AUTHOR
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IX
PLEDGE ON A SPRING DAWN

ILLUSTRATOR
Kinta

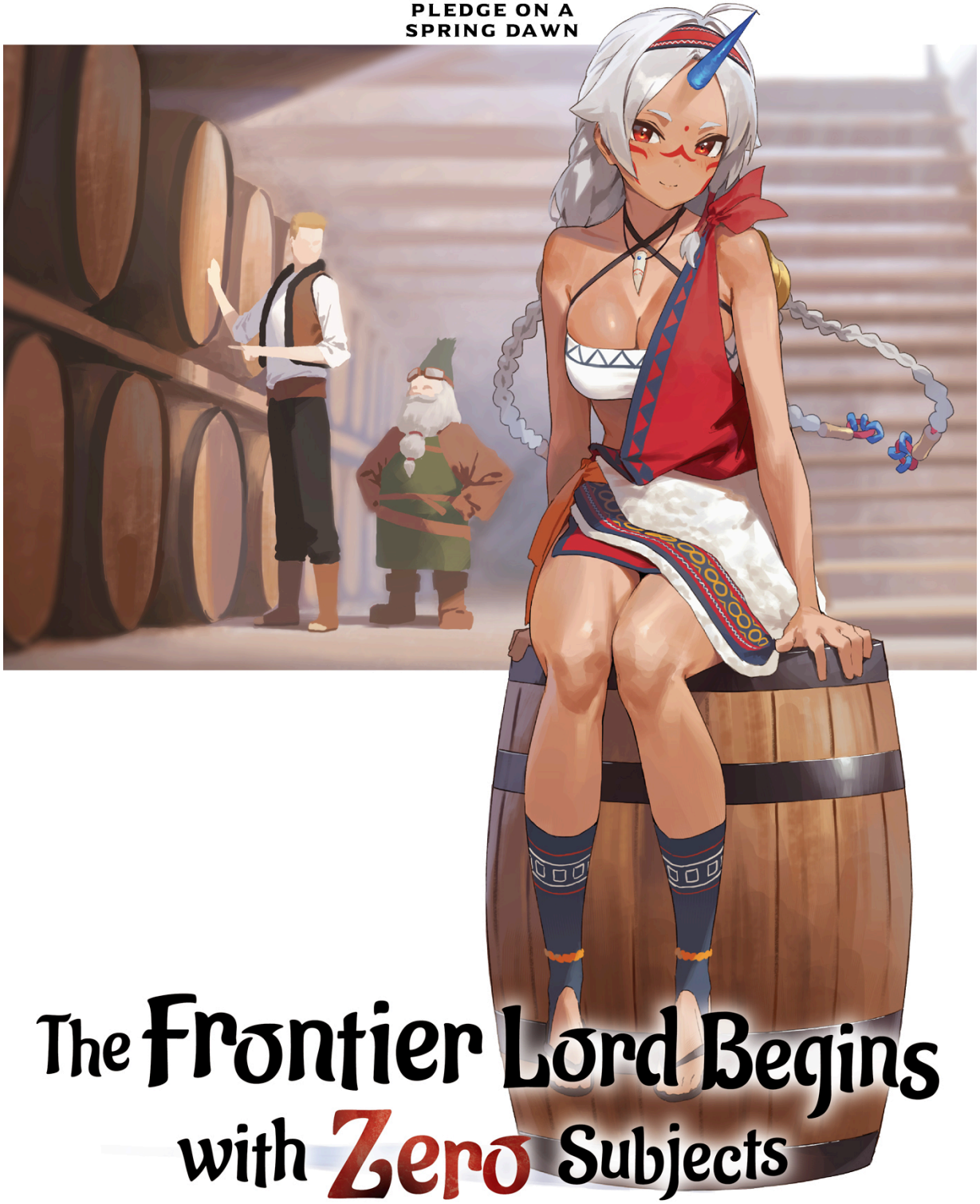


# The Frontier Lord Begins with Zero Subjects

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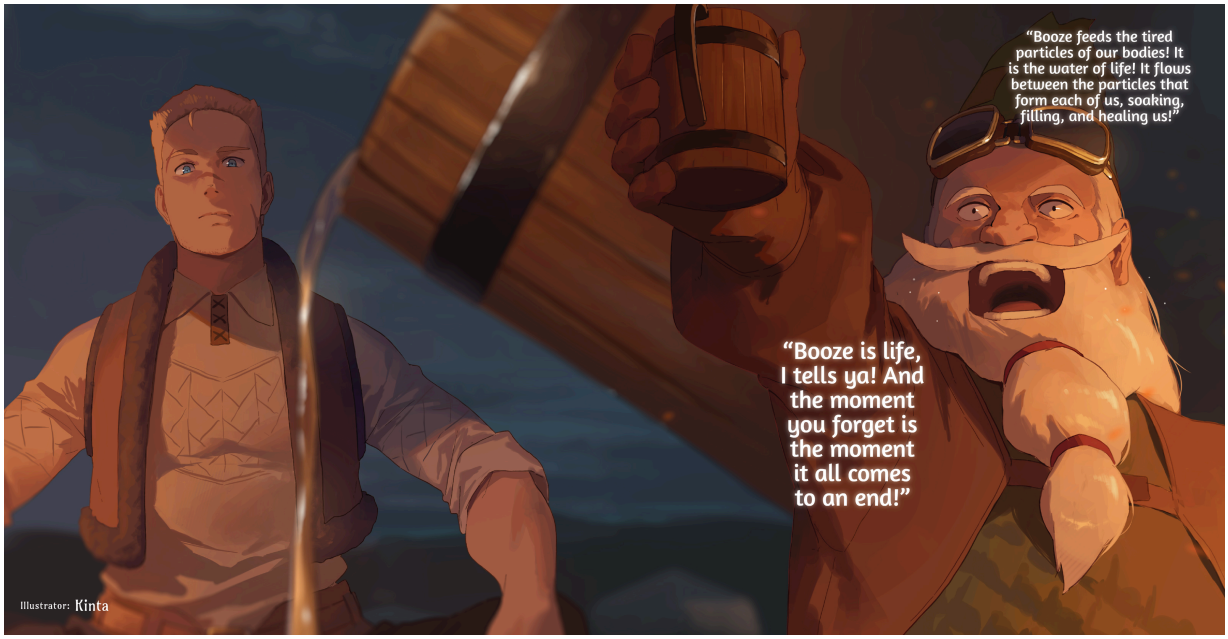
IX
PLEDGE ON A SPRING DAWN

ILLUSTRATOR
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# The Frontier Lord Begins with Zero Subjects


The Frontier Lord Begins with Zero Subjects
With their jars of fresh honey in their hands, Senai and Ayhan turned to us with great big smiles on their faces, giggling with excitement.
It smells wonderful too!
It tastes just as good as it looks!


"Booze feeds the tired particles of our bodies! It is the water of life! It flows between the particles that form each of us, soaking, filling, and healing us!"
"Booze is life, I tells ya! And the moment you forget is the moment it all comes to an end!"
Illustrator: Kinta



# Cast of Characters



## Dias

Lord of the Baarbadal Domain, formerly Nezrose.



## Klaus

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



## Eldan

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



## Ellie

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



## Alna

Onikin tribe member and Dias's wife.



## Senai and Ayhan

Twin sisters and forestkin with mysterious powers.



## Aymer

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



## Zorg

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



## Juha

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



## Hubert

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



## Goldia

Childhood friend of Dias, now the head of Artois Trading Co.



## Seki, Saku, and Aoi

Three lostblood brothers who moved to Iluk from the Beastland Kingdom.

## Narvant

Elderly cavekin and skilled blacksmith.



## Sahhi

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



## Mont

Once Dias's former foe, but now Iluk Village's resident drill sergeant.



## Aymer's Report

# Residents: From 158 to 196!

A strange baar gave the Baarbadal domain lord, Dias, a set of armor crafted from a mysterious material. Clad in his new armor, Dias went to battle against a group of wind dragons. Together with the falconkin Sahhi, the two slew all of the wind dragons, acquiring their materials and magical stones in the process. The material was quickly put to use crafting armor for the falconkin.

Goldia, Dias's childhood friend who is now head of the trading guild Artois Trading Co., visited Iluk Village. He impressed upon Dias the importance of a dedicated guesthouse, and so yurts were erected and decorated for that very purpose. Not long after the guesthouse was put up, two nobles of the royal faction visited—Erling and Sachusse. Both left on friendly terms with Baarbadal.

Dias's former war buddies—led by Joe, Lorca, and Ryan—all arrived in Iluk and became residents. The other new Iluk resident, Mont, was once an imperial soldier and Dias's enemy. The peg-legged Mont is now the resident drill sergeant.

*When I heard that Dias's former comrades in arms were coming, I couldn't help but worry as to what sort of people they were, but they're all wonderful. They all look up to Dias. Though I must say that Sir Mont is a touch...let's just say quirky...*

*Not a bad person, by any means—just rather unique.*

A rebellion broke out in Mahati, the domain overseen by Eldan. Upon receiving a call for support, Dias headed out with Mont and his former troops to suppress things in western Mahati. They all returned home safely.

The domain lord of Baarbadal and his friends were glad to be reunited.

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, guesthouse, water stream hut, ice storehouse.

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# At Breakfast in the Village Square

With our part in the war in Mahati over, we celebrated our victory and safe return home—a celebration that stretched over two days. The day after our victory banquet, we all had breakfast in the village square, where I had a chance to hear what everyone had been up to while I'd been away.

I'd only been gone a little more than a week, and while it had felt like the blink of an eye to me, for the residents of Iluk it had felt like an age. A whole lot had happened, and the status reports were no easy thing to summarize. They kept on going even after I'd finished breakfast, helped clean up, and put away all the tables and chairs save for my own.

Ellie, Seki, Saku, and Aoi were first to tell me what they'd been up to. With trade on hold, they'd taken to helping Narvant with making and stocking our new storage cellars.

The storage cellars were basically all done, but at the time they'd still needed to be filled with ice before the summer. Ellie and the lostblood brothers had made trip after trip out to the northern mountain, filled their cart with ice and snow, and wrapped it up in baar wool to keep it from melting under the sun. Once all that was brought in, the storage cellars had gotten nice and chilly.

We had one cellar by our little hut at the stream, one north of the village, one by the guesthouse, and one at the border station. Now that they were filled with ice and snow, one step inside was like walking straight into winter, apparently, and the villagers had already taken to keeping foodstuffs in them. So far we were storing herbs, forest forage, white ghee cheese and butter, and raw meat.

Now, everyone understood that food lasted longer during the winter, but some had been a little dubious that the cellars functioned the same way, and so these villagers had to be shown the effects of the cellars firsthand. Once they were convinced, however, everyone

was happy to use them. That said, it wasn't just ice we were using. We'd already learned about the preservative effects of rowan berries, which we gathered in the forest, and the plan was to start experimenting to see how much they added to the cellars' impact.

Speaking of the forest, Senai and Ayhan had begun cultivating a field out that way. Klaus and the dogkin had helped them cut down some trees to create a space not far from the border station, which the girls were using to replant the various saplings they'd grown at the village. The girls realized that some of their plants were much better suited there than on the plains, and now that the forest was part of our domain, they were hurrying to ready the new field. They called it their sapling garden.

The soil in the forest was rich and held all sorts of power in it, according to the twins. They said that trees would grow even bigger if they were nurtured in the forest, and that meant their nuts and berries would grow even bigger and more delicious.

That said, it being the forest and all, there was lots of wildlife and bugs around compared to the plains, which could sometimes pose problems. That meant we'd have to set things up to combat such issues. That was the reason that the twins had decided to keep some of their saplings around Iluk Village. They said they were doing it just in case something happened to the forest, but they also said something along the lines of wanting to find out which trees grew well on the plains.

As for Uncle Ben and Hubert, they'd been discussing how to expand Iluk and deciding on lots of detailed rules, laws, and other village matters. You see, when Joe and my war buddies had turned up, we'd gotten a whole lot of new residents all at once. We'd had to put up yurts for everyone, and naturally Iluk had ballooned too...into a big ol' pile of yurts.

That was all fine for the time being, but according to Uncle Ben and Hubert, if we just kept putting up yurts wherever we felt like it, we'd run into trouble in no time. They said we should set about doing some district planning—or something like it—so we knew where to put different yurts for what. They were also talking about constructing wooden buildings as well.

The practical issue that came about with Joe and the others arriving was that we also had to build extra privies and wells. If we weren't thoughtful then it would lead to bigger problems. Uncle Ben and Hubert wanted to make sure everybody could live happily with convenient housing and facilities. Planning ahead meant we wouldn't build anything we didn't need to.

I didn't have the smarts for any of that stuff. I didn't know the best course of action or even how to *start* with district planning, so I left all of it to the two of them.

