beastkin do it either. I reckon it’s best to hire a few humans with a good handle on manners and etiquette.”

Goldia began to mull over giving us someone from his guild, but the grandmas had been listening to our discussion too, and two of them spoke up. One of them, Pison, had graceful features and wavy hair; the other, Jimechi, had kind eyes and beautiful long black hair.

“If you’re looking for a caretaker and a servant, then look no further,” said Grandma Pison. “I used to do a similar job in our old home, so I’ve a good grasp of etiquette.”

“I have experience working at the dining hall of an inn,” added Grandma Jimechi, “and I developed the same skills as Pison here. Not to mention, I just love doing such work.”

I wasn’t exactly sure how to react, but before I could utter a single sound, Goldia beamed and nodded.

“Aha, so you’re experienced hands, then? I like it,” he replied. Employing youths meant a lot more problems, the way he put it. It was a lot easier on the lord to leave this kind of work to the experienced elders.

“But it’s a bit cruel to leave everything to these wonderful women, so make sure they have the support of some beastkin...

No, *dogkin*. Have some of the young dogkin act as assistants for Pison and Jimechi here. You can have them hide when you've got guests or just send them on back to Iluk."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying about young people?" I asked, tilting my head.

"Exactly that." Goldia nodded.

With young people, the inexperience of youth sometimes led to mistakes, but sometimes you also had guests falling head over heels for your staff too. That's why ideally you wanted elderly servants about Kamalotz's age to greet and look after your visitors. And while Iluk's grandmas struck me as a touch too old, they were sprightly, energetic women, so I didn't see the harm in letting them work.

"In time you may want to employ a few people a touch younger," said Goldia, reading my face, "but you don't have such people here at the moment, and in fact you'll be able to avoid potentially troublesome conversations by making it clear that you've such a small population you *have* to employ elderly women for this kind of work."

He then added, "It's perfect. Serve up some of nana's homemade food with some local booze and it'll tell visitors all they need to know about the scope of your domain."

It was here that Narvant and the cavekin reacted. They'd already been thinking about making alcohol here in Iluk—in fact, preparations were already underway. They began making a racket because they were so happy to hear that their stuff would essentially be the face of the village. They started talking about what alcohol would be appropriate and what food to serve with it, and all of a sudden Alna got involved, and then Goldia too, because he'd loved the stuff since he was young.

And with that, all talk of the guesthouse was put on hold, and all attention was drawn to Iluk's future alcohol. Everyone was real excited about it, that was for sure. First it was just the booze, and then it was how to build the brewery to even make it, and from there the excitement only grew. I was pretty exasperated by it all, and that was when Narvant slipped out of the discussion to speak to me.

"Young Dias," he said. "Might be about time we got serious about importing timber on a regular basis."

I'd expected him to talk to me about booze because that was on everyone's mind. I couldn't hide my surprise. Timber? I looked over to the forest, and then I pointed at it—*what about that?*

"We've used a good amount of timber already to construct our border station and our hut up by our water source," Narvant explained. "Now we've got the guesthouse facilities to think about, and a proper brewery too. When you factor in potential repairs and maintenance, logging simply isn't going to get us enough timber."

"I mean, the forest *would* be fine if we were happy to rid it of all its trees, but I don't think the twins will let us go that far, and besides, we can't afford to lose the other bounties the forest provides us like berries and whatnot. We'll need that stuff for our booze."

With increased traffic came increased need for timber, even just for maintenance. As such, Narvant suggested that getting a stockpile in advance, before we found ourselves hurting for materials, was a wise idea.

I finally replied, "I see," turning my gaze towards Ellie, who was taking care of her horses and sorting through all the stuff we'd bought from Mahati.

Ellie had heard our conversation, and something of a worried look grew upon her face as she spoke to Narvant.

"If it was temporary it'd be one thing, but regular imports? I don't know… Our baar wool production is going smoothly, but with our increase in residents we've also had to make them clothes and put up more yurts, which has left us with less to sell. We also have to buy more food now… It's not a simple cut-and-dried issue."

She continued, "Considering that we also have to pay for the furniture and decorations for the guesthouse too, our accounts are already tipping towards the loss side of things. I don't think we have the financial capacity for imports. Selling some of the wind dragon materials would allow us some leeway, but you've already decided to use it for equipment. If only we had something else we could sell…"

"So how about this, Papa? How about you go out and slay us another dragon? Then we could probably afford a small mountain's worth of timber."

Ellie was clearly joking about the last bit, which was why she

dropped into thought again. Narvant and I did likewise, and I started thinking that maybe I should take Ellie's joke seriously and go looking for dragons. We were all mulling that over when one of the young sheps ran up to the horses.

"Great job!" he said, and he held up some rock salt for the horses to lick at.

Salt, huh?

We could sell salt if we wanted to, but given that we've a limited supply, we probably shouldn't be going wild with it. And besides, I already promised Moll that we wouldn't sell too much of it.

Ellie was looking at the salt just like I was, and she turned to Goldia.

"Hey, Goldia," she said. "What's the demand for salt like? Are there any places in the kingdom with a desperate need for it?"

Goldia had been deep in discussions about booze, but he pulled himself free to answer Ellie's question.

"Now that you mention it, they need it to the south, down by the ocean…" he replied, stroking his beard, but then he suddenly stopped with such a shocked look on his face I worried it would get stuck like that. "What?! What in the blazes?! You lot harvest *salt* here too?! *Dang it, Ellie!* You never told me nothing about no salt!"

He was getting mighty riled up about it, but Ellie remained totally calm in her response.

"Well, we only just recently acquired the salt plain, so I didn't have the chance. And besides, I've been far too busy. And that's beside the point—why in the world would they need salt down by the ocean?"

Goldia heaved a big old sigh and began telling us about a port town to the kingdom's south.

Maybe it was the tide, or maybe the weather, but either way, in Goldia's words, they'd been "fishing up a storm." In fact, they'd been catching so many fish that they couldn't eat or sell them quickly enough. They had started preserving their excess with salt, and as a result their reserves were running dry.

"Now I know what you're thinking—why don't they just make up some salt from the ocean, right? Well, you need a whole lot of firewood for that, and the ocean winds mean they can't grow good trees, so it's not actually that simple. They don't need anything of especially good quality because they're just going to crush it up,

and I reckon they'll pay handsomely."

My brow creased in thought. If we could make a hefty profit on it, then selling some salt sounded good to me. Ellie looked at me, then began drawing a picture in the dirt as she began her own explanation.

"Now I know very well that we aren't to sell too much of our salt," she said, "and with that in mind I have a proposal. What say we sell some salt just this once because the demand is there, and we use the sales to buy us some time?"

She suggested we discuss things with the onikin to determine how much was fair to sell, then start importing timber with the proceeds. That would likely buy us time until the fall, and from there we could make preparations to shift our payments to our ice sales. When fall arrived we would need to look for more to sell anyway, but the main road would be finished by then, and we'd be looking to raise baar wool production too.

"I mean, when we have a stable source of timber, we'll be able to build all sorts of facilities, including homes that aren't yurts, so I think it's a good plan. The onikin would be against us selling the salt if we were selling it cheap, but I think they'll be much more amenable now when we can get a tidy profit. To keep tabs on ourselves, we'll keep our trading to the guild only, as they have the necessary trade routes."

In the ground by our feet, Ellie had drawn a map of sorts, which showed the salt going to the south, then the money from the salt sales traveling back to Mahati, where it paid for timber which would come to us in Iluk. It was nice and simple for me to understand, and she'd even drawn what looked to be some ice and some baar wool too.

The lines *did* get a bit complicated, what with the produce turning to coins and traveling here and there, but the lines followed roads, and those roads would be traveled by Ellie and Goldia and their helpers. She went on to say that what we sold and how much would depend on the season and the circumstances, and we'd have to be careful to make sure those involved didn't suffer any losses.

Until now Ellie had been handling the actual trading, but now that would be done by the lostblood brothers. Thanks to Ellie's picture I had a much clearer handle on things, and so I nodded my

agreement.

“All righty then, if that’s the case then I’ll leave the selling of the salt and the buying of the timber in your hands, Ellie. Zorg is the onikin representative at present, so you can talk things through with him and then hash out the finer details with Goldia. I’ll also want you in charge of managing the market exchange that we’re setting up after we build the guesthouse facilities.”

I’d tried my hand at bargaining and sales, and I was all too aware that most of it was beyond me, so I couldn’t really be trusted to manage such things. Better to keep my nose out of it and trust Ellie with it. That said, saving money wasn’t our goal, so I made sure she knew we weren’t just doing it to pad our coffers.

By this time I’d already entrusted most of the trading to Ellie anyway, but now I was entrusting her with practically everything, and she nodded in understanding. The rest of the village was happy with the idea too, and nobody raised any grievances. All of the village reps were here except Klaus, and because we could always confirm things with him later, we’d arrived at a consensus without issue.

“You must be joking,” sputtered Goldia. “The boss comes up with a decision on the spot and there’s not even a *single* objection? If this were a guild meeting, you’d have complaints flying left, right, and center. It’d take four or five days of arguing to hash things out. Dias, you son of a… Here I was thinking you were struggling out here in the boonies, but you’re just as lucky as you’ve always been, and you’re blessed with great partners no less!”

I didn’t really understand much of what Goldia was going on about, but I could tell by his expression that he was a bit vexed.

“I know something’s got you seething, Goldia,” I said, “but how about you and I go another round, eh?”

I dropped into a wrestling stance and readied my hands.

“You asked for it!” shouted Goldia.

And with that, he came at me with his hands raised and even more gusto than the first time.

At the Guesthouse

Goldia planned to stay in Iluk for a hot minute, and he took charge of constructing the guesthouse while he was here. Aisa and Ely also showed up to help, bringing in all the stuff they had prepared over in Mahati. With everyone working together, we were done in a flash.

It wasn't all that surprising, I suppose, given that the yurts were so easy to put up, but actually the hard part was the interior decorating, which had to meet noble standards. But thanks to Goldia and the others getting things ready for us in advance, all that was sorted. Goldia had heard all about Iluk from Aisa and Ely, so he'd had a good idea of what we'd be lacking. With that knowledge, he'd readied a lot of what we needed and arranged for Aisa and Ely to work nearby.

Our newly erected guesthouse—a big yurt—was built on the flattened path that was soon to become our main road. I was standing outside looking at it with my hands on my hips when Goldia came out to talk to me.

"Yep, what we need is a mantelpiece," he said. "Without a grand mantelpiece made from oak or walnut wood complete with some carving, it's just not complete. If you're going to display ornamental handicrafts made from mother-of-pearl or decorated with inlaid work, then you need a mantelpiece. And that only makes more sense when you consider that someday you might want to display dragon materials or magical stones."

Then he added, "Also, what do you want to do with that baar flag of yours? We could make a stand to fly it outside of the yurt or hang it from the wall so it's on display right behind your chair... It's really a matter of taste, so I'll leave that decision up to you."

We'd put up the biggest guesthouse yurt in such a way that it hid the well and the privy, and we'd put up yurts to the right and left of it to act as a storeroom and a waiting room respectively. We'd also put up two yurts as guest accommodations, which were near the well and the privy for convenience, and we'd surrounded it all with a timber fence.

Aisa and her people had brought in a really impressive table for the main yurt, which we covered in a baar wool tablecloth. There were equally impressive chairs to go with it, as well as some decorative elements such as a vase and the like. I felt like that was more than enough, but Goldia clearly thought it needed a little more still.

"Well, if you're asking my opinion, I'd prefer we hang the flag inside," I said. "It won't get dirty or damaged that way, though I don't mind putting something outside so long as it's with the understanding that the wind and rain are going to have their way with it. As for the mantelpiece, Narvant and his family can whip something up for us as long as we've got the timber…"

"Ah… Now look, it's not that I doubt the cavekin's abilities, but I think we'd be better off with something carved in the fashion of the kingdom proper, so I reckon it's best you let me handle it. Weiz is quite the craftsman, and if I get in touch he'll make something for us. Otherwise I'll have something brought out of storage…"

"That said, if I bring *you* up, Weiz will probably go crazy. He'll be champing at the bit for any work at all. It'll be a real handful, but…if I'm asking him for work to display in a certified domain guesthouse, then there's no hiding the finer details like whose domain it's in, especially when it comes to carving in things like the family name and crest…"

Weiz. That was the name of one of the kids we looked after… I remember he was really good with his hands.

Hearing Weiz's name made me all nostalgic, and I was overjoyed to hear that he'd grown up to become a tried-and-true craftsman. Contrary to my big grin though, Goldia's expression was a bit more hesitant.

"Dias, do you still remember the kids we looked after all those years ago?" he asked.

"Hmm? Of course I do. All their faces, all their names—I haven't forgotten a single one."

"Good, good. In which case you owe me proper thanks for keeping them all at bay. Just like with Aisa and Ely, as soon as they heard that you were back from the war, they were set to drop *everything* just to go and see you. The guild had gotten pretty big, but we needed our branches in the countryside to keep up our distribution channels, and dang it, all the young ones were ready

to just up and abandon them all completely."

"I made it crystal clear to every one of them that if they were going to visit you then they had to make sure they at least trained up trustworthy successors, but as soon as I said it, that became their sole reason for working... So Weiz and all the others, you can bet your bones that they'll get here at some point or another."

Sheepishly, I answered, "Oh... I see. I guess I caused you some trouble while I was gone."

Goldia's expression wasn't easy to read, and he seemed somewhere between wanting to complain and wanting to laugh. In the end, however, he let out a big sigh that felt a bit put on, and after some mumbling to himself, he looked up at me.

"Well...we had it easier than you did out on the battlefield," he said. "I stopped the kids from running away to join you in the war, and I sent out trade caravans to support you and your troops. To help raise your reputation, I also hired performers to star in theatrical shows in which you were the main character and minstrels to tell grand stories of your achievements. I did all that while I was growing the guild, and it wasn't easy, but...when things finally started to relax, I realized I was having a great time doing it."

He sighed a little and continued. "But if we'd lost the war, who knows what would have happened to the guild we worked so hard for or the tavern we finally built and opened? I don't got no complaints, Dias."

"You did all of that?!" I exclaimed.

"That I did," said Goldia, chuckling.

When I thought back, I could remember Juha praising the merchants who always had the supplies we needed. He'd said they were attentive and detail oriented, and they'd never taken advantage of us. Now I realized that it was thanks to Goldia's hard work that they'd been so good to us.

"If that was the case, then you should have said something," I moaned. "If you'd sent me word, we could have talked about things or at least exchanged letters..."

But Goldia just laughed and shook his head.

"If you'd known about us, then in the end *everyone* would have known about us, friend and foe alike. That could have been really troublesome, so I made sure that our connection was kept secret

until the end of the war."

"We're a bigger organization now, and we've formed our own bonds with the royal family, but back then not everything was so easy. While we didn't go through the hardships that you did, we did go through some tough times of our own, you hear?"

And with that, Goldia flashed me the same proud smile I'd known since we were both boys, and I smiled back. Perhaps my smile was the same as it had always been too. In any case, Goldia began regaling me with tales of his times back when he was trying to grow the guild. I listened to his stories as we both walked back to the guesthouse. Goldia kept working on building it into the place we wanted it to be, and I helped him out.

At the Border Station—Klaus

Today, as it had been every day of late, Klaus was overseeing the border station construction. They'd erected an impressive wooden gate, equally impressive defensive walls stretching out from either side of it, guard towers next to the gate itself, and a small hut for interviews and interrogations.

The border house's well and privies were both of excellent quality and boasted proper walls and roofs of their own, and the stables were plentiful. They even had basic accommodations set up for any travelers to stay if necessary. As far as housing was concerned, the border station still relied on yurts, but Klaus didn't think it would be long before they wouldn't need them anymore. Little by little, Klaus's own stronghold was coming together, and he was filled with the energy and enthusiasm to make it happen. He was always running here and there and giving orders to the laborers and craftsmen who'd come to work from neighboring Mahati.

Mahati's craftsmen were very good at building simple walls and homes, but there was much they didn't know when it came to constructing military facilities, and so the well-versed Klaus was often thinking on his feet and considering the local environment as he directed the people working on the station. The craftsmen and laborers, for their part, never pressured him or spoke out of line; they simply went about their work and did as they were told, because Klaus treated them well and paid them well.

As the laborers worked, the dogkin were always by their side or around their feet, earnestly putting their small bodies to work and aiding the construction wherever they could. They were steadfast and obedient, and the laborers trusted them completely, which made work on the border station a peaceful and friendly undertaking.

Once Klaus had finished making the day's rounds and issuing necessary orders, he climbed the ladder to one of the guard towers and took a look around to make sure there weren't any issues that needed his attention. He looked left, then right, then off past the gates, and that was when he noticed a group of dogkin reacting to something, their ears shooting upwards and their noses sniffing the air. Klaus looked farther down the road towards Mahati.

The border station had only just been built, and it did not receive many visitors. When it did, the visitors were, by and large, friends of Baarbadal. The border station still had yet to welcome anybody who could be truly deemed a *new* visitor. But any visitors that did arrive would arrive by way of the neighboring domain, and so Klaus narrowed his eyes and kept his senses keen as he watched a horse-drawn carriage—likely a traveling merchant—trundle down the makeshift road towards the border station gate.

"Looks like a merchant," he said to himself. "Four guards, two horses, and one driver. Doesn't look to be anybody inside the carriage. But they're only a small group, so what are they doing here, I wonder?"

The arrival of a merchant would have been a joyous occasion back when Klaus had first arrived in Baarbadal, but now that they had Ellie and the lostblood brothers handling trade, they had little need for new merchants. Klaus kept a watch on the small merchant group as he pondered how to handle the situation.

If it's just a merchant then I'm happy to welcome them in, but there's a chance that it's not... It's those four guards that get me. They're thugs any which way you look at them, and you can tell at a glance that they're neither well trained nor even carrying decent equipment. Should I let them in, or...?

The thoughts raced through Klaus's mind as he took another close look at the merchant group approaching. It was then that the dogkin in the tower turned their ears back towards Baarbadal,

their tails wagging rapidly as they heard hooves approaching from Iluk.

Klaus thus turned back to the border house, where Senai and Ayhan were nearing on their horses, with Aisa and Ely close behind on horses of their own. Klaus could see that the twins would arrive well before the merchant group, and so he nodded to himself and climbed back down the guard tower ladder.

At the Border Station Gates—A Merchant

A new domain had been growing next to Kasdeks. And though Kasdeks was now known as Mahati, the area was still the center of trade in the west. The new domain, too, already had its own unique products and was flush with dragon materials due to recent (not to mention constant) hunts. These factors made for excellent trade opportunities, and so the bearded, big-bellied, middle-aged merchant had come to the new domain, one hand on the reins of his carriage, the other patting down his thinning hair.

A certain organization had robbed the merchant of his trading opportunities and left him near broke, forced to scrape by on what little intelligence he could sell. His carriage trundled forwards on strained, creaking wheels, and he gazed up at a set of border station gates that were far more stately than he'd been expecting.

The gates blocked the road ahead, and the walls stretching out on either side made detours near impossible. This was to mention nothing of the dense forest on either side of the road. All of this meant that there was no way for a carriage to enter the domain save for passing through the gates.

What the hell…? You mean I've got to pass through a border station now? A bribe should let me skip past the carriage check, but…the price of that bribe might leave me in the red…

The merchant brought the carriage to a halt in front of the gates and plastered his best merchant smile on his face. There he waited as the border station gates slowly opened, and three people emerged to greet him. One appeared to be a soldier dressed in armor the likes of which he'd never seen before, and he carried a spear that was equally unique. With him was a man who looked to be a merchant or perhaps just a traveler, and then there was a woman.

Don’t tell me the border station boss is a woman…

The woman stood at the center of the trio as they discussed something between themselves. The merchant could not hear what they were speaking about, and so he waited silently, his expression unchanging, as he wondered whether he should say something. Before he could come to a decision, however, the woman stepped forward and approached him with a smile that was decidedly much colder than his own.

“Welcome to the Baarbadal domain,” she said. “We thank you for making the long and arduous journey here to our frontier lands. Unfortunately, trade in the domain is managed exclusively by our guild, and as such we cannot allow any merchants who are not members past this point.” She continued, “That said, given how far you have come to see us, it would be far too cruel to simply send you back the way you came. So how about this? Would you be interested in selling your wares here with those working on the border station? If so, there will be no need for us to delve any deeper into such matters as…”

Managed exclusively. The guild*.*

The merchant’s face grew pale at the words, but his face soon flushed red with rage. The exclusive trade relationship didn’t bother him; he was surprised that a frontier location such as Baarbadal would have one in place, but such relationships were commonplace, and he could not begrudge them that.

But the *guild*… It was the guild that had left him struggling to survive, and he could barely contain himself at the realization that they were involved. The guild was a ridiculous organization that had sprung up out of nowhere, starting their operations in the sparsely populated frontier regions—the countryside, in other words—where trade opportunities were few and far between.

Their slogan was pure nonsense. *“Honest accounting.”* Worse still, it wasn’t just a slogan. “Honest accounting” came with certain rules, and the guild held free classes for citizens in which they learned basic reading and writing so as to understand them. They also taught citizens how to conduct trade, meaning that those who once knew nothing of buying and selling now had a grasp of the system.

The guild would then build a trade area in which these rules were strictly upheld, essentially forcing those rules on every other

merchant in the area. Any merchant who did not follow the now agreed-upon rules was promptly banned from trade without a second thought. It was a strong-arm tactic—they made their own rules and then forced them upon all others.

On top of that, things were only getting worse, what with the guild charming their customers with promises that “the customer will never make a loss” and “the customer will never be tricked or swindled.”

The merchant, and many like him, had been slow to realize just how troublesome the guild really was, and so naturally they had been slow to react. By that time, however, it had already been too late. The guild’s reach had exploded and its sales skyrocketed with it; a portion of those sales it donated to the castle under the guise of “war expenditures.” Thanks to that, the guild had built ties with the royal family and, with that authority acting as its shield, spread its rules further still.

And to think that they were really teaching people to read and write. They were teaching the unlearned—the easiest to fool! The very best marks!—skills that took the merchant’s former sales and mercilessly ground them underfoot!

The merchant had taken to sending bribes to various domain lords and tried to convince them that in educating the general public they were only inviting revolt and rebellion, but the guild was teaching only the most basic skills. The general public thus only learned the very fundamentals of reading and writing. Domain lords did not believe that such education would ever lead to outright rebellion, and so they ignored the merchant. To make matters worse still, the guild’s connections to the royal family and its ability to pay better bribes meant they already had those very same domain lords on their side.

As a result, the guild was pulling ahead, and taking over fast.

The merchant would not stand for it. He could not bear all the ways in which the guild was beating him to the punch and leaving him in abject poverty. But even as his face reddened with rage at the thought of it, there was nothing he could do, and in his present circumstances there was very little he could say either. And so he fought to maintain his calm. He knew that he would make no money if he exploded in a rage or ran off in protest, so he plastered his smile back on his face and decided that yes, he

would sell what he could here at the border station. At the very least he would break even.

"I appreciate your kindness and humbly accept your offer," he answered cheerfully.

The woman's joy at his response was clear on her face, and the merchant felt then as if he'd seen her somewhere, at some point in the past he could no longer remember, and perhaps no longer wanted to remember.

Her smile grew a touch colder as she approached him.

With Work Ongoing at the Border Station—A Craftsman

Boy, I hope all of this blows over soon…

The craftsman, dressed in a leather apron with his gray hair tied in a ponytail, looked at the domain lord's two young daughters, Senai and Ayhan. The two girls were always smiling and always filled with energy, chatting amicably even with lowly laborers such as himself. Just watching the two girls was a delight for such laborers, but today they were not smiling. Today, they wore dissatisfied pouts, and the laborers felt none of their usual delight.

The twins sat at a corner of the worksite, their cheeks puffed up, surrounded by worried dogkin. The reason for the girls' displeasure, however, lay elsewhere, with the traveling merchant on the other side of the gate. The twins had come to the border station with relatives they hadn't seen in a while, and the plan had been to frolic and play in the forest the girls so loved. The very moment they'd arrived, however, was when Klaus had approached them all about a most suspicious visiting merchant.

It was then that the twins' relatives mentioned they'd seen the merchant before and decided to make handling him and his entourage their first priority. Naturally, this left the twins with no choice but to kill time until the matter was settled.

The forest is such a special place for Senai and Ayhan… They're always talking about how the forest builds up energy over the winter which makes the flora burst with blinding life and makes for powerful herbs that can only be gathered now in the spring. They run around enjoying the forest each and every day…

Now they want nothing more than to share that joy with their relatives, but the moment they get here they're made to sit off to the

side. They're really being amazingly patient...

It was not just this one craftsman who worried about the girls but many others who labored at the station. With worry in their eyes, they found themselves glancing at the twins as they toiled.

Almost all of the laborers now working in Baarbadal had been approved by Eldan himself. He had conducted background checks and given them lessons in manners and etiquette to ensure that none did anything disrespectful. They had all been taught not to stare, and yet the worried laborers could not suppress their concern, and so they could not avert their eyes long.

"In which case, we'll need to survey your goods before you conduct any business..."

The craftsmen could just make out a voice on the other side of the fence. It was the voice of the woman who had come with the twins. She had seen the merchant's face from one of the guard towers and decided in an instant that she would handle things personally. At the sound of her voice beyond the gate, the twins' ears twitched. Their puffed-up cheeks deflated and their expressions changed to curiosity as they began to listen intently.

You don't see ears like theirs very often. Perhaps they have some beastkin in them. And they hear so much better than any of the rest of us. Just a glance and you can see they're picking up every word on the other side of the wall.

The craftsman was not a scholar, and so he could not say with any certainty exactly which type of beastkin the girls might be mixed with, nor could he make out most of the conversation on the other side of the wall. But the twins could, and so he felt certain that they shared blood with a creature of stellar hearing. Perhaps rabbits, he wondered, but then he caught the direction of his own thoughts and brushed them away with a shake of his head.

Eldan had made it very clear that the laborers at the border station were not to talk about the twins to others, nor were they to be too nosy. The craftsman felt that his very thoughts were, in and of themselves, just this sort of excessive curiosity. And besides, work on the border station was safe, it paid well, and the laborers were provided with delicious food and comfortable rooms. If things were to go well, surely Duke Baarbadal would remember them and provide them with more work in the future. The

craftsman did not want to do anything to jeopardize such good work and such excellent future opportunities. He did not even want his thoughts to spoil his chances.

And so the craftsman turned back to the task at hand and tried to focus, but once more he heard a snippet of conversation from the other side of the wall.

"Say whatever you will, but we must be allowed to survey your wares… This is a border station, after all… It's nothing more than a simple inspection. It will not cheapen the value of your merchandise… Surely you must be aware that the domain's exclusive partner is the Artois Trading Company. If you do not have superior merchandise, then…"

"*Artois*?! You mean that monster Ellie is here?!"

The woman's voice was cut off by a man's angry shout. The craftsman believed it to belong to the merchant. When Senai and Ayhan heard the outburst, their faces reddened and their brows raised. A moment later their cheeks puffed up once more, and it became very clear very quickly that the twins were mad. The dogkin surrounding them were just as angry—wrinkles creased their noses and they began to growl.

"You mean the exclusive partners here are the guild's top brass?!" shouted the merchant, as if to further spur the twins' rage. "I'd heard that the guild got here early, but they're in *that* deep already?! What the hell! And don't tell me *you're* all part of the top brass too…?! Oh no… No no no! I *knew* I'd seen that face before. You're that underhanded, cunning Aisa, aren't you?!"

As the merchant's voice faded, men could be heard speaking among each other, likely the merchant's guards. None knew what Aisa looked like, but some knew her name and the two descriptors the merchant had used, and as they informed the others of her reputation the craftsman heard too.

Aisa, it seemed, was a powerful mage, but she did not use her magic in a straightforward manner. The most well-known story of her magic was one in which she clutched grains of sand and fired them with magic. It was a spell without a known name, and one had to wonder if it was even a spell at all. Nonetheless, the grains of sand flew with more force than arrows fired from bows, tearing through clothing and skin without mercy. According to the guard telling the tale, the sand even had the power to blind one

completely.

With this unique spell of hers, Aisa kept her foes flinching and cowering while she hit them with punches and kicks, firing off extra sand for good measure. And because it was just sand she sent hurtling at her foes, her “spell” required very little magical energy. The fact that she could also easily pick up sand and similar earth from the ground at her feet meant that she was never without a weapon either.

Aisa used knives and swords when they were at hand, and when there was gravel that, too, became a weapon. As the guild saw success after success, people attacked their members out of jealousy, and it was with her “underhanded” and “cunning” methods that Aisa fought off her many attackers.

Come to think of it, I’ve heard about that… Every merchant in the guild is trained to defend themselves, and all of them are well-versed in combat.

The guards’ chatter reminded the craftsman of stories he had heard. Each merchant in the guild was a capable warrior, and on top of that the guild hired mercenaries to act as protection. The mercenaries were always paid handsomely, so they prioritized any and all work that came from the guild. This meant that very few bandits ever set their sights on the guild’s caravans and that when they did, they had a serious fight on their hands.

All of this meant that the guild’s wares always arrived safely, and this, too, became a weapon of sorts against their competition —*everybody* wanted to do business with the guild. The guild had thus secured itself a strong position, and in terms of what it wanted in trading partners…

“Our guild is only interested in working with merchants and customers who can participate in fair trade. This includes the Baarbadal domain. Now, if you, too, are such a merchant, then we will gladly welcome you to the domain. That is why we are constructing the border station you see here—it is a facility for the protection of merchants and customers alike…”

The woman spoke with dignity and authority, and each word could be heard no matter which side of the wall one was standing on. It was an admonishment of the perhaps not entirely honest merchant who stood before her, but there was a kindness in her words too.

All of the laborers at the wall stopped their work to listen. The merchant responded with anger, for some reason infuriated by what he had just been told. His outburst was a truly horrible thing to have to listen to and difficult to bear. He called the twins' relatives devious, he called them monsters, and when Senai and Ayhan had heard enough they decided to take action.

First, the twins gathered up nearby branches scattered around the workplace. Next, they snapped these branches into twigs and splinters and quietly approached the wall. Then they made their way to a small door in the wall, one that the craftsmen had put all of their skills to use constructing—a hidden door made especially for dogkin.

The hidden door was designed to be difficult to find, hard to open from the outside, and *just* big enough for a dogkin to squeeze through. It was also big enough for the twins to pass through if they crawled on their bellies, and it was as the twins lowered themselves in front of the door that the craftsman realized they intended to do exactly that. They quietly opened the door, set their sights on the merchant from the doorway, and, with twigs in hand, began to cast a spell of some kind.

It was all too clear to the craftsman what would happen next—the twins were going to cast the very spell that the guards had talked about earlier. The craftsman did not know why they had chosen twigs instead of dirt or sand, but when he saw the flow of the twins' magic and their postures, he was certain of what they were doing, and he ran over in a panic to stop them.

This is a matter best left to the adults! It is never a good idea to attack another in the midst of your rage!

These were the words that the craftsman wanted to convey, but Klaus, too, had noticed the girls and the spell they were casting, and in the next instant he smacked the ground with the pommel at the end of his spear. The gesture stopped the girls from casting their spell, but it was also a signal to the border station dogkin...and their loud barks could be heard as soon as they received that signal from their master.

Some of the dogkin barked sharply, some of them growled, and others howled. Others still stomped the ground with their feet. But the sounds did not just come from the border station; they also echoed from the surrounding forest, making it clear to all that

there was no easy way out.

The merchant might have known that all the sounds were dogkin, but he might also have thought himself surrounded by wolves. Either way, he knew his position was tenuous and weak, and realizing this he began to panic. So too did the guards with him, and in an instant the cries of the merchant's group filled the air. First it was the guards that turned tail and fled, but it wasn't long before the merchant himself took the reins of his carriage and headed back the way he'd come.

The sound of fleeing footsteps, hooves, and carriage wheels filled the air, and then the dogkin's barking settled into silence, leaving only the everyday sounds of bugs chirping. The situation had been brought to an end in a peaceful manner and without trouble.

The craftsman let out a relieved sigh…but the twins seemed annoyed that they'd been denied their chance at having a little fun, and as they looked out the hidden door their little arms and legs flailed about in their tantrum.

"Y-You must calm yourselves," said the craftsman. "You'll dirty your clothes and scuff your knees!"

He did his best to sound gentle and calm, and when the twins heard his voice they turned to look at him and stopped their flailing.

"Okay," they replied together.

The craftsman was relieved all over again. The twins were nobles, yes, but they were nobles who would lend an ear to the advice of a commoner. But just then, all three heard the distant sound of approaching hooves. For a moment the craftsman was perplexed.

But the merchant just left. Why would he be back? No, wait, that sound is different from what we heard earlier. There are far more guards, and either the carriage is far heavier or the horses are stronger, because they're much louder. Is it possible that another visitor is arriving after the last…?

Just as these thoughts were passing through the craftsman's mind, Klaus went to the driver of the approaching carriage and greeted them. It was a polite greeting, and by that the craftsman knew that this was a very different visitor from the last. He ran once more to the twins, thinking it best that they be sent home

before the visitor could see them here in their now dirty clothes.

"You must go home at once," he whispered to them, "and you must tell your mother and father that you have very important guests, okay? I'm sure they would be delighted if you were to tell them yourselves."

The twins burst into big smiles at the craftsman's suggestion, and after nodding their agreement they ran to their horses, brushing the dirt from their clothes along the way.

At the Just Completed Guesthouse—Dias

"Guests are coming!" announced the twins.

A few moments later, some of the dogkin who worked under Klaus turned up to tell me exactly the same thing, so all of us at the guesthouse got ready to welcome our visitors. As for who would greet them directly, that responsibility went to me, Hubert, and Uncle Ben. Aymer was on standby and hidden on my person; she'd be our messenger to the others if such a thing became necessary.

Alna and Goldia were waiting a little ways from the guesthouse yurt just in case "something happened," though to be honest, I wasn't expecting anything. Meanwhile, Grandma Maya and her friends were already preparing some food at the basic kitchen range setup, and they had some alcohol to go with it.

Senai and Ayhan's report didn't give us anything concrete to work with, and the dogkin messengers weren't any more descriptive, but we knew that our visitor was someone of pretty high standing, being that Klaus had informed his border station dogkin to tell us to get the guesthouse ready to accommodate them. We did all the prep we could, and I changed into something a little more formal. I also brought my battle-ax with me and left it inside, because it made for a nice decoration.

It wasn't long before an impressive carriage showed up, complete with a banner that displayed a family crest flapping in the wind. I could hear the energetic dogkin who were zipping around the carriage and leading it to us, and one of them—an especially spirited youth—split from the others to announce their arrival.

"Lord Dias!" said the dogkin. "We've brought guests to the

domain! There's also *another* group of guests following some distance behind this group, so Klaus is having us escort this group because he's got his hands full with the other!"

The dogkin paused for a moment, then remembered something. "Oh... As for the visitor's name... They're Sir something...something, of, uh, rank, and they're here on behalf of an important something-or-other!"

All of the dogkin struggled when it came to names and ranks, so this new messenger was no more helpful than the last. All the same, I thanked them for letting me know and gave them a pat, and all the other dogkin ran up wanting pats too. I didn't have much of a choice, so I gave in and gave them all the pats they craved.

The carriage arrived while I was caught up in patting the dogkin, and then a group of guards began running around in a hurry. They were equipped with some real snazzy armor and cloaks, and when the dogkin saw the carriage come to a halt, they took action—they placed wedges at the wheels to keep the carriage in place, started looking after the horses, and did other such tasks.

Hubert took note of the carriage's banner while all this was happening and leaned in to whisper to me and Uncle Ben.

"I believe it likely, based on that banner, that Count Sigurdsson is here from the north. The north of the kingdom is northeast of here, and monster attacks are fairly commonplace; it's well-known that the soldiers in the area are very tough."

"The winters are especially harsh up there, and so because people spend the vast majority of their time in their homes during that period, they've come to put a lot of effort into culture and the arts. I'm certain the location is part of Second Princess Helena's faction. Please bear in mind that I've never actually visited the location personally, so all of this is secondhand information. Still, I hope it will prove useful."

"Yes! That's it!" yipped one of the dogkin by my feet. "The visitor's name is Sir Sig-some-something!"

It looked like we really *were* getting a visit from a member of the count's family. This still left one more unanswered question: Just why were they here in the first place? And so, as the guards let the person in the carriage know it was safe to alight, I realized it

was a question I'd have to ask face-to-face.

The man who alighted from the carriage was maybe in his mid-twenties, with long golden hair that wavered on the wind in an almost annoying fashion. He wore an exquisite leather cloak, and under it black slacks, a shirt woven with gold and silver thread, and an ostentatious red vest. His red eyes darted around as he took in the scenery and the guesthouse, and then with a great big smile he approached us.

"Wow!" he exclaimed joyously, raising both of his arms. "Wow! You must be Sir Dias, the nation's heroic savior! I am Erling, of the family of Count Sigurdsson, and I have been waiting for this moment for so long! Why, I'm so moved that I feel almost compelled to sing!"

His voice was so high-pitched that I thought he *was* singing, and I was suddenly frozen and unsure how to respond. But thanks to Uncle Ben, who gave me a stealthy but sharp smack to the shin with his cane, I snapped back to my senses.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Dias, Duke of Baarbadal, and I thank you for making the long and arduous journey here to our frontier. Please, let's take a seat in this tent, where we can better acquaint ourselves over food and drink..."

I went on in that long and winding way, under the stern watch of Uncle Ben and Hubert, while Erling smiled and nodded and entered the yurt with two of his guards. Me, Uncle Ben, and Hubert followed after them. The rest of Erling's guards remained outside with our dogkin.

Inside the yurt, the first thing you noticed was the baar-face-embroidered flag on the wall and my battle-ax in front of it. The next thing to catch the gaze was the beautiful long table and chairs that Aisa and Ely had brought for us. Then there was the mantelpiece—a simple thing that we were using temporarily until a proper one was built.

I took a seat at the back of the guesthouse, at the head of the table. Uncle Ben and Hubert took spots on either side of me, while Erling sat near the entrance, opposite me, with his guards on either side of him. For a moment he stared straight at me with a nervous look on his face. I was mighty confused by it. Why was he so silent? Hadn't he come here to talk to me about something? Was I supposed to start the proceedings? I was trying to

understand the situation when Erling suddenly clapped his hands together loudly and burst with joy.

"I must say this is utterly wonderful!" he exclaimed. "I had heard the stories of your circumstances, Duke, and of what has occurred here in the past, but to think that you have constructed such a stunning border station in just a year, and this exquisite guesthouse too! I am beyond impressed!"

The compliments just kept coming, and I could barely keep up. "And that marvelous flag and all your ornaments! Oh, how they draw the eyes to their splendor! It would appear that you, too, are a lover of the arts, and I could not be any happier to have found in you someone so close to my own heart! There is no doubt that Princess Helena is sure to be overjoyed, for there is no more fitting a husband for her person than you, and this makes me—"

"Huh? What was that?" I knew I shouldn't have cut Erling off mid-sentence, but I reacted before I could think.

For a moment Erling wasn't sure what to say, but he cleared his throat and started over.

"There is no doubt that Princess Helena is sure to be overjoyed. After all, in you I have found for her a wonderful and fitting life partner who is sure to support her as she so deserves."

I didn't even take a moment to think before I answered him.

"Yeah, no, I'm already engaged, so that's off the table, sorry. I'm happy you came and all, and I want nothing more than to make you feel welcome. We've also got food coming soon, but...I'd appreciate it if you took any thoughts of marriage and forgot about them completely. I'm going to shut down any talk of marriage, no matter who it's with or what the conditions are."

Hubert had told me before that vague answers could lead to misunderstandings and confusion, so I made things about as crystal clear as I could. However, Hubert covered his face with his hands like he was embarrassed. Uncle Ben, however, was smiling ear to ear. Erling was smiling too, but it was more like a statue's smile.

I didn't know what thoughts were bouncing around in that head of his, but Erling stayed frozen for a little while. While he was there, I noticed a sliver of movement by the entrance—the door opened for a brief second, and a head peeked in, then disappeared as the door shut. Then I heard a voice outside of the

guesthouse walls, and little by little they made their way to the back of the yurt, where Aymer climbed up my back and to my collar.

"He's blue," she said, whispering in my ear.

That was all I needed to hear to know that it was Alna who'd stuck her head in the door. She'd done that to cast her soul appraisal, and Aymer had picked up the results with her excellent hearing.

"Got it," I whispered back.

I didn't know exactly why Erling was recommending I get married to Helena, but at least I knew that he didn't have any ill will in his heart. And if the soul appraisal said he was blue, then I figured I owed it to the boy to listen to his reasoning through to the end.

Frozen in Place—Erling

What do I do? I never expected this at all… He was an orphan who became a volunteer soldier and went on to become the nation's heroic savior. By the king's own hand he has risen to the rank of duke. I was so utterly convinced it was his goal to make inroads with the royal family…

I'd heard that he was already set to be wed, but who would've thought that he'd use a prior engagement as reason for declining such a marvelous offer?

I've clearly gotten his motives entirely wrong. I'll need to regroup and change how I approach this, but…I just never expected to have to think on my feet…

Erling's body remained statuesque, but his mind was racing, and it was only when one of his guards shook him by the shoulder that he snapped back to reality to once more speak to the Duke of Baarbadal.

"It would appear I've gotten too ahead of myself," Erling said. "You have my sincerest apologies. Perhaps you would allow me to explain why I've come all this way to speak with you…"

Erling's faction, led by Second Princess Helena, strove for something that could be summed up in a single word: peace. It was her faction's aim to unite the nation through the arts and usher in a world without conflict. Military powers would be turned

against monsters instead of people, and the spoils that came as human territory expanded would be split between the nation's inhabitants.

In the past, the founding king had used his military might to save the people and establish the continent under the singular rule of the Sanserife Kingdom. But as time passed, the kingdom had split due to differences in race, culture, and location. These differences had eventually given rise to the monster known as the empire.

Military might was therefore not the answer.

This was the conclusion that Helena's faction had come to, and admittedly there were not many who agreed. Nonetheless, Erling and many like him hoped earnestly that it would lead them all to peace.

"As for whether it's truly possible for culture to usher in world peace, well…none of us can say for certain. However, if it is indeed possible, we will not see the fruits of our labors for centuries—perhaps even millennia. At the same time it does not feel right to simply do nothing at all, and so we feel it important to create a foundation for the future, even if our actions amount to but a single step towards the future we desire…"

Erling observed Dias carefully as he spoke of his faction's intent. Usually people reacted to his faction in one of two ways: They looked down on them, or they outright made fun of them. Dias, however, did neither. He agreed that peace was indeed a righteous cause and was surprised to learn of the power that existed in the arts. He was impressed by the faction's earnest consideration of future generations, and he accepted Erling's words with an open mind and heart.

"…and that is why, if you and Helena were to form a bond through the ceremony of marriage, your fame and renown in the sphere of war would add enormous support to our goal—no, our very *dreams*…"

But when Erling broached the topic of a potential marriage, Dias's face quickly scrunched up in discomfort and he refused outright.



Erling couldn't understand why Dias was being so stubborn, but he knew that the duke's fiancée was clearly of incredible importance to him, and so he asked about her. He discovered then that Dias was engaged to a commoner and one who called the grassy plains home.

"Then how about considering the idea of taking on a concubine?" asked a desperate Erling. "Now, while it's true that concubines are technically against the law, a great many nobles take concubines as though it is an ordinary part of life—"

And yet Dias would not budge no matter what offer Erling presented. He would not break any of the kingdom's laws, nor would he go against the teachings of his parents. He punctuated all of this with the crossing of his arms and a shake of his head, his displeasure all too clear on his face.

Erling understood that to Dias, an orphan, his parents' lessons were invaluable treasures to be cherished, but was he not being excessively stubborn in his adherence to them? Still, Erling could not bring himself to say as much to Dias in person, and his thoughts continued to race as he sought out an opening from which to strike and convince Dias to change his mind.

Erling thought of the people he'd seen at the border station. From their appearance, he surmised that they were members of the guild's leadership. Erling had heard for quite some time that the guild was friendly with Dias, but he was shocked to see that their leadership had seen fit to visit personally. Erling desperately wanted to win Dias's favor, to draw him to his faction's side, especially now that he saw that Dias had a link with the guild that was deeper than just him being the nation's heroic savior. As he mulled over all of this, however, another thought suddenly struck Erling.

Aha... Dias spent all those years on the battlefield, and so he may not know about the temple's modernists. Their ways came to the forefront during the war, and they are tolerant of bigamy. If I explain this to him, he may have a change of heart. It is possible he is devout and faithful, being that he has a priest with him here at our meeting, which could make things difficult...but no, he is sure to at least lend me his ear.

Erling thus shifted their conversation to the modernist ways. However, it was not *Dias* who rebuked him but the elderly man

dressed in priestly robes by his side.

"Ah, you would speak of the modernists so highly in *my* presence, hmm?" he said. "But I will allow no further discussion on this."

"Uncle Ben..." Dias sighed.

It was here that Erling once again froze completely, the color draining from his face. If he had disrespected the elderly man with his talk of the modernists, it was likely because the man was a fundamentalist. But among the fundamentalists—and these days some did not know that the faction even existed with them having fallen so far—was a man of renown. A man chiefly known as *Ben*.

Word had spread that this Ben, a fundamentalist priest, had returned from his pilgrimage to the holy lands last year. His full name was Bendia, and he was the older brother to the former high priest and high priestess, but upon return from his pilgrimage he had seemingly vanished without a trace. Erling had assumed the old man had died, but...was it possible that he was alive and that he was living *here* in Baarbadal?

There was yet another matter too: Dias had called the man "Uncle Ben."

Erling's thoughts then accelerated to a blistering pace within his unmoving body.

The nation's heroic savior, who was orphaned, staunchly defends the fundamentalist ways... Could that be why he became *an orphan? Is it possible that the high priest and high priestess had a child who still survives to this day? Is it possible that this Dias has strong ties not just with the guild but with the very lifeblood of the fundamentalists?!*

And can the bloodline of the royal family even match the heights of such an individual...?

The scent of spices tickled Erling's nose and stirred him from his thoughts as the tent door opened and an elderly woman brought in some bowls on a tray.

"I apologize for interrupting your discussion," she said. "The food is ready, and it would be a shame for it to go cold, so we hope you might enjoy it while you talk. We have also prepared some drinks, but in the meantime please enjoy this bowl of black ghee soup."

"Grandma Maya?" exclaimed a surprised Dias. "What happened to Grandma Pison and Grandma Jimechi? Oh, I mean if they're

busy then that's fine, of course. Wow, thanks for the food. Looks delicious."

The old woman began serving the food, and Dias spoke to her casually as she did. Erling, who was listening, felt a chill run down his spine and trembled. His teeth clenched and began to grind, even as the rest of his body refused to budge.

Maya?! Could she be the *Maya?!*

She looks about the right age, and her face… Damn it! I can't tell if she looks like the portraits I've seen or not… Old people and their faces —they all look alike! Could it be that this old woman simply has the same name, or is it possible that she is the *grand sorceress who achieved feats so great she was once known as the king's saintly aide until her remonstrations saw her exiled…?*

If it is her, then this is so, so *much more than we can handle.*

And as much as I want nothing more than to put this all down to coincidence, given the flow of events and the timing of her appearance, I cannot believe this woman's arrival to be anything but intentional. Indeed, I read their message to me loud and clear!

Erling realized then that any further thought on the matter was pointless. If this Maya was the legend he knew of, then Princess Helena's faction could not hold a candle to Baarbadal. In fact, neither could Princess Isabelle's, who he knew would soon arrive at this same guesthouse. Even Prince Richard's faction would be hard-pressed to find equal footing with Dias. And Erling, himself nothing more than the son of a count, was completely and utterly powerless.

Erling had raced here to Baarbadal in order to arrive before Princess Isabelle's representative, but he now knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that even *they* stood no chance before a person of such incredible standing.

And so, suddenly released from his duties by this revelation, Erling turned his focus to the delicious scent of the steaming bowl of soup before him. The stewed chunks of meat were generous in size, and the soup itself was thick and full-bodied, flavored generously with a great many spices.

Erling's guards gulped hungrily as they eyed the soup. The now relaxed Erling took his spoon in hand and settled his mind on the flavors of the soup as its warmth spread through his body.

Cleaning the Guesthouse—Dias

When Erling finished his soup, Grandma Maya offered him some mulled wine to help ease his weariness. Erling drank the herb and spice flavored beverage in a single gulp, announced his departure, and got ready to leave. I knew he was tired after such a long trip, and I also knew that it wasn't going to be any fun riding a carriage home drunk, so I offered that he stay the night. Erling declined because he was intent on informing his faction of how things had gone, and he would not be swayed. It was all we could do just to prepare him a little souvenir before he went.

Erling hopped aboard his carriage, the driver took the reins, and just like that they were heading back the way they'd come. Because the rest of us knew that another visitor was on their way, we quickly got to tidying the guest yurt and readying it for the next arrival. We got rid of any rubbish, cleaned the table, wiped the chairs, and prepared another round of food, drink, and souvenirs. By the time we'd finished, another luxurious carriage was within sight.

Klaus was leading the carriage on one of his military steeds, and with him were a number of dogkin. Klaus looked pretty nervous, and when he saw me out front of the yurt he sped up, stopped nearby, hopped off his horse, and ran over.

"The Duke of Sachusse, Sir Frederick, is in that carriage," he said, glancing in its direction. "He is the lord of the eastern region, once a battleground, and is a famed veteran of the war. He is here on behalf of Princess Isabelle, but even with that in mind this is a much farther distance than one of his standing would ever usually travel. He might have something up his sleeve or some other reason for coming, so please be careful."

"Got it," I replied with a nod.

Klaus nodded back, then took his horse behind the guesthouse where he wouldn't interfere with proceedings. Immediately after, the carriage rolled to a stop in front of the yurt. It was quite old, but it was covered in elaborate carvings and was a heck of a sight.

An elderly gentleman alighted from the carriage with a long, thick cane in hand. It looked like something with a weapon hidden inside of it. He wore an ostentatious cloak that struck me more like a piece of defensive equipment on account of how thick it was. His

long white hair was tied in a neat ponytail not unlike Uncle Ben's, and he stood with a straight back and an intelligent glint in his eyes.

The moment I saw him, I couldn't help thinking that Sachusse was exactly like the imperial commander that had given Juha a really hard time. That commander had been the sort of person who wouldn't attack unless he was assured victory, and he'd pulled his forces back the moment the tide began to turn in our favor. Even when victory appeared imminent, that commander never rushed or panicked and always fell back on tried and tested tactics. He didn't like out-of-the-box strategies and moved his forces as if they were a part of his own body, approaching war as if it were just another everyday chore not unlike washing the dishes or sweeping the floor. Juha'd nearly pulled his hair out over that man.

"It has been a long time, Dias…or should I say, Duke Baarbadal."

I was sure we were meeting for the first time, but when Duke Sachusse opened with that I was stuck. What did he mean? How did nobles respond to this kind of thing? I didn't have the faintest clue.

"Just ask this: 'My humblest of apologies, good sir, but have we met before?'" whispered Aymer from my back. "At times like this it's not good to lie or let things slide."

I took Aymer's advice and said exactly what she recommended.

"My humblest of apologies, good sir, but have we met before?"

"Hmm? Ah, I see," said Duke Sachusse, his gaze softening a touch. "I only ever saw you on the battlefield, come to think of it. We've never actually been officially introduced to one another. I was just a lowly commander whose forces were saved countless times by your own. And I realize that I should have thanked you at the time, but I felt hesitant to do so around the other nobility. But now we are *both* of the nobility, and both dukes, no less. There is no need for me to put on such airs, and so I thank you. You have my gratitude for all of your past support."

"As you do mine, Duke Sachusse. On the battlefield, it is our duty to support one another," I replied. "I am certain that you as well came to my aid when I required it. You need not offer any thanks."

“Ah, it is nice of you to say as much. I feel more at ease. I don’t get along very well with the other dukes—we simply don’t click,” said Duke Sachusse. “I am so very glad to have an associate like yourself among my ranks.”

“I am still so very immature in the ways of the nobility, and I am but an infant when it comes to carrying the weight of my responsibilities. Nothing could make me happier than knowing you are among my fellow dukes, and I hope with great humility that through our connection you might be able to offer me guidance where necessary.”

I went on repeating everything that Aymer relayed to me, and Duke Sachusse relaxed even more. Aymer thought we’d done enough in the way of opening pleasantries, so we directed him inside with two of his guards, who might have actually been his aides. They were all decked out in very nice armor and looked very much like proper knights.

As we walked into the guesthouse, Aymer crawled and scrambled this way and that—from my back to my shoulders and up to my head—always telling me what to say and do while she stayed out of sight. As for me, I simply stuck to doing what I was told. There was just so much about noble etiquette that confused me and I just couldn’t remember it all. Aymer had heard all about it from Hubert and Ellie though, so I felt it was best just to follow her lead.

Once inside I introduced Duke Sachusse and his guards to Hubert and Uncle Ben. Duke Sachusse then introduced the brown-haired young man by his side, who, it turned out, *was* a knight, just like I’d thought. He then introduced us to the other knight, and for a time we simply talked about nothing in particular, with the duke himself leading the conversation.

I knew the duke had come to Baarbadal for a reason, but he didn’t talk about it straightaway. Instead he asked me about the state of the domain, the items we had displayed in the guesthouse, and if it was really true that I’d slain dragons. Even after the grandmas brought out food and mead, he still didn’t get to why he’d come to visit. In fact, it was only after he was on his second cup that he finally got down to things.

“Ah, come to think of it,” he started, “I had originally come here to talk to you about a potential marriage with Princess Isabelle,

whom I serve. However, I couldn't help but note that the young man who arrived before us has already decided to leave, and so I can only assume you have no interest in such topics."

He continued, "You haven't even met either of the princesses, and they are so distant from what you've been up to that it wouldn't be surprising if you were hearing their names for the very first time today. I very much doubt that you have a preference for one princess over the other. On top of that, word *has* been going around that you are already married, which is to say we've arrived far too late."