Narvant and his family had been working on the cellars, as I said earlier, but they'd also been putting a ton of effort into making lots of their strange pots and water jars—the ones that somehow cooled their contents. Every single yurt in the village had its own pots and jars now, and the cavekin had even made some for Ellie's cart. They told me that because the pots were essentially just unglazed pottery, they were very easy to produce in large quantities. Quick too, I gathered.

However, good pottery required good clay, and the cavekin had gone about exploring the plains and the wasteland for what they needed. It was a cinch for them, and they knew that we'd always want to have the stuff on hand, so they gathered enough that there was a dedicated stockpile at their workshop.

Grandma Maya and her friends had spent the days the way they always did, while Sahhi's wives had been keeping watch over the village's safety from up high. The baars had been worried about us going into battle, so they'd lost a bit of their usual appetites, but other than that they'd gone about their days as usual.

The dogkin, too, had been going about everyday life and staying flexible as necessary. They'd worked the fields, done guard duty, and protected the lostblood brothers on their trips to gather ice; and as for the sheps, they'd kept going to the salt plain for collection. The salt was for Ellie to sell, but with trade on hold she'd had no buyers. But even then the sheps had kept up their daily salt gathering, knowing that trade would start up again soon enough.

The sheps had gathered so much salt that eventually the villagers had needed to erect yet another dedicated yurt to store it all. Not

that it deterred the sheps. They were even planning to go out today and collect, just like they did every day. Goldia had already told us that the kingdom was in dire need of the stuff, so the plan was to use all the gathered salt for that, which meant having Goldia take care of it.

The proceeds of our salt sales would go towards timber, which we'd use for housing and to finally build the temple that Uncle Ben wanted. I also wanted to make the cavekin workshop into something real respectable, and I felt like the stables could do with an expansion while we were at it. We had a growing number of horses and white ghee, and it wouldn't be long before they produced offspring, so I thought it was a good idea to prepare for that early.

With that idea in mind, I also wanted to expand the goose pen...and, well, when I thought about it, I realized there was lots of stuff I wanted to do around the village. I also had to think about jobs for Joe and the other new residents. Iluk was seriously growing in leaps and bounds, and it meant busy days ahead.

Eventually, when I finished listening to everyone's reports, I was finally able to get up and stretch my legs. I figured that I'd just get to working on whatever job needed me, and first on that list was putting my chair away. After that I went through a light training session, then took a look around the village and helped out around the fields and the stables. Then I went to the village square, because I knew that if I hung around there then someone would ask me for help with something.

While I was there, Ellie, Seki, Saku, and Aoi all showed up. They weren't dressed in their usual gear, instead wearing cloaks and baar wool caps. It all looked a lot to me like what they liked to wear when they were traveling across the border.

"Why are you all dressed that way?" I asked. "You're not thinking about heading out with the cart already, are you?"

The rebellion had been quelled in western Mahati, where we'd suppressed their efforts, but the war was still being waged in the east. It wasn't peaceful by any means. Things were improving day by day, but it would take some time before things really settled. I couldn't really agree to the idea of taking valuables over the border

given the situation over in Mahati.

That was my take on things, but I could tell by Ellie's smile that she had other ideas.

"That's *exactly* what we're thinking," she declared. "I know you're probably against the idea because you think it's dangerous, but for us guild merchants, danger spells opportunity! When situations are bad like they are in Mahati, trade lines get held up and people starve. When people starve, that's an opportunity for us to help and to profit. The whole reason the guild got to where it is now is because we strode right into danger, fighting off monsters, bandits, and enemy soldiers to conduct trade wherever necessary!"

Ellie brought her arms out from her cloak and struck a fighting pose to show me she meant business. Seki, Saku, and Aoi all followed suit, grinning as they showed off some strange new gauntlets.

"All of us merchants—Goldia, Aisa, and Ely too—use our fists, weapons, and magic to break through any barriers that block our progress," continued Ellie. "We'll find our way to customers who need us by hook or by crook! I think this is a fine opportunity to educate the boys, and so I had Narvant and his family craft some weapons for them. And besides, if we don't get all our salt to Goldia soon, we might lose those sales entirely. So I ask that you see us off with a smile, please."

"Opportunities in the midst of danger, huh?" I murmured, taking another look at the lostblood brothers. "Well, if you're going out there to help people in need, then I won't stand in your way... But would you at least tell me about the new weapons? When did the boys even get them?"

"I'll be honest, I was as shocked as you are, but the boys started making prototypes as soon as they got here. I made sure they had swords for when we went on our trade trips, but Sanat said that as beastkin they have different preferences, and he used their designs to make them something more suitable. I know they look like just gauntlets at a glance, but thanks to some clever use of monster materials, they're *so* much more! Go on, boys, show papa what I'm talking about."

Seki, Saku, and Aoi all grinned and clenched their fists. At that moment, I heard the sliding of metal and watched as three steel claws emerged from each gauntlet, glimmering in the sunlight.

"A little magical energy is all it takes to engage the claws," explained Ellie. "When they feed it more, it hides them. The boys already learned swordsmanship and hand-to-hand combat before they came, and I only know human fighting styles, which don't really fit with them. But let me tell you, the boys move well and they're good at thinking on their feet... Sometimes they even beat me in our sparring sessions. I think it's safe to say the claws work well for them. I'm going to teach them human fighting tactics anyway, and I'll make sure they still have a backup weapon, but I'll let them use their claws as they like."

"It doesn't matter *what* monster appears out there!" said Seki. "With these claws they don't stand a chance!"

"I was fine with our old claws, but these new ones? I *never* have to worry about them breaking or bending out of shape!" cried Saku.

"You both need them," chuckled Aoi. "Neither of you can even touch me in our bouts!"



Seki and Saku didn't like their brother's comment, and they jumped at him with their claws bared. Aoi, however, deftly blocked and parried their attempts. This only fired up the two elder brothers, and the three started leaping around slicing and slashing at each other.

"They're still very much boys their age," muttered Ellie, "which is admittedly a little worrying, but look at them go! They're so healthy! So robust! No bandit's going to get the better of any one of them. But if you're really worried, why don't you ask some of your old buddies to accompany us as guards? Wouldn't that help?"

The boys were light as feathers as they whipped about, moving like no human I'd ever seen. I watched them and found myself nodding along and agreeing very much with Ellie's idea.

"Wait here a minute," I said.

I strode off to the south, where Joe and the others were doing "physical training," cultivating fields under Mont's supervision. I explained the situation to them and asked Joe and his platoon to accompany Ellie. There was no need to send everybody, after all.

Once that was settled, I went back and told Ellie, and she and the lostblood brothers dove straight into preparing for their trip. First they readied their cart; then they wrapped the rock salt in baar wool. The sheps who'd gathered it in the first place were all too happy to help load it all up. While that was going on, Joe and his platoon got all their traveling gear ready and stuffed rations into their backpacks.

"Up until now I'd really thought that we had plenty enough horses," I muttered, "but now I sure wish I had enough for everyone."

I felt bad, knowing that Joe and his platoon had a lot of walking ahead of them, but my comment only made them all grin from ear to ear. Ellie and the lostblood brothers smiled in much the same way.

"Enough for everyone? Ha!" boomed Ellie. "We're going to save up so much money that you won't be able to even *count* how many horses you have! You just wait!"

"We're going to give it everything so that we can buy as many horses, white ghee, and geese as you like!" added Seki.

"We'll get them all soon so they can all have kids, and then Iluk will be filled with livestock!" cried Saku.

"And anything we can't handle we'll just sell for more profit!" chimed in Aoi.

I nodded happily at the lot of them and decided that the least I could do was help them prepare. I walked on over to the storehouse and loaded my arms with everything I could carry, then took it back out to the square.

After all the prep was done, I saw Ellie and the gang off as far as the edge of the village. Ellie, Seki, Saku, Aoi, Joe and his platoon, and three mastis were all headed for Mahati. I felt safe and sure in the fact that with a group like that, they'd be able to handle themselves just fine. With Joe's experience and the mastis' keen senses, I was also confident they'd know well in advance if it was best to turn back and come on home.

But more than anything else, I had faith in all of their abilities. I'd given them everything I could for them to succeed on top of that, so I didn't really need to dwell on it any further. I turned to head back to Iluk, and it was then that I heard some baars bleating a little ways from the road.

*I wonder if they've picked out a spot to eat for the day?*

I walked on over towards the sound, where I found a few sheps keeping watch over all the balls of wool hanging out in the grass. All in all there was Francis and his family, Ethelbald and his family, and eighteen of our new baars with them. Some of them were just basking in the sun, some were munching on grass, and the six youngest baars—all of whom were growing a little more each day—were learning from their elders.

Some of the young baars watched as Francis dug a hole with his hooves, bleating an explanation as he did so. He was telling them something along the lines of how there were lots of holes like this—deep but with narrow openings—placed around their turf for emergencies.

"Baa! Baa!" he bleated.

Francis entered the hole butt first so his horns were facing out.

*"If some wolf thinks it can get you, just spring out of the hole like this and ram it as hard as you can!"* he said...I think.

Baar horns were *tough*, and a regular steel sword wasn't going to get very far with them. When I thought of those same horns colliding at high speed with a wolf, I didn't much like the wolf's chances. I'd actually taken baar headbutts to the body a couple of times during some light training sessions, and I knew that if I took a hit like that at full speed I'd get rocked. If a baar got a good hit in, then it could take out even a monster.

"Baa baa."

Those bleats were from Francoise, who was teaching Framea and Frannia how to use their wool when emergencies called for it. Baar wool grew the more a baar ate, and if a baar wanted, they could hide their whole darn body in the wool they grew. When it got long and thick enough, it was tough as steel and not even a wolf could chomp through it...or at least, it seemed that way according to Francoise.

"Baa baa baaa. Baa," she continued.

She was explaining that if a baar rolled themselves around in grass and leaves, they could camouflage themselves and become near indistinguishable from the grassy plains. By staying low and rolling into a ball, a baar could disguise themselves as just another rock or part of the grassy environment.

"Baaa baa baa baaaa," Francoise concluded.

I'm pretty sure that translated to something along the lines of *"You must learn to make use of your wool in all its various ways!"*

As for Ethelbald, he was running around with Fran and Franca, putting them through drills.

"Baa!" he bleated. "Baabaa! Baa!"

Fran and Franca bleated back as they ran with him. According to Ethelbald, there was a knack you had to develop when it came to both running and ramming. You had to know how to move your legs, and you had to be able to spot the best patches of land for getting a good start. You also had to use your ears to better understand your enemy's location. He was explaining all of this as they ran.

"Baa! Baa baa!" he bleated boldly. "Baabaa, baa! Baa,

baabaabaa, baa!”

Those bleats were part of a strategy he was sharing...I think.

I couldn’t understand everything the baars were bleating at one another, but I could make out the gist. Things like “Don’t ram on your own—ram as a group,” and “Ram as a herd,” and “Against humans and beastkin that walk on two legs, don’t let up the attack,” and “Once they topple to the ground, they’re easy pickings.”

All of it was enlightening to me. I *had* thought it strange how baars always seemed so meek, and I’d wondered how they survived out in the wild. Now at least I understood that it was a combination of clever horn use and footwork.

The six young baars all absorbed the lessons they were taught, and they ran around doing their best to remember everything they were told. For a time I stood and watched it all in silence. The young baars had been taught like this since they were born, but now they were getting bigger and growing more enthusiastic about the training. They were studious, and it suddenly struck me that they weren’t really kids anymore.

Baars matured quickly, and in fact all the young baars weren’t that much smaller than the adults now. The eldest of them, Fran, even had horns starting to grow from his head. And while a part of me wanted those kids to just stay tiny and adorable, I also wanted them to grow into respectable adults who would enjoy life, meet partners, and settle down. I was filled with this swirl of emotions as I watched, and suddenly Fran opened his mouth as he was running around and let out a bleat.

“Baa!”

His voice boomed, not like a child’s but like a full-grown adult’s. It sounded just like Francis, and it was filled with emotion. I knew then that he was no longer a boy. He and his siblings were all grown up now.

“Was that Fran?!”

“You’re all grown up!”

The voices belonged to Senai and Ayhan, and they weren’t far. I scanned the area until I noticed a spot between the baars who were basking in the sun. The girls were peeking their heads out from

among them. Senai and Ayhan must have been enjoying the baar wool, soft and warm as it was, while I was watching the others train. They were both rubbing their eyes as if they'd just woken from an afternoon nap, but they quickly picked themselves up, shook the grass from their hair, and ran to Fran.

"Baa! Baa!" shouted Fran, as if he were bleating his message just for them.

The twins leaped on the baar and wrapped him in a big hug. Then Francis, Francoise, and the rest of their family all ran up to Fran and showered him in congratulatory bleats.

The twins then took off for the village to tell everyone that Fran was bleating like a grown-up baar. And while it wasn't really big news, the villagers all thought it was nice. It was then that I remembered the rest of our livestock, and I headed for the grazing pasture the white ghee were at.