"Yes, that's right," I replied. "I'm already engaged, so I won't entertain talks of another marriage, regardless of who might be involved or what conditions are offered."

I had a feeling that the question was one that *I* had best answer, and so before Aymer could say a word I said my piece. Aymer dug her little claws into the back of my head like a kind of scolding. Meanwhile, Duke Sachusse stared at his empty cup for a moment, then offered me a smile.

"And if that is your decision, that is fine," he said. "I am satisfied simply to know that it is highly unlikely you will ever become our enemy. You are also far removed from both our domain and the royal capital, which makes it unlikely you will ever have to deal with the disputes on center stage, so to speak. You appear to have no strong connections to the other factions—and one in particular—and so I am glad to proudly call you an acquaintance. This, in itself, is a victory."

I didn't really know what he meant about "center stage" and "other factions" so I didn't know how to respond. Aymer took to scratching my head again.

"I feel likewise," she whispered.

And that's exactly what I said.

After finishing his food and wine, Duke Sachusse announced that it was about time he started on the road home. We'd gone to a lot of trouble to prepare the accommodation yurt, so I was really hoping that he'd stay the night. I told him as much, but the duke said he was on a time limit and there was nothing more I could say.

"While I cannot help but feel some sorrow at not being able to

provide you an evening of hospitality, if you have pressing business then it simply cannot be helped," I said by way of Aymer. "I sincerely hope that you will visit us again soon should the opportunity arise."

Sachusse's knights then left to prepare the carriage while Hubert went off to get the duke his souvenir. It looked to me like the knights were as surprised as I was that they'd be leaving so soon, and so they pretty much dashed from the yurt as fast as their feet could carry them.

"What in the—?!" shouted one as soon as they were outside.

"Oh," replied Hubert, who was out there with them, "the dogkin are just giving your horses a massage."

The dogkin just *loved* giving horses massages. They'd do the feet, the hips, the back, the whole nine yards, and the horses just couldn't get enough. Balers was such a big fan of them that he'd look at me just begging for work so he'd get a massage upon his return. Usually it was somewhere between five to ten dogkin all huddled around a single horse, and it was probably a bit of a shock to see them all hanging off a horse if you weren't expecting it. They'd be stuck all over a horse rubbing out its aches and pains, and the horse would look like it was hovering somewhere up on cloud nine. I was willing to bet that that's exactly what the knights had seen when they went outside.

The knights reacting started a whole commotion outside of the guesthouse as everyone rushed around to get the duke's carriage ready. Among all of that Hubert returned with a package wrapped in baar wool. It was the same package we'd passed to Erling before he left, which contained our domain specialties: baar wool, rock salt, and a piece of a wind dragon.

Wind dragons were light and sturdy creatures, but using the head for materials was a difficult task, and you weren't really rewarded much for the effort either. With that in mind, Narvant didn't think much of the heads for crafting purposes. He didn't need them for the falconkin equipment, and we didn't really have any use for them otherwise. So all the heads had just ended up gathering dust in our storehouse. We'd done a bit of digging before Erling left and decided they might make for nice souvenirs.

You couldn't use a dragon's head as material, but it *was* still a dragon's head, so you could use it for decoration or otherwise

trade it for some decent coin. That sounded like a pretty good gift to me, so that's what we decided to use them for. Erling hadn't been surprised by the wool or the salt, but he'd been blown away by the head. He'd held on to it very carefully, as if he'd had a mountain's worth of gold in his hands.

Hubert didn't simply pass the baar wool package to Duke Sachusse but instead first gave it to me. I then unwrapped it and displayed the contents while I explained what was inside. There was more of everything in this package than the last one, because we were dealing with a duke now, after all. We'd only given Erling a single dragon's head, but for the duke we packed three.

Looking at them in that package though, I had to admit that it felt a bit strange for me to give someone three dragonfly heads as a gift. If they weren't worth anything then it would have definitely come across as a mean gesture. All the same, the duke's gaze went not to the dragon's heads but instead to the rock salt, which was not unlike a little salt mountain. He seemed mighty happy at the sight of that.

Once I'd done all the explaining, Hubert neatly wrapped up the package and I took it over to give to the duke myself. Usually in these sorts of situations you had your servant give the package to the guest's servant, but given that we'd talked about becoming friendly acquaintances, it felt right to hand it over personally. Well, that's what Aymer said, and once again I was pretty much just doing as I was told. Duke Sachusse had his cane on one side of his chair, and I went to the other side to give him his package.

The duke took the package with a smile and a word of thanks, then called one of his knights and told them to put the package in with his other stuff. Once that was done, he reached for his cane and held it up.

"It did not escape my notice that you were aware of this from the moment we first greeted one another," he said. "You have a most impressive set of eyes and—not only that—your every movement has put you in a position to deal with the cane were it ever to come into play. You maintain the perfect distance, so to speak…and I can only assume that the stories of countless threats on your life in the past are no mere legend."

"Uh, to be honest, I kind of do it all the time, even when someone's just chopping stuff in the kitchen," I replied. "I mean,

you never know what might happen if they trip and the knife goes flying.”

I answered without so much as a thought, and a look of surprise flashed across the duke’s face unlike any expression he’d shown until now. It wasn’t all that surprising a thing as far as I was concerned.

I was the same way when Alna carried a meat cleaver, when the twins had their bows in hand, and when Klaus picked up his spear. It was everyday life for me. But all the same it came as something of a shocking revelation to Duke Sachusse. But after a few moments of silence, he chuckled and placed his cane on the table.

“Then allow me to give you this cane as a token of my gratitude,” he said. “It is certainly not as luxurious as the dragon materials you have given me, but it carries value nonetheless. I’m certain it will be of use to you. My plan was to surprise you with it before I handed it to you, but I suppose I simply have to accept defeat.”



Leaving me with the cane, the duke stood up and bid us farewell.

"Please, there's no need to see us off," he said, and with that he was gone.

Unlike when Erling had visited, we didn't have any other visitors to prepare for. We could have easily seen Duke Sachusse and his knights off, but we stayed right there in the guesthouse. It felt a bit rude to force it when he'd told us not to bother, so me, Hubert, and Uncle Ben stayed inside and talked about how tiring a day it had been. While we did that we tidied things up and lined up all the chairs. That was when I took the cane in hand with a curious look.

"Can't believe he just gave me his cane," I muttered.

"Well, he did mention you noticing something, so maybe it's a special cane of some sort?" said Hubert.

I nodded. Duke Sachusse had stood really straight, and he didn't seem to have any issues when it came to his legs or his hips or anything. I was doubtful he needed a cane at all. Then there was the fact that the cane was much thicker than your usual walking stick. Plus, when I'd picked it up I'd immediately noticed just how heavy it was—far too heavy for the sort of person who would actually *need* a cane.

It was obvious to me that the cane had a weapon hidden in it, which was something I'd seen a number of times during the war. I took it in both hands—one on the handle and one right in the middle—and tried pulling it in opposite directions. As soon as I did I heard a clicking sound, and there it was—the cane had a sword hidden inside of it.

"Ah, now I get it," I said. "This is why he said it was still valuable."

"It's possible that the duke intended to frighten you with the cane before offering it to you as a gift," commented Hubert.

The sword was dull, so as an actual weapon the cane wasn't all that useful, but the blade still glimmered gold. Based on the weight of it, I figured it was probably made of pure gold.

"I guess that Duke Sachusse is like those old men you hear about," I said. "You know, the ones that like playing tricks?"

I put the sword back in its sheath while Aymer and Hubert looked at me, skepticism written all over their faces, like they

wanted to tell me, *What the heck are you on about?*

But right then Uncle Ben burst into laughter, and it left me wondering if I'd said something funny or foolish.

In Duke Sachusse's Carriage—A Young Knight

The duke was on his way home from the Baarbadal domain. With him in the gently rocking carriage was a young knight eating a sandwich filled with dried meat. The sandwich had been a gift to the young knight.

"One who treats his soldiers as he would his children," said Duke Sachusse quite suddenly, "earns himself soldiers who would give their own lives to fight by his side."

The young knight was unsure what had brought out this sudden comment by his master, but it was a comment that could not simply be ignored, so he quickly swallowed the mouthful of sandwich he had been chewing on.

"Is that a proverb you learned somewhere, Your Grace?" he asked.

The duke nodded as he stared at a small amount of rock salt in his hand, and he began to explain.

"It was something my grandfather was fond of saying," he said. "The dogkin you saw, the ones that served Dias—those little ones do not choose their masters based on money or authority. The dogkin decide by instinct."

"And when they do elect to follow someone, they are fiercely loyal with *no* expectation of repayment. But when they do not choose their own leader, no amount of gold can earn that same loyalty. Such is their obedience that most put the dogkin to ceaseless work, but take advantage of the dogkin and they will eventually leave you without so much as a word."

"Now, I do not know how long those dogkin have been working under Dias, but based on how comfortable they are in the domain I would hazard a guess that it has been anywhere between six months to a year. That strikes me as about right. In that short amount of time, they appear to work completely autonomously, and smiling the whole time. It is as though Dias treats them as he would his own children."

"I… I see," replied the knight. "It is said that when the war

ended, Dias—uh, my apologies, I mean Duke Baarbadal—split all of his wealth between his fellow soldiers and invested it in the surrounding area."

"He who does not pursue success or honor, who does not fear failure and desires only peace and prosperity in his motherland, is a true national treasure."

"Is that also one of your grandfather's proverbs?" asked the knight.

"No, that one in fact came from my father," replied Duke Sachusse. "You see, even upon being deemed the nation's heroic savior, Dias asked for nothing. When he was taken to jail, he offered no resistance, no excuses. His whole reason for joining the volunteer forces was because he wanted peace in his homeland. Even now, he prepares high-quality salt in order to serve his king."

The duke brought the salt closer to his face. So close, in fact, that the knight thought he might start licking it.

"Salt, you say?" asked the knight. "Ah, are you referring to the overfishing that has occurred in one of the domains personally governed by the king? Where they have a surplus of fish and not enough salt to preserve them? Oh, I see... So Dias has offered this very salt to aid the king in this time of need."

But even as the young knight himself spoke the words, he found them difficult to believe. All across the entire nation, the nobility were frantically watching the turmoil rippling through the lands as they sought to grasp which prince or princess would become the next king or queen. All the while, not a single one of them spared a glance for the king himself. And yet, there was Dias, faithfully serving his king, even though he was a commoner for whom loyalty and gallantry should have been far distant concepts.

Duke Sachusse had heard rumors that Dias had fallen in with Prince Richard, and this meeting had cleared his doubts. Dias was in a faction all his own in service to the king. Or rather, he had no interest in kings at all, present or future. His faction aimed to better the nation. The king didn't matter to Dias—it could have been Meiser for all he cared. All that mattered was that he worked for the *people* and protected their peace.

"It will not just be the king who celebrates when those preserved fish reach the marketplace; it will be the citizens who can pile their plates and fill their bellies with cheap fish. And while

it will take some time to deliver the salt to where it is needed, when word spreads that salt is flooding the market, those who had been hoarding their own stashes hoping for a golden opportunity will panic to follow suit. Salt is an essential part of life, and one might say that it, too, serves the people and their peace."

Duke Sachusse carefully took the salt in his hand and placed it in the white piece of cloth with the rest. He then brought forth one of the dragon heads he had received, bringing it just as close to his face as he had the rock salt.

"He is but a fledgling duke, and yet it vexes me terribly to think that he is already using me to promote his outrageous achievements. That said, one cannot deny that he is simply paying much too generously for the work. When the people begin to speak of the spread of Baarbadal salt, I will seize any opportunity to ensure their rumors are confirmed as fact."

He then added, "But to think that he can give us *three* of these heads without a hint of hesitation. Just what kind of magical, demonic, monstrous lands are they dealing with out there, I wonder?"

The duke spoke of being frustrated, but his knight did not miss the smile on the man's face. Dias had, after all, saved Duke Sachusse's own subjects and was a living embodiment of his ancestors' words. Even now, it was clear that the duke held no ill will for the heroic savior of the nation. If anything, the meeting had only served to endear Dias to the duke further.

As repayment, Duke Sachusse had prepared a sum of gold—which he had intended to deliver by way of a little mischief—but it paled in comparison to this collection of riches he had been gifted. The duke had intended to display the difference between the two of them but had instead been made to understand that the scales tilted in the other direction entirely. Even in defeat, however, Duke Sachusse felt he could place great confidence in Dias.

"Were it that he had just a touch more ambition," he muttered.

The duke's knight, upon hearing this, went pale as a sheet.

If he had a little more ambition, then what...?

For a loyal retainer, and one who desired only peace, ambition was unnecessary. It was a hindrance if anything. As the knight wiped the sweat from his brow, he prayed that the duke would refrain from any further pointless comments.

“It does not matter that he is not of noble birth,” said the duke. “What he lacks in education can be made up for by the support of good aides. Were it that he had just a touch more ambition, perhaps the path to the future would have been a different one. Alas. The only word for it is regrettable.”

“My lord duke, that’s enough jokes for now, surely…”

The knight was unsure if it was his place to speak the way he did, but he spoke all the same. The duke smiled in reply, but the nature of his smile was not an easy thing to parse. It seemed to toy with the knight, while hinting that the duke was laughing at himself. It could have been either. It could have been both. But all the same it left the knight confused and unsure of what to say next.

And so the duke opened his mouth once more.

“My father, my grandfather—both men often talked of what made a truly good general. But neither spoke of what makes a truly exceptional king. In peace our present king is acceptable, but in tumultuous times like these? I wonder.”

“It would seem that Baarbadal, however, has a talent for child rearing. That is true of his work with the guild, but it also appears true of the twins who made their first official appearance in Mahati recently. Both show striking potential. And were a certain king so talented perhaps there would be no factions or struggles with regards to the matter of succession.”

The knight had been confused and worried, but now he chose to give up. The duke’s words carried a weight far above the knight’s pay grade, and being that they were alone in the carriage he decided to simply let them pass. And with that decision made, he thought back to the taste of the sandwich he had just eaten. He sensed that Baarbadal was a place that was particular about flavor, and he imagined that the dogkin ate very well.

It was with these thoughts swirling in the young knight’s mind that Duke Sachusse’s carriage rolled along on its way home.

At the Bustling Village Square—Dias

Three days had passed since our guesthouse had been erected and immediately received its first visitors. It was early in the morning when some of the young sheps decided to go for a walk. It was still dark when they stepped outside their yurts, but very quickly they smelled blood in the air. They dashed in the direction of it without a second thought.

It was coming from the stables, and the first thing they saw was…a once pregnant white ghee looking much thinner than the previous day. It also looked incredibly relieved. It was then that they noticed a little baby white ghee trying to walk on frail legs.

“Huh…?” uttered one of the dogkin, and then it hit them. “Ah! You gave birth, didn’t you!”

The dogkin ran into all the yurts to tell everyone and share the news. I didn’t notice any of the commotion because I was fast asleep, but fortunately Alna and all the grandmas saw to it. I woke up at the same time as I usually did, but by then the mama ghee was being looked after and everything was all cleaned up. Shev told me all about what had happened and pointed me in the direction of the square, where I found the mama white ghee with her child, and both of them with much neater coats than I’d expected.

We’d thought the baby ghee was coming in the winter, so it was even bigger than I’d imagined, and it already boasted some of the fluffy fur unique to white ghee. That young one was sucking down milk like it was going out of style, and Grandma Suuk was by its side with a big old grin and a pot in hand.

“Thanks to you feeding the mother all it needs to eat every day and the dogkin always massaging it, the mama ghee got all plump and had such a smooth birth I couldn’t quite believe it!” she exclaimed. “And look at all this milk! Look, young Dias! We took a pot’s worth of the stuff for ourselves, but the little calf is still going! If that mama ghee is producing this much milk on a daily basis, we’re looking at *mountains* of cheese and butter!”

All the milk in Grandma Suuk’s pot was sloshing around as she

excitedly showed it to me, though admittedly I was still struggling just to keep my eyes open.

“Oh…” I murmured, “and I guess with all that milk we can maybe have a stew as well. Hmm… We need animal stomachs to start making cheese, don’t we? I, uh, I guess that means we should look at hunting some black ghee, then, yeah?”

I hadn’t even washed my face yet, and it probably showed. Still, I tried to reply as best I could.

“Of course we can make a stew!” said Grandma Suuk. “And if we can get our hands on some safflower then we can make cheese with that too. The twins have already run off to the forest with a group of dogkin to gather up herbs that’ll come in handy for our cheese making, so that’s what we’re going to use this time around. Cheeses made with plant rennet have a refreshing, fruity scent, and let me tell you, they’re delicious too!”

Suuk went on grinning ear to ear as she explained it all to me. I could tell that Shev was excited about the cheese too, because his tail was wagging this way and that. That was when we all heard the horse hooves. It was Senai and Ayhan coming back from their trip to the forest on the backs of Shiya and Guri.

The twins rode back towards us slowly, each of them with a big basket on their back. Shiya and Guri came to a calm and easy stop, at which point the twins hopped off with practiced ease and, after leaving the reins with some dogkin, came running over to me. In their baskets was a hefty collection of gathered flowers, which made Grandma Suuk that much happier. She was beaming as she gave Senai and Ayhan a pat on the head.

“Thank you, girls,” she said. “Thistles are perfect for making cheese, and anything left over we can just eat as is, so nothing will go to waste. And look at all these other herbs you’ve gathered… It’s like the two of you have discovered a whole flower garden in that forest out there.”

Grandma Suuk kept on patting the girls on the head while she praised them, and the twins puffed up their chests proudly.

“Now that we’ve gotten rid of all the trees we didn’t need, there’s lots more sunlight!” said Senai.

“That means that all the flowers and herbs grow so much better!” added Ayhan. “And there are lots more bugs too!”

“Oh, now that you mention it, I do remember cutting down a

bunch of trees for you girls," I said. "And Narvant chopped down a bunch for you as well. I guess we're seeing the results of that already, huh?"

The two girls offered me very satisfied nods.

"You did a really great job, girls, you really did," said Grandma Suuk. "Thistles are good for more than just cheese. As I said before, we can eat them, but they also have so much nectar that they're great for bees. You can also get oil from them depending on the type, and birds love them too! You were wonderful to gather so many. The only downside to them is their thorns, but once you're used to those it's a cakewalk."

Senai and Ayhan were already well aware of the thorns, and to make it clear they were on top of things they held up their gloved hands and shook them—the gloves were thick and plenty tough enough to protect from any thorns. When Grandma Suuk saw them she cackled happily and took the twins with her to the kitchen range to get started making cheese.

"The fields are going really great, and the forest is full of helpful flower gardens," said Shev as we watched Grandma Suuk and the twins leave. "But that wasn't just because you cut down the trees—it was because of all the hard work that Senai and Ayhan have been doing."

"Yep, I reckon you're right."

Now that it was known that the twins were forestkin, they were free to use their powers out in the open. But even before that, they'd been working some of their magic on the fields and the forest, and the results were really starting to come through. I didn't know exactly what they were doing because, like the sanjivani, the village had decided not to interfere or control how the twins used their powers, but Shev spent a lot of time with them, and if he thought they'd been working hard then I believed him.

"Boy, it sure is going to be exciting to see how the fields and the forest develop now!" said Shev.

And with that, we walked over to the white ghee mother and child to make sure they were looked after. We put a bucket of cut grass in front of the mother and checked on the little one to make sure it was drinking properly. For a time I watched Shev as he jumped on the mama white ghee's back and gave her a massage.

It made me all thoughtful, and I put a hand to my chin…which was when I realized that I still hadn't washed my face, shaved, or done any of my morning routine. I left the white ghee to Shev and hurried to the well so I could get everything done before Alna got mad at me.

The sudden birth had made for a bit of a flustered start to the day, but after I'd washed up breakfast was ready much like it was every day. That said, it was a livelier sight now, what with the new eiresetters having moved in. We also had Goldia, Ely, and Aisa staying with us, and so the village square was pretty much packed with tables covered in steaming plates of food.

There was meat, potato and egg soup, and various bits and pieces gathered from the forest, and now we even had milk. All in all, it sure was becoming a very nutritious breakfast.

"You know, when I heard you were living out on the frontier, I was worried that maybe you weren't eating well," said Goldia. "But I reckon this might be as luxurious as anything they serve in the royal capital. Then again, you've always been a stickler when it comes to food, so I guess there was no use worrying in the first place."

Goldia spoke his piece between bites of his food, like the thought had hit him right at that very moment. As soon as he spoke, everyone looked at him with burning curiosity. There was Senai and Ayhan, the dogkin, and the baars (all of whom had finished their breakfast already and were just lying around).

"Oh, well, it's like this," said Goldia. "When I first met Dias, back when we were just poor street kids, he would always buy everyone lots of food so we could eat like kings whenever we got ourselves a bit of money. Bread, meat, cheese, fruit, all the sorts of things you wouldn't expect orphans like us to eat because we already had a hard enough time just looking for places to sleep. But that's because Dias put a priority on food; he didn't care about savings. Me and a few others, we got real loud about that for a bit. We complained that Dias always spent too much coin on food all the time… But after a year, nobody had any complaints whatsoever. I reckon that was around the time we all agreed to put Dias in charge."

You could hear the nostalgia in Goldia's voice and, when I

thought about it, it really was a story from what felt like an age ago. That said, it wasn't really all that amazing when I thought about it.

At the time there had been other orphan groups, and they had put their focus on things like saving their money, spending it on weapons and equipment, or otherwise buying clothes and renting places to stay. Those groups had worked hard day after day, but they'd fed themselves on old bread. They had looked at me and my group and told us we were wasting our coin by spending it all on food, and about a year went by with them butting heads with us like that.

And after a year, we had started to see some of those other groups break down. Those orphans had lost a lot of weight, so much that they were thin as twigs. Being so thin meant they hadn't had any energy, and they hadn't had any strength, and so they couldn't work. It had gotten so bad that many of them had started getting sick. But that's why I didn't think it was all that amazing a story; of course you get sick when you don't eat properly. That's just common sense.

Yeah, you could starve yourself a little to save on your food expenses. Doing that wasn't particularly difficult, but it was like having a tab at a bar—eventually you were going to have to pay what you owed.

All the adults around us had been well-built and healthy, and they had told us that if we worked and trained hard then we'd be just as strong. They weren't wrong, but none of them had ever mentioned that eating well was a prerequisite. The other orphans had never realized that fact until their bodies wouldn't let them ignore it.

I'd been able to watch them from afar, so it had been easy for me to see them all slowly getting thinner and weaker over time, but because it happened so slowly the other orphans just hadn't seen it in themselves or their friends. By the time they had realized, it had already been too late.

When I'd seen them sliding down that spiral of theirs, I'd tried to tell the other orphan groups that they needed to improve their eating habits. Unfortunately, they'd just laughed at me. In the end, some of those orphans had gotten sick and realized they'd made a mistake. Those guys had joined up with my group and slowly

improved because they started eating better.

But some of them hadn't wanted to admit that they'd been wrong, and eventually they'd just left town and disappeared.

"But I tell you, after a while it was Dias himself who was the problem," said Goldia. "After a couple of years he just grew into a monster, and all of a sudden he was eating as much as three people. When times were rough, we were hunting from morning to night just to keep the guy fed… And look, I know all that work gave him the body he has now and made him the hero he is today, but back then we were at our wits' end, I tell ya…"

I wasn't sure why Goldia had to go and tell *that* part of the story for all to hear, and so I just shook my head. Now, it was true enough to say that I had an appetite back then, but I knew for a fact that Goldia's was a similar beast. Heck, back then the guy had sometimes eaten twice as much meat as me.

Ely, Aisa, and Ellie clearly remembered those times just as well as I did, because they had exasperated looks on their faces. Still, everyone was having a great time listening to Goldia's story, so none of us said a thing, and we all ate our breakfast to the sound of his reminiscing. When we were done we all helped to clean up, then brushed our teeth, and then we all scattered to see to our various jobs for the day.

Goldia was still helping out around Iluk, and together with Uncle Ben, Aisa, Ely, Colm and the eiresetters, Sahhi, and Narvant, he set out with a horse and cart in tow.

The group was heading north to secure our water supply. Sahhi was on lookout for monsters while everyone else constructed a hut and storage location for ice. The plan was to dig out a section under the ground, and Narvant was there to help them whip up a special kind of clay for just that purpose. That clay was made by mixing sand from the wasteland, ordinary clay dug up from the ground, ash, limestone, baar wool, and even egg whites. The end result was something that was impervious to water and heat.

Narvant applied that special clay to the walls and ceiling of the cool storage location, which was of course held up and reinforced with timber. And wouldn't you know it, the place kept in the cold even better than a stone storehouse would have. It was the perfect spot for keeping produce over long periods of time.

We built a number of basement storehouses. The first we put

next to the hut out north, but we also put one near the guesthouse facilities, and another near the border station. We put snow and ice in there from the mountains along with foodstuffs, all so that when the time came we could take it all to Mahati to sell. According to Uncle Ben, the extra basement storehouses were put in those locations to act as a transportation route, or “ice road,” as Uncle Ben liked to call it.

But even if we never ended up selling ice in Mahati, the basement storehouses were sure to come in handy because our fields were growing all the time, and the forest was becoming a more useful gathering spot by the day. If it ever got to the point that we harvested more than we could consume, the storehouses would help make sure that nothing went to waste.

Apparently, some people didn’t harvest their produce in the fall, and instead they just left it where it was because the winter snow kept everything preserved. A thick blanket of snow worked essentially the same way as the storehouses. Starvation came about when there wasn’t enough produce, and it could stretch on until the situation eventually became life-threatening. We all wanted to make sure that never happened.

The northern mountains were infamous for all the monsters that wandered those parts, and so working out there brought with it danger, but fortunately we hadn’t encountered any such thing during the construction.

Not that there was anything to worry about; Goldia, Ely, Aisa, and Narvant were all more than capable enough of holding their own, and Sahhi was always there to make sure nothing sneaked up on them. With eyes in the sky, everyone could simply flee if an especially dangerous monster showed up. That said, the only monsters the group couldn’t handle alone were dragons, and if one of them showed up then they’d call for me.

Narvant and the cavekin were actually whipping up some special equipment especially for tackling dragons, but they hadn’t completed it yet. This was no surprise—the cavekin had their hands full designing and crafting the falconkin armor, and they were always whipping up all sorts of stuff for daily life in the village.