The ghee grazed at a point just barely within sight of the village. Just like with the baars, they were accompanied by a number of young sheps keeping watch. The six white ghee munched on grass and milled around, and in the center of them was the recently born white ghee, with fluffy fur and a big old head sitting on short, little legs.

White ghee weren't the type of animals to get all that excited about anything, and they mostly just kind of spaced out wherever they decided to stand. They were about as relaxed as relaxed could get, but the young one was more active and curious, running around its parents' legs, pushing them with its head, sniffing about, and playfully munching on the adults' tails. Sometimes it even ran up to the sheps to get pats.

Thanks to the new ghee's mother, Iluk had added butter and cheese to its lineup of foodstuffs. We could whip up a stew whenever we felt like it, and I was nothing but thankful, I'll tell you what. White ghee calves usually stopped taking their mother's milk at around two and a half months, at which point they moved on to grass. The mother, however, continued making milk for some ten months more, which meant we'd have milk well into the next winter.

When I thought of how perhaps we'd see another ghee calf next

year, I started to think that maybe Iluk could safely call milk a staple. And even though we still had grazing pastures as far as the eye could see, I still thought it was probably a good idea to start thinking about what to do when we started running out of space. Handing them off to the onikin was one option, and I thought it'd be quite some time before we'd be thinking about slaughtering them for their meat. After all, we could still go hunting if we wanted meat, and outside of that we could always rely on our geese, of which we had about thirty now.

I wandered around near the ghee thinking about all of that until I noticed a figure approaching from the northwest, which probably meant they were coming from the onikin village. As the figure neared, I realized it was Zorg, Alna's brother, and he stopped when he got within speaking distance of me.

"Hey, got some time to talk?" he asked.

"Sure thing."

For some reason Zorg lacked his usual confidence and couldn't quite look me in the eye. He almost sounded apologetic as he talked.

"Firstly, I, uh...wanted to discuss security with you, in the forest to the east. I... Well, I had some business that way not so long ago, and...look, your border station is swell and all, but the trees thin out to the south... Anyone could just slip through the forest and into the domain from there if that was their intent, so I recommend you increase security in that area."

"Oh... I had no idea," I remarked. "I'll mention it to Klaus and have him take a look."

Zorg scratched the back of his head bashfully and then finally looked me in the eye.

"That, and one of Peijin's messengers got mixed up and came to our village instead of yours. I told him we weren't Iluk, but the guy insisted on leaving the message with us anyway. The Peijins will be coming down this way in a few days' time, together with one of the Beastland Kingdom's higher-ups. Somebody to talk about borders and stations and the like. Apparently you've been waiting on that...? Anyway, the messenger said you'd best get ready for the entourage

to come. Their exact arrival is going to depend on the weather...and how the higher-up is feeling from day to day, so they couldn't give an exact date."

"Oh yeah, I remember that," I said. "Got it. Things might be a touch trickier with Ellie out for trade, but I'm sure Hubert, Aymer, and Uncle Ben will be more than enough to cover for her. That still leaves the problem of the guesthouse and its current location. We built it thinking of guests coming from the east, not west... Hmm. I guess we'll just have to put up another yurt to the west and move all the guesthouse furniture there for the time being."

"You've been putting up yurts all over the place recently. Do you even have enough materials for it all? You know what? Don't even answer that; I know that you don't. Look, let us put up the western guesthouse for you, okay? We, uh...happened to fall into a bit of wealth of late, and, I mean... I figure it's only fair that we share it around some. We'll also throw in some of our own furniture and decorations for you, which you can use as you like. Where do you want it put?"

"Huh?" I sputtered. "Are you sure? I know as well as you do that big yurts aren't cheap. And you're going to throw in extra stuff too? Zorg, look, I'm happy to buy it from you..."

Zorg's sudden generosity took me completely by surprise, and all of a sudden he averted his eyes again. He just scratched the back of his head bashfully like he'd done something wrong.

"Nah, nah, we'll just give it to you," he said, his voice a touch flustered. "It's yours."

I couldn't help but be curious about how the guy was carrying himself, but if he was offering us something out of the goodness of his heart, then I figured it was only right of me to accept.

"All righty," I answered with a smile. "You have my thanks, Zorg."

"Aw, come on, knock it off. Just tell me where you want the yurt, okay? Yeah, you can move yurts if you need to, but the bigger ones are more troublesome to shift around, so be certain about where you want it put. It's for people coming from the west, so I assume you're thinking somewhere in that general direction, but do you want it close to Iluk?"

Now Zorg sounded suddenly annoyed with me, but I shrugged it off and thought for a moment before answering.

"Well, there's a road running from the east to Iluk, right? That road is set to go straight on through the village and continue west. So if you follow that as a guide, I want the guesthouse to sit at the roadside, far away enough that Iluk is just out of sight on the horizon. If you put it there, we'll handle the rest."

"Okay, that should be simple enough. We'll put up a yurt big enough for entertaining an important guest. There won't be nearly enough time for us to install a well for you, so you'll have to bring some water jugs and whatnot. As for food, bringing stuff is easier, but you could always prepare something simple."

"Got it. Thanks, Zorg. I really appreciate it."

When I thanked him a second time, he once again looked a bit put off. He put a hand to the strange ornament that hung from his neck, then waved goodbye and walked back in the direction of the onikin village.

Zorg and the onikin put up our second guesthouse yurt practically before I even knew they'd started. We loaded the eastern guesthouse's furniture and decorations on our cart and moved it to the western one, where we spruced the place up. Lorca's platoon and a number of sheps came along to help us out, and while we were in the middle of making the place fit for visitors, we heard the familiar sound of a cart or carriage trundling down the road.

We all rushed out of the yurt, thinking that perhaps it meant the Peijins had already arrived with the Beastland Kingdom's representative, but we quickly realized it was just Goldia, Aisa, and Ely coming from the other direction.

"All done over in Mahati, I take it?" I asked as I ran up to them.

Goldia, Aisa, and Ely had all gone with us across the border when we'd left to fight the rebels, but when we were all set to return home they'd said they had work to do and stayed behind. At the time I'd thought I wouldn't see them for a while, but here they were, even sooner than I'd expected.

"We've done all we can for the time being," replied Goldia, who had hopped out of their cart to check on their horses. "Everything

else I can leave to the rest of the crew. I'm getting older now, and I need to make sure I have trustworthy people to take up where I leave off. For that reason, I only do what work I have to, and put the rest in the hands of the younger folk."

"I see. But even then you could have just waited back in Iluk. What brings you out here to the western guesthouse?"

"We bumped into Ellie on our way here and she said to keep an eye on you. That, and everyone in the village is talking about some bigwig coming to visit, so we came out here as fast as we could. It's the neighboring nation, right? The one Ellie approached about investment? If that's the case, it can't hurt to have some tried-and-true merchants like us here with you."

"I have to admit, Goldia, it feels really weird calling *you* a tried-and-true merchant."

"What's *that* s'posed to mean, huh?!"

While Goldia was huffing and puffing, I said hello to Aisa and Ely, then got back to work. I'd pulled some mother-of-pearl antiques from the storehouses and put them on display, and the baar flag hung at the back of the yurt behind the table at its center. We arranged the chairs all nice and neat, then put up a second yurt next to the guesthouse in which we placed a simple oven. It was time-consuming, and it turned to late afternoon in the blink of an eye, so we decided to finish up for the day and head on back to Iluk. Just as I'd left the yurt and was on the road home, Goldia spoke up.

"What are you going to do about the guesthouse yurt?" he asked. "Are you just going to leave it? With all those valuables in there I reckon you should make sure you've got a couple of guards watching over it..."

"Oh... I guess it'd be one thing if it were just the furniture, but we've got all the decor in there too, huh? Guess I'll have some of the dogkin on night watch sleep here tonight. We don't get thieves out this way, but we don't want the place being busted up by wild animals either."

I'd never heard anything about wild animals attacking yurts before, and it had never happened the whole time I'd been living on the plains, but there wasn't any harm in preparing for the

unexpected. After all, if something *did* happen, we'd have nowhere to entertain our scheduled guests.

"How about I put some of my guys on guard, then?" offered Lorca. "Ain't no problem for them to work a night shift once in a while."

Just as I was about to answer, Goldia spoke up again.

"In that case, let me give your men some of the goods we picked up in Mahati," he said. "I know you and your men train hard, but pulling a sudden all-nighter will take a toll on even the best of us. I feel for them, so I'll throw in some fine cheese, some salted meats, and a few bottles of wine. That'll keep everyone in high spirits for a night or two!"

Lorca and his men all broke into smiles, and suddenly they started up a playful argument over who was going to take the shift. The sheps were all on board with guard duty the moment they heard the words "fine cheese," and they zipped back into the guesthouse yurt before anybody could say otherwise.

"Goldia..." I murmured.

But Goldia simply chuckled at the admonishing tone in my voice and stuck his chest out.

"This is how us tried-and-true merchants do things," he said. "We charm people into action with our wares, get them hooked, and turn them into regular customers. Best-case scenario and they'll be back for more every time! The more they buy, the more stable production gets, which means we can talk about lowering prices, which is good for everyone. I've managed the guild and run a pub, so I know my way around things like this. I know high-quality produce when I see it, and the cheese, meat, and wine I bought is no joke. Fit for a king, and your scheduled guest is gonna love it too, I bet."

There wasn't much I could say to that—not when Lorca, his men, and all the dogkin looked so darned happy. My lack of a reply only made Goldia's grin even wider; he puffed his chest up even more, and Lorca went from smiling to laughing.

"When I heard that Dias's childhood friend had gotten back in touch with him," he said, "I couldn't help wondering what sort of a guy you were. Turns out you're a real stand-up sort. Same goes for

Ellie, of course. Reliable merchants are a rare lot, I know that from experience, so when I find one I always get ready to spend my money. And as a connoisseur of wines, I am mighty excited about our future prospects!"

"And us merchants welcome all good-natured customers happy to spend their coin," replied Goldia. "There's plenty more fine wine and quality cheese stacked in our cart, so get your boys together and come see us back in Iluk."

Goldia wasn't talking like the guy I'd grown up with. He was like a different person entirely as he and Lorca laughed and chatted. They talked about his goods all the way back to the village, and all I could do was share a wry grin with Aisa and Ely as I followed them home.

I'd met Goldia way back when I'd lost my parents.

He didn't have much work, didn't have many friends—heck, all he did have was the clothes on his back. It was about as hard as hard times ever got for him. He was the type who watched people from the shadows, envy filling his gaze as they indulged in completely ordinary things like eating, washing with warm water, going home, and sleeping in their own beds. And all the while Goldia wondered why he had to live on the streets and what made him different from everybody else.

Maybe that was why Goldia was always the most conscientious out of all of us about work and why he was the happiest to earn money. He lived every day with everything he had, all to ensure that his friends and the younger orphans wouldn't have to go through what he had.

Goldia's efforts shaped him and eventually saw him grow into the leader of a merchant guild. But even through all the change, I felt like his motivations were exactly as they'd always been. And that being the case, I didn't feel like I wanted to get in his way, so I just followed behind him as we made our way to Iluk.

"I'll be making trips between here and Mahati for a little while yet, so I reckon building a tavern ain't a bad idea," mused Goldia. "The clientele's already built in, and with quality food and drink the money will come pouring in with them."

Okay, well, when I heard *that* I rolled up my sleeves, because I

sure had some stern thoughts about the idea of a pub. I knew that Goldia and I were going to have to have a discussion, so I picked up my pace to catch up with him.

# West of Iluk, at the Second Guesthouse

"Brothers Do and Re are serving directly under the Beast King's councillor. They're taking things nice and easy, and they'll arrive in due time... I expect you'll see them some time tomorrow or perhaps the day after. Oh, me? My apologies, I am Peijin-Fa. It's a pleasure to meet you."

The frogkin spoke as he observed the interior of our guesthouse, smiling all the while. Like his brothers, Peijin-Fa was a merchant. He'd come to the guesthouse just as soon as he'd discussed things with Goldia.

"Brother Mi is headed towards Iluk to conduct the usual trade," continued the frogkin, "and he's brought a variety of goods. I hope you'll make time to see them yourself when you have the chance, Duke Baarbadal. As for me, I've been sent here early to ensure that everything is to the councillor's liking. I'm happy to say that this impressive guesthouse of yours will require no changes whatsoever."

At this point I couldn't help but ask about Peijin-Fa being so eloquent.

"Oh, the language? Yes, well, I had a sense that trade in these parts would become more important in the future, and so I asked Lady Kiko for lessons. I daresay I'm the most articulate of all us brothers."

Outside of his hat and his clothes, Peijin-Fa looked a lot like any other frog, though he struck me as a bit chubbier than his brothers. Peijin-Mi had passed by the guesthouse and headed straight on to Iluk to start the trading while Peijin-Fa stopped for his inspection. He smiled as he examined the inlaid boxes and the mother-of-pearl ornaments on the shelves.