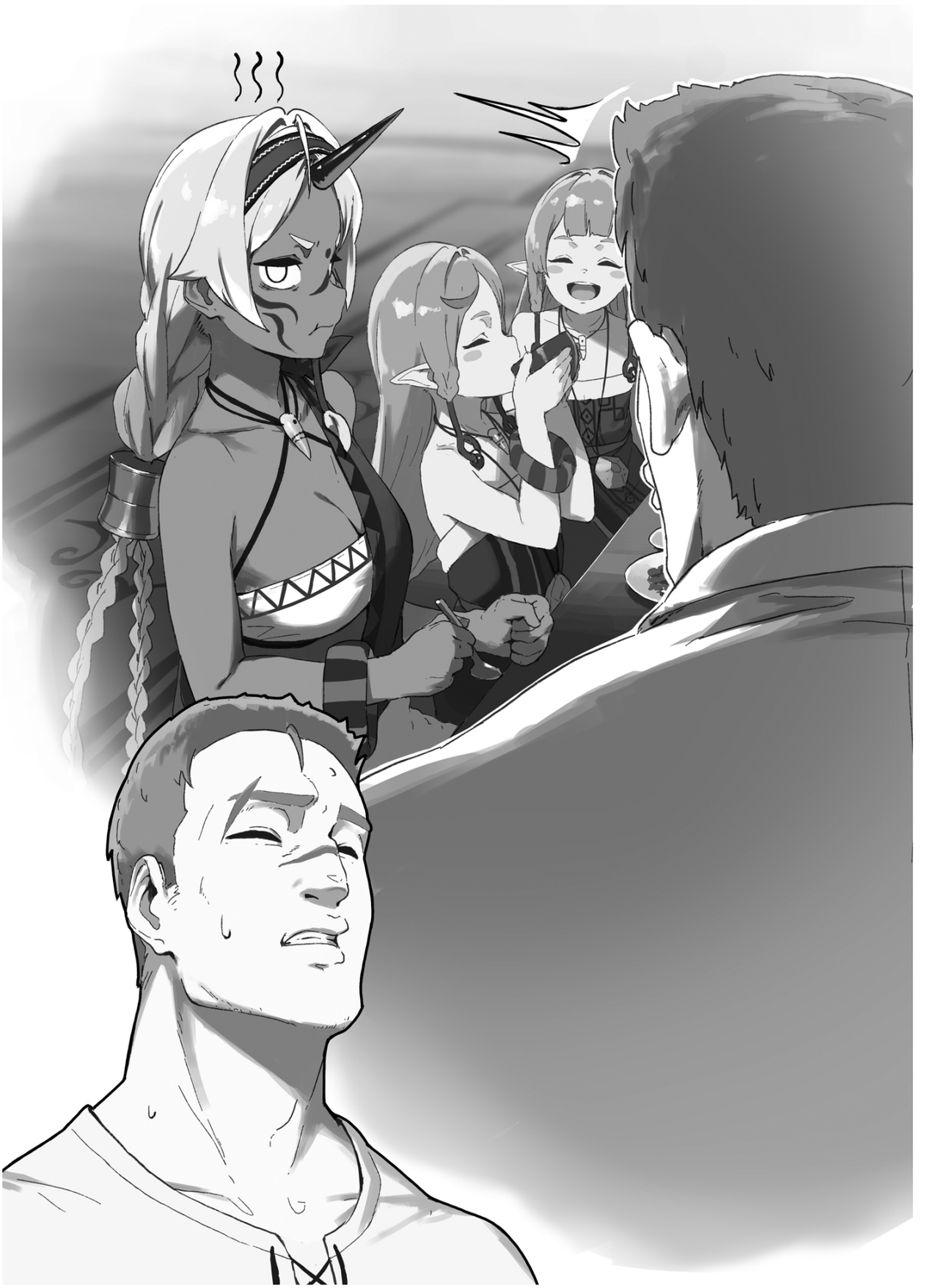
I was thinking about all of that while I was in the village square working through my daily training regimen, but my thoughts were

interrupted when I felt a gaze prickling at my skin. I'd been feeling that exact gaze a whole lot of late or, to be more exact, ever since we'd had our first visitors to the guesthouse. The gaze belonged to Alna, and she stabbed it right into me during chores, during meals, and pretty much whenever she had a free moment to spare.

I think it was all because of the fact that both Erling and Duke Sachusse had come to talk to me about marrying princesses. The offers were just crazy, so I'd shut them down immediately (and Duke Sachusse never even made the offer, anyway…) but that didn't stop Alna from feeling how she was going to feel about it.

In Alna's mind, the names of the two princesses were now the names of her mortal enemies, and for whatever reason that had resulted in her shooting me with a withering gaze. I still felt it on me as I finished my training, and I let out a big sigh.

I just don't know what I'm supposed to do about it…



So, with Alna's gaze still burning a hole into me, I wrapped things up and headed south, past the fields and all the way to Narvant's workshop. The space was filled with a number of kilns and magical stone furnaces, a dedicated material storehouse, and of course the workshop proper. Narvant and Sanat were out north constructing the basement storehouses, so on this particular day it was just Ohmun, working her darndest at one of the kilns. I said hello to her and headed into the workshop. I'd been visiting the place a lot of late.

The workshop was decked out with finely crafted wooden tables and chairs. On the walls were all the tools that the cavekin needed for their smithing and crafting, although a good deal of them were strewn about here and there or otherwise stuffed into boxes. The space and the tools were perfect for working on the necklaces I made for all our new residents.

I used to do all the work in the family yurt, but the nature of working with black ghee materials meant that I was breaking bones into smaller pieces and carving those pieces into shapes. That made for lots of bone shards, which got all over me and the floor. The yurt got really dirty. Also, those shards sometimes got into the baars' wool and it was a real pain getting them out. I figured that if I was going to be doing messy work, it was best to do it in a place that was messy with wood, metal, and materials anyway. All of that brought me to the cavekin workshop.

Once I started coming to the workshop, Narvant and the cavekin had been kind enough to set up a table and chair to match my height, and because they were just the right size it was all too easy for me to get lost in my crafting. I was mighty thankful.

I carved away at a piece of black ghee bone, put a hole in the finished product, then threaded a piece of string through it. I finished up by placing some jewel shards here and there. Then I did it all over again. The new necklaces were for the lostblood brothers, Seki, Saku, and Aoi; Sahhi's wives, Riesse, Bianne, and Heresse; and Colm and the Eiresetter clan. I tried to picture each of them as I worked on their individual necklaces.

Working on these trinkets and picturing who they were going to was a good way for me to remember everybody's names and faces, and I didn't cut any corners. What I really wanted was to do such a good job that everyone would be really happy to get their

new necklaces.

"Putting your soul into it each day, aren't ya?" remarked Ohmun.

She'd come from her kiln carrying chunks of steel and stone, and she took a look at what I was doing.

"By the way, young Dias," she said, dumping all the stone and steel on her own workshop table. "I couldn't help noticing Alna standing near the workshop earlier, staring at it with a really fierce look on her face. Did something happen?"

I stopped what I was doing because I didn't want to make any mistakes, and I sighed.

"Yeah, something did, but...where do I start? Okay, so you remember the visitors that came to the guesthouse? The ones who came with marriage proposals? Well..."

I felt a bit awkward talking about it, but Ohmun figured it out in a flash.

"Ah!" she cried as she burst into a smile. "So *that's* what it's all about. Oh, that Alna, she's so adorable, isn't she? If it's all about those visitors and their talk of marriage, then the answer to your problem is easy! Just marry the girl."

"Hmm..." I murmured, rolling my shoulders, which had gotten all stiff from all the hunching over. "Look, it's not that I don't *want* to get married to Alna, but the way I feel is that when she's of age, she should take a good long look at me and decide *then* if this is what she really wants. That, and if I want to be an upstanding domain lord, then I've got to follow the law, and that means no marrying anyone who's underage."

"Oh, so that's the story, hmm? But one thing about married couples is, you get together and work things out along the way. That said, if you've thought that much about it and come to that conclusion, then I guess that's another way of being a couple too."

She continued, "But now Alna is in a position where she's worried sick, so what you need to do, Dias, is give her a present. Call it 'proof of engagement,' even. Do they have engagement rings and the like in the kingdom?"

"Oh, uh...yeah, the rich nobles give their fiancées rings and stuff like that. A ring, huh...? Alna doesn't wear rings because they get in the way of her chores and her cooking. Maybe I could make her something different, like a necklace, or a hair accessory..."

I looked around the workshop, and my gaze fell on the quiver standing up in the corner. It was one of Alna's quivers, actually, and she'd given it to Narvant for repairs because some of it was torn.

"Hmm," I murmured thoughtfully.

A quiver. Maybe I could make something to decorate a quiver with. Maybe instead of something purely decorative, I could give Alna a gift in the form of something she uses on a daily basis.

While I was lost in thought Ohmun went to one of the shelves at the back of the workshop and grabbed something, then she came back and dropped it on the table in front of me with a thud.

"Well, if you're going to make something, why not use this? You can melt it down and shape it into something new. I'm sure Alna would love something handmade, especially if it came from you."

Ohmun really emphasized how a handmade engagement gift was truly one of a kind. Alna could show it off, and simply having it would help to soothe her anxieties and reassure her even under threat of competition.

"All of which is to say that this material came at just the right time, as if to announce that it were for this very purpose. I'll do what I can to help you along, so what say we get started on it when you finish the rest of those necklaces you're working on? Oh, and. One. More. Thing. No quiver decorations, young man. Alna is a woman, after all, and she'd like to be reminded that you think of her as one."

I shook my shoulders out and nodded to Ohmun, then picked up the golden sword that Duke Sachusse had given to me off the table and took a good, proper look at it. Back when I'd received it, I hadn't thought we had any real need for it, so I'd given it to Narvant and told him to melt it down and make it into some gold coins or whatnot.

But now, I figured that if I melted the sword down and made it into an engagement gift for Alna, that would be a gift of some real worth. If I crafted it with my own hands, that would go a long way towards earning Alna's approval. With a plan settling in my mind, I nodded to myself and placed the sword back on the table.

First things first, let's get these necklaces done for all our new residents.

A few days later, I started crafting an accessory for Alna in earnest, and the news spread fast. I'd never intended to keep it a secret, and because Alna was following me around and glaring at me I knew that she was going to find out soon enough anyway. But as soon as everybody knew, they subtly made it so I had less to do around the village. Alna was reassured by it all, and life in Iluk returned to normal. Just like Ohmun said, the handmade engagement gift had an impact, and it wasn't even done.

While I took to crafting Alna's gift, the villagers kept up their good work. The twins took the saplings from their personal field and started replanting them in the forest now that they were a good size to do so. Originally they'd simply planned to plant the saplings around the village, but now that the forest was part of our domain, that was the best place for them to go, and the twins assured me that it would make for even more to harvest…so I just took them at their word.

All that was left in the twins' field was one of each type of herb and their parents' trees. The rest were replanted—most of them went to the forest, but a small selection was planted in a circle around Iluk because apparently they were more suited to the plains than they were the forest.

Hubert, the falconkin, and the Bah Senji clan busied themselves hammering in stakes to mark out our territory, including the forest. We already had Eldan's permission to go ahead, so Hubert used the map he'd made to oversee the location of the border stakes. The falconkin made doubly sure of things, and then the senjis set about the hammering. Most of the stakes that marked the line between our territory and the onikin's were hammered in, so next it was on to the forest. Once we were done, it was just a matter of letting Eldan know so his officials could come and assess the placement.

The sheps had started using our donkeys to get into…trade, of a sort. They attached carts to the donkeys, took them to the salt plain, and filled the carts with salt to take to the onikin village. The onikin needed the salt anyway, and so they paid the sheps in small clumps of baar wool and scraps of baar thread. The onikin had trouble working with such small pieces of materials, but the sheps, being much smaller, loved having it. They gathered up all the baar wool and thread to make handicrafts and the like.

On top of that, the sheps went to the village chieftain Moll and got her permission to sell the leftover salt that the onikin didn't need. That put us in a position where the sheps were discussing with the onikin how much salt to gather and sell. They had it all worked out so they were working with the onikin *and* selling the leftovers, and all the while they had the onikin's blessings. I was mighty impressed by it all; the dogkin had thought it all through and they were doing a bang-up job.

Little by little, the sheps were filling our storehouses with salt, and Ellie and the lostblood brothers took it with them on their trading travels. This was all part of the sheps' plan, because in the end it earned them even more baar wool.

We were paying all the dogkin in baar wool for their work, and it was all the rage among them to make handicrafts or otherwise wear it in various ways. Hubert had recommended that we use baar wool as a currency in place of silver and gold, and this was one of the unexpected results of that experiment.

The baar wool craze had yet to fully hit the eiresetters, who had only just recently arrived in Iluk, but you could see signs of it getting started in the way they were so gung ho about looking after all our horses.

Balers and all the horses we'd had from the start had originally been under the care of the sheps, but now there were donkeys and a white ghee calf too. We were gradually getting more and more livestock, so the dogkin agreed that the eiresetters would become the primary horse caretakers.

By this time, pretty much all of the mastis were working over at the border station…and actually, with our population and facilities all growing, everybody in Iluk was settling into the jobs that they were best suited to. I quite liked watching all the dogkin living their busy, jumbled lives, but at the same time it made me a little lonely. Still, it was a sign that Iluk was growing into a respectable village, and I couldn't be mad about that.

A few more days meandered their way by, and then one day a little after noon I was working at my workshop table as always when Ohmun burst in. She strode over to me with some kind of pot on her shoulder and put it down in front of me.

"What is that? Some kind of pitcher?" I asked.

I mean, it was big enough, and it had a pouring spout and a

handle too.

“It’s a beautiful piece of work, isn’t it?” declared Ohmun proudly.

“Sure looks that way, but, uh…is it even finished?” I asked. “I’m no expert when it comes to pottery, but I can’t help thinking that you haven’t finished glazing it. All the water’s going to soak right into it, no?”

The bottom of the pot and its spout were the only parts of it that were glazed. The rest of it wasn’t, and it had a kind of rough look to it. It looked like a half-finished job to me, but Ohmun simply giggled and beamed at me proudly.

“You’re right, young Dias,” she explained, “the walls of the pot *are* unglazed. And just like you said, any water you put inside of it *will* soak into those same walls. But when that water reaches the exterior it’ll evaporate, and that evaporation process will cool all the remaining water inside the pot! When I heard all that talk about selling ice and keeping produce cool, I just *knew* we had to have something like this. So? Don’t you think it’s just wonderful?”

I thought about Ohmun’s explanation, but honestly?

It went completely over my head.

I tilted my head and I put my thinking cap on, and when that didn’t work I asked Ohmun question after question. Ohmun was good about it all, and she happily answered all my questions again, and again, and again. But in the end I just couldn’t wrap my head around any of it, so I gave up trying. I had no choice but to just agree that Ohmun had made a real strange pot, and it had the power to cool its contents just by putting water in it.

A Room in a Town Somewhere—Joe, a Former Carpenter

In a simple, tidy room, in a house built from timber, stood a man named Joe, packing his bags at his bed. He wore a plain linen shirt with leather pants, leather boots, and a leather cloak. He'd grown his mostly unremarkable brown hair long, and he kept it in a neat braid to give it just a touch of flair. Joe's face, on which was written all of his forty years, was ragged and oval shaped. His brown eyes, however, glimmered with excitement, and his expression was not unlike that of a boy about to hear the tale of a great bard's adventure.

"Oh, brother, do you really have to go? Why not just live out the rest of your days here? My husband, our kids, it's what we'd all like most…"

The pleas came from Joe's younger sister, standing in the doorway as she watched her brother pack.

"Hmm… Right from the start, I made up my mind and I told myself I'd take care of my family for a year," replied Joe, stopping his hands for a moment to smile. "You and your family have been nothing but good to me, and I'll never forget it, but I just have to do it. I want to go—I *need* to go, more than anything else I've ever wanted."

"Well…if that's the case, then at least take a little more money with you. Almost everything we have here is what you brought home with you, after all…"

"No, no, I can't do that. Money's a simple thing, and I'll just earn more of it when I need it. And besides, it's all the easier for me to leave here if I can rest assured you're financially secure."

"Ugh… Is that how badly you want to see this Dias fellow?"

"It sure is, and truth be told, he made me the man I am today. He's the reason I came home with money for you all, and he's the reason folks around here call me a war hero. Everything, all of it, it's all thanks to Dias. And look, nothing's ever been more enjoyable for me than following that man on the path he walks."

Joe's sister sighed.

“You ran off to be a soldier in the war, and here, now, when I finally think you’ve come back home, you’re already off again. I barely recognized you when you came back, you know? That’s how little we got to see of you!”

“Yeah.” Joe laughed. “I’m sorry about that.”

His sister sighed once more and gave up trying to convince him. Joe had come home with so much money they could have rebuilt the entire house and still had coin to spare. He was so well respected by all in the village that Joe’s sister’s husband had been elected village chief. She was nothing if not grateful, and she hoped that she might one day repay her brother for his great kindness, but it seemed now that she would never have the opportunity.

“At least write once in a while, okay?” she said.

“You got it,” said Joe.

And with that, he hefted his now packed bag on his shoulder. He bounded out the door, out of the house, and out of the village like a man who had recaptured his youth.

In a Corner of Desolate Rocky Expanse—Lorca, a Former Stonemason

Lorca knelt before his parents’ gravestones, which he’d rebuilt himself, and he prayed. He wore a plain linen shirt with leather pants, leather boots, and a leather cloak. His mostly unremarkable brown hair was cut short and hidden behind the cloth wrapped around his head. He was forty-one years of age, and the cloth helped him avoid the truth that his hairline was beginning to betray him.

One never would have imagined that the exquisite gravestones belonged to a simple stonemason couple. Lorca had spent much in the way of money on them, along with a good deal of blood, sweat, and tears. When he was done praying, he opened his eyes and picked himself up. Then, after hoisting his backpack back on his shoulders, he took a look around.

The land around him had once belonged to a prosperous quarry town, but it was now little more than ruins. As its inhabitants left for greener pastures the place had grown desolate, but it was here that Lorca had crafted his parents’

gravestones. The two had died before the war began, but Lorca had kept coming back. In fact, he'd come so much that everyone in the nearest town looked upon him as an oddity.

"All that messing around meant this took me a whole darn year," he uttered. "Well, it also means I spent a whole year in service to you two, which I guess is good enough to earn me a spot by Dias's side."

Perhaps Lorca spoke to the silent souls at rest before him, or perhaps he simply spoke to himself. Either way, he began to walk.

"I spent a year messing about and spending all my coin, and in the end all I got for it was the title of the town's resident weirdo. No point in going back there before I leave."

Sighing to himself, Lorca took a map from his pocket and, after confirming the position of the sun, began to head west.

A House at a Roadside Town—Ryan, a Former Blacksmith

At the same time as Joe and Lorca were starting their journeys, so too was Ryan. His mostly unremarkable brown hair was kept in place with hair oil, and his sharp brown eyes stared at the bag before him. He was a man of thirty-eight years, and he wore a plain linen shirt with leather pants, leather boots, and a leather cloak.

The bag was in the living room, which was so bare now as to be furnished by naught but dust. Ryan had been staring at the bag for quite some time.

"Oh come now," said his wife, dressed in similar garb to her husband. "Everything's ready, isn't it? If we don't get a move on then who knows when we'll ever arrive?"

Ryan raised his eyes to look at her. She had reddish-black hair neatly cut to shoulder length, and it was only a few months ago that they'd gotten married.

"Look, it's just, uh..." muttered Ryan awkwardly. "I don't know what to pack for a woman hitting the road. And I can't make any guarantees that it's going to be a simple, easy life waiting for us out there either. Maybe you should stay, is all I'm saying..."

"What? You intend to pull that on me *now*? Now that we've gotten rid of all the furniture and everything we don't need? And

why even bother getting married if you're just going to try and leave me here? What was the point of even proposing?"

When Ryan had left to join the military as a volunteer soldier, his wife, Capella, had been just a girl. He'd never imagined that she held such love for him in her heart, but upon his return, he had found a mature, adult woman, one now thirty years of age, who'd waited for him in earnest the whole time he'd been gone. He was grateful and impressed, and he'd fallen in love…only to now find himself wondering if it was right to throw his wife into a long journey to destinations largely unknown.

"You want to go to where Dias is, right?" said Capella. "That's what you've been worrying about this whole last year, isn't it? But what's there to worry about now? Dias told you to go home and that's what you did, but you've regretted your decision ever since… You couldn't even pretend to hide it at our wedding ceremony. But I've been prepared for this moment since we tied the knot, and I married you knowing it was going to happen. So now's the time! *Let's go!* If it turns out we don't have enough of something, we'll just buy it on the way."

His wife's assurance took a huge weight off Ryan's chest, and it showed on his face. He closed his bag, threw it on his back, and headed for the door. Outside was the sturdy carriage he'd prepared for his journey, complete with strong, healthy horses to pull it along. Capella headed for the back while Ryan headed for the driver's seat, where he sat upon the big cushion that Capella had put there for him. He took the reins in hand and followed the road west.

An Expensive Inn Located in Merangal, Mahati—Duke Sachusse

"I must say, I'm surprised that you'd come all this way."

Frederick Sachusse, a duke of the Sanserife Kingdom, sat upon a comfortable sofa upholstered in hide, sipping from a glass of wine. It was a pricey, luxurious wine, the likes of which were only served at pricey, luxurious inns like this one, which was built from stone and decorated with lavish carpets. Before the duke was a cheap wooden chair completely out of place in the room. Sitting on it was a man whose wispy gray hair was pulled back into a

simple ponytail tied in place with string.

"What of it?" rasped the man. "Wasn't it you who told me I could do what I wanted?"

The man took a tone that no sane man would with a noble, let alone a duke. One of the knights standing at the ready behind the duke reacted immediately, but the duke stopped him with the wave of a hand. He was not bothered by the man's attitude.

"Indeed I did, though I hadn't imagined you'd come all this way on that leg of yours. That you marched all this way like that truly is commendable."

The man with the wispy hair did not take kindly to the duke's words, and the rage was clear on his face. He hopped off his seat, and as his black leather cloak fluttered around him one could spy his prosthetic leg. A moment later, however, he sighed and sat back down.

"All of you, all you kingdom types, you're all... Ugh. Forget it. I don't intend to cause you any grief. That town's got good governance now, but me? I figure it's high time I had a word or two with that son of a bitch Dias."

"Hmm...well, the two of you *were* thick as thieves during the war, so I'm not *too* concerned, though *do* bear in mind that the man is now a duke. So I ask that you at least *try* to keep your tantrums to a minimum."

"Gah! I *hate* this about you lot! All you kingdom types, dammit! Dias was a pain in my butt, but he's far better than the alternative! And listen up! I ain't never thrown a tantrum! He went and tried to make a fool out of me, and I just gave him a rightful rebuttal! You hear me?!"

The man stood up once more, kicking the chair over with his prosthetic leg in the same motion, and marched for the door with his cloak fluttering behind him. He was in his fifties, tall, and clearly well-built. His golden eyes glimmered with intelligence, and they settled into a glare straight at the knight standing in front of the door.

The knight flinched for a moment as the man walked towards him, his prosthetic leg clacking against the floor, but just like that the man was gone. Sachusse looked at the door for a time, wondering about the commotion that would very soon hit the Baarbadal domain. And as his imagination played out the

possibilities, the duke couldn’t help but lament for a moment the fact that he had a domain to return to, and duties along with it.

At the Workshop Table—Dias

We weren't anywhere near a season where Ohmun's strange pot would come in handy, but because it was sure to be a huge boon in the summertime Alna and the others were all happy to have it. In fact, Hubert and Aymer pretty much shrieked in perfect harmony the moment they saw it.

"Hmm?" Aymer had uttered. "I have a feeling that with a little innovation and tinkering, we can use pots like this to cool all sorts of materials!"

"Oh?" Hubert had uttered at the same time. "We could use this design to cool more than just water!"

It looked a lot to me like the two of them had happened across the same idea at the same time. After that, Hubert and Aymer came to the workshop more frequently to discuss things with Ohmun. With the three of them throwing ideas around and making them a reality, it wasn't long before they'd perfected their cooling pot system.

The way it worked was, you started with a big pot and a smaller pot. You didn't glaze the *big* one, but you completely glazed the smaller one and put it inside the bigger one. Then you poured water into the space between the two pots. That water would soak into the walls of the bigger pot and evaporate, and by some strange cooling logic, whatever was in the smaller pot got colder.

If you put water in the smaller pot, it chilled, but you could also put things like nuts, vegetables, and fruits inside and they would chill too...according to the tinkering trio, anyway.

Still, the construction of the two pots meant that the smaller pot was unstable, and the rocking of that smaller pot in the water could sometimes damage what was inside of it. The three inventors decided that it was best to put something else between the two pots that could absorb water and cushion the pots. They tried baar wool at first, but ultimately decided that there had to be something better and less expensive.

They considered a lot of options but eventually settled on sand, because it was everywhere and really easy to get a hold of. First

they heated the sand to get rid of any bugs, and then they poured it into the gap between the big pot and the small pot. The sand meant that the small pot was safely nestled inside, but it also absorbed water which meant the evaporation process wasn't affected.

After further experimenting, the three inventors realized that by placing a damp cloth—a linen one, not one made with baar wool—over the top of the big pot as a lid, you got even better results. The pots weren't particularly hard to make, so it was decided that we'd get started producing these odd pitchers and pots at scale. We could use them for trade, and we could use them to keep our produce for longer periods of time too. They were a real boon to the village. We had Ohmun to thank for the idea, and Hubert and Aymer to thank for the development of it.

All of their tinkering and heated discussion really livened up the workshop, but all the while I stayed at my own desk crafting my gift to Alna. Narvant and the cavekin had melted the sword cane down to gold and fashioned it into a circular plate about the size of a palm. I polished it, scraped at it, and put a hole in it, then started on the design.

As for that part... Well, to be honest, I labored over it a lot, but I knew I couldn't make anything too elaborate, so I went the simple route.

Firstly, I put a baar's profile in the center, to represent the Baarbadal domain. Under that, I put my initials and Alna's initials side by side, to indicate that we were a couple and I intended for her to be my wife. Underneath that I put two flowers that looked not entirely unlike the twins' parents, followed by Senai and Ayhan's names. If I were putting all of my kids' names in, then I'd have to put Ellie, Aisa, and Ely down too, but between me and Alna there were only the twins.

The end result would be something that never degraded even if it dulled, and it would display my bond with Alna in all its glory...or so I earnestly hoped. I mean, in the end it would all come down to what Alna thought of it when she got it. I put heart and soul into my work either way, and I was sure she would accept it with those feelings in mind...

Or so I earnestly hoped.

Once the design was done, all that was left to do was thread a

band through the hole to make a necklace, which I finally did a few days later. With the finished engagement present done, I sent a dogkin messenger for Alna, who came right to the workshop.

"So that's your necklace, huh?" she said as soon as she entered. "I knew you were going to make something different from the usual ones you make for the new residents."

"Uh, yep. I tried to put my heart into it, I really did..."

I was standing by the side of my workshop table as Alna strode forwards and took the necklace in hand.

"A baar face and letters," she murmured, taking a close look. "Ah, they're our names. And underneath there's Senai and Ayhan's names and...I guess these are flowers?"

She brought the necklace real close to her face and tilted her head to the side as she took in all the details. Finally, she tried it on, felt the weight, and pointed to it.

"This is a bit big to just wear around," Alna said, "and it's pretty heavy too."

"Well, yeah, I thought that it would be something nice to wear on special occasions, like when we throw banquets or if we have visitors to the domain like last time," I said timidly. "I'd really like it if you could wear it for those kinds of occasions. I mean, you don't need to go telling the people of Iluk what they already know, so there's no need to go wearing it around *all* the time...right?"

Alna closed her eyes, and the hint of a smile crept to the corners of her mouth.

"Yes," she said, nodding.

"Next year I wanna give you something different, you know, to mark our third-year anniversary, but I hope that this necklace of mine will tide you over until then."

Alna nodded. "It certainly will."

Then she opened her eyes, took a good long look at me, and sped out of the workshop before I could so much as open my mouth. She hummed as she ran, and she looked to be having a great time as she circled through the village, showing off her new necklace. I knew immediately that the villagers were going to be teasing me all about it for the immediate future, but...well, I was ready to just take it on the chin if it meant that Alna was happy.

At the end of the day I'd done what I'd set out to do, and that was that. Basically, it meant for peace and tranquility. Yeah, there

was still lots to do around the village, but I'd done what was most important, so I swung my arms around to loosen them up, then gave my back a nice, long stretch.

The Village Square, Looking Up at Sahhi and the Falconkin Soaring the Skies

A few days had passed since I'd given Alna her present, and everything in Iluk was going smoothly. For one thing, the hut by our water source had been built, complete with an extra room for taking a rest in, and the storage cellar was well on its way to being done too. On top of that, we'd started making Ohmun's strange water pitchers, and every yurt had one.

The falconkin equipment had also been completed, and Sahhi and his wives got it on and took to the skies as quickly as they could to test it out. All of it was built from wind dragon materials. They had helmets that covered their heads and beaks, armor for their torsos and backs, and greave-like boots that covered their legs and talons.

Together with all of this they had additional armor that covered their entire wingspans, kind of like shields on their wings that could be opened and closed at will. I suppose if they'd been built for a person we'd have called them shoulder pads of a sort. In any case, they had all their new equipment, and the falconkin loved it.

The falconkin were especially enamored with their new wing shields, which were built with monster sinew that responded to magical energy. This meant that a flash of magical energy could open the shields whenever the falconkin wanted or close them whenever they got in the way.

For Sahhi and his wives, the wings weren't just shields. They doubled as a second set of wings, because they were so light they could be used to glide on the wind whenever the falconkin wanted to rest. They were just rapt at the idea that they could relax and let their equipment do the work.

Naturally, the wing shields couldn't be used for takeoff, so the falconkin still had to work whenever they wanted height, but even then the new equipment was really handy…according to the falconkin, anyway.

So we had the falconkin equipment done and construction

ongoing across the domain, and in that time, Goldia, Aisa, and Ely had pretty much become residents with all the help they were doing around the place. They told me that eventually they were going to return to Mahati to see to their guild work over there, but they were becoming such a natural part of Iluk that I had to wonder exactly when they were planning to do that.

Which isn't to say I wasn't grateful for all the support we got from them, but I knew the guild was busy. I couldn't help worrying that maybe I'd be making things hard for them in the long run.

In any case, Iluk was doing great and we had no complaints or issues to speak of. The days went by nice and peacefully, and… Maybe if there was any problem at all, it was Alna. You see, she wore that gift of mine around her neck every single day, and she never missed an opportunity to show it to someone. She went about her chores the same as always, so it wasn't really a *problem*, so to speak, just kind of embarrassing.

Everybody in Iluk knew that Alna and I were engaged, and they didn't need any reminding. I didn't think it was really important for Alna to make such a big deal of it. Still, I couldn't exactly tell her to knock it off either, so I resigned myself to that being just another part of daily life for the immediate future.

It was while I was thinking about it that Alna came on over with her necklace dangling from her neck. She had a look on her face like she wanted some attention, and so I let out a wry chuckle and walked over to meet her.

A Roadside Inn in Mahati—The Innkeeper

"This place was splendid! Many thanks!"

The group of travelers heaped praise upon the innkeeper as they paid their bill and headed on out. It was a group of eleven in total, all of whom were well-mannered, polite, clean, and (best of all) generous. They were everything the innkeeper thought of as ideal customers.

"Come again whenever you like!" he replied, his voice lively and energetic. "I wish you all safe travels on your journey!"

The middle-aged innkeeper waved farewell to the travelers and took a look in the leather pouch that contained their payment. The healthy clink of silver coins within brought a smile to his face.

None of the furniture was broken, none of the bedding was dirtied, and no fights had broken out. To top it all off, negotiating the price of the stay had been a delight. The innkeeper could not even remember how long it had been since he'd been blessed by such great customers, and it was as he mused on it that his wife arrived, sharing his ear-to-ear grin.

"What wonderful customers!" she remarked. "How easy our jobs would be if they were all like that…"

"You got that right… But I guess it shouldn't be surprising when they're all Lord Dias's old war buddies."

The innkeeper showed his wife the contents of his leather pouch, to which she responded with a mix of surprise and joy.

"Ah, the renowned Lord Dias… Oh, do you mean to say they stopped here on their way to him?"

"Sure looked that way. The one in charge, Joe, I think it was… He said he set out alone and just kept on bumping into friends along the way. Eventually they all just formed one big traveling party. That's all who just left."

"Oh… So that explains it. But didn't we hear about a similar group passing through a neighboring town just a few days ago?"

"That was a different group, led by someone else. Lord Dias is making the western frontier habitable, and he's got a good thing going with Lord Eldan. His old friends have heard the stories, so they're gathering around him."

The innkeeper's wife let out a contented sigh.

"If that's the case, then this main road here is only going to get livelier, isn't it?"

"That it is. There's a lot of people who'll want to see the lords of our two homes, that's for sure."

The innkeeper and his wife laughed as they chatted between themselves and went about cleaning up the inn to prepare for new guests.

The Forest Border Station—Klaus

"You all deaf up there?! I said open up! You're not letting me in?! Explain yourselves! *I demand respect!*"

The voice came very suddenly, echoing from the other side of the border station gate. It was followed by the sound of a fist

slamming against timber. Klaus raced to one of the watchtowers to see what was going on.

The border station was becoming more presentable by the day, and it had even performed its intended duties in recent days, letting various visitors in and out without hassle. All of this had brought Klaus great joy. *We're finally a real border station! And it's only up from here!* he'd thought, but he'd never imagined the next visitor would arrive looking to knock the gates down. And so it was with some trepidation that he climbed the rungs of the watchtower ladder and peered down to the other side of the gate.

But when Klaus spotted the man standing at the entrance to the border station, he couldn't believe his eyes. He knew the man well, but seeing him here like this caused him to freeze on the spot.

The man at the gates was wrapped in one of the black leather cloaks favored by imperial soldiers, and dressed in their very uniform too. That said, he didn't wear it with any of the expected decorum, and in fact his unbuttoned shirt exposed his entire midsection. His face was a picture of rage the likes of which Klaus had seen countless times during the war, and his rounded, bald head shone like an apple fresh off the tree. What wispy gray hair he had left was tied with string at the back of his head, and it wavered to and fro as the man threw his tantrum.

What made the man stand out more than anything else, however, was his wooden leg, which he made no attempt to hide with his pants.



“Hurry it up! Let me in!” barked the man. “Just try and keep me out! I’ll burn all this to the ground! Oi… You there! Yeah, *you*, Peeping Tom in your watchtower! Hang on a second…! Klaus, is that you?! It is! Klaus, you little bastard! It’s me! Mont! It’s me, so open up these damned doors, and be quick about it!”

But Klaus remained frozen as the man named Mont continued to smack the gates and shout up at the watchtower. When Klaus returned to his senses, he slowly made his way back down the ladder, shaking his head with every rung. He felt a headache coming on. The border station’s laborers, the dogkin, and even Klaus’s wife, Canis, all looked at him expectantly, all of them with the exact same question in their eyes.

Who in the world is that out there?

Klaus gripped his head in his hands, told the dogkin to open the gates, and finally gave the others the answer they were waiting for.

“The guy out there is named Mont. He was an imperial soldier, and one of significant rank to boot. Some time during the middle of the war, he fought with Lord Dias, and Dias sent Mont’s whole troop packing. In the end, Mont and Dias went head-to-head, but…when Dias saw Mont’s wooden leg he couldn’t give it his all. He felt sorry for the guy, and he held back. Of course Dias still won, but Mont *despised* Dias for going easy on him.”

He continued, “Mont became a prisoner of war, but he wasn’t like any usual prisoner. He was a prisoner in name alone. Every waking minute he was screaming at Lord Dias about how he was going to get revenge, and he just never stopped following the guy around.”

“Anyway, when Dias met up with the rest of the volunteer troops, Mont decided he wasn’t going to eat for free, so he made it his job to act as drill sergeant for the troops, and that’s the role he shouldered all the way up until the end of the war. The whole reason that Dias’s men put the actual Sanserife military to shame with their marching, well…it’s because of Mont.”

But the last Klaus had heard, all of the imperial prisoners had been returned home following the end of the war. Which begged the question: What was Mont doing here?

It was then that the border station gates opened, and Mont came striding in as if he owned the place, walking with so

confident a gait that one never would have imagined that he'd lost a leg at all.

"Hah! Klaus! You're looking well, you rascal! So you came here to work under that dumb fool's rule, huh? Anyway, let me guess: You're in charge of building this place, yeah? Well, I have to tell you, it's not a bad effort. It's got all the makings of a border station. But you gotta give it the right *gravity*. Where's the sense of *authority*? Where's the *pressure*? The place has to *feel* like a border station, damn it!"

Mont smiled as he spoke, but Klaus could only shake his head and sigh as he fought to think through his growing headache.

Back at Iluk—Dias

I'd never thought I'd see Mont's face again, but there he was, clopping along on his wooden leg as Klaus brought him to see me. I couldn't tell if he was smiling or enraged, because it looked to me like a mix of the two.

"Been a while," he said.

"That it has," I replied, scratching the back of my head while I gawked. "So, uh, what are you doing here? I thought you went home...?"

"My 'home' is a part of the kingdom now," replied Mont. "So I never actually returned to the empire. But everyone back home was like 'they govern so well' and 'that Dias is wonderful' and all manner of other bull... That's no place for a fallen general, I can tell you that much."

Then he looked me right in the eye and went on. "But all of it? Everything? It's all *your* fault. And I'll have you know that I got *permission*. I went to the piece of work who runs the place I used to call home and he said I could come, so I followed the damned letter of the law to get here. So you just *try* whining about it. I won't hear a word of it."

"You, uh...you got *permission* to come here...? You went *that* far? Just what are you planning to do?"

"You haven't changed a bit, have you, you dolt? I'm here to make you regret that you ever looked down on me!"

Mont hated me with a passion. He'd been a member of the imperial military, and when we'd fought I'd gone easy on him on

account of his wooden leg. The guy had never forgiven me for it. We'd made him a prisoner of war, but that hadn't stopped him from abusing me. It wasn't anything serious or big, so we couldn't get rid of him, and it wasn't like I was going to just outright kill the guy. But we also hadn't wanted to give him to the kingdom's troops because of how badly they treated their prisoners, so we'd kind of just…let him be.

During that time Mont tried to get at me just about every which way he possibly could, but I think eventually he simply ran out of schemes, because one day the abuse suddenly stopped. A few months later—which amounted to about a year of traveling with Mont—he up and decided he was going to help us.

"I don't want to be no freeloader," he'd said.

Then he'd added, "You sorry lot are such a damned mess I'm sick of complaining about it."

Finally and for good measure he'd barked, "If you ruffians are wiped out then all that's left for me is the darkness."

With all of that off his chest, Mont had taken to training all the volunteer troops. He'd also overseen their marching. Mont wasn't into tricky strategies, so it had all been very straightforward. He and Juha had bumped heads a bunch of times about it, but Mont had stood his ground and gotten his way.

In the end, Juha and all the troops had come to respect Mont, and eventually none of us could imagine life without him. I reckon we must have spent some seven or eight years together. Back then, Mont had been steadfast in his ways, and he had never let anyone see into his heart. But now I felt like I could see the truth of who he was, and Klaus could see it too, because we both started to smile until it was all we could do just to keep ourselves from laughing.

"Huh? What's with the dumb look?" barked Mont. "This is all *your* fault! Always was! Complaining about it now won't get you anywhere. If you'd just cut me down where I stood you'd have none of this! But you didn't! And then you didn't mend any of my ways neither! It's all! Your! Fault!"

Behind Mont, Alna's horn glowed, giving his back a blue glow. She'd learned how to read people's souls without her horn glowing, and she'd told me all about it, but she probably wanted to let me know Mont's true intentions.

Klaus was standing next to Alna, and with each blue glow of her horn he was losing control. He was on the verge of breaking down right in front of me, and he had to cover his mouth with his hands.

"Listen up, you little bastard!" shouted Mont. "If I'd wanted you dead I could have done it any time I damn well pleased! When you were sleeping, when you were washing up, when you were taking a dump... I could have had you! Whenever I damn well pleased! But I didn't lift a finger because I wanted to make you regret your past! It was my job to make you feel it in your bones!"

He's blue. He's so *blue.*

There was probably truth in the words he spoke, and he probably believed them too, but even then there wasn't a single iota of malice in his body.

"Damn it, boy! Are you even listening to me?! You freakin' lout... You've always been like this! You don't listen when people are talking, and you ignore instructions! You even strode right into the enemy castle when it was just jam-packed full of traps! My damned blood ran cold!"

Alna's horn pulsed with an even brighter blue glow when Mont said that, and now even *I* was near bursting. It was getting painful holding back any longer... You see, after all that time with Mont, his blue-hearted nature just hit me even harder than I expected.

Yep, at this point my hand was covering my mouth and I thought I was going to explode, but right then Senai and Ayhan came over to us holding a bowl between them.

"Are you going to be living here from now on?" Senai asked.

"Are you a villager now?" asked Ayhan.

Instantly Mont cooled down, and he looked a little troubled.

"Well, uh...I'm not sure how to put this," he stammered, patting his hair down and neatening it, "and I'm pretty reluctant about moving in if I'm being honest, but I guess I am...against my own will, yep. I don't got nowhere else to go, you see... But, uh...I promise I won't get in the way of you two lovely young ones, and I'll work hard for my keep, I promise."

Every single one of his words was blue. The twins glanced at Alna, who nodded at them, and then they held their wooden bowl out towards Mont.

"Okay, then drink this," said Senai.

"You have to drink it," said Ayhan. "It's a tea with lots of herbs in

it!”

I had a feeling I knew what was in that bowl, and I could see by Alna’s and Klaus’s expressions that they knew too.

“Well, if I have to,” muttered Mont, “but I’ve never been good with them herbal concoctions.”

All the same, he knelt down, gently took the bowl, and drained it in one big gulp.

“Huh? *This* is herbal tea?” he exclaimed. “But it’s so sweet and refreshing… What the heck? I mean, I could tell that you mixed some raw, bitter herbs in there too, because there was a bit of kick to it, but I’ve never drank something like this in my whole darned life.”

Mont was puzzled, but the twins were grinning in silence. That seemed to be a sign for the baars and the dogkin, who chose that moment to come trotting up to welcome Mont to the village. They all flooded towards him while he was still on his knees, and soon enough he had a big ol’ smile on his face too.

That’s how Mont came to be an official resident of Iluk. We put a yurt up for him too, of course. The next day, I was at the well washing my face when Mont marched up to me with his expression all scrunched up like all of his wrinkles were converging on the center of his face.

“Hey! Dias!” he screamed as he grabbed me by the collar. “What’d you do to me?!”

“I didn’t do anything,” I answered with some confusion. “Did something happen?”

I was pretty used to Mont treating me the way he did, because that was how things had always been. I wasn’t especially shocked.

“The pain!” he exclaimed, his face still scrunched up. “The pain is *gone*! Ever since I lost this leg of mine I’ve been in agony! I forgot sleep even existed sometimes, the pain was so awful! But I’ve got no memory of what happened after I laid my head on my pillow last night! None! Me! Mr. Torture himself! That’s the first good night’s sleep I’ve had in *decades*! So tell me! Now! What’d you do to me?!”

“Oh…”

Now that things had clicked for me, I put my hands on Mont’s shoulders to make sure he wouldn’t run away or rampage or

anything like that, and then I looked over at Senai and Ayhan, who were out strolling the plains with the baars.

"The girls?! What about them?!" demanded Mont, following my gaze. "Don't think you can hide the truth from me! I'll wring it out of you!"

I told Mont that he wasn't allowed to tell anyone else what I was about to tell him, and then I explained about the sanjivani plants we had. I told him about the odd way in which we had come into possession of them and how mysterious it was. I told him how it could heal poisons and chronic diseases, and how even though a lost leg wasn't a *disease* as such, it was the sanjivani that had probably worked some magic on the pain it had caused.

"When you decided to become a resident here, Senai and Ayhan saw you as a friend and must have decided to feed you some of the sanjivani that grew this spring. I just want to remind you, by the way, that you can't tell anyone about it. If word spreads we could well have people looking to use it for selfish purposes, in which case all the plants we have will just wither and die."

Mont released his grip on my collar and crumpled to his knees. He sat there, stunned, softly patting his leg, then looked up at me without a hint of his usual glare. It was a soft, gentle expression unlike anything I'd ever seen on him until then.

"What in the blazes could have brought this about?" he muttered. "I won't speak a word. Not to nobody. I wouldn't dream of bringing any trouble to the angels who worked this miracle on me. But look, all this is so unexpected, and I don't know whether to be shocked or grateful or what. I can't make heads or tails of nothing, damn it…"

Mont stayed there on his knees for a time and didn't rise until Alna's voice boomed throughout the village declaring that breakfast was ready. Only then did Mont slowly pick himself up and wander to the village square, stopping everyone he passed to ask about what sort of work he might be able to do around the village.

That's how Mont started working for Iluk. We were grateful for the help, of course, but there was one problem. Mont was an expert when it came to *human* soldiers, but he was no specialist in the ways of the dogkin.

The two races were built differently, thought differently, fought differently, and came from completely different cultures to boot. Naturally, they each had their own unique approaches to training. But because Iluk's defense was composed largely of dogkin, all of Mont's knowledge and experience were rendered basically useless.

"Yeah, it's nice to have talented military dogs, but if dogs is all you've got, what's left for me?!" Mont had said. "Where are your ordinary soldiers?! Doesn't a regular domain usually have some human soldiers?! Besides the grandmas and grandpas it's just Klaus and that civil servant guy! I can't do *nothing* for you like this!"

Mont had had his outburst, and for a few days afterwards he had been left wallowing in his sorrow and tortured by the fact he couldn't really help. I figured he was old enough now that it was a good time for him to take all his experience and put it in a book—or otherwise impart his knowledge to the twins and spend the rest of his time just taking it easy—,but Mont was hell-bent on finding some way to contribute to Iluk…and work to thank the twins. Those were a painful few days for him all right.

Then one day, right after breakfast, a masti came running on behalf of Klaus at the border station. The dogkin had a message, and that message released Mont from his torture and suffering.

"A group of your friends has arrived," said the dogkin. "A really big group led by Sirs Joe, Lorca, and Ryan. Gosh, there must be about thirty of them, I reckon. They said they all fought by your side back in the day!"

Joe, Lorca, Ryan.

Just like the masti said, all three of them were war buddies of mine. I'd told Alna and the twins about them during the winter when we were stuck in our yurt. I'd thought they'd all gone back to their homes after the war, but it seemed like thirty or so were at the doorstep of my domain.

Honestly speaking, I wanted them all to enjoy life back home with their families. But as I knelt down to thank that young masti and give him some pats, Mont couldn't wipe the grin off his face as he began to march to the border station.

"Mont!" I shouted. "It's too far to just run to the border station! At least take a horse or get someone to bring out one of the carts!"

I don't know if Mont heard me or not, but either way he didn't

stop for a second. His march turned into a jog, which quickly turned into a mad dash. I watched him go and I sighed.

“Keep an eye on him for me, would you?” I asked the dogkin.

And with that, I started for the stables. I got Balers ready for a ride and asked Colm to join me with our wild horse that we still hadn’t named, and then we headed straight for the border station.

The Plains

Mont had spent many years with that wooden leg of his, and boy was he quick on it. That said, he couldn't outrun a horse, so we caught up to him in no time. Mont didn't even bother saying a word to us, though. He saw that we'd brought a horse for him and immediately had Colm help him onto the saddle with a speed you'd never have imagined from a one-legged man.

"This one have a name?" asked Mont.

Colm and I simply shook our heads.

"Then I'm calling him Fintz," he declared.

Mont had Colm sit in front of him the way you might seat a child, and then he took off galloping to the forest. I was left scrambling just to keep up, but I didn't go all that quick because I wanted to avoid hitting any branches or running into any unexpected fallen trunks. When I finally arrived at the border station, Mont was already there looking all worked up, and he was with a bunch of guys who weren't sure what to make of him being there. But when they saw me, they started shouting.

"Long time no see, Dias! Uh, Lord Dias!"

"You're a duke now, huh? Congratulations!"

"How's it going, mate?!"

"And did I hear you got hitched?! Congrats!"

"I was so bored back at home I just couldn't help myself…so here I am!"

"Hire me, Dias! I've got no other place left to go!"

All of our new visitors had a whole lot to say…and all at once too. I called out to Joe, Lorca, Ryan, and everyone else one at a time to say hello and calm them all down. As soon as I saw their faces, their names sprung back into my mind, and I counted as I went. All in all there were thirty-three of them, together with one woman to make for a grand total of thirty-four. It was quite the entourage.

"Well, look," I said. "I don't know what brought all of you this way, but you're all here now and I promise I'll hire all of you. For those who want to join the domain guard, just know that we've

already got Klaus in charge with Mont as the drill sergeant. We're short on hands for carpentry, smithing, stonemasonry, and farming, so feel free to do that too."

For a moment the group went silent, but mere moments later they erupted into cheers and cries.

"Ha! I'm not picky about who's in charge, but dang it, that Klaus!" shouted one of the group. "Breaking his promise first and coming here to serve Lord Dias! The bastard beat us to the punch and now he's in command!"

The others were quick to chime in.

"All that aside, we'll do our jobs to the best of our abilities!"

"Hey, old man Mont! Retire already! Ha!"

"I'll start with the guard. Already done my fair share of plowing back home."

"A guard under the direct command of a duke? That's a promotion if you ask me! I'm in!"

"Ha ha! Boy oh boy, the tales I'll have to brag to the guys back home when I see 'em again!"

Everyone was bright and happy, and in the end all thirty-three of my old war buddies decided to join the domain guard. I looked at Klaus, their leader now, and he was grinning just seeing them all. Then I turned to look at the woman among them, who had a gentle-looking face as she happily chatted with Canis. But they weren't the only ones who were happy; the mastis, too, were overjoyed to have more company.

In fact, the only one with a stern expression was Mont, and when he'd seen enough he raised his voice.

"Listen to you lot! Could you get any louder?! Enough! *Attention*!"

At Mont's last word, all the men lined up neat and tidy, with Joe, Lorca, and Ryan starting three lines. Everyone moved like a well-oiled machine, and it was only the woman who'd come with them who stayed put.

All the men were still dressed in their travel garb and still hefting their heavy backpacks, but the way they moved you'd have thought they were carrying feathers. In no time at all, they were standing at attention in three neat rows of eleven, with Mont watching their every step.

"Good! I see you haven't forgotten the basics!" said Mont with a satisfied grin. "I'm not a big one for making things complicated, so

Joe, Lorca, Ryan! You three are the leaders of the platoons lined up behind you. One leader, ten guards, eleven men to a platoon! That's how it's going to work here in the Baarbadal military from now on! Thirty guards all trying to move at once is just going to erupt into chaos, so we'll spread each platoon's work and training across multiday shifts!"

Then Mont looked at each newly named platoon leader in turn and gave out their orders.

"Joe! Your platoon is on border station support! Lorca! Yours will be splitting its time between training and patrolling the domain's territory! Ryan! You and your men will help the twins with whatever fieldwork they're up to! Feeding you lot is going to eat into the domain's stockpiles, and dammit we're going to work for our food!"

"Sir, yes, sir!" replied the three platoons.

The platoons all replied in unison, then looked at me and grinned. In those grins were messages I read loud and clear.

We won't let you down!

We've got this in the bag!

Boy, this is going to be a blast!

I nodded at all of them and then raised my voice so as not to be outdone.

"Glad to have you here, everyone!" I boomed.

My message got everyone shouting and cheering again, and Mont covered his ears with his hands and started barking at everyone all over again. In any case, Iluk had itself a whole bunch of new residents, and Alna's soul appraisal told us they were all a nice clean blue. When the villagers found out that some friends of mine were moving in *and* they were going to help keep the place safer, it just made for more joy all around.

That said, even with the extra military strength, all there was to fight in these parts was monsters. I didn't think it would be like the old days, where we'd had our hands full fighting other humans in long, drawn out wars. At the time, in fact, I was expecting that they'd all pretty much be farming most of their days.

A few days later, however, we got a message from Mahati that turned that dream completely on its head.

We'd just finished breakfast, and I was wondering how to spend

the rest of the day. I was doing a little stretching and warming up in the village square when I heard the familiar sound of flapping wings. I turned to the sound of them and saw Geraint the dovekin making his way to me.

Geraint was dressed in his usual outfit, though he looked a little gaunt. He wore a very grave look, which was completely out of character for the guy. He was completely exhausted as he alighted from the sky, and he didn't even bother with his usual cheerful greeting.

"Wh-What is it, Geraint?" I asked worriedly as I took him in my hands. "What happened?!"

Without even a word, Geraint gestured to the bag on his chest. Alna came running over, so I left Geraint with her while I opened up his bag, took out the letter inside of it, and read the message within.

The contents of Geraint's letter were shocking to say the least, and his behavior suddenly made a whole lot of sense. Alna was quick to come over when she saw I'd finished reading it, and I told her what was going on.

"There's a revolt happening in Mahati," I said. "The people behind it are humans, all of them supporters of the former domain lord. None of them can stand the direction Eldan is taking the nation in. They don't like him abolishing slavery in the domain, and they don't like sharing the lands with the beastkin. They planned this out long in advance, and riots broke out in several locations at once."

It seemed the merchants had managed to grow their numbers by allying with slavers and other disgruntled groups, amassed a good deal of money, and from there somehow erected strongholds across the domain. It had taken Eldan completely by surprise, and as I was explaining he was already locked in battle on multiple fronts. To top it off, the rebels that occupied the southwest stronghold had been flying a fake flag of Baarbadal, claiming that we supported their efforts and spreading all sorts of false information. Mahati was erupting into chaos, and Eldan was requesting reinforcements.

As I was explaining things to Alna, her expression hardened into one of pure rage, and Mont, who happened to be passing by and had listened in, was so incensed he turned bright red. A

moment later, he roared in a voice that drowned out my explanation entirely.

"***What?!*** How *dare* they?! Those damned wannabe rebels think they can sully the hallowed name of our darlings Senai and Ayhan?! Dias! Quit your damned dillydallying! We're moving out! We're gonna march right over there and give them all hell like they've never seen!"

I felt a bit like I should explain to Mont that the Baarbadal name was *my* name, but I could tell that was neither here nor there as far as he was concerned. Without any further input his face went even redder and he started stomping the ground. When he was done, he raced around telling the dogkin to spread the word, then dashed to the storehouse to prepare.

I let out a little sigh as I watched him work, and as Uncle Ben, Goldia, and everybody else gathered to find out what all the fuss was about, Alna and I told them that it looked like we were going to war.