All of the Peijin family were merchants to their core, and I got the

sense you couldn't take any of them lightly, but Peijin-Fa was noticeably different from his siblings. He was more relaxed and gentler in both bearing and expression, and this gave him something of a softer disposition.

"Ah, which reminds me," said Peijin-Fa. "I have a letter with me from Lady Kiko, addressed to her sons. She did her utmost to ensure they were prepared for their new life, but like all mothers she worries about her children. She has asked that I pass this letter to them and check on how they're doing. She did not say this directly, I should add; rather she indicated as much in her manner. It was in that spirit that I accepted her letter."

"Oh, unfortunately Seki, Saku, and Aoi are all in Mahati on a trade visit," I said. "I'm not actually sure when they'll be back."

Peijin-Fa simply nodded in response.

"In which case, would it be acceptable for me to stay here until the three return? Lady Kiko is my language teacher, and as her student I see it as my duty to ensure her worries are laid to rest. I will of course pay for accommodation and would be happy to be given bedding at the edge of the village. I realize this may be something of an inconvenience to you, but I do hope you won't mind."

"If you'd like to stay for a time, that's absolutely fine," I replied. "And there's no need to worry about paying for anything. After all, the boys were all taught by Kiko just like you were. It's only natural that she's worried about their well-being, so stay as long as you like. But can I ask something? If you were sent here in advance to make sure everything was in order, should I assume that the Beastland councillor is particular in their ways?"

"Hmm? Oh, no, no, nothing of the sort. The councillor has been entrusted with this diplomatic meeting by none other than the king himself, and his character is a reflection of that choice. However...he's a person of *very* high standing. In the Beastland Kingdom, the farther west you go, and the deeper into the kingdom you delve, the closer you get to the lands such people call home. Our diplomatic councillor lives as far west as the kingdom allows, a place where, for better or for worse, people believe the Beastland

Kingdom to be the entire world."

Peijin-Fa explained that a person so unused to foreign environments could be shocked by what they saw, and so it was his responsibility to ensure that their arrival was smooth and untroubled.

"My brothers and I hail from the kingdom's east, where the culture of Sanserife mingles with our own. On occasion, what appears to us as simply a slice of everyday life still comes as a shock to someone from the west."

"As far west as it gets, huh?" I murmured. "Well, it is a place beyond even the fairy tales I grew up with...and I'll bet the sights out that way are beyond even my own imaginings too. Oh, and one other thing... What manner of beastkin is the councillor? Given where he hails from, am I right in thinking that he's a beastkin of a type uncommon to me?"

As Peijin-Fa had been talking about the Beastland Kingdom, this question had popped up in my mind. Peijin-Fa rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a moment before answering.

"I am unsure if you've ever heard of such a kin before, Duke Baarbadal, but the councillor is a *martenkin*. They are known for their stunning coats of golden fur, which are as beautiful to behold as they are soft to the touch. They are the envy of us furless beastkin, and many call them the most charming of all. The fur around a martenkin's face is so white as to be almost transparent, and now that I think about it there's a little black around their eyes too. They are a supple and agile people, and in the past many were put to use as spies for their ability to squeeze into and through narrow spaces."

"Wow, golden fur... Is he similar to Kiko in that sense, then?"

"No, Lady Kiko is entirely different. The councillor is more...thin and...long, with...an impressive neck... Hmm... I realize now it is a very difficult race to describe when one has never seen them before."

I did my best to imagine what Peijin-Fa was telling me, but I just couldn't put all the pieces together. I didn't let it bother me, though; I figured I'd just see them when I saw them. In any case, with the guesthouse preparations all set, I left with Peijin-Fa so I could show

him around the village.

Goldia, Aisa, and Ely had been relaxing outside waiting for us. Lorca and all the sheps—all of whom'd been lured in by the fine cheese and wine—were on standby ready to stand guard, and so I let them do just that. When we got to Iluk I had a yurt put up for Peijin-Fa to stay in, then took a peek at Peijin-Mi's market. I also made time to discuss what food to serve when the councillor arrived.

The next day I did my usual chores, then headed to the guesthouse with Peijin-Fa, where Lorca's platoon and the sheps were all staring off to the west. We could hear a carriage rumbling along together with the clopping of hooves and smatterings of conversation.

Eventually a carriage appeared, painted in red and covered in decorations. I say carriage, but it was so dang big it could have been a house on wheels. From the side of the carriage a head poked out attached to a long, slender neck. It was covered in fur so vivid I would have believed you if you'd told me it absorbed the color of the sun itself.

"Oh, I see," I muttered. "So that's what a martenkin looks like."

Peijin-Fa heard what I said and simply nodded.

The councillor wore clothing not unlike Kiko's, though the design was a little different on account of the fact that he was a man. His angular outfit was made up of white and navy blue, and from the collar of it stretched his lithe, golden-furred neck, at the top of which sat his furry white face. It reminded me a bit of a weasel's.

The councillor wore a strangely shaped cap, and once we were in the guesthouse he sat assuredly on his chair with his legs spread. All of us who had gathered at the guesthouse to greet the councillor waited for him to speak—there was me, Alna, Aymer, Hubert, and Goldia. I sat directly in front of the councillor with Alna, Hubert, and Goldia standing behind me. Aymer was on the table as the official minute taker.

Aisa, Ely, and the dogkin were standing on guard around the guesthouse, while the guards the Peijin family had brought with them stood at the ready a short distance away. Behind the councillor

stood Peijin-Do and Peijin-Re, both of whom were at rigid attention and looking *very* nervous. That alone let me know that I was dealing with someone mighty important.

"My name is Yaten Raisei, councillor for the Beast King."

"I am Dias, Duke of Baarbadal. It is an honor."

I knew that in the Beastland Kingdom, people introduced themselves by their family name first, which meant that the councillor was Raisei of the Yaten family.

"When I heard that a letter had arrived from the Sanserife Kingdom suggesting friendly relations, I was shocked," said Yaten. "I immediately asked the Peijin family for a more detailed explanation...and now that I am here in person, everything has become much clearer. You live in harmony with beastkin in this domain, and you also display our nation's handicrafts here in your guesthouse. Beastkin even occupy positions as your aides and secretaries. Such circumstances demand that I speak with you openly and honestly."

Yaten was male, but he spoke with a high-pitched voice and in a soft-spoken manner.



"I am glad you would say so," I replied. "The Peijin family have always been there for us when we needed them, and the beastkin residents of Iluk Village are an essential part of our home. I cannot imagine life without them. I want nothing more than for our relationship to thrive, and nothing could make me happier than strong bonds with the Beastland Kingdom."

Aymer and the others had all said that they'd send me a signal if I forgot to say something, so I spoke my piece nice and slow. My reply served to deepen Yaten's smile, and he brought forth a number of papers, which he placed on the table and slid towards me. Hubert was quick to respond, moving silently to Yaten's side before politely placing a hand on his chest in thanks, then bringing me the papers.

One of them was a letter in an envelope. It was folded differently to how we folded them in Sanserife, and the paper was thicker too. I opened it up, scanned the contents, and was grateful from the bottom of my heart to find that I could read what was written in it. The style was a bit old-fashioned and rather formal, and there were some turns of phrase in there that I wasn't really used to, but basically the letters detailed that the Beastland Kingdom was happy to accept our offer of friendship.

There was also a map, which detailed Sanserife as far as the Baarbadal plains, with the Beastland Kingdom to the west. It was very much like the map that Hubert had already made, and I had no problems with the councillor's suggested border. Yaten smiled when I nodded my agreement, but he held himself tall, and when he spoke it was with more authority than before.

"Firstly, with regards to the border between our nations, we have no objection to the establishment of one, nor to the construction of a border station along it. Should the border act to keep problems from occurring between us, we see it as beneficial. However, once the border has been determined and agreed to, we ask that you endeavor to make sure none cross it unauthorized."

"Yes, of course. We will have regular guards on-site and on patrol once our station is completed."

"For that we are most thankful," said Yaten, offering a short nod. "The border area is one that poses many challenges, and so it has

remained undeveloped. I am certain that many of our more worried residents will be relieved to hear of your stance."

"And I will do my utmost to see that they never need worry. It is my ardent wish to see a long and fruitful relationship between us. That means the Peijin family, the Beastland residents, Kiko and her family, and of course you as well, Yaten."

I did my best to mimic Yaten by sitting up straighter and trying to sound more bold, but even then I meant every word I spoke. Yaten seemed surprised when he heard mention of Kiko's name, and even when I was done he couldn't seem to shake his surprise. I knew that Kiko was a councillor too, just like Yaten, so I figured they were acquainted, but I wondered for a moment if I'd said something I shouldn't have.

But as I pondered on the thought, Yaten cleared his throat and moved on to the topic of the investment plan that Ellie had thought up.

## Standing Behind Yaten, So Nervous His Skin Is Drying Out—Peijin-Do

*Ah, this is givin' me chills. That Lord Yaten's smile is scarier than a volcanic eruption, I tells ya.*

Peijin-Do was, like most frogkin, known for the year-round sticky moisture of his skin, but at present it was drier than he had ever known. With great trepidation, he could only watch silently as the negotiations played out before him.

The Beastland Kingdom was not so simple a place that one could simply call it completely under the control of the Beast King. The vast number of races that lived within its borders meant there were many clans vying for power—and in fact, those at its frontiers tended to act like kings of their own territories. And while in general all obeyed the king's rule, clans and others of significant power sometimes rebelled, and sometimes went to war to maintain power or otherwise increase their standing and profits. That had been the state of things in the nation for more than a century.

One man, however, had traveled through the nation, negotiating in ways both soft and unrelenting, mediating conflict in ways beyond any expectation. That man was Yaten Raisei, councillor and supervisor of foreign affairs. He was a most exceptional individual, and it was said that many folded at the very mention of his name.

*I don't reckon I've* ever *seen 'im smile, not once...*

Yaten began negotiations in a most friendly manner, and while Peijin-Do suspected the martenkin had something up his sleeve, no such scheme ever emerged. Instead, the negotiations sped to their conclusion swiftly, peacefully, and without issue.

*He's not tryin' t'strengthen Beastland control through investment or hijack the minin' operations... Don't tell me Yaten's lost his edge. I don't wanna believe it, but it's like he's gone soft as jelly...*

As Peijin-Do was thinking these very thoughts, Yaten moved on to the topic of the split of profits from the Beastland investment. But the offer he made to Dias couldn't even be called a concession. The martenkin was practically handing Dias and Baarbadal every conceivable profit on a silver platter, burdening his own nation with losses at the same time.

*Ribbit?! Ri-Ri-Ribbibbibbit?! Ribbit?!*

Peijin-Do was so shaken and confused by Yaten's actions that the ancient language of his ancestors, no longer even used by the elderly, almost leaped from his throat. But he was not alone; everybody listening to the negotiations wore a furrowed brow and a look of concern, and none more so than Dias.

"No, that won't do," said the Duke of Baarbadal. "We can't accept conditions in which only we profit. Though we *did* conceive of the idea of a shared investment, it is a means for strengthening our relationship, and as such both of our nations should benefit. I want conditions in which our relationship can be maintained over a long period."

Yaten had almost given up his entire nation in a single, outlandish concession. But for all the profit it might have given him, Dias refused to stand for it. Peijin-Do's thoughts raced at such speed that he forgot even to breathe, and as his eyes rolled up into his skull, he lost consciousness entirely for the briefest of moments.

## Standing Outside the Guesthouse—Dias

With our border and investment negotiations concluded, Yaten and the Peijins made for home. I looked at the signed documents on the guesthouse table while Alna saw the beastkin carriage off.

"That councillor Yaten..." she started when she came back in, making sure the yurt door was closed so nobody outside could hear her. "He was every shade of red I've ever seen. I stayed quiet because there were no obvious lies in anything he said, but still..."

A while back, Alna had learned to use her soul appraisal covertly, without her horn lighting up. We all realized that she must have used it during the negotiations, and it threw Aymer and Hubert into a panic. They started combing through all of the documents again, looking for traps or clauses that might be written to trick us. In the end, however, they didn't find anything like that, and it was a great relief.

"He may not have our best interests at heart," muttered Alna, "and he doesn't seem to be scheming anything just yet...but still, his motives are unclear and his strategy difficult to read. If you hadn't spoken up, Dias, he would have given us more than we could imagine."

I felt my head tilting to the side as I tried to make sense of Yaten's motives, but in the end no answers came of it. The only person I knew who could read strategies that deep was Juha. I wondered if we should talk things over with him to aid in our discussions.

"Whatever his intent may be, they've made a huge investment, and that's still great for us," said Goldia. "With their financial support, we can buy all the materials and tools we need. All that's left now is to get some dedicated help for kick-starting our mining operations. That means specialists we can trust, not just any lout off the street. I'll get the guild on it."

I nodded in reply and put Yaten out of my mind as we all shifted to talk of our mining operations.

## In Yaten’s Carriage—Peijin-Do

The walls and floor of Yaten’s carriage were built from high-quality ebony. Covering the floor was a luxurious baar-wool carpet, upon which sat cotton-stuffed cushions for seating. The interior of the carriage was covered in lavish decorations, including wind chimes clinking harmoniously at the window. As those wind chimes caught the eye one could easily see the detailed work that craftsmen had done to even the windows themselves.

This was nothing like the carriages that the Peijin brothers were accustomed to, and the mere thought of how much gold it would cost to build one sent shivers down Peijin-Do’s spine. He could not hide his awkwardness, sitting as he was directly before the carriage’s owner, Yaten Raisei, who noticed the frogkin’s expression and spoke.

“You do not understand the meaning of what I offered during the negotiations. You cannot even comprehend it. That is the picture your face paints, the question it asks, yes?”

Peijin-Do did not know how to respond. Yaten gazed upon him through narrowed eyes, then let out a sigh before going on.

“Well, given that you and your brothers put in considerable effort to get us this far, then clearing your confusion is the least I can do, I suppose. Though it must be said that those negotiations would have been nigh incomprehensible to a dedicated merchant such as yourself. Which is not to point fingers at your nature, of course. Any merchant would have reacted the same way—a fact seen clearly enough in one of the men among the duke’s group, who looked like your twin. I am quite certain that he, too, is a merchant.”

“You mean us career merchants can’t understand it...? But you were talkin’ investments and future trade... Ain’t that our specialty...?”

Peijin-Do was even more confused now, and Yaten’s eyes narrowed further.

“You have already erred in your understanding of the discussions,” he said. “What Baarbadal wanted was to discuss friendly relations between our countries. The topic of our investment is only in its very infancy. It would be a mistake at this stage to put

your focus on what we might gain through such investments."

Yaten continued, "An alliance... *Harmony*. *Friendship*. Those were the themes that Baarbadal brought to the table. They want us to create bonds that might strengthen such an alliance. Talk of their future mining industry was a distant second in terms of importance. But an ordinary person—a fool, in other words—would, through their very foolishness, miss the forest for the trees in this regard."

"When one's greed runs rampant at the idea of vast wealth, discussions of friendship devolve into grasps for further riches. I arrived from afar to talk about future relations, and in so doing, I offered a slight opening that could have been taken advantage of. Perhaps fine for a merchant, but for the likes of the duke and I, not so. You see, if the duke had leaped upon the opening I left him, he would have closed the door on any potential talk of alliances. After all, can you even call someone a friend if they look to exploit your weaknesses...? Such an act could even result in war."

"Is... Is that what you were aimin' for?" asked Peijin-Do. "I always thought that showin' weakness at a big, important deal was somethin' t'be avoided..."

"And in the case of merchants that is true enough. Things are different when you bear a nation upon your shoulders. Baarbadal reached out with an offer of friendship, and our kingdom sends one of my rank all the way to their domain. Were they to betray their own professed offer so as to steal from and humiliate us...well, war would then be nigh unavoidable."

"However, it would seem that is not their intent, given how little power they have as a nation. That said, we would have had our honor to uphold, and it would not have been enough for them to simply ask us not to go to war. Indeed, if such an event came to pass, we would have required the ownership rights to their mine or even a portion of their land in the name of reparations."

"But I am not a monster, and I would not go to such lengths. Had the duke taken the bait I laid out for him, I would have pointed it out and admonished him. I would have been kind about it, but it would have put control of the discussion in my hands and planted a seed of guilt in the duke's heart."

"You have spoken of the duke as a kind man of upstanding character, yes? Guilt is a poison for such men; it eats away at their hearts and souls. It weakens them, and it would have put the duke under our control until the day he died."

Yaten let out a deep sigh.

"And how vexing to have been *so* close," he said. "Never in my wildest dreams did I expect him to refuse my offer so flatly. He did not strike me as such a character... Were he only a *touch* greedier, then those plains would have been ours in some ten to twenty years."

"R-Ribbit?!"

The exclamation left Peijin-Do's lips before he even knew it. Yaten looked down upon the frogkin like a god atop a mountain and made an obvious show of clapping his hands together.

"Alas, the fault ultimately lies with me for not expecting such a simplistic response. I should have driven him into a corner financially and started discussions from there. Do you remember the Beastland handicrafts that were on display in that tent of theirs? We should have sold them more to suck up more of their finances before engaging in any discussions... Ah, how *vexing*! To think the idea never occurred to me, even with a merchant at my very side... How very embarrassing, and proof that I would make a horrible merchant to boot."

The councillor laughed at his own joke as Peijin-Do reeled back once more in shock.

"Ri-Ribbitbit?!"

Yaten continued to chuckle—no, cackle, even—as he looked down upon the frogkin, clapping his hands and pointing at the increasingly confused Peijin before him.

## Stuck to the Outer Wall of the Carriage—Peijin-Re

Peijin-Re had been born with sticky hands and feet—appendages he was putting to use right at this very moment, glued to the outer

wall of Yaten Raisei's carriage with his ear pressed up to it. Inside, he heard his brother yelp. The cry was a signal the two had agreed upon well in advance, and when he heard it Peijin-Re released his grip.

As he dropped from the carriage, Peijin-Re fell into the waiting arms of the carriage's guards, all of whom had served the Peijin family for generations and were trustworthy beyond measure. Once he was set down on solid ground, Peijin-Re quickly whipped out and readied paper, an ink stick, an inkstone, and a brush. Moments later he was writing a letter in the script of the Sanserife Kingdom.

The small-ilk dogkin, who had been tasked with escorting Yaten and the Peijins to the newly agreed-upon border, tilted their heads quizzically at the frogkin's actions but said nothing and silently watched on as Peijin-Re wrote of Yaten's plans and his true character.

*Yep, yer not there yet, Lord Yaten. Y'may be one of the Beastland Kingdom's higher-ranking officials, but y'done messed up, y'see. Using our eldest brother as yer errand boy, using our entire family as yer servants on this trip, and paying chump change at that? We can't respect that, no sir. Did y'really think the Peijin family were just going to bend the knee quietly?*

*Unlike you, Lord Dias has been nothing but good to our family, and he pays us what we're worth. It should've been obvious from the start who we were gonna side with, yep.*

Peijin-Re thought back to the promise Dias had made to his family.

*"Even when we set up our border station, the Peijin family will always be free to come and go as they please."*

It was an astounding amount of authority that Dias had promised them, and it would pay dividends with all the future development on the horizon: the border station, the investment, and the international trade, among others. The sheer wealth it would bring the Peijins was beyond measure. They would have free access to a nation which boasted baar wool, salt, and steel among its industries, and the profits only grew when one considered they could also trade with Baarbadal's eastern neighbor too. While rival merchants were having

their trade caravans held up by inspections, the Peijin family would be free to move and trade with impunity.

*With that much money, even a mansion will be chump change. We could build our own castle, or...we could even found our own town, yep. Maybe even start a little nation.*

*But that dream will only come to fruition as long as Lord Dias remains the lord of the plains. He must remain alive, healthy, and in charge, yep. So to protect the Duke of Baarbadal, we Peijins will side with him the best we can. It would be a different story if we were balancing Dias on the scales with the king himself, but as it stands Yaten does nothin' to tip them in our favor.*

Peijin concluded his letter along with his thoughts, then placed it in an envelope upon which he wrote "Lord Dias." Without so much as a word he passed the envelope to one of the nearby dogkin, who looked even more puzzled than earlier. Still, the dogkin read the letters on the envelope and knew what was expected of him, and he took off running for Iluk, taking great care to keep the envelope protected.

Peijin watched the dogkin go, then silently put his writing tools back in his knapsack. With his job done, he headed quietly for Yaten's carriage to ensure that the councillor was none the wiser to anything that had just happened. Peijin's guards made no mention of his actions as they accompanied him, leaving the dogkin to think that the people of the Beastkin Kingdom had some rather odd customs. But the dogkin were nothing if not loyal, and a moment later their noses were sniffing the air and their tails stood tall as they dedicated themselves once more to the guard duty that they had been entrusted with.

# Cleaning the Guesthouse—Dias

With diplomatic negotiations done, we were all tidying up the guesthouse when a dogkin arrived carrying a letter. It came from Peijin-Re, and it was all about the guest who'd just visited, Yaten. I took in all the intel that Peijin-Re had thought to share with us and thought, *Well, I guess if we meet again, then I'd best be careful.*

I mean, Yaten was already gone, and all the things we'd had to discuss were settled in a clean manner. There weren't any real issues to speak of, nor any lingering problems, so to be honest, the letter felt like it had arrived a bit late. Not that I wasn't thankful for it or anything like that, but Peijin-Re had written that Yaten was a very busy man because of his rank and that he probably wouldn't ever be back unless there was a noticeable issue at the border.

With that in mind, I didn't think we needed to worry all that much about his scheming. It was better for us to put our efforts into border management so we'd never have to deal with him at all.

I shared the information in the letter with everyone at the guesthouse. Alna couldn't have cared less about it, going about her cleaning unperturbed, while Hubert dropped into thought for a few moments.

"Considering this new information, I'd like to ask the falconkin to help me hammer in stakes along the border as soon as possible," he said finally. "As much as I'd also like to expedite our construction of the western station, we've no forest or timber in that direction. We'll need far more time, materials, and hands to get that part done."

According to Hubert, the eastern border station benefitted from the forest, which acted as a natural deterrent, or maybe a wall. We'd also been able to borrow labor from Mahati *and* use the forest itself as construction materials. All of that meant that the border station had gone up in a comparative flash. At the border to the Beastland Kingdom, however, things weren't going to be so easy.

The station to the west had to be fortified so it could act as a military base while also having ample room to inspect all the caravans that came through from our neighbors. The border station had to clearly impress upon travelers its importance, but it also had to have facilities in which diplomats or special guests could relax for a spell.

Well, according to Hubert, anyway.

"Now, while I very much doubt that the Beastland Kingdom expects us to put up a border station overnight, we *have* promised them to carefully manage and guard the border, so I think it's important we at least show them with our actions that we intend to do exactly that," continued Hubert.

"That starts with hammering in stakes. We'll want them closer together than when we mapped out the onikin territory so they appear more like a fence. When the exact location of the station is decided, we'll erect actual fences like a sort of floor plan. That should help for the time being."

Hubert told me that it was one thing to hammer in some stakes here and there to establish territory for the onikin, but it was a whole other thing when we were talking about a foreign nation. With the onikin, we'd left quite a bit of space between each individual border stake. So much space, in fact, that anyone who didn't know any better might see a stake and wonder what it was even for. But the onikin and the people of Iluk knew at a glance that it marked a split between our territories, and so we were careful when it came to where our baars and ghee grazed.

The whole arrangement worked because the onikin and Iluk had established a strong bond of trust, but you couldn't be quite so casual about things with an entire other nation. You couldn't just rely on trust—you had to make it obvious that the border wasn't to be crossed without good reason. At the very least you wanted stakes and a fence, and if you couldn't easily put a fence up, then you at least connected the stakes with rope.

Once the station was up, you employed guards to watch the borders, and you chased down and apprehended anybody who tried to sneak over the line. You didn't really need stakes if you could just

catch any would-be intruders, but that was something to consider later on.

"In that case, you can leave all of that to us!"

A real booming voice came out of nowhere, interrupting Hubert's lecture on international borders and how to enforce them. I knew the voice, but all the same I couldn't hide my shock.

*What is* he *doing here?*

"Uh, what brings you here, Narvant?" I asked.

"Do you mean to say you'll construct the border station for us?" asked Hubert.

Narvant took in our words, crossed his bulky arms, and puffed up his chest.

"I came over here assuming you'd want another cellar," the cavekin boomed again, his beard bobbing as he spoke, "but get this: If you want a border station, we cavekin'll whip one up for you quick as you like! We'll cut the stone we need from the wasteland and bring it on over, then craft it all into a certified fortress! I bet if we build a formidable-looking castle with a stone wall running along either side of it, it'll keep your neighbors nice and quiet. So with all that in mind, you there—Goldia, right?—can you buy as much booze as this'll get you? It's all the gold my family and I have received for our work."

Narvant then reached into his chest pocket and brought out a leather pouch, which he tossed towards Goldia. It had some hefty weight to it, because I'd paid the cavekin for all sorts of work—their support against the flame dragon, crafting my set of armor, and making tools and whatnot. The leather pouch had *all* the gold that all three of the cavekin had earned, and Goldia looked over to me with something of an uncertain gaze on his face. It asked a very clear question.