The Iluk Village Square

My old war buddies had all become official residents of Iluk Village, led by Joe, Lorca, and Ryan. Ryan's wife, Capella, had come along with them. It was a tall task to put up yurts for thirty-four people, so most everyone started out living in tents. That said, nobody was particularly grumbly about it; we had lots of water, everyone was well-fed, and whenever tent cloth tore people simply stayed in the assembly hall until it was mended.

While Joe and the guys struggled a little to get used to life in Iluk, Capella had quickly found her place in the Iluk Wives' Club, and it wasn't long before she was fast friends with Alna and the grandmas. When she got tired of living out of a tent, the grandmas offered her a spot in their yurt, and on top of all that she took a real liking to the baars and took great care of them.

The village square was filled with tents when Mont started screaming, so everybody heard and quickly came running. When my buddies learned that the Baarbadal reputation had been sullied and our flag put to nefarious use, they quickly dispersed and started readying the weapons they'd brought with them so they could run right on over to Mahati.

But it wasn't just Joe and my war buddies. Francis, Ethelbald, and all the other baars looked real riled up about it. The dogkin were raring to go too, and even the grandmas started waving their canes and farming tools around. I sighed deeply then and realized it was my job to calm everyone down.

"*I* will decide who goes to Mahati!" I declared. "Some of us will have to remain here to protect Iluk, and depending on the state of things over there the border station may need reinforcements! We can't all respond to Eldan's request directly, not when we have fields and livestock that require our constant attention! With that in mind, Alna, Senai, Ayhan, you three are staying here. I'm putting you in charge of defending Iluk!"

All three of them had their bows and quivers at the ready and had even put on their war paint. When they heard my order, they looked disgusted. It was written all over their faces. Aymer must have noticed it too, because she scrambled up my body and took a seat on my shoulder to soothe the trio.

"This is all very sudden," she said, her expression the very picture of calm repose and her voice a perfect match. "Preparing rations for a mobilization of this speed will prove quite the challenge. Given the state of things over there, I'm not sure how easy it will be to purchase anything either. With that in mind, the support troops here in Iluk will be that much more essential. We'll be preparing food to send to the front lines."

She continued, "Lady Alna, Senai, and Ayhan, we will desperately need your hunting expertise to acquire the meat which we can salt and dry and send to the troops. Please, this is how best to contribute."

Alna and the twins reluctantly agreed and accepted their responsibilities, which helped to calm everyone. Only Mont was still on his high horse shouting about this and that, but I figured it was fine to let him wear himself out while I discussed things with the village reps.

Discussions proceeded smoothly, and we agreed that the following people would go to Mahati: Me, Aymer, and Mont were first up. Joe, Lorca, and Ryan would all come along, each of them leading their platoons. Then we'd have Sahhi, five young mastis, Goldia, Aisa, and Ely. Uncle Ben would be acting lord while I was away, and the border station would, as always, be under Klaus's

watch. The dogkin outside of the five coming with me were to remain in Iluk as its protection.

Fortunately for us, Ellie and the lostblood brothers were all currently back in Iluk, so we decided to put a halt to trade until things were settled. The four of them would help out around Iluk while they learned whatever they could from Hubert. As for the cavekin, I had them stick to their smithing.

Goldia, Aisa, and Ely were all visitors, so I wanted them all to remain in Iluk where it was safe, but they were intent on going. They said that as members of the guild they needed to get a handle on the state of Mahati as well as gather intel on the enemy. In that sense, they were less part of our fighting force and more just coming along for the ride.

With everybody's role set, we decided to set out that same day, just as soon as all of our preparations were done. We'd spend the night at the border station, then set out for Mahati the next morning. Once in Mahati, we'd ideally spend a night at a town or village where we could gather some intel and get a read on where the enemy was located. We'd set up camp somewhere appropriate, and using that as our base of operations we'd set out to suppress the rebellion and clear the Baarbadal name.

Thanks to Geraint, we had signed papers from Eldan allowing us entry to Mahati and permission to exercise force. Those papers allowed us to commandeer what we needed should such actions be necessary, but…

All told, I wasn't keen on that idea even if it *did* become necessary. If we started requisitioning what we needed by force, we wouldn't be any different from the rebels as far as I was concerned. We'd just make ourselves unpopular with the locals and make future trade harder for Ellie and the lostblood brothers.

Thankfully, Iluk's traders had saved some gold coins for the village, and I planned to use that to buy whatever we needed when we needed it. Everybody was in agreement with my idea and the overall plan, and so we started our preparations in earnest. When we were all good to go, we set out for the border station.

The Border Station—A Merchant

The merchant looked to be in his fifties. He sat in the driver's

seat of his cargo-filled carriage, safe on the Baarbadal side of the border station gates. And yet he could not help but sigh.

It had been just another day of trade in Mahati for the merchant when suddenly a rebellion had broken out. The rebel army—thieves or whoever they were—had set their sights on the merchant's wares, and he'd fled. It had not been easy, but thankfully he had made it to the Baarbadal border.

At first he'd been wary. He was, after all, just a common merchant, and one without travel papers to boot. But the captain of the border station had welcomed him with a smile and promised to look after him until things in Mahati settled down. As dogkin ran about handing him and his guards cups of water, the merchant thought himself lucky, especially when the dogkin went as far as taking care of his horses. Despite the rebellion, the merchant now felt great relief.

It was then, however, that he heard something echoing from within the forest. It was the sound of deafening footsteps. The merchant wondered if they belonged to a giant or perhaps a monster. His face went pale, but soon his fears were allayed. It was not the sound of a single creature's footsteps but rather many walking in time with one another.

The merchant's eyes went wide when he saw what approached from the road through the forest. First it was the man in the glimmering golden armor, sitting astride an imposing black horse. Across one of his shoulders rested a giant battle-ax, while on the other perched a falcon in strange armor. The word "majestic" did not seem sufficient for describing what the merchant saw, so overwhelmed was he by the man in gold.

"Lord Dias!" cried one of the dogkin.

Ah, the heroic savior of the nation. So that is what a true hero looks like.

Following Lord Dias was a balding man on a powerful black horse of his own, then a bearded fellow on what looked to be a fine (if not top-of-the-line) brown horse, and behind them a horse and cart driven by a young man and woman. Behind them were foot soldiers.

But to the merchant's eyes, none of the foot soldiers were dressed like any troops he'd ever seen. They were all clad in the sorts of cloaks, clothes, and boots that you could buy pretty much

anywhere, and none wore any armor to speak of. Their weapons were a mishmash of all sorts, and none of them looked of exceptional quality. To be completely honest, the foot soldiers simply looked like travelers on the road.

And yet each of them stood with their back straight and their gaze ahead as they marched as one, their footsteps so perfectly synchronized that they sounded like one giant creature. Not one of them wasted a word on pointless chatter. It was the strangest thing for the merchant to see—even the knights of the royal capital would be unlikely to match them. Such perfection took many long years of drilling.

The group came to a halt before the merchant, and the golden hero on his horse took a look around before settling his gaze upon the merchant himself. The border station captain then came out to explain the situation.

“Ah, that is unfortunate,” said the hero to the merchant, his voice calm and gentle. “Were you heading somewhere in particular to sell your wares?”

The merchant hurriedly explained that he dealt mainly in foodstuffs and daily necessities, and he had been heading to the Merangal markets to trade. The hero then reached down to one of his saddlebags, and from it he brought forth a rather heavy-looking leather pouch. As he lifted it up, the merchant heard the pleasant and familiar clink of coins within.

“You ran into some bad luck, and it brought you far from where you were heading,” said Lord Dias. “I don’t like the idea of you losing out because of that, so let me buy everything you have at your usual market rates. We have need of the items you’re selling, so from our point of view you’re a godsend.”

The merchant simply could not believe his ears, and his guards knew then that they would not go hungry anytime soon.

“Oh, but, are you most certain? We would be most grateful for your patronage, of course, but buying *everything* at market rates will not be cheap, you see…”

The hero had offered the merchant salvation, and yet instead of simply accepting the blessing as he should have, the merchant went and muttered *this*. Now it was his guards who could not believe their ears, and their faces scrunched up with frustration. The hero, however, simply nodded and hopped off his horse. He

walked up to the merchant and held out the pouch.

The merchant took it in hand, then hurried around to the back of the cart to check on all his merchandise and ensure that what he was offering was worthy of the gold coins he had been given. And so, with his merchant heart set ablaze, he went about his work at astounding speed.

At the Rebel Stronghold—A Man

It was merchants—chiefly those who had once called Kasdeks home—who had first started planning the rebellion. Their slave trading operations, which had grown to quite the scale, had been shut down and banned. The domain lord of the region now named Mahati had seen these merchants as no different from criminals and thus offered absolutely nothing in the way of reparations for their losses.

To add insult to injury, the new domain lord had seized both land and money from the merchants and did not hesitate to respond harshly to those who tried to resist. Leaders around the area felt it a just punishment for the act of trading living beings, but until the change in lords the merchants' trade had been completely legal. There'd been zero reason to rain hellfire upon them. As such, the merchants were enraged, and they had begun planning a takeover.

At first the plan had been to revolt and curry favor with Prince Meiser. Siding with the prince would have allowed the merchants the authority to promote one of their own to the position of domain lord, after which they would have control of all western trade. That plan had failed however, as none could have seen Meiser falling from grace.

With Prince Meiser out of the picture, some had questioned the very point of an uprising, and the merchants had begun to consider giving up altogether. But it was then that Lady Luck had smiled upon them: The nobles and merchants in Meiser's splintered faction—the ones who were barred from allying with Prince Richard's faction—had joined the cause.

These nobles and merchants were gangsters, essentially, and they had brought with them impressive wealth to help boost the rebel ranks. The merchants had begun to believe that their

uprising could succeed even without the assistance of one among the royal family. Prince Richard's faction had grown to be the strongest among the royal siblings, but the merchants believed they could push him to acknowledge them with a show of force. That, or they would simply declare themselves a state separate entirely from the kingdom proper. The rebels were gaining momentum, and with their growing confidence they had chosen to defy the law.

The domain lord's advisor, Juha, had been aware of the rebel activities the whole time, having acquired the intelligence upon capturing a number of them during a certain incident. However, Juha had not moved to nip the rebel activities in the bud and had decided instead to allow them a certain freedom. It was his thinking that it was more effective to let the organization grow and eventually purge a greater number of dissidents all at once. The rebels had thus been free to gather—and just as Juha had predicted, more dissenters had joined their ranks.

The rebels' numbers had swelled. First it had been bandits, then those dissatisfied with the new government, and those who preferred the way things had once been...but then others had gathered—people motivated by greed, people enamored by a life of crime, and even former mercenaries and soldiers.

The rebel forces had thus grown well beyond what even Juha had anticipated, and in secret they had made use of both their own inns and the bases once occupied by the Kasdeks military, blocking off the roads from prying eyes and building the locations into impressive strongholds.

Neither Eldan nor Juha could have ever imagined the scale to which the rebel army had grown, and so they had found themselves pulled into fierce battles. It was then that a certain man appeared, claiming to be a member of Duke Baarbadal's army.

The man was a former war buddy of Dias, and the two had fought side by side against the imperial forces. Dias had always seen the man as loyal and conscientious, and one with a strong moral compass. In the man's heart, however, he was nothing like the man Dias saw him as.

In truth, the man had joined the volunteer troops for no other reason than to run rampant in war zones and plunder to his

heart's content. He was powered by this greed but also driven by a desire to do great things and achieve such heights that his name would be revered. Dias was driven by a desire to protect and save those in need, but his former comrade in arms felt not a hint of such compassion.

And yet, he had obeyed Dias's commands and fell in line because he always obeyed the overwhelmingly powerful. The man was much younger than Dias, and when they'd first met Dias had been in the prime of his life—incredibly strong, overflowing with the vigor of youth, and experienced in the ways of war. Dias was overwhelming strength in the shape of a man, and the man knew that even if heaven and earth parted, Dias could not be felled.

So the man had fallen in line, but all the while his mind simmered with dreams of rebellion. He'd obeyed his commands and been loyal to a fault, but because the man's greedy desires were never fulfilled by Dias, the man's dreams of rebellion turned to dreams of murder. His need to kill—nay, to slaughter—Dias ballooned beyond control. The man was consumed by thoughts of how to do it, and in the end he arrived at an answer.

He would see an end to Dias by way of his age.

As the war raged on, Dias's prime had passed. He had endured day after day of the agony of war, and through it all he had weakened. Dias himself had not been aware of it, but to the man who observed Dias each and every single day the change had been clear. The degradation was slight, yes, but the man saw it. He also knew that he was younger and entering his own peak. He came to believe that given enough time, his destruction of Dias was inevitable.

He dreamed. He dreamed of surpassing Dias and killing him, then taking command of the volunteer troops and, in saving the nation, becoming its venerated hero. The man could see that future—he could practically taste it on the air—but then the war had come to an end…and Dias had been crowned the heroic savior of the nation. The man had felt as if he'd forever lost his chance to defeat Dias, and he sunk into the depths of despair.

The man grew despondent, his will to live gone. It was the lowest point in his life he had ever known.

And then, one day, rumors began to spread of a rebellion in the domain neighboring Dias's own. In this the man saw a second

chance, and suddenly he discovered a completely different feeling: rapture. He'd joined the rebel forces and convinced them that Mahati was not enough. He'd convinced them that Baarbadal, too, was well within their reach. He then took charge of the stronghold nearest to the border between Mahati and Baarbadal and flew a fake flag to draw Dias to his location.

The man knew that if they made enough noise then Dias would eventually arrive. It was simply his nature. The man was confident in this. He believed that Dias would arrive weaker than he'd ever been. He also knew from the rebel intelligence network that his five hundred men easily outnumbered whatever Dias would bring. And to top it off, the man had a stronghold of such size one might have even claimed it a castle.

This time, the man thought, *I will kill him, and then I will have slain a hero.*

In every way he held the advantage, and so the man believed that even if heaven and earth parted, this time *he* would be the one who stood undefeated.

So, as the man waited within his stronghold, news arrived from his scouts that Dias and his troops were passing through the forest. Once again, the man was filled with crazed bliss, and he drowned himself in wine as he excitedly waited for his prey to arrive.

A Village in Western Mahati—Dias

While Geraint was guiding us to the stronghold we happened across a village made up of a collection of houses near the main road. The people there made their living through their livestock.

The village proper was just a number of small square houses made from clay, but the vast majority of its area was a huge pasture filled with rich, green grass. The look of it reminded me of Iluk, and because there was space for us to put up our yurts and tents, we decided to stay the evening.

The villagers were clearly apprehensive when they saw the Baarbadal flag we were flying, but when they saw me—and Geraint by my side—their worry turned to relief. When I told them that we were here as reinforcements for Eldan, they even started smiling and offering to help.

“Them creeps came just a few days ago and stole a bunch of our cattle,” said the elderly village chief as he and his people helped us with our tents and food. “Fortunately, this time of year we send the young ones up into the mountains to graze, so only the older cattle got taken, but even then…it pains me, it does. We put our hearts into raising them and we don’t do that so they can be stolen from us. Sir Duke, I’m begging you, drive them creeps away, please.”

I listened to the old village chief, and his words told me that this was a battle we couldn’t afford to lose.

I gave him a reassuring smile and said, “Leave it to us.”

In a Yurt on a Small Hill

We rested up the best we could that night. The following morning we made sure the horses were well looked after, readied all of our armor and weapons, and set out a little before noon. Geraint led us to a small hill to set up camp. It was just a short walk from a point where we could confirm the first enemy stronghold with our telescopes.

Eldan had set up that hill to be an emergency base of sorts, so it had a hidden well, and fruit and nut trees that grew regardless of the season. They were all so neatly lined up it was like a little orchard. It offered water and a little food, which made it the best place in these parts to set up camp.

When all the yurts and tents were up, I sent Geraint and Sahhi out for reconnaissance. Aymer and Mont organized all the intel, and that night me, Aymer, Mont, Joe, Lorca, and Ryan all met at my yurt in the center of the camp for a strategy meeting.

We had wooden boxes set up to act as a table, upon which were papers documenting everything we knew. Everyone stood around the table except for Aymer, who sat on it with her inkpot and tail at the ready. Aymer kicked things off by detailing the various strategies she'd come up with. They involved weakening the enemy, forcing them to flee, and drawing them towards us before attacking them from unexpected angles. They were fine strategies, and Joe, Lorca, and Ryan were all for them.

"Hang on a sec," said Mont. "Miss Aymer's strategies are excellent. I've no issues with them, and they'll work. I'm not going to criticize them neither, but I'd like you to listen to me. I have a feeling that our enemies over in that stronghold are dumber than even our doofus Dias here. And if we're dealing with idiots that dull, then I don't know if we need any fancy plans… I'm thinking there might be a simpler and faster way to end things."

"Do you have some basis for why you claim the rebels here are idiots?" asked Aymer calmly.

Mont nodded and looked off in the direction of the stronghold as he replied.

“According to Sahhi and Geraint’s intel, they have something in the realm of five hundred troops, but here’s the kicker: Getting that many people in a stronghold that size is a real tight squeeze. I’m guessing that ordinarily, they send most of their troops out to procure food and essentials, which would leave about one or two hundred at the stronghold. But if they’ve stuffed the place full of five hundred troops, it’s because they know we’re coming.”

Mont continued, “With Dias here, they could send out troops to plunder, but we’ll look to block them wherever they go. Clearly they don’t want to lose anybody that way, so they’re all huddled up in that stronghold instead. Now I know what you’re thinking: We’re just thirty strong, right? We’re outnumbered more than ten to one. Why don’t they charge out here and crush us? Well, the fact that they don’t shows their stupidity. But it also means the person in charge knows who they’re dealing with.”

Everybody around the table, Aymer included, nodded in agreement. When Mont saw this, he went on.

“From the moment I heard that the enemy was waving around a Baarbadal flag, I had an inkling, but now I’m sure of it. They were *provoking* us with their antics. They *want* Dias here because they want his head, so I’ll bet that they’ve got that stronghold booby-trapped. They’re convinced they’ve got everything they need to take Dias down. They’re so convinced of it, in fact, that they won’t budge. They’re not leaving that stronghold.”

“Five hundred soldiers will always beat thirty, but when you’re up against Dias, you’re still looking at a couple hundred casualties…or if we’re being more realistic, you’ll lose almost your entire fighting force. If the enemy leader and their troops know that, then ordering a full-on charge is only going to result in most of the troops fleeing.”

“But the rebel forces have to know that beating us isn’t the end of things. They have to topple the duke of Mahati and his forces too. That’s why I reckon they’ve holed themselves up—it’s an attempt to preserve their numbers. That said, why would they go to the trouble of taunting Dias into the whole thing…? Even Dias himself wouldn’t be *that* stupid.”

“You raise an excellent point,” said Aymer, rubbing her chin thoughtfully. “It doesn’t really make sense, does it? The rebels’ motives in that regard aren’t particularly clear.”

Mont responded with a wide grin and a nod.

"Your plans would work a real treat on numbskulls like them," said Mont, still smiling. "The thing of it is, they'll all take time, and I'm not sure I want us spending too long taking down that one stronghold. If we smash them rebels and free this area nice and quick, news'll spread through the villages and towns. It'll boost the morale of the Mahati troops and make the rebels real worried. If we take out a few more enemy holds in the area, it'll make things that much easier for Duke Mahati and Juha too."

Mont seemed to think that if Juha had gone all out, this whole revolt would have already been wrapped up. I'd told him about the control that Eldan had over the waterways, and Mont said blocking off the rebels' source of water would have been enough.

He thought that if Juha wasn't doing that then there was a reason for it, and it was more than likely that he wanted to avoid casualties. Mont explained that it was better to capture the rebels alive so they could be arrested and put to work to make up for all the trouble and losses they'd caused around the domain.

"Juha made *you* into the nation's hero, Dias, and he's not the type to worry about rank or pride or none of that," said Mont. "He won't be looking for a big move to make up for letting this rebellion grow out of hand. That said, I don't have any intel or proof to back that idea up, so there's no need to factor it into our tactics."

"I see..." murmured Aymer. "I don't really understand Juha's train of thought either, so let's put that aside for the moment. What do you have in mind for seizing that stronghold in a speedy manner?"

The strategy meeting had essentially turned into a discussion between just Mont and Aymer, so me and those who weren't a part of it just kind of watched on blankly. Mont, for his part, looked delighted to unveil his idea, and he glanced at me briefly before turning to Joe.

"Joe, what's *the* tried-and-true means of seizing a stronghold?"

"Huh? Well, there's nothing more straightforward than running a battering ram right through the front gates," replied Joe.

"Attaboy! If we break down the front gate and turn the stronghold itself into our battlefield, even a small group like ours has a fighting chance. Now, Lorca, let's say we send a battering

ram to the front gates. How's the enemy going to respond?"

"Uh... I reckon they'll launch arrows at it from a distance, and up close they'll probably look to spray hot oil over it and set it on fire. If we're talking a battering ram with wheels, they might also use grappling hooks to get a hold of it, then have their men pull with all their might to turn it on its side."

"Yep, right on the money," said Mont. "If the battering ram gets rolled, it's hard work to move or recover the damn thing. A fallen battering ram can even impede any other siege weapons you bring in, so it's an effective tactic, especially when you consider battering rams with steel roofs to defend from arrows and oil. That brings us to you, Ryan. We've got ourselves a battering ram that's impervious to arrows, oil, and even hooks. So what is it?"

Ryan tilted his head to the side as he dropped into thought. He was thinking real hard, because we hadn't brought a battering ram with us. Heck, we didn't have any siege weapons whatsoever. Nobody had said a thing about bringing a ram when we were getting prepared, so I didn't have a single clue as to what Mont was talking about.

After some more thought, Ryan's eyes flicked to my armor, sitting at the back of the yurt, and then to my axe standing right next to it, and then to me. Aymer, Joe, and Lorca followed Ryan's gaze until they were staring at me too, and finally Mont looked at me with a mischievous grin on his face.

"You got it," he said. "It'll hit a set of steel doors over and over without tiring, it'll shrug off arrows, oil, and hooks, and nobody even needs to carry it to its destination. As an added bonus, it can react to changes in the battlefield on the fly *and* it'll cause a right ruckus with the enemy forces once it's inside. With Dias as our battering ram we'll bust our way in and have Sahhi handle the archers to allow an opening for the rest of our forces. Once we're inside, we just have to make sure we manage the numbers effectively."

Mont's plan was to have Aymer ride with me to sniff out whatever traps the enemy had set within the stronghold with her keen senses and smarts. All I had to do was listen to her and not run totally amok. Joe, Lorca, and Ryan would head inside after me. The three platoons would work separately but be in constant communication through the armored mastis, who would

coordinate their assaults and retreats by way of howling.

"Me, I'm no strategist like Juha and Miss Aymer here," said Mont. "But frontal assaults are my game, and I do them well. I know how to do it right, and I know what to expect. I'll be waiting on standby not far from the stronghold with Goldia, Aisa, and Ely as my guards. I'll send orders through masti howls. I think we'll have the place done and dusted in a day."

I had a whole lot of issues with Mont's proposed strategy, and I opened my mouth to voice them but Aymer beat me to the punch.

"It's settled, then."

Joe, Lorca, and Ryan were quick to agree to Mont's strategy, and after a brief nod to show that everyone was on the same page, the meeting was over.

I didn't mind the idea of a frontal assault, and I was fine with breaking in through the front door too, but I didn't much like being treated as a siege weapon. Still, nobody knew I felt that way, and so for the rest of the evening up until the next day, they all kept referring to me as "the battering ram."

The next day, I was on Balers in front of the stronghold, just outside of bow range, decked out in my armor and ready to move. I took in the stronghold before me and looked up at the flag they had waving from it, which was a poorly made scrap of fabric with an animal's face on it that wasn't entirely unlike a baar's...I guess. I waited to see if they would bring the battle to me, but I couldn't see a hint of movement.

Looks like Mont was right after all.

So there we were, me and our thirty-some soldiers standing in front of the enemy stronghold. But even then there was zero movement from inside. That made it crystal clear that they were planning something.

I raised my battle-ax up high and I let out a battle cry. Joe, Lorca, and Ryan all followed suit, while Mont began waving the real Baarbadal flag from his horse.

It was only then that the enemy soldiers began to start moving, and in a panicked fashion, I might add. They were on the walkways at the top of the stronghold, which was made of red stone and looked just like the travelers' inn we'd stayed at on our vacation (remodeled for military purposes, of course).

“No time like the present!” shouted Mont, patting the head of the masti sitting in front of him. “Send in the battering ram!”

My shoulders slumped a little at the battering ram treatment, but all the same I jumped off of Balers and passed his reins to Ely. Then, battle-ax in hand, I took off on my own, heading straight for the front doors.

The enemy soldiers couldn’t believe their eyes, but still they readied their arrows and fired…but anything that would have been a direct hit was bounced away by my new set of armor. It was like I had an invisible wall around me, or an invisible hand swatting the arrows that got close.

The soldiers started to really freak out as they saw that their weapons were useless, but by then I was already at the steel gates.

I gripped my battle-ax a little tighter and, readying myself for a stint of heavy labor to crack open the doors, lifted it up high and let it down with all my might.

It was the opening attack in our assault on the stronghold.

At the Back of the Stronghold—A Man

At the back of the inn-cum-rebel stronghold, in what was once considered the penthouse suite for the finest guests, was the man in charge. He had been aching for this moment, and it was finally here. It began with the sound of panicked shouting and a harsh boom which entered the room from the window that looked down to the courtyard.

“So he’s finally here,” muttered the man.

He jumped from the sofa and bounded to the window, watching as soldiers ran through the courtyard and rushed around near the stronghold walls.

“But is he seriously trying to come in through the front gates…?”

It was then that a soldier burst in through the penthouse doors with a report.

“We believe that Dias himself is trying to break through the front gates! He’s on his own!”

“On his own?!” exclaimed the man. “If he’s by himself, then impale him with a rain of arrows already!”

He ran a hand through his short, blond hair and tried to calm himself.

“W-We tried stopping him with arrows!” replied the soldier. “But Dias appears to be under the protection of an invisible wall of some kind. We believe it might be some kind of magic.”

“What?! What kind of magic is *that*?! There *were* tales of such spells in the legends of the founding king, but they’re all simply fairy tales! Myths! Ugh! If the arrows don’t work, then prepare the rocks and oil to drop on him and—”

“The oil is being prepared as we speak, but the rocks are as useless as the arrows! Perhaps we should consider sending troops out…”

“Send out troops?! It’s just *one* man out there! If he’d come with a battering ram or siege weapons, that would be one thing, but *he’s on his own*! Ah, I see, so perhaps Dias’s magic is only capable of defending him alone. That would explain why he came by himself. In the past he broke into strongholds by scaling their walls… Is he trying that again now…?”

As the man considered countermeasures, he barked at the soldier before him.

“Get that oil on the walls and on Dias now! Even if his armor protects him from the stuff, he still won’t be able to climb with it all over him. Surely that magic can’t defend against everything, so keep up the arrows while you prepare the oil, then—”

At that point, another boom rang out into the sky, and the impact of it shook the entire stronghold. It was followed by another, and another, and such was the impact that it rendered the man momentarily speechless. He ran his hands through his hair again, then sighed.