*What should I do?*

Now, I knew full well that the cavekin drank alcohol while they worked, and that drinking actually made them more efficient, but I also knew they already had their hands full working on the cellars and other tools for the village. I wasn't convinced that a mountain of alcohol was going to suddenly empower their little family of three to

build a border station on top of it. Maybe they planned to get some help from Lorca's or Ryan's platoons, but even then there were still the materials and the tools to think about first.

I was so caught up in my thinking that I wasn't sure what to say, and when Narvant saw that something hit him. He clapped his hands and looked all excited.

"Ah! I see! That mining investment that Ellie brought up a while back, that's all settled, right? Well, if it's mining you need then look no further! You're worried about us working on the border station, aren't you? Well, you can rest easy, young Dias. If you use some of your investment to ready us cavekin some more booze, then we'll build you your mine! Probably best to build it closer to the west, seeing as you'll be selling a lot of the ore and steel to your neighbors. That'll make transporting it much easier. So if we've got the mine and the border station to the west, then we may as well throw up a blast furnace around that area too. Build a road connecting them all and business will be *booming*!"

"W-Wait!" I stammered. "Wait, Narvant, wait! Border stations, mines, blast furnaces... You can't possibly handle all that on your own! The rest of us will help you out as much as we can, but we're still completely lacking in manpower!"

Narvant looked confused by my outburst.

"We cavekin are more than enough to handle the job, young Dias! And what's more, we can do it without your help."

"No. No, no, no. There's no way the three of you can take all of that on with all the work you already have."

"Huh?! Young Dias! What in the world are you on about? It won't be just the *three* of us. A project this big will take all the cavekin working together to get done!"

When Narvant said that, everyone in the yurt just froze. It was like we forgot to even breathe. Me, Hubert, and Goldia were first, then Alna and Aymer who were cleaning up, and then the dogkin who were helping around the place. Everybody's eyes gathered on Narvant, and all of our heads tilted right at exactly the same time.

*All the cavekin working together...?*

Narvant ran a hand through his beard and sighed.

"Young Dias, you didn't really think our clan was just the three of us, did you? That's preposterous! There are more of us than I can count on both my hands and my feet! The only reason I didn't call them all here was because the village didn't have enough alcohol to satisfy everyone! But they'll all come running once I wake them up and let them know there's plenty of booze to go around! With all of us here, your border station and your mine'll go up in the blink of an eye! Then we'll smelt your ore into steel and make up all the tools and armor and weapons you can dream of! As long as we're flush with drink, the cavekin clan has you covered, young Dias!"

So...to be completely honest, I really *had* thought that it was just Narvant and his wife and son, so I was still frozen solid, and I didn't thaw for quite some time...

After I returned to my normal state, Narvant told me that like some animals, the cavekin were capable of a sort of hibernation. When the environment worsened due to the weather or a disaster, the cavekin dug deep into the earth, curled up, and slept like rocks until the situation on the surface improved. While the cavekin were in hibernation they didn't need to eat, and when they woke they could move around as happily as they had before they slept.

As for how they determined the weather on the surface, that was the duty of the cavekin leader, who—according to Narvant—was...well, Narvant. The cavekin leader was the one who was most sensitive to the slightest changes of magical energy in the weather and the natural world. When they felt things were improving, they could wake themselves to check on things. They'd head up to the surface and, if everything looked good, they'd make sure everything was in place before waking all the others.

"I woke when I felt Senai's and Ayhan's magic," said Narvant. "So I dug up to the surface and met you. Still, I was lonely and I needed some help, so I woke my family and had them come to join me. I could have woken all the others then too, but that would've brought problems—food and housing, for one thing, but also just making sure everyone could be of use to the village. For that reason, Ohmun, Sanat, and I all set about preparing things for the others to

join us."

That all had started with their magical stone furnace, which was a way for the cavekin to show me what they could do. Next they had started making cellars so we'd always have enough food stored away for everyone, including the rest of the cavekin.

"And with the cellars we can store alcohol and start some low-temperature brewing of our own, which means we're not just making tools, we're also making produce."

With the arrival of my old war buddies, all of whom were now residents, Narvant promised that the cavekin would make them all such durable armor and weapons so sharp that even the king and nobility would be foaming at the mouth. The new border station was icing on the cake; it was just another reason for Narvant to wake up his brethren.

"Oh, so that's the bigger picture, then," I mused. "You cavekin sure are something, huh?"

That was how I felt on the matter...but Goldia, Hubert, and Aymer were all still in recovery. The dogkin, meanwhile, were overjoyed to have more residents coming, and Alna was happy for the same reasons...along with the idea that we'd be brewing alcohol in the new cellars. In fact, Alna's eyes were practically glimmering.

"Nothing makes me happier than seeing Lady Alna in such a good mood," said Narvant, his laughter booming in the yurt. "A young lady who's more about booze than she is about weapons and armor, huh? We can make some fantastic wine at low temperatures, and beer too. Just you wait!"

The cavekin's comment only served to make Alna brighten up even further, and I wondered if I should say something to them. That was when Uncle Ben came up to me with Baalia and Baatak, wearing something of a stern, troubled expression. I was just about to ask him when he'd arrived and what he wanted, but he beat me to the punch.

"You're about to go mumbling about your stance on alcohol, aren't you?" said Uncle Ben. "Tell me, Dias, why do you dislike it so much?"

I was shocked for a second, but I answered straightaway.

"Well, because it's bad for the body, of course, and my parents taught me never to drink..."

"They did no such thing. Even your parents enjoyed a glass of wine every now and again. And it's true that alcohol is bad for you when you drink *too much* of it, but you're meant to drink it in moderation. Neither I nor your parents ever said anything about never touching the stuff."

"Oh. Is that... Is that so?" I murmured. "Well, even then, ever since I was a kid I haven't liked it, and during the war I saw the worst it could do to a person..."

"If you saw that much, then I'll bet you saw some of its positive effects too, no?" countered Uncle Ben. "Then again, maybe you really *didn't* see the positives. Now, I'm not here to criticize your stance, but don't you think it's about time you remembered the truth? The *real* reason you can't stand alcohol? I researched your parents' passing upon my return, and alcohol was a part of why they died, you know."

"Huh? No, it wasn't. They died of an epidemic..."

"Your parents were *poisoned*," Uncle Ben declared, "and the poison was mixed with wine. Don't you remember? You *saw* them drink it. Heck, you didn't just see it, you drank it yourself. If you still can't remember, then I guess you must have purged it from your memories. All that remains is your distaste for alcohol, which is understandable."

This was all news to me. I was frozen once more while Uncle Ben went on. He said that when the temple broke into two factions, my mother and father had become the de facto leaders of the fundamentalists when Uncle Ben left on his pilgrimage. That had put them at the center of the conflict. The modernists hadn't liked it at all, and they had put into play schemes to bring about the downfall of my parents. They had tried to beat them down through the use of cunning debate tactics, but my parents never fell for any such schemes, and they had always been well-spoken.

Faced with defeat after defeat, the modernists resorted to underhanded means...

Nobody knew *exactly* what had happened, or what conversations

had taken place, but somehow the modernists fed my parents poisoned wine, and me along with them. My parents had collapsed and died as a result, but because I'd only ingested a very small amount I only lost consciousness. My parents' friends had rescued me, nursed me back to health, then took me away to a city out of the reach of their enemies.

The plan had been for those same friends to look after and raise me, but eventually they'd left my side. Perhaps the modernists had found them, or perhaps they'd returned to the temple to fight back. I don't know. Either way, I ended up as just another orphan living on the streets.

Well, according to Uncle Ben, anyway.

"Perhaps it was an effect of the poison, or maybe it was from your high fever at the time, or maybe it was simply the shock of losing both of your parents. I can't say for certain, but it's obvious that at the time of your poisoning you weren't in a clear state of mind. That's probably why you came to believe that you lost your parents to an epidemic. You would have been around a lot of orphans who lost parents in exactly that way, and maybe you just assumed that it was the same for you."

He continued, "Then again, it did happen more than twenty years ago, so it's unlikely you'd remember it with perfect clarity anyway. But even then the shock of their death and that poison probably carved itself deep into your psyche...the result of which became your hatred of alcohol. And if that's the case, it's about time you broke free of those chains, don't you think?"

When he said that, Uncle Ben looked at me with a worry in his eyes that I hadn't seen since I was just a boy. Alna, Goldia, Hubert, Aymer, Narvant, and all the dogkin turned to look at me as they took it all in, but all I could do was just scratch the back of my head and sigh as I tried to assemble my thoughts.

"Well...I have to admit that I never imagined that might be why I came to despise alcohol so much," I said, opening with whatever passed through my mind. "I always wondered about it...and it makes sense that seeing my parents die in front of me after drinking poisoned wine could make me come to see things the way I now do.

But I don’t remember any of it, and even if I try I can’t find any of those old memories... You know, the human mind is a strange thing all right.”

The true reason my parents had passed away, my distrust of alcohol...both were a connected and shocking story, but for me all of it was in the distant past now. It didn’t matter how my parents had died or how I’d become an orphan. In the here and now I was happy and fulfilled, and every day was a blessing.

In truth, I couldn’t really give a damn about what had happened back then. I knew that my parents weren’t the type to want me to take revenge, and if anything it was more likely that they’d want me to cherish the happiness I now had instead. I was pretty certain in my heart of hearts that Uncle Ben, Alna, and all of Iluk Village thought the same thing.

I shared my thoughts with everybody in the yurt, and they were all blown away. Or perhaps “horribly disappointed” is the more apt way to put it... Either way, they all heaved big old sighs at the way I saw things and they didn’t make any attempt to hide them.

To build a new border station, we needed manpower, and Narvant was convinced that he had enough friends—all still sleeping in their caves—who were more than capable of seeing the job done. The thing was, alcohol was an essential part of their daily life, and just like when the cavekin had made my armor, it wasn’t until they had alcohol that they could really work to their full potential. For that reason we all decided that Iluk would buy and brew alcohol more proactively, and everybody loved the idea.

I still thought it was important to drink in moderation, given how bad alcohol could be for the body, and I sure wasn’t changing my drinking habits either. For me, alcohol was always going to be something I kept at arm’s length. I knew where my dislike of the stuff came from now, and I could understand why the cavekin needed it, but that didn’t mean I liked it any better. I’d seen too many people throw away their lives to the bottle, and it was enough for me to only ever want a sip in social circumstances. I wasn’t going to touch the stuff otherwise.

And besides, if I got blind drunk and went on a rampage, then who was going to be able to stop me? I didn't think anybody in Iluk would be much help, so with that and all the rest of it in mind, I came to accept that I just wasn't going to be much of a fan of alcohol no matter how much I tried.

However, the one thing that *had* changed was that I stopped harping on people when the topic came up. I'd make sure we had enough of it for everyone in the village, I'd help to acquire and brew the stuff, and I'd make sure people had a nice place to drink it all too. I saw that as one of my responsibilities as the lord of the land, and gosh darn it I was going to see my duties through.

I thought that my change of heart would really brighten Alna's day, given how much of a fan of drinking she was, but she was much more concerned with the matter of my parents than with my change of attitude, and she wouldn't stop bringing it up.

"I'm always here for you, *always* and *forever*, if you ever want to take revenge," she assured me. "You know that, right? No matter how far away your parents' killers are, and no matter who's protecting them, if you want them gone, we can make it happen."

According to Alna, vengeance was a rightful act among the onikin people. It was the honorable thing to do, in fact, and recommended in most cases. By taking revenge for those who were lost, you were essentially saving their souls and protecting their honor. That's how the onikin felt about it, and so Alna meant every word with the utmost sincerity.

And to be fair, while it was a shock to learn that my parents had actually been murdered, and I did harbor *some* grievances, at the same time it was all a past that had shaped me. Becoming an orphan was the very reason I'd met Goldia, and in meeting Goldia and making new friends I'd gone to war with the goal of protecting them all. Going to war, in turn, eventually saw me made the domain lord of the plains.

All of it was fate of a sort, and that fate gave me joy here in the present. Most importantly, I knew that my parents weren't the revenge-seeking type. If anything, they'd have gotten right mad at me for throwing away a good life and a happy home to go

galavanting on some revenge trip. The more I thought about who my parents were, the more I felt I should treasure what I had.

I said that to Alna, but I don't think my message really got through. I could see it in her attitude, which spoke for her: *Yeah, okay, but shouldn't you at least* try *to get revenge?* It was a moment that reminded me there were still some core cultural differences between us.

That said, she never tried to force me into it—she just strongly recommended what she thought was right, so I took her pressure as a sign of her good heart...and I just kept on politely refusing to go along with it. I figured that in time she'd come to understand things just fine.

In any case, Narvant was all set to call upon his fellow cavekin. There were some thirty of them in total, and the plan was to have them work on the border station for us. Still, before we could actually wake them up, we needed to make sure we had yurts, food, and alcohol for them all. We had the yurts and food covered, but your run-of-the-mill cavekin practically breathed alcohol—they just couldn't imagine life without it, apparently. Narvant's family was an outlier in this regard because they could go a little longer without a drink, though among cavekin they were considered abnormal.

When the cavekin worked up a sweat they drank to reenergize and rehydrate. When something good happened they drank to celebrate. And when nothing was going on they drank for the taste of the stuff. Apparently, a light buzz was healthy for a cavekin. It was actually peak condition, according to Narvant.

One surprising difference between cavekin and other races—and it sounds a lot like an excuse, I'll admit—is that alcohol wasn't about addiction or anything like that, but rather it was an integral part of how they functioned. They were sturdy and tough, and their beards did two things: neutralized harmful fumes when mining *and* neutralized the harmful effects of alcohol.

Cavekin could drink until their stomachs were ready to pop, but they'd never get drunk. They never lost their senses, their judgment was never impaired, and they never got rowdy or violent. Supposedly it never made them sick either. On top of all that,

cavekin lived long lives and could hibernate. In the old days, Narvant told me, people had called them stonekin.

"They called us that because we 'sleep like rocks,'" explained Narvant. "Pretty simplistic if you ask me, but eventually we took to calling ourselves cavekin. And sure, you could say that cavekin is pretty simplistic too, but you know, we thought that name up ourselves, so we've taken a real likin' to it."

That was how Narvant wrapped up his general explanation of the cavekin as he patted a wall he'd made from bricks. It was an archway, actually, and one in the shape of a semicircle, where the wall and the roof were essentially one and the same.

"I heard that you made the cellar walls from stone," I said, "but the ones in here are brick, huh?"

This was the day after I'd met with Yaten and heard from Uncle Ben about how my parents had actually died. Narvant had brought me to a cellar by the cavekin workshop, a big underground space meant for storing and brewing alcohol. The place was lit up by the torches we were carrying, and they illuminated Narvant's smile as he replied.

"Yep. The others are built only to keep the cold in, whereas here we also want it to be a space that brings out the best in our brews. You get some air through the space in the bricks, you see, and that helps the booze fairies to gather. When they all get together they help us brew and distill good booze, and they make it all the more delicious when we store it here. In cellars like this one, sometimes even mold helps the process. When this whole place is filled with barrels and barrels of booze, why, we cavekin might be moved to tears in sheer joy."

As he explained things, Narvant headed deeper into the cellar, looking longingly around at the place. Narvant's son, Sanat, had talked to me about a dedicated cellar for their alcohol, but I hadn't imagined this. It was very different from what I'd been expecting. I mean, for starters, the cellar was so big that a single torch couldn't light the whole thing up. Just imagining how long it would take to fill it all with barrels of wine and whatnot made my head spin. Then again, for thirty heavy drinkers, this could very well not have been

enough.

I realized in that moment that the sight Narvant spoke of was his picture of an ideal home...and as the domain lord of Baarbadal, I knew that seeing his vision realized was one of my goals.

"If that's the case," I said, "then let's start by saving enough money to buy you what you need and put our minds to gathering everything for your brewery. We're going to be real busy for a time when you consider all the yurts and food as well."

"I don't know anything about brewing except for when it comes to mare milkwine," said Alna, who'd been with us and silent until this point, "but to think you'll be getting help from the fairies! Amazing! Will you be able to make wine here?!"

Narvant's laughter echoed in the cellar, his beard bobbing along with it.

"Not just wine, my girl," he boasted, holding his beard in place. "Apple cider, beer, mead, berry wine, potato liquor—we'll make it *all*! They grow sugar cane across the border, don't they? We'll make booze out of that too. If it's sweet, we can almost always do it. As for the current season, however... I reckon we can get our hands on some honey in the forest, and all it'll take then is four or five days to whip up some mead."

Narvant wanted to get some help from the twins, because he needed good timber for barrels and nice herbs to mix with the brew. He professed to not knowing very much about making money, but all the same he hoped we might be able to sell some of what they made too.

"Wow! I wonder what sweet honey mead tastes like?!" mused Alna. "And the idea of mixing it with herbs is *very* intriguing! I never knew that the fairies could help with such a thing! I can't wait to see how it all goes!"

What could I even say?



Until now, Alna had been consumed by the idea of revenge, but with the completed cellar before her eyes, her heart was only filled with her passion for alcohol. It was as though she'd been presented with polished diamonds or stunning flowers, and it was an excitement she didn't show often.

Seeing Alna like that must have brought out something similar in Narvant, because he called out to Alna in his booming-est voice and the two got into a deeper conversation about it all. That was when Sanat came trudging through the darkness towards us.

"Ah, there you are. I've made what you asked me for," he said, pointing deeper into the cellar. "When pa calms down I'll show you, so just hang tight."

"So? What did you ask for, Dias?" asked Senai.

"Yeah, what did Sanat make?" asked Ayhan.

It was the day after Narvant had showed us his cellar, and we were all walking through the forest in our long boots, our cloaks, and our gloves. There were the twins, Alna, Aymer, the horses, and me. Senai and Ayhan were out in front when they asked their question.

"I asked him to make me a fermentation chamber," I said. "Basically it's a room for making and storing things like pickles and cheese. Sanat and the cavekin didn't just make me a room, though. They built a bigger place underground, right next to the cellar."

Back when I was an orphan and worked on farms to get by, we'd been given all the poor-quality vegetables, and because they went bad quickly, we'd pickled them with salt and vinegar. It wasn't quite that simple, though, and so eventually we'd had to build a small fermentation chamber for it. When I thought back on it, the whole thing was a whole lot of trial and error as we worked out how to handle factors like wind and humidity.

"Are there fairies in the chamber?" asked Senai.

"The cute little fairies that help to make alcohol!" cried Ayhan.

I smiled and nodded. But really, fairies didn't mean the creatures out of fairy tales. "Fairy" was the name given to the strange phenomenon that was the fermentation process itself. Back in the

day we used to say it was the work of spirits, and Narvant said it was the work of fairies. In any case, because it wasn't very well understood, everybody had their own name for it.

Senai and Ayhan *loved* the idea of fairies helping out in secret. You couldn't see them and you couldn't talk to them, so whether they even existed was debatable, but the twins loved to let their imaginations run wild as they talked about how the fairies dressed and what kind of lives they lived.

"I bet there are different fairies for alcohol and pickled vegetables!" cried Senai.

"And I bet the alcohol fairies all have beards!" added Ayhan.

The girls talked like that as we made our way into the forest, jumping here and there, climbing the trees, and just having a grand old time. As I watched them, I couldn't help thinking that the forest had changed since the last time I saw it. I'd been by a bunch of times with the twins, and I'd passed through it on the way to Mahati, but it felt *different* now. There was a refreshing breeze passing through the trees, and sunlight fell warmly all around us. The ground, too, was covered in colorful flowers.

"Is this what happens to the forest at this time of year...?" I pondered.

Alna looked at me and shook her head silently. The onikin had lived on the plains for a long time, and they often came to the forest for wood.

*So if Alna says it's not just a seasonal thing, then that must mean...*

"It is the work of the girls and their tree cutting," said Aymer, relaxing on a horse's head. "The sunlight falls more easily on the ground when there are fewer trees, allowing the flowers to grow more freely. This also means that the wind has more space to travel. All of it changes the feel of the forest considerably. With more flowers come more butterflies and bees. The girls tell me that there will be more berries and herbs to pick in the fall too. Still, even I'm surprised by just how much the forest has changed through their efforts."

"Wow...well all righty then," I replied. "The girls always told me

how important it was to stay on top of tree growth in the forest, and now I know just how much of an impact it has. When I think about the mushroom and sapling fields they have going as well, we're going to have a real harvest on our hands."

"Indeed. Though growing trees usually takes many long years, the girls can cast spells to encourage their growth. The fall might be more of a harvest than we can even imagine..."

At this point, Aymer's attention snapped back to the present as she realized where we were.

"Oh," she said, "we're almost there. You'll see them soon enough, and then you'll know what the girls have been working on with Narvant."

She pointed to a small opening in the forest, while Alna was practically floating from the anticipation. I followed them with the horses in tow to find a group of sheps waiting for us.

"Welcome to the honey field!" they cried.

In the field were a number of boxes, each of which stood on four long legs. The four-sided boxes had triangular roofs and small holes for their entrances. A small plank sat at the base of each house, connected to the legs. The girls looked at the boxes, then clasped their hands together as if to say a prayer. They chanted a few words, then swung their arms in circles a few times. When they were finished, they neared the boxes.



“What was that...?” I asked.

I was watching the twins...from a distance. I’d also given the sheps the reins to our horses to keep any of us from getting stung by the bees.

“That’s a forestkin spell,” explained Aymer. “The twins tell me it allows them to converse with the bees. I don’t understand the finer details, but apparently bees communicate by way of a unique dance, and the girls are mimicking that. They also send some of their magical energy out as a scent, which allows for rudimentary conversation. That said, only the twins can ‘speak’ to the bees in this way, so it’s best to keep your distance. Even the dogkin keep watch from afar, though Alna clearly isn’t worried in the slightest.”

Alna had indeed run straight up to the girls, intrigued by the beehives and peering closely at every angle. The girls happily explained it all to her as they took jars from their baskets, unscrewed the lids, and placed them on the planks attached to the legs. Once the jars were in place, they reached for the metal poles at the top of the beehives and lifted them up. After a few moments, honey began to drip right into the jars waiting below.

“How in the world does that work?” I asked.

Aymer whipped out her beloved book—the one she carried everywhere with her—and referenced some illustrations.

“Did you know that bees live in hexagonal nests not unlike these?” she asked, pointing to a few illustrations. “It’s where they sleep and raise their young, and the hexagonal shapes are also where they store their honey. The nests in the beehives you see are built between two planks of wood inside.”

Half of the nest was attached to the left plank, and half to the right, and all of it was attached as one. Using their magic, Senai and Ayhan had led the bees to the hive, where they had begun storing honey. When the girls pulled on one of the metal poles, it lifted one of the planks, thus splitting the hexagonal nests. The honey then flowed out of the beehive. The honey dripped to the floor of the beehive and out a hole at the bottom of it, where a jar was waiting. All the girls had to do was put the lifted plank back in place when they were done and the bees would be able to store more in it.

"The girls tell me that it's a beehive developed during what is now called the ancient times," continued Aymer. "The method was passed down through the forestkin people, and the girls are no different; they learned from their parents. However, they couldn't actually build the hives on their own, so they enlisted Narvant's help. And you know how the cavekin are—they had several ready in the blink of an eye."

Aymer went on to explain that the girls had made a deal with the bees. In return for some of the bees' honey, they would care for and protect the nest. That was why the twins had done their prayer gesture and arm swinging before taking anything. They were telling the bees that it was time to collect a little honey as part of their deal.

"Doing things this way means that you don't have to completely destroy the hive to get to the honey, and the ease of it all puts the bees under very little stress. It's a most impressive honey gathering method. If there is any downside to it at all, it's that you can't collect any wax."

The girls hadn't really known whether their whole honey gathering venture would even pay off, so they'd kept it a secret from the rest of us until they knew for certain. This made a lot of sense to me. Honey was hard to get, it was sweet and tasty, and it was good for you. If they'd told me they knew an easy way to get something precious like this, naturally I would have been pretty excited. Everyone else too, I bet. So I could understand that the girls would want to keep their project under wraps rather than make us all wait when there was always the chance they might disappoint us.

In terms of materials, the hives only need some wood from our tree felling work, some earth, and some candles. It was easy work for the cavekin, and Aymer had also pitched in.

"I don't have a problem with them keeping things on the down-low," I said. "I mean, I gave them express permission to cultivate their fields and to forage as they pleased. But I never imagined they'd build such a great way to gather honey. I tried building a hive myself as a kid, more than once, but I always got stung all over..."

I started reminiscing about those old times, when I broke our

own hives and squeezed them for honey and sometimes took honey from hives in the wild when there wasn't enough. Naturally it always ended with me running as fast as I could and coming home covered in new bumps... Aymer listened in silence, looking at me through narrowed eyes.

I knew by that look on the mousekin's face that she had some real thoughts about how I'd handled things, but she didn't say a word, so I went on talking about the time I'd found myself in a battle for my life when I found a hive so big I had to hold it with both hands.

The twins finished gathering their honey while I was regaling Aymer with stories from my past. They turned to look at me with loaded jars in their hands and great big smiles on their faces, giggling with excitement. The jars were pretty big, and the girls could only carry one each, so the other two jars were sitting by their feet, making for an impressive total haul of four jars of honey.

"Wow," I uttered. "Look at all that honey you gathered, and not a sting on either of you."

My comment only made the girls even happier, and their smiles got so big I thought the both of them might burst. They brought the jars in their hands over to my feet, then went back and grabbed the remaining two jars, which they held up to show me.

"We can only gather this much because we only take a little from each hive," said Senai. "We don't want to trouble the bees too much... But we'll come back tomorrow or the day after, and we'll be able to get the same amount again!"