“That sound… That’s no battering ram,” he muttered. “He must be trying to break down the gates with that axe of his. Heh heh heh. Once an oaf, always an oaf. He doesn’t stand a chance against the front gates. And even if he manages to get through, he’ll have exhausted himself doing so. He’ll be lucky to even move afterwards. It was my strategy all along to see him tired and worn down, but now he’s doing the job for me!”

The man smiled a wicked grin as he swung his arms and rolled his neck, loosening his body of the tension that ran through its muscles. He then walked to the back of the room and began

putting on a finely crafted set of steel armor.

The soldier watched in silence as the man prepared himself for battle, and felt some relief at his leader's utterance of the word "strategy." Since the outbreak of the revolt, the man had always been right, and his soldiers knew that as long as they followed his instructions they would emerge victorious. Thanks to him, the soldier had been well-fed and never short of wine. Upon climbing the ladder, the soldier had also found his wallet heavier with gold, and so he believed every word when the man said that all was going according to plan.

The plan to exhaust Dias went like so: Hole up in the stronghold and create a defensive line to take some of Dias's men out of play, then lead them in, where booby traps would further tire Dias and remove his men from the battle. When Dias was at his weakest, their leader would move in and strike the final blow.

The man and soldier knew that they would lose men in this fight—and that some of their forces would be no more than fodder—but the other soldiers did not know this and thus clung to their blind faith.

The man put his armor on, then his helmet, then hung his sword from his belt. Only then did he take his beloved halberd in hand. Before he could do anything else, however, another tremendous boom rang out from the gates, followed by the sound of steel and stone crumbling.

"I did not expect him to get through the gates *that* fast…" muttered the man, "but it is of no concern. The door to the interior is blocked and hidden behind the brick wall we built in front of it. Dias will think the only way in is through the courtyard, and he will stride into it like the fool he is…at which point our traps will see him struggling just to survive."

The man walked to the window once more, but the soldiers who had been positioned to launch their surprise attacks remained in shadow. Dias still had yet to emerge.

"What?" spat the man. "Where is that blasted Di—"

It was then that another boom shook the stronghold. The sound indicated that Dias had just taken his axe to another wall—but not just any wall. It sounded like one of the walls on either side of the entrance just past the main gates. More specifically, it sounded like one of the very walls that had been built to hide the

stronghold doors so Dias would walk straight into the rebel trap.

The man couldn't believe his ears.

You mean to tell me that he somehow saw through our carefully laid ploy?!

It was then that he heard the screams from above. They came from his own soldiers, above him on the stronghold ramparts. The man quickly looked in the direction of the noise and saw a falcon draped in a shell of some kind attacking his archers. It deftly cut their bowstrings with its talons and snapped the bows clean in half whilst easily weaving out of the way of whatever blade attempted to stop it. The few arrows that managed to hit the falcon bounced harmlessly from its carapace. Clearly this was no ordinary falcon.

"What the heck is up with that bird?!" cried the man, leaning out the window to get a clearer look.

The man quickly steadied himself. He knew that it didn't really matter *what* the falcon was; what mattered was its *intent*. Before his mind could settle on an answer, however, he heard the footsteps of platoons pouring in like a cacophonous wave.

The man hurriedly tried to issue orders. He wanted his soldiers to cover the gates and stronghold openings with planks, stones, whatever was there to delay Dias's progress. And yet he knew that it was too late, and the sound of Dias's axe through a door only served to remind him of his own failure.

"Grr... Wh-Which door did he just break?!"

There were two of them, one on either side of the entrance, and Dias would be coming through one of them. He needed to send the majority of his troops there immediately...but then the stronghold rumbled again, and the man realized that Dias was now heading for the *other* door.

All the while, the man heard the rumbling of footsteps—belonging to Dias's troops, no doubt—closing in with every moment. He wanted his archers to keep them at bay from their vantage point on the ramparts, but they had been rendered completely helpless under the strange falcon's assault.

"This is incomprehensible! The whole point of a stronghold is that it slows the enemy at its gates and walls so they can be dealt with! That's the whole point! But what's the point of the damned thing now?!"

But the stronghold was far too small for the five hundred

soldiers that had been squished inside of it. It was such a squeeze that the rebels had needed to fill the corridors with sleeping bags for the troops. While it was not entirely suffocating, it was nonetheless impossible for the rebels to put their strength of numbers to any effective use.

Things would have been different if they'd been able to make use of the courtyard, but that was now filled with pitfalls, bear traps, and entirely too large ballistae. It would only create more havoc.

Then what am I supposed to do?! What options still remain?! Should we flee? No, if we flee then my chance to kill Dias evaporates completely, and there's no guarantee that I'll get another...

As the man's thoughts raced, the situation only grew more dire—Dias destroyed the remaining door by the entrance, and the remainder of Dias's troops arrived. They stormed in through both left and right, and the air filled with battle cries, screams, and the clashing of weapons.

A scout who had been sent to check on the state of things reported that Dias had but thirty men under his command. Just thirty men, yes, but even from afar one could see in their every movement how well trained they were. Dias had not simply gathered nearby farmers to assemble a semblance of a fighting force.

The man also received word from his scout that a nearly bald man resembling Mont was among Dias's men. Mont had his weak points as a commander, but as a drill sergeant few could compare. If he had seen to the training of Dias's troops, then it was safe to say they were far more prepared for battle than the rebels.

"But wait, if it's Mont we're dealing with, then... Yes, that's right. Mont has sided with Dias, but Juha is with Eldan. That means it's Mont issuing all the commands! That means we still have a fighting chance! That bald old man was always suffering from that lost leg of his, and when the pain got too much it clouded his judgment without fail! It got so bad that Juha banned him from interrupting their strategy discussions. Mont is as stupid and worthless as that damned Dias himself! And that means it's only a matter of time before Mont issues an order that sends Dias and his troops into complete and utter chaos!"

The man then swiveled to issue new orders.

“Change of plans! All we have to do is buy ourselves time! That means…”

But his words trailed off as he realized that the soldier who had been standing by his side was now gone, along with a number of military fund chests…and the bottle of wine that the man had intended to open upon his victory over Dias. The now missing soldier was the only one the man had granted access to his room, because the man had believed him the most capable among those under his command.

And when it dawned on him that he had been betrayed, the man gripped his halberd and swung it with all his might as he let loose an inhuman scream.

Minutes Earlier, After Breaking Through the Gates—Aymer

Upon destroying the stronghold gates, Dias ran down the corridor before him but quickly came to a very sudden halt. Aymer, who was taking shelter within his armor, spoke up.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

“Uh, well… This stronghold is built just like the inn we stayed at on our vacation, right?” Dias replied. “It’s exactly the same, except that there should be doors here. It’s so weird that they’re just gone.”

Dias put a hand to the brand-new bricks that made up the wall, and as he did Aymer realized that something was astray. Her ears pricked up and her brow furrowed as she listened for sounds around them.

“Dias!” she exclaimed. “I think there’s an open space on the other side of this wall! A room, or more likely a corridor. I can hear people moving around on the other side of it. That would mean that this wall is—”

Dias required no further explanation. He brought his axe high above his head and swung it down at the wall in front of them. As the bricks crumbled down to the floor, Aymer and Dias saw behind them a steel door not unlike that which they’d seen on their last trip to a roadside inn. Dias reached out a hand to open it only to find that it was locked, so he once more raised his axe and proved he had just the key for it.

But just as Dias was about to storm into the now open corridor, Aymer spoke up again.

"Wait!" she cried, pointing to the wall behind them. "Let's tear down that wall and break open the door on the other side too! That will let Joe and the others attack from a second front! If both walls were covered, it's likely that the rebels wanted to lead us to the courtyard where they've likely set traps for us. We'll want to leave a 'danger ahead' message for the troops that follow after us."

Dias was nothing if not obedient, and so he broke down the opposite wall, smashed open the door behind it, then carved a message into the floor with his axe. Only then did he proceed down the corridor he'd been about to go down earlier.

The architecture before Aymer and Dias was that of the roadside inns they knew. The ceiling was supported by archways which Dias had to crouch slightly under to get past, and the floors were littered with stray weapons, armor, and makeshift beds, all of which got in the way of progress. Dias thus proceeded slowly, carefully looking out for traps. When Aymer caught the sound of light breathing with her sharp hearing, she relayed the message to Dias in a whisper.

"Two enemies, straight ahead! They're hiding behind that pillar. There are also a number of soldiers lurking in that room beyond it, behind the door. Be on guard!"

Dias simply nodded, then readied his axe and approached the pillar, hitting it with the butt of his axe as if to say, *I see what you're playing at!* The two soldiers hidden behind rushed out, desperation in their eyes as they raised their swords and charged...but with a sweep of his axe—attacking with the face of it, not the blade—Dias slammed one of the two soldiers into the wall before handling the remaining one in exactly the same way.

Whoa! For a second there I thought those soldiers might explode on impact! Still, that was quite the show of force, so either way they're... Oh, actually they're still breathing. But...why didn't Dias use his blade? Why did he show mercy?

Aymer pondered this while Dias kicked down the door ahead of them and proceeded to knock all of the soldiers inside of it senseless. When the dust had settled and the coast was clear, Aymer decided to voice her thoughts.

"Um... Dias?" she said. "Why are you simply knocking these

soldiers out? It seems rather clear to me that you've chosen to spare their lives."

"Well, before we burst in here," said Dias, destroying the enemy weapons with his axe, "Mont said that Eldan wanted to put the rebels to work to make up for all the trouble they caused. Now, I'm not a big fan of slavery and that kind of thing, but if Eldan's plan means that the victims of all of this get repaid some, then I can get on board with it. So with that in mind, I'm trying to make sure we can take all these soldiers alive. As for what happens next—whether it's work or the death penalty—I'll let Eldan decide that."

Mont had actually been talking about *imprisonment* as a way to make up for losses, not slavery, but Dias had assumed Mont meant that the victims would be repaid. Mont and Juha thought of making up losses through the domain's earnings, taxes, and economy, but Aymer was reminded here that Dias saw things differently.

Given just how hard Dias hit all these soldiers, I daresay that none of them would even be capable of work until their broken bones healed…but then again, I suppose we can just leave those worries to Eldan. After all, it was his lack of foresight that allowed this rebellion to occur in the first place, so there's no need for Dias to get mixed up in things any more than he already is.

Aymer thus took to listening for enemy troop movement and providing intel to keep Dias safe. Her warnings weren't *really* necessary, given that Dias was more than capable of handling the enemy soldiers on his own, *and* his armor would protect him from any who miraculously landed a strike on him, but Aymer knew that Dias's armor had a power limit. If he were continually attacked, then eventually his armor would run out of energy and stop protecting him, and there was no guarantee that the Baarbadal forces would be done when they brought this stronghold under control. Knowing that, Aymer thought it best to conserve the magical energy within Dias's armor.

And…yes, the armor is still at eighty percent capacity. It's such a pleasant surprise that I can feel its reserves by touch…which makes it my job to keep Dias abreast of its status, seeing that he has no such abilities himself.

The impressive suit of armor remained on Aymer's mind as the cries of Joe and his platoon rang through the air, followed by the

sounds of fierce battle. Punctuating the chaos were loud howls—the coded messages that Mont had discussed with them all at their strategy meeting. Aymer's ears pricked up as she deciphered each one.

Enemies defeated, captured, defeated, defeated, captured...

Sounds like Joe's platoon is doing just fine. Joe is on the opposite side of us on the upper floor, while Lorca is on the lower floor. Ryan is following behind us, so...we'll head upstairs and let Ryan handle the rest of the ground floor.

"Dias," said Aymer, "let's head upstairs. Based on the construction of this inn, I suspect that the rebel leader is on the top floor. Leave the rest of the ground floor to Ryan's platoon. And just an update: Joe and his platoon are sweeping the stronghold, bringing enemy forces down and capturing them."

"Is that so?" replied Dias, grinning as he raced for the stairs.

When he reached the second floor, Dias proceeded with caution, doing his utmost to stay completely silent. But even then, rebel soldiers leaped out of hiding trying to catch him by surprise, because the halls were not wide enough to allow them to make good use of their numbers. For the rebels, then, their best chance was to catch Dias off guard, because if they could catch him in a pincer attack, then perhaps they might still find a way to beat him.

Aymer, however, did not allow them any such chances. She had excellent hearing, she was exceptionally intelligent, and her focus was so sharp that not a single soldier matched her wit. With the mousekin feeding Dias constant intel, he swept through the stronghold, felling all who stood in his way.

Just as they were about to reach the leader's room, Aymer's ears caught the sound of footsteps and carts outside of the stronghold.

What's this? Some of the soldiers are escaping via the stronghold's back entrance. Hmm... But if I were to inform Dias of this, he would only chase after them, fearing that they might attack a nearby village. We're only thirty strong, and we can't stretch ourselves so thin. We can't surround them at this point in time, so I suppose I'll just remain silent on this matter.

And so Aymer said nothing as Dias approached the room located at the deepest part of the stronghold. She sensed that the room had only one occupant and that they were ready for Dias.

But it was not a surprise attack they wanted. Rather, they looked to meet Dias face-to-face.

Except for the rebel soldiers making their getaway, all of this was information Aymer fed straight into Dias's ears.

"Your armor has a good reserve of magical power, and Joe's platoon has things completely under control. You're free to handle the rebel leader however you see fit."

But Aymer was not about to let her own guard down, and so she focused once again on her ears and prepared herself for anything.

In a Barren Plain Some Distance from the Stronghold —???

Just as Dias and Aymer were busting down the door into the last room of the stronghold, a group of rebel soldiers were making a hasty escape. Unfortunately for them, they came under siege by unknown assailants. Arrows had flown at them from completely out of nowhere, piercing their heads and throats as they attempted to flee.

Now only one remained, and so lost was he in fear and despair that not a word escaped him. But before he could utter anything at all, another arrow zipped through the air, as if fired from the ether, and ended his life.

"Dias wouldn't have had any trouble with arrows like these."

The voice came from right beside the last fallen soldier, and moments later the air wavered as though it were melting, revealing several men on horseback.

"Ugh... Hiding this many people with concealment magic really takes it out of you."

"You probably shouldn't say that aloud. The chieftain keeps the entire village hidden the whole time she's awake. You sound pathetic."

"Enough with the chatter. Let's start looking over the haul."

There were horns growing from the foreheads of the young men who chatted among themselves, their faces covered in paint that evoked an image of flames and their tanned bodies covered in thick hide likely designed especially for battle.

At the center of the group of young onikin men was Zorg, his

status as prospective village chief prominently shown in the ornament swaying from his neck. He briefly scanned the area, and when he saw no other survivors he had his men begin digging through the cart the soldiers had brought with them. Within moments, one was crying out with excitement.

“Hey! Zorg! Look at this! These soldiers were carrying a whole box of gold coins! Wine too! It’s been ages since I went on an expedition, and I guess luck is smiling on us today!”

“Gold, huh?” remarked Zorg. “Save some for the chief and split the rest among yourselves. Take all the soldiers’ equipment for the village, and… Hey! How are things looking in that cart?”

The young onikin carrying the box of gold coins looked delighted as he put it by his feet and began stripping the rebel soldiers of their armor and weapons.

“We’ve got some provisions, some wine, and salted meat,” reported the onikin rifling through the rebel soldiers’ cart.

“I’m taking some of those provisions for myself,” said Zorg, “but look how much there is. This is sure to win me some favor with the chieftain. With all the baby baars we’ve seen of late, we’re running out of helping hands… It can never hurt to have more food supplies.”

All the young onikin men grinned. Where once Zorg would have had eyes only for the riches the soldiers carried, now he was more interested in food—in feeding the people who waited at home for their return.

Zorg was no longer part of the onikin expedition parties, but when he had learned of a revolt in the neighboring domain, he had decided to lead a group out to the area and begged the expedition crews for their assistance.

“Dias is always far too kind,” he’d told them, “and there are bound to be stray soldiers looking to flee. If we target them, it’ll be easy work.”

And Zorg had not been wrong.

If they had done as the expedition parties were known for and charged into battle, the onikin likely would have caused Dias and his troops trouble. However, by remaining quiet and targeting only those who fled, they were able to loot valuables whilst playing a support role for Baarbadal. Everything had gone exactly as Zorg had predicted, and his men were overjoyed by the haul. And in the

grins of the young men were silent messages.

This guy might make a good chieftain after all.

Zorg's really grown up. Nothing like he used to be.

Zorg felt these messages prickling at his skin, and he averted his gaze from his men and motioned for them to get back to work.

"Don't just stand around, you idiots!" he barked. "This is a war zone! Now hurry up and get all this stuff back to our own cart before we get spotted!"

And with that he refreshed his concealment spell, the onikin men disappearing into the air as they rushed to finish looting.

The Deepest Room in the Stronghold—Dias

We'd marched through the stronghold dispatching every enemy soldier we met, and now we had arrived at the stronghold's last room. I kicked open the door to find a man dressed in a well-crafted suit of armor. He carried a beautifully decorated halberd and wore an impressively foul expression on his face.

The moment I saw him, I couldn't help thinking of an old comrade who'd stood by my side during the war. For a moment I thought that it actually *was* him, but then I realized that this man's twisted features and gaunt cheeks were not those of my former brother-in-arms.

"I'd come quietly if I were you," I said.

The man wore a mean look, but he had a presence about him too. And judging by the way he held his weapon, he clearly knew his way around a halberd.

I've got a fight on my hands with this one.

No sooner had the thought crossed my mind than the man launched his halberd at me. In his strikes I saw his strategy; he thrust his halberd over and over, not giving his opponent a moment to breathe, and then he struck with fiercer blows when an opening presented itself. He relied not on power but rather on technique. By aiming for openings in his opponent's armor, or their wrists or throat, the man could leave them writhing in pain, breathless, or without even a weapon to defend themselves. After that, it was just a matter of landing a killing blow.

Funnily enough, the fighting style reminded me of my old war buddy again, but unlike him this man's thrust lacked the accuracy I

remembered, and I was easily able to deflect it. The moment I did, I looked to take advantage of the opening, but the man saw it coming and hopped back a step. This surprised me, but I kept my swing going so I wouldn't leave an opening myself.

I knew then that this was not an opponent I could take lightly. My grip tightened on my axe. I couldn't simply knock him unconscious like the others. I would have to use the edge for this one.

I swung and I swung, but the man bobbed, weaved, and easily evaded everything I threw at him. I couldn't believe it. It was like he knew me or, at the very least, knew the way I fought. I couldn't hide my surprise, and in that moment of confusion my opponent pounced, shouting as he thrust his halberd so quickly I couldn't react to it in time.

"Wha?!" I cried out.

I readied myself for the pain that was soon to come, but instead of being struck by the man's halberd, my armor lit up and unleashed something like a blast of wind.

Oh, right. I forgot my armor could do that.

I was a bit surprised, admittedly. I'd completely forgotten about it because I was lost in the heat of battle. But my opponent? He was even more surprised. He'd been thrown backwards, his halberd almost flying from his hands. But I wasn't going to give him time to recover, so I stepped forward and swung my axe.

Instead of trying to pull his halberd back into the fight, the man simply let it go and dodged my axe slice. Then he reached for the sword hanging at his side, unsheathed it, and took a circular shield hanging from the wall. He had his shield in his left hand and his sword in his right, and I could tell by the loose grip he had on his sword that he meant to use it for thrusting.

The man's sword was very beautifully made, but it was also very short and thick. It was made with durability in mind, and it wasn't going to break easily. Little by little the man crept towards me. He kept his sword thrusts light and quick as he tried to better understand the phenomenon he'd experienced with my armor just moments ago.

In response, I raised my axe up high and brought it down at blinding speed to end our battle in an instant. But as I did, I noticed the hint of a grin on my opponent's face. He hadn't been

testing my armor at all; he'd been baiting me to throw this exact strike. As my axe came down, it ground off the man's shield, its momentum carrying it off to the side.

"Whoa!"

The man moved in to capitalize with all of his energy in a single killing thrust. But my armor once again came to my rescue, pushing the man away and off-balance. It was enough time for me to recover and collect myself.

Now, I'd always known that some people used swords and shields to deflect enemy attacks as a way to create openings, but I couldn't believe that this guy was using his shield on *my* battle-ax. Throughout the entirety of the war, nobody had ever deflected one of my axe strikes, and I was shocked now to find that there was somebody who could actually do it. Still, I kept on swinging, trusting in the fact that my armor would back me up whenever the guy parried me.

The man's sword was specifically designed to deal with opponents in a similar way, which meant he could parry with both sword and shield. And if he was *that* prepared, then I knew that playing cautious was pointless, just as I knew that coming up with a strategy was pointless. I never was very sharp in that regard, and it put me in a bit of a bother.

Every time I was parried I regrouped and swung my axe again, looking to tire him out so I could catch him when exhaustion forced an error. Left, right, up, down, diagonal—I swung my axe every which way I could, over and over. Every time the man parried me with his sword or his shield, or he deftly ducked, dove, and dodged to safety. We went back and forth, playing a cat and mouse game of attack and defense.

That said, I had things a bit easy on account of my armor instinctively deflecting the man's attacks. My opponent didn't have that same advantage, and so with time he began to tire. I could see lethargy creeping into his movements.

"What the heck, man?!" he cried out suddenly. "What is up with that armor?! And your crazy endurance on top of that?!"

His words were like a frustrated scream. His sword and shield were beaten and battered now and he threw them to the wayside, turning his attention to whatever was at hand and throwing it at me. He threw jars, wine bottles, even fabric—whatever he could

get his hands on. When he ran out of that stuff, he kicked open a box by his feet and started throwing coins at me.

Naturally, my armor knocked it all away, which only caused the man to scream and throw even more coins at me. The room filled with the sound of wailing cries and clinking coins as Aymer whispered in my ear.

“D-Dias, you must hurry! Your armor is using magical energy to deflect these coins just as it would ordinary attacks! It’s running out of energy very quickly, and it won’t defend you much longer…”

I’d had the upper hand until now thanks to my armor, but if it stopped working and my opponent knew it, I could find myself in a world of trouble. So I brought my axe down at the man, but with another cry he kicked off the ground and rolled to safety. Then he took off running for the door that I’d kicked down.

He’s making a break for it.

I wasn’t about to let that happen, and so I gave chase. I followed the man down the hall and up a set of stairs that brought us to the ramparts. The whole time the man was throwing coins at me, and when we reached the ramparts, one of them bounced off my armor with a clinking sound. At the same time, the golden sheen of my armor dulled.

Well, I guess that’s my armor all out of pop…

The man’s ears pricked up at the change, and it was clear to me that he knew what it meant too. He spun on his heels to face me and drew from his breast a dagger. Just like his sword, the blade was short and thick and designed for parrying. I didn’t think he’d be able to deflect a battle-ax with a dagger, but to my surprise that’s exactly what happened.

As my axe flew towards the ground, the man’s face twisted into a wicked grin and he launched himself at me. I knew that he was an experienced veteran and excellent in combat, but I also knew that Narvant and the cavekin had crafted me a truly excellent set of armor. Even without its magical powers, there weren’t any openings for the man’s blade to get to, and I trusted that the armor could easily take a knife.

With all that in mind, I didn’t think there was any need to worry, but because of the look of sheer crazed desperation on my opponent’s face, my instincts just kicked in and screamed at me to react.

So he's still got something up his sleeve, but…how am I supposed to deal with him?

I gripped my axe in both hands and lifted it up high while the man rushed at me, his dagger held tight in both hands near his waist. I was ready to take his attack dead-on and so I brought my axe down to finish the man off for good, but at that moment he sidestepped and my axe drove straight into the ground. In the next instant, he was all over me.

There was no getting out of the way now, and there was no defending against what was coming, so I accepted my fate and put my efforts into pulling my axe from the ground.

Dashing Madly Towards Dias—The Rebel Leader

Victory is mine!

With his poison-covered blade in hand, the rebel leader was mere moments away from plunging it into his sworn enemy. Gone was the strange blinding light of Dias's armor, and the man's eyes raced, searching desperately for an opening in which to bury his dagger. All he needed was a scratch. If he could open even the tiniest of wounds, that would be enough for him to stand triumphant over his foe.

The thought of it consumed the man and filled his heart with maniacal glee, his excitement so fulfilling, so orgasmic that there was little clarity left in his crazed grin.

But then, from within Dias's armor, a *mouse* hopped out.

The mouse's hands held a needle, and the rebel leader could not believe the sheer spring in the little creature's leap. He had not needed gloves, and he had not needed gauntlets, so he had never worn them. His hands were thus defenseless, and it was into their soft flesh that the mouse's needle sunk. The man's hand went numb for an instant, and as he lost the sense of his own limb, his dagger slipped from his grasp.

"A paralytic?! You damned mouse!" he screamed.

He had lost his dagger, but Dias was still right there in front of him, and so the rebel leader did not stop. He gave himself over to desperation and opened his mouth wide to bite his nemesis.

It was at that very moment, however, that a *falcon* dressed in strange armor kicked and scratched at his helmet with its talons,

stopping the rebel leader from attacking Dias at all.

The rebel leader thus screamed unintelligibly, his mind now far beyond the ability to express itself in words. But as the face of Dias's axe fell upon his head, he heard the man speak in a strong, confident voice.

"Sorry, but I've got a whole heap of friends looking out for me," said Dias.

A moment later, the impact of Dias's axe sent the man to the land of wind and ghosts, his grand dreams of conquest crushed in the worst way possible.

In the Stronghold Courtyard—Dias

We had suppressed the stronghold and rendered its leader unconscious. While we disarmed all the dangerous traps in the courtyard and made sure all of the rebel soldiers were bound nice and tight, the lionkin Sulio arrived with a force of a hundred soldiers under his command.

“Long time no see, Sir Dias!” he said. “We cannot thank you enough for coming to Mahati’s aid when it most needed you! After we received word from Geraint, Kamalotz ordered that we come to take the rebel soldiers into custody. Anything the bandits own or confiscated is free for you to do with as you wish! Their supplies, equipment, it’s all yours!”

I was just about to tell Sulio that we couldn’t possibly do that and that we’d give them all the supplies back, but it was then that Goldia gave me a real hard poke in the ribs with his elbow. It was something he’d done since we were kids, and I could always read what it meant loud and clear. This time it meant *Keep your damned gob shut*, so that’s what I did.

Realizing I still had to say *something*, I thanked Sulio for coming. Then Goldia called Ely over to help Sulio and his men see to their work while he pulled me aside to a quiet storeroom and shut the door so we weren’t heard.

“Look, I know what you’re thinking, and yes, returning all the stuff the rebels stole from the local towns and villages is a truly generous thing to do. But listen! Do that and you’ll just be spitting on the Mahati duke’s reputation. You waltzed in here, and you took down a stronghold without breaking a sweat, and if you do it all for nothing you might be stoking the fires for another revolt further down the line.”

Goldia explained that the revolt had happened because Eldan had made a mistake, and so to help him save face with his own people, the best thing to do was let *him* provide aid to the towns and villages instead of me.

“Take the supplies and the money you’re being offered and give it to Joe and your other troops as a reward,” continued Goldia.

“Them being your buddies, they might turn it down, but if that becomes the way of things in Baarbadal, then I feel a bit sorry for your future residents, I really do. If you want to help the victims in all of this, do it by investing in their economy. Buy the food you need and whatever local produce they’re selling. And if you don’t know what to buy, then just leave it with me or Ely… Actually, just leave it with the guild, okay?”