"You're making alcohol with it, right?" added Ayhan. "Here! We'll give this to you!"

I looked over at Alna, who read my mind from the expression on my face and nodded. In turn, her expression said everything I needed to know.

*I'm with you.*

I got down on a knee and gave Senai and Ayhan a pat on the head.

"Well, girls, thank you for being so kind. That means the world to me—it really does. But you two worked hard to get this honey, and I

couldn't possibly take it for nothing. I mean, the two of you always have some as a treat, and you love using it in our meals too. You also got help from Narvant and his family, right? I reckon you're going to give them some honey as thanks, but the rest is yours to do with as you like."

The girls were shocked all right. Neither of them had expected me to say anything like that. But after a little thought, both of them looked confused; they weren't sure what to do now.

"If you've got yourselves more honey than the two of you can use alone, or if you want me to use it in village projects and whatnot, then I'll pay you for it," I said. "Honey is a precious commodity, so we'll ask Ellie for the market price and we'll pay you two appropriately. That means you'll get some gold and silver for your efforts. Anything you earn is yours, and that means you can buy the things you want when one of the Peijins comes to visit, or you can even ask Ellie to pick you up something when she's out doing trade."

Well, the girls hadn't expected me to say anything like *this* either, and they froze with the jars still held up to me. They were totally at a loss, and the shock they were showing made their eyes look like they'd pop right out.

Until now, we'd been giving the girls some copper coins as pocket money for their help with the chores and their various mushroom foraging efforts. But these beehives were something on another level; they were made well, they were bound to bring in profit, and more importantly they were the direct result of the girls' wisdom and ingenuity. Pocket money just wasn't going to cut it.

There was also the fact that the girls were always using their magic—magic unique to the forestkin, no less—to help everyone who called Iluk home. The beehives, in that sense, were a chance for us to give the girls a proper thanks and reward them as they deserved.

"You mean...we'll get...money?" asked Senai.

"And that money...is ours...?" asked Ayhan.

I nodded.

"Yep, the money you earn will be all yours," I replied. "Me, Ellie, Goldia, Aisa and Ely—all of us worked as kids, and we were all paid

for that work. With the money we earned we bought things, and those experiences brought us countless lessons. Sometimes we spent too much, sometimes we bought odd items and things we didn't need, and we sure wasted some of it... But all our failures made for lessons learned, and seeing as you girls are working so hard, I want you to have those same opportunities. But just to be clear, if you start wasting your coin or using it in the wrong way, then me and Alna are going to scold you for it, you hear?"

The girls couldn't quite understand all of what I said right away, so they stood there with jaws agape. Alna, meanwhile, gave a great big nod to show that she agreed with my idea. She'd worked from a young age herself, and she'd spent most of her earnings on her family, so I knew she felt strongly when it came to matters of money. She just couldn't help but feel so proud of the girls, and I could see it in her rosy cheeks and smile. Between her love of honey and her pride, it was probably more joy than she knew what to do with.

The girls looked at Alna's expression, then at the jars in their hands, then back again...and then they put down their jars and spread their arms wide. Alna didn't hesitate for an instant—she wrapped the girls in a big hug and patted them each on the head. I didn't think the girls could have been any happier at that moment.



"And if you start getting into any strange jobs just to earn more money, then we'll have to have a talking to you then too," I continued, "but I don't think I have to worry about that when it comes to you two. You're always coming to us adults to ask for advice when you need it. And with Aymer always there by your sides, I reckon you can just keep on doing what you're doing."

I picked up one of the honey jars at the twins' feet and took a look at it.

"I gotta say," I added, "you haven't just made the honey gathering easier—this is some *real* quality honey. Usually you have to filter it through cloth and take out all the impurities, but the honey in these jars is so clean I don't think that's necessary. I guess it's just a matter of tasting it to settle on a price, then, huh?"

The girls let out little "Hmph!" sounds while they were still wrapped in Alna's arms.

"It tastes just as good as it looks!" the girls cried proudly. "It smells wonderful too! We know that because we planted perfect flowers for the bees really close by!"

"Ah, I see," I said. "Feed the bees the right nectar and the honey is sure to be tasty. With honey this good, and considering the pace you can gather it, I reckon it won't be long before we've got a decent stockpile of mead."

The girls looked at each other and grinned. It looked to me like they were both racking their brains to come up with more things that I could praise them for, and after some mumbling and murmuring they gasped.

"We have redcurrants for wine too!" exclaimed Senai. "Redcurrants! They grow really quick so you'll be able to make a whole lot of wine in the summer!"

"They're not all that tasty, but you can use them for wine!" added Ayhan.

"Y-You're growing redcurrants?" I stammered. "But they're... Oh, wait. Of course you two are going to handle them just fine. You're forestkin."

Aymer and Alna apparently didn't know anything about redcurrants, because they shot me puzzled looks. I was quick to

teach them what I knew.

Redcurrant shrubs weren't particularly big, but in the summer they produced a whole heap of fruit. The actual redcurrants themselves were pretty tiny, and because they didn't offer much in the way of flavor you couldn't really call them *delicious* per se, but that didn't mean you couldn't use them in jams and wines. They were a good fruit for processed goods.

If you put a redcurrant shrub in a pot and kept it small, it would still give you lots of fruit, which made them handy when you didn't have anything to eat. The problem was that if you didn't manage it carefully, you could very quickly find a place completely overrun by shrubs. When the redcurrants got out of hand, every other plant in the area withered away or suffered as a result. I knew that from firsthand experience. I'd been a little overzealous planting them as an orphan, and in the end, it had just caused more problems.

Still, now that I knew we had redcurrants, that meant we could potentially have mead in the spring, redcurrant wine in the summer, and berry wine in the fall. If we were brewing and stockpiling that, then that meant we'd have plenty of alcohol for Narvant and all his cavekin.

"Keeping control of redcurrant shrubs is important work, so just don't let it get out of hand," I said to the twins. "If you think you're going to have any trouble, you come speak to me, okay?"

I made sure to sound serious on the matter to really put my stamp on it.

In a matter of days we'd made up some mead with the honey that Senai and Ayhan gathered, and we had the makings of even more alcohol in the revelation that we had redcurrants available. Then there were Goldia, Aisa, and Ely, who returned to Iluk with a considerable haul of wine barrels. Safe to say Narvant was about as happy a chap as he could possibly be.

One reason for Narvant's mood was, naturally, all the different alcohols we could make. Another, however, was that we'd gone to the effort of getting that alcohol production going because we needed the whole cavekin clan's help. Narvant had tears in his eyes

when he told me it was the right time to officially call his fellow cavekin to Baarbadal.

To call everyone to Iluk, there was a rite of sorts that had to be abided by, so we gathered wood to start a fire in the village square, and Narvant took a seat by it with his legs stretched out in front of him and a bottle of recently brewed mead in hand. (A bottle that had the twins' faces drawn on it, I might add.)

"Young Dias!" Narvant boomed, holding the bottle up high. "D'you know what's in a body?! Let me tell you! It's all just tiny particles of sand and earth, and eventually it crumbles to return from whence it came! Don't you think it's all a bit meaningless, the fact that we spend our whole lives in search of meaning?!"

Narvant started getting all philosophical on me, and I found myself thinking back to the lessons I'd received from Uncle Ben as a child. I sat down cross-legged next to Narvant, and I mulled over his question before giving the cavekin my answer.

"But even then there's great joy in life," I said. "So long as you have family, friends, and delicious food to fill your belly every day."

"Hah! That's one way of seeing it, I'll give you that!" replied Narvant. "And I agree that it's better to enjoy the time you have than to lament it! But let me tell you something that works a little better! It's *booze*, and the drinking of it! Booze feeds the tired particles of our bodies! It is the water of life! It flows between the particles that form each of us, soaking, filling, and healing us! Booze is life, I tells ya! And the moment you forget is the moment it all comes to an end!"

"Well, uh, I won't deny you your opinion, but I've gotta ask that you don't go so far you hurt yourself."

Narvant grunted his approval.

"Do you hear that, my friends?! You to whom I promised a future in which we were reunited?! There is a village here for us! Lands to call our own with each sunrise! This ordinary human has asked for our support! And what's more, me and mine can't help but feel a little lonely drinking all on our own! Show yourselves, that we might drink together and indulge in the water of life and all its healing properties!"

Pouring his heart out, Narvant then poured some of his mead into a cup on the ground. Then he poured some on the ground itself and sipped a little from the bottle. Then he did it all over again, filling cups and pouring mead on the ground.

Nobody was entirely sure what he was doing, and I could hear Mont and the other guys muttering about how it was a waste of good booze. The twins sure weren't a fan of what Narvant was doing either, but he kept it up and did it over and over until his bottle of mead was completely empty.

But when there was nothing left for Narvant to give, the ground began to tremble, so slightly you dang near couldn't feel it, putting everyone a little out of sorts. I couldn't hear all that well what with Mont and the twins making all their noise, but I looked around when I felt the shaking—it was definitely there, but not anything you'd call an earthquake.

It was then that the ground split, and a stocky arm broke through the fissure, right where Narvant had poured out his mead.

"Whoa!" I exclaimed.

Everyone else was quick to see the arm too, and the village dropped into a sudden and confused silence. Nobody knew what to say, so we all just watched in rapt attention as a shoulder soon followed, then a head, and so on until an entire cavekin popped out of the ground. They looked just like Narvant.

"Ahh!" said the cavekin in a gravelly voice. "Now *that* was one heck of a slumber!"

The cavekin crawled out of the hole and climbed to their feet. They brushed the dirt from their body, took the cup Narvant held out, and drained it of the mead within.

"Yes! That's the stuff!"

That cavekin took a seat next to Narvant, and then another hand popped up from the same spot and started pulling itself out of the dirt, with yet another cavekin attached to it.

"Wait a second, are you telling me that the cavekin were sleeping right underneath Iluk?!" I exclaimed. "Is that the hibernation cave you told me about?!"

Narvant simply laughed and drank some more mead.

"Relax, it's nothing like that, young Dias. While you were preparing all that booze for us, we were making a path for our fellow cavekin to get here. With a special magic reserved only for waking the others, we dug a tunnel from them to here, so they'd be able to find the village square. And don't you worry; when all this is over we'll fill the tunnel back in so it's not dangerous in the slightest."

While Narvant was speaking, more arms were sprouting from the ground and more cavekin following, men and women alike. All of them had real impressive beards, and while I couldn't really make out their ages very clearly, I didn't see any kids, infants, or elderly among them. It looked to me like they were all adults.

Soon enough, everyone had come up from the ground and was drinking what Narvant had prepared for them. The mead was gone in a flash, at which point Sanat brought out a barrel of wine and poured some into his father's cup. All the cavekin partook of the new booze as they talked.

"Hah... What's this maroon stuff called again?"

"It's gotta be wine. Of course it's wine. I know you've been asleep for a while, but surely you haven't forgotten what it tastes like!"

"Isn't all fruit-based alcohol the same? Me, I'm a mead guy, personally."

"You idiot! Nothin' beats spirits! Nothin'!"

"Boy, what I wouldn't give for some spirits right now..."

All the cavekin sat in a line with Narvant at the center, and every single one of them was bright and happy. In the end, a total of thirty-two cavekin came out before it was all over. Once they all emerged, Ohmun came out and patted down the hole they'd come out of. She chanted some kind of spell, which I assumed was to close the tunnel they'd built under the ground, because I felt a faint rumbling under my feet again.

Sanat brought out another barrel of wine, and the cavekin reunion was turning into a party. That was when I cleared my voice to get everybody's attention.

"Well, I never expected an entrance quite like *that*," I said. "But all the same, I know you're all friends of Narvant, and you came all this way to become new residents. I just wanted to give you a warm

welcome. My name is Dias, and I'm the lord of these parts. I'll be doing my utmost to see you all live well, and I hope you'll chip in to help me. It's a pleasure to meet you all."

All the cavekin looked at me, and their eyes went wide with surprise.

"*It's an ordinary human!*" they exclaimed.

What was amazing was the way they all said it in unison.

# Prince Richard's Ballroom, the Royal Capital—An Elderly Knight

The map looked very much like a child had been playing with it. It was in the shape of a horizontal rhombus, where to the far west were the plains which widened as the map progressed to the royal capital before thinning again to the east, formerly imperial territory.

It was a map of Sanserife Kingdom, and Richard was neatly painting all the areas under the king's direct control in a glossy and—it must be said—*expensive* red ink. When he was done, he put the lid on the ink jar and closed it tight, then put the brush on his desk before letting out a satisfied sigh.

Prince Richard's ballroom was now a ballroom in name only and had become very much an office. It was filled with tables and shelves for books and scrolls, the most luxurious of which occupied the area near the fireplace, where Prince Richard was updating his map to reflect the efforts of his reforms