“Oh, okay. All righty, Goldia, it’s all you.”

When I put some thought into his reasoning, I realized that Goldia made a solid case, and Goldia nodded happily to see that I agreed with him. He stomped out of the storeroom to some of the guys waiting outside and started helping them carry out our new supplies. By that time, Sulio and his men were already moving all the captured rebels out, so I went up onto the ramparts to keep an eye on things. While I was there, Aisa ran up to me.

“I heard about everything from Aymer,” she said, placing a hand on my armor. “I’ll top you back up. I’ll fill you right to the brim, as I imagine you’ll be heading straight to the next stronghold, but now that I’ve had a chance to talk to Aymer I want to give you some advice.”

Aisa’s advice concerned how I was fighting, which is to say, she saw a lot of room for improvement.

“You’ve got this wonderful new set of armor, but you fight the way you did in your old gear. This is *much* nicer *and* more effective than those mass-produced plates you used to wear, and it’s got a great, albeit strange, power to go along with it. And considering you’re just as strong as you used to be, then you’ve got to understand that there’s a better way to fight now. According to Aymer you showed glimpses of it in that last duel of yours, but…you’ve got to be more bold! Fearless! You’ve got to throw yourself into the fray with *everything* you’ve got…literally! Are you feeling me? Do that, and your enemies’ confidence will just melt when you attack, *and*—”

Aisa went on to tell me about all the tactics, innovations, and fighting styles she’d learned about. Some of it was really helpful…and some of it less so, but all the same it helped me put things into perspective.

“I see, yeah, I think I get it.”

While Aisa and I were talking, all of our new supplies were

readied and all the rebel soldiers were hauled away, so it was time to say so long to Sulio. He said he was going back to Merangal to join up with Kamalotz. They were working hard to keep the place well defended. Sulio had actually been on the assault and had planned to siege several other enemy strongholds, but then Merangal had been attacked and people had been getting hurt.

Sulio and his troops could have stayed on the offensive, but Merangal was Mahati's center for governance and commerce, and so it was well populated. I could tell that by Sulio telling us about the strongholds he couldn't get to, what he was really saying was that he wanted *us* to capture them in his stead.

I thumped my chest with a fist and told him that we had things covered. We watched him and his troops start on the way back to Merangal, took a short break, then headed north for the next rebel hold.

We marched, we rested, and we stopped at towns and villages along the way, and at each stop news spread about us having toppled a stronghold. People also talked about the other bases we were heading to deal with and how we were ready to jump into the fray to help those in need.

It became quite the topic around the place, putting the citizens at ease and striking fear into the hearts of our foes. With morale high, we just kept doing what worked, and that meant our battles always started with me heading up to the stronghold doors by myself and busting them open.

Then I marched on inside and fought just like Aisa had said I should, which is to say I didn't give defense or evasion a second thought. Heck, I didn't even give it a first thought!

My first order of business was showing the rebels what they were dealing with, so I'd hit the walls or a pillar or the floor with everything I had, just like that time I'd cracked open that giant turtle's shell way back when.

When the rebel soldiers saw that attack, and when they saw all the dust and rubble bouncing off me because of my armor, most of them just surrendered on the spot. They didn't fight, and they didn't flee. I think it probably helped that we'd taken control of that first stronghold without any casualties.

Whenever we brought down an enemy base, we told Geraint,

who sent word to Sulio, who took all the rebel prisoners away. Then it was on to the next place, and the next place, and so on and so on. After a few rounds of that, we brought down all the strongholds on Merangal's western periphery. Nobody on our side was injured, and while some of the rebels were busted up pretty badly, they were all captured alive.

At the end of it all, we had ourselves a huge stockpile of goods thanks to all our work. I gave all the money and useful equipment to Joe and the troops as rewards, and everything else I tried to sell to villages and towns at bargain prices. I also made sure we bought things too, like food and wine, as well as furniture and whatnot for my war buddies' new homes. I tried to buy all that stuff at a premium, but even then we had a whole treasure trove of loot.

There wasn't really much else we could do except for haul what we could carry back to Iluk. The rest of it we gave to Goldia's guild as an investment. Investing in the guild was sure to have an effect on all the local populace, and I felt that was a good thing for all the people who'd suffered losses in the revolt.

Mont wasn't especially happy about us trading and investing all our resources, but I didn't like the idea of us making a profit from warmongering, and it would only cause big trouble if we started hoping for rebellions because of all the loot we got from it. Living a life of profit through war spoils wasn't all that different from living like criminals, not to mention it would constantly have us leaving Iluk. I didn't want that at all.

Beyond all that, I just wasn't interested in becoming ultra wealthy or anything. I much preferred farming and taking care of all our livestock, and in truth that was the life I most wanted to live anyway.

Long story short, instead of heading east to where Eldan was fighting, we decided not to get involved any further. We'd helped out Eldan enough already, and we felt good about it, so we went home. And unlike when we'd come to Mahati, we left with all our soldiers fully decked out with proper armor and weapons.

At a Giant Bonfire in the Iluk Village Square

We arrived back home in Iluk, and wouldn't you know it…they'd

already prepared a banquet the likes of which we'd never seen before. In the center of the village square was a massive bonfire. By the looks of things it'd required a major load of wood. Food and wine were in no short supply either, and all of it made for a huge party. There were smiles abounding, and everyone was singing songs and whooping with joy until they went hoarse.



We of course had plenty of reasons to celebrate. We'd taught those Baarbadal imposters a good lesson, we'd come home loaded with loot, and every single one of Baarbadal's new soldiers had returned home alive and uninjured. I guess that's why our banquet stretched on for a whole two nights.

And on the second night, Zorg turned up with some onikin. It looked like they'd had a spell of good luck in recent days because they celebrated right there along with us. When you considered that we were also celebrating the arrival of new residents, it was understandable that things got pretty rowdy.

Zorg had brought some onikin women with him, and it seemed like they'd come at least in part because they were on the lookout for prospective husbands, and, well, a lot of my war buddies were single. And sure enough, the men and the onikin ladies hit it off, but there were no sudden marriage proposals. Everyone agreed that for starters it was most important that we all got along.

When I'd heard about the rebellion, I hadn't been all that excited about the prospect of going to war again, but now that our part was over I couldn't say that I was unhappy about it. After all, we'd come away with more than what we'd had, and our efforts had proven so manly that it looked like we'd be able to make deeper connections with the onikin tribe. That was a good thing, in my book.

I was naturally a bit worried about my friend Eldan, who was still quelling the rebellion, but I had faith that he'd see things through. My worrying wasn't going to change anything anyway, and so spring in Iluk just kept on keeping on.

An Office in a Mansion in Merangal, Mahati—Juha

Juha took the report and looked over its contents. He stood in a dimly lit office, where maps and various reports lay strewn across every available surface.

"Dias has swept through the region, then… I see," he muttered.

He had been watching the enemy. He'd *known* what they'd been planning. And then they'd suddenly grown beyond any scale he'd predicted and seen through all his tactics as if they'd been reading his mind. Slowly but surely, the enemy had put Eldan's back against the wall. Juha's only option had been to send Geraint to

Dias with a request for reinforcements. Dias, in turn, had settled things in the west at lightning speed…yet again defying Juha's expectations.

Juha read the report one more time, and when he had committed the situation in the west to memory, he turned his focus to the map hanging on the wall. He dipped a finger in an inkpot, then painted over a section of it before taking a step back to look at it from another angle.

"I know the blame lies with me for not being able to read the enemy's movements," he muttered, his expression clearly pained by the admission, "but I don't understand. Their actions don't make any sense. The rebels did not maneuver like merchants thinking in terms of profit and loss. They did not maneuver like idiots drunk on ideas of revolution or like those helpless bastards who still believe in human superiority."

The foot soldiers were anything but high on morale, and yet as a whole the rebels had moved with surprising focus and accuracy. They had made virtually no mistakes, and Juha had been left utterly clueless as to who was actually in charge and what their true objective was. From the merchants to the fallen nobility to the human supremacists, every faction claimed itself the leaders of the rebellion.

"But given the chaotic nature of the rebellion as a whole, how was it even possible for them to move with such precision?" Juha muttered. "Is it possible that there was no leader at all? Did they move as they did out of sheer luck? No… That's simply not possible. There *must* be a leader, but could it be that none among the rebels is truly aware of who that leader is? Is it possible that a genius exists who surpasses even me? Were they pulling the strings from somewhere behind the scenes? But even if such a person existed…who the hell were they, and what did they want?"

Juha reached down, picked up a discarded report, and wiped the ink from his fingers with it. What bothered him now was how the movements of the rebels had suddenly lost their former confidence. It was as if their leader had suddenly vanished from their ranks completely.

"Is there any chance that they simply lost faith…? Was the rebel leader killed randomly, somewhere in the midst of it all? The rebel forces began to crumble right around the time that Dias arrived at

the first stronghold… Is it possible that the rebel leader was *there*? Or was it the leader's aim all along to draw Dias to *that* location, after which their presence was no longer necessary? No, such a thing could have been accomplished far more easily. Perhaps the idea was to draw Dias into battle and then by killing him, essentially steal his reputation…"

Juha paused momentarily but soon shook his head. "No, I'm just grasping at straws now. That is *far* too convoluted…"

For all of Juha's meandering thoughts, he was still left with one glaring question: *Just what the heck happened?*

He continued to wipe at the ink on his fingers as his brain struggled to find a place of logic and reason in the behavior of the rebel forces. But no answers ever arrived, and so Juha abandoned the topic to focus his attention on bringing down the last remaining rebel bases. He knew precisely the right tactics to use next in the blink of an eye, and after neatening his messy clothes and combing his hair, he strode out from his room to report to Eldan.

Some Days Later—Across the Kingdom's Lands

The Mahati rebellion was crushed, and as the war came to a close the people returned to their daily lives. But in the days following, people all across the Sanserife Kingdom heard of it through rumor, poetry, song, and tales of adventure.

Much of the talk centered on how the nation's heroic savior had once again saved his home country, moving with unbelievable speed like a spear into the heart of the rebel army, stopping their efforts before they had any chance to grow out of control. He had assembled a small fighting force consisting of old friends, and decked out in a golden suit of armor that protected him from even raining arrows, he had brought down entire enemy strongholds with a single swing of his battle-ax. He had asked for nothing in return and had even done all he could to help support and rebuild the areas that had taken the worst damage.

On the great hero's shoulder had perched an impressive falcon in equipment all its own. The courageous animal understood the words of its master and it soared the blue skies, swooping in to rescue the hero from danger. This led to talk of how even the

natural world could now be counted among the hero's allies—a story given all the more credence due to the fact that skies had been clear all throughout the hero's campaign.

And while these stories shifted and changed as they traveled from place to place, the key points remained constant…though the reactions of the people were wide and varied. The king responded with a smile at the news, while a renowned elderly duke clapped his hands and laughed. A former princess locked away in a temple ground her teeth, while her sisters reacted with excitement and giggles. And then there was the prince, who worked the wonders of reform to shine a light of hope among the populace, saving the weak and crushing the corrupt. It is said that he, too, allowed for a grin in private. All in all, most of the citizenry were glad about the news.

But these stories and rumors did not stop at the kingdom's borders. They crossed them, in fact, entering the empire's lands and reaching as far as places that even Dias himself did not know existed.

???—???

The rumors and stories of the hero Dias thus arrived here, at a lonely, dark, and quiet place where the clean air had a chill to it and no other signs of any life existed.

"Dias's lack of ambition comes as a surprise. I did not expect him to return home with so little."

The voice came from a man, speaking to himself in the darkness of that desolate location.

"He could have taken territory along his route or made Mahati concede some of it. So many options, and yet before I could do a thing he swept through and then went home, just like that. While he is there, with *them*, I can do nothing. What to do, what to do…?"

The man quickly lost interest in the happenings of the outside world and turned his attention back to the documents he held. He was drawn to them, engrossed by these strange papers that could be read even in the darkness, and so he lost himself in their contents. He spoke no more and was still as a statue in his reading. Yet his mind was abuzz, considering what to do next and whom to have do it.

Extra Story: The Nation’s Heroic Saviors

One Day on the Plains—Dias

The skies were clear as a gentle wind rustled through the grassy plains. Standing on those plains were two opposing forces. On one side stood a group of four: Goldia, Aisa, Ely, and Ellie. On the other stood thirty-four: the platoons of Joe, Lorca, and Ryan, all of them under the command of Mont.

The face-off between the two groups had started as mere chatter during lunch. Somebody had brought up the topic of the war, and Dias’s war buddies had started regaling all with tales of their escapades. At the same time, Goldia had been talking about the guild’s own exploits behind the scenes, and so the conversation had grown more and more energetic.

In the beginning, everyone had spoken nothing but praise for one another, but at some point a competitive spirit had started to boil, at which point each group looked to one-up the other. Suddenly, the air had grown thick with tension, and it was then that Alna had chosen to speak.

“It’s one thing to sit here and talk, but if you really want to settle things you’ll get out there and prove it.”

That was all it took, and the two groups had agreed to what was, in essence, a giant sparring match. Everybody’s weapons were wooden and wrapped in cloth. Every competitor, too, had their head, body, legs, and fists wrapped in similar material to ensure that none were seriously injured. In the case of magic, spellcasters were told that any show of excess force would result in immediate disqualification.

Four versus thirty-four was the exact opposite of a fair split, but Goldia’s team was so confident that they *welcomed* the imbalance as a chance to really prove their dominance beyond any doubt. And if they were happy to take on larger numbers, then who was I to stop them?

To be honest, I couldn’t really get behind all the bravado, but I was kind of totally alone in that sentiment. Alna, the twins, Aymer,

the grandmas, Hubert, Uncle Ben, the baars, the lostblood brothers, all the dogkin, Sahhi and his wives…

Yep, the literal entire population of Iluk (besides me) just couldn't wait to watch. They laid out blankets, brought food and drink, and even started shouting and cheering.

"Good luck, everyone!"

"Give 'em hell!"

"Baa!"

By that point, uh…there was nothing I could do to stop any of it.

The referees for the sparring match were me, Aymer, and Sahhi. Aymer and I kept an eye on things at ground level while Sahhi watched from above. It was our job to make sure everyone played by the rules and to disqualify anybody who didn't.

"Look, just try and make sure nobody gets hurt," I said, resigning myself to the fact that this was all really happening. "And no matter how this all ends, I don't want any hard feelings between any of you, okay? You'll leave it all out here on the plains!"

"Yeah, all right!" shouted Goldia.

"Isn't that obvious, you dolt?!" barked Mont.

The two sides were already raring to go, so I gave the sign for them to start.

"Let the sparring commence!" I declared.

I knew that now that things had come this far, the only option was to just let them play out and stay out of the way. I stepped back closer to the crowd as both of the teams came charging at each other.

"I done built myself up to get one up on Dias, and now *you're* gonna taste it!" shouted Goldia.

He held both of his arms at the ready by his sides, and had his legs spread in a wide stance as he took a number of deep breaths to psych himself up. Aymer was sitting on my shoulder, and she pushed her glasses up her nose as she watched the proceedings.

"Sir Goldia is building up his magical energy to boost his physical abilities," she said. "He must be quite good at such spells, because I can feel the magic even from where we're standing. With that much of a boost on his side it wouldn't surprise me if he could break rocks with those fists of his."

Goldia raised his arms as Aymer broke it all down, and then he leaped forwards, throwing his fists at Joe's platoon. Joe and his

men quickly jumped out of the way, and Goldia's fists pounded straight into the ground. Everything shook, but that was when Ellie leaped into the fray.

"Ellie is boosting her body with magic too, but her spells work a bit differently from Goldia's. My sense is that she reinforces her joints in particular, therefore raising her flexibility. This enhances her natural elasticity and makes her even lighter on her feet. She can evade attacks with it, but she can also launch her own from very unorthodox angles. And when it comes to her fists, she can harden and soften them at will, effectively turning her arms into a ball and chain."

While Aymer told me what she was doing, Ellie launched her own attack on Joe's platoon. The way she dodged and swayed made me think she was dancing, but she also threw punches while she moved, and anyone hit by them found themselves red and swollen even through all the protective cloth.

"Aisa is using magic very much in the way we've already heard about, though she's refrained from using dirt and sand. She's holding back just like we asked. As for Ely...he's up to *something*, and the other three are all protecting him. He's definitely casting something, but it's thin and spread out... I wonder if he intends to catch the other team's legs and trip them up? Oh, wait, it looks more like he's sapping them all of their magical energy. He's doing it slowly but very surely. If Mont and his team don't realize soon, they'll be in a world of trouble."

Ely kept to the center of the guild's formation, and though he had a weapon, he wasn't really moving, doing something that seemed pretty complicated instead. Ely's weapon wasn't anything particularly big, and he wasn't an especially big guy in the first place. He looked a bit meek and frightened actually, so none of Mont's men paid him any mind. They just didn't see him as a threat.

From where I was standing, Ely looked like he was putting on an act. I could see right through him, but Joe and the others hadn't known Ely that long, so they were none the wiser.

"Goldia has so much raw strength and endurance going for him," said Aymer. "He just keeps on going, and his strikes hit like he's swinging a steel hammer. Ellie fights in a similar fashion, but she's a little more cunning and a touch more precise. She's not

looking for a one punch knockout; she's looking to make you give her an opening, and *then* she puts you away. She keeps abreast of everything that's happening around her so she can support her team. Meanwhile, Ely can do what he's doing because he trusts that his friends will keep everyone occupied."

Now that she had Goldia's team strategy worked out, Aymer turned her attention to their opposition. My war buddies were moving around as per Mont's orders, and they'd had a couple of successful attacks. If they'd been using real weapons, they'd have finished the battle already. However, with wooden weapons wrapped in cloth, just hitting the others once or twice simply wasn't enough.

Mont's style was to stick with tried-and-true strategies. When he had his opponents outnumbered, he made sure they were surrounded and, if they were tough nuts to crack, then he wore them down before finishing them off. Victory was the final destination, and he expected some losses on the way to it.

So while he was steadily wearing Goldia and the others down, he and his team weren't able to put any of them down for the count. In contrast, Goldia's team was going all out, and they'd taken a couple of Mont's men out of play.

My old war buddies were by no means weak, and if they'd been in a real war, they'd have gone just as hard as Goldia's team. Unfortunately, the rules of the sparring match worked against them and put them at something of a disadvantage. This meant that the platoons had to make use of their numbers to chip away at Goldia's team, but they were also dealing with Ely's magic and defending themselves, and their movements started to dull.

"Joe!" barked Mont. "Keep a tight perimeter! Lorca! If you're afraid of his fists then tackle the guy and put him on his back! Ryan! Save your energy! We need you for our final push!"

Mont had seen his men slowing, and his orders put some much-needed energy into them. His training was harsh, but Mont was always on the front lines with his men when they were drilling. He was one of them, and his words buoyed the others in a way that went beyond tactics alone. Over many months and years, Mont and all the platoons had developed a deep trust and a brotherly bond. They were all proud of that, and Mont's shouts reminded them all of it.

The first of Goldia's team to fall was Ellie. She was held down by ten men with wooden spears, and we considered her out of the match. Aisa was the next to be captured, and Ely fell as his team's formation crumbled. But Mont's team wasn't without its own casualties, so to speak—there were only five of them left by this point: Mont, Joe, Lorca, Ryan, and one other. They had to take down the rampaging Goldia, a task much easier said than done.

The last remaining platoon member was the first to fall, followed by Lorca, then Ryan. Joe was next, after taking one of Goldia's punches straight in the kisser. That left only Goldia and Mont standing face-to-face, glaring at one another. It was like a staring contest where the first to look away lost, and for the briefest second, Goldia's eyes flashed downwards...to Mont's prosthetic leg.

"You idiot. Thinking you can go easy on me, eh?" muttered Mont.

He'd lowered his voice, but we heard him clearly even on the sidelines, and in the next moment Mont's fist flew upwards like a flash of light, colliding with Goldia's jaw. Goldia was completely and utterly exhausted, and that one little slip of concentration was all it took—he wobbled, he stumbled, and then he fell.

"They had the advantage in terms of numbers, but even then Mont's team showed us their guts," I said.

"And at the very end, Goldia's own kindhearted nature lost him the battle," added Aymer.

Behind us, everybody erupted into cheers.

"Yep, both sides showed some tremendous manliness," Alna commented, walking over to us. "It's the life of a warrior to endure the loss of such battles and strive to surpass who they were. It might be worth holding more matches like this in the future. But for now, the Wives' Club has made some delicious, nutritious dishes, so once everyone regains consciousness, let's eat, drink, and be merry. There's nothing like good food after a fight to bring people together. Everyone's going to be stronger for this."

Alna then took off to start dishing out the food. I decided I'd help her out, but not before glancing at Aymer on my shoulder. By the look she gave me, I could tell we were on the same page. We both knew that all of this had been Alna's plan right from the start, and so all we could do was shake our heads and chuckle about it.

Afterword

As always, I'll start with thanks. To everybody who has supported this story, and to everybody supporting me on Shosetsuka ni Naro. To those of you who send me fan letters. To all the editing staff working on the book. To the excellent staff who help with revisions. To the designer, and Kinta the series illustrator. To Yumbo handling the manga, their assistants, and the manga editing staff.

To all of you, thanks so much! It's because of you that we have volume 8!

Now, on the topic of volume 8. This is a volume in which items are invented, facilities are built, and new friends are made. We meet people who fought by Dias's side, people who fought in the same war elsewhere, and people who supported it all behind the scenes. It's for this reason that the subtitle is The Nation's Heroic Saviors.

All of the characters introduced in this volume will pop up again later down the road, but you'll just have to wait and see how they get mixed up in things and how they turn out. You might have noticed that some of them are rather similar in one way or another, and later down the line the exact reasons for that will become clear.

There's so much I want to talk about and introduce, and so much more to write about. It's my plan to write all of it into the story so you can enjoy it, and I'm going to give it everything I've got!

You might have seen this fact on the cover slip, but the *Frontier Lord* series has surpassed a total of one million copies sold. I'm so overjoyed and grateful, and now I'm filled with the desire to make things even more fun for you readers. This milestone is a huge motivation for me.

I want to make sure the story and the world are fun, intriguing, and refreshing so that even more people decide to pick it up and

take a look at it. That I can feel empowered like this and that I can keep writing like this is thanks purely to all of you who read the story. I know I'm repeating myself, but I can't tell you how grateful I am.

Thank you so much! I'm going to put even more effort into the story than ever before!

With all that enthusiasm overflowing, it's time to talk about volume 9. We'll have a return to summer, and we'll see the use of certain things introduced in the pages of volume 8. We'll also see the people of Iluk grow and take part in lots of activities. You can bet there'll be some trouble to deal with too, but with Dias making new friends all the time, you know he'll find a way through.

Oh, and a nostalgic face from the past might even return, so...look forward to that!

I look forward to writing you all again in volume 9!

Fuurou, July 2022

Bonus Short Story

Goldia and Mont Cook

Early Afternoon on a Bright and Clear Day—Senai and Ayhan

It was a beautiful day. The girls had studied hard and taken to their chores diligently and had been given the rest of the day to play to their hearts' content. As they dashed happily around the village, they noticed two men at the kitchen range.

It was quite rare to see men at the kitchen range, but it was rarer still to see one actually cooking something, and the twins approached the kitchen range with great curiosity. The two men in question—Goldia and Mont—were both wearing aprons and smiled when they noticed the girls approaching.

"Are you cooking?" asked Senai.

"Can you cook?" asked Ayhan.

The two men didn't stop their prep as they replied.

"I used to own my own tavern," replied Goldia, "so cooking is easy for me. I also happen to have some free time on my hands, so I thought I'd put it to good use here at the range."

"In the empire, they say that if you can't cook to save yourself, you don't deserve saving," said Mont. "I thought I'd stretch the old cooking muscles, and I happened to bump into Goldia when I got here."

Goldia talked to the girls like an uncle or aunt might their nieces, whereas Mont was as deferential as one who'd sworn loyalty to their king. The girls were curious about what the men would make, and so they stepped up onto the kitchen range to get a better look.

On Goldia's side, there was a board on one of the prep tables, and on it was ham, herbs, cheese, and soft, fluffy bread in the shape of circles. It looked like he was making the sort of thing the twins often had for breakfast.

On Mont's prep table, they found a long, thin loaf of hard-looking bread with some sliced butter on the side. He hadn't prepared anything more than that, it seemed, and the twins pouted looking at it. "That's not cooking!" they were about to say. Mont saw this, however, and his grin silenced them. He cut the bread down the middle, and inside the girls saw that it was chock-full of walnuts and fruit.

The bread was crunchy on the outside but fluffy on the inside. Packed with fruits and nuts, it was by no means an easy bread to bake. The girls knew that even by itself the bread made for a fine meal, and they knew that lightly toasting it before covering it with butter would make it undeniably delicious. They knew this so well, in fact, that they had to be careful not to drool on themselves.

"Hey now," called Goldia. "I bet you I've got something just as mouthwatering."

The twins bounded on over to Goldia's table, where he cut open a piece of bread and put in it melted cheese, herbs, ham, and spices. Finally, he sprinkled some crushed walnuts over it. There was also the faint scent of honey wafting from it, which must have been baked into the bread.

The twins' drool was at risk of overflowing as Goldia and Mont finished their preparations, chuckling the whole time. They even pulled up a couple of chairs so the twins could join them. When they were done, they served a little to both girls and asked them to decide which was the most delicious.

"Not only is this up there with the best the kingdom has to offer, you might even call it the best on the entire continent!" declared Goldia.

"Nothing is wasted in the refined style of imperial cuisine," said Mont. "It is truly the best on the entire continent!"

The twins, however, were less concerned with what the men were saying than with the flavors of the bread sitting in front of them. They gave their thanks to the chefs and the ingredients, then opened their mouths wide and took the biggest bites their mouths could manage.

Goldia's bread was soft, with a luxurious sweetness thanks to the honey. It was made even tastier thanks to the delicious ingredients sandwiched within, and each bite came with a lovely flow of melted cheese. It was a masterpiece from start to finish.

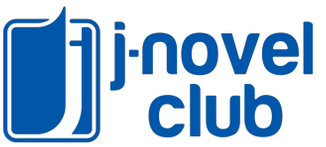
Mont's bread was just as firm on the outside as the twins had imagined, and this made for a delightful crunch when they bit into it. Bread crumbs went everywhere as the scent and taste of butter filled their nostrils and mouths, intensifying the whole experience.

For the twins, this was not about which was better or worse. Both were *incredible*. By the time they finished, the twins felt wonderfully full and supremely satisfied.

"These are so good!" said Senai. "Thanks, Goldia! Thanks, Mont!"

"I want to eat both of these again!" added Ayhan. "Thanks for the treat!"

Truth be told, the twins had completely forgotten that the men had given them the bread so they could judge which was superior, and for a moment both Goldia and Mont were speechless. However, they were happy as long as the twins were happy, and with everybody quickly gathering around because of the delectable aroma, they promptly got back to work baking more for everyone.



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The Frontier Lord Begins with Zero Subjects: Volume 8
by Fuurou

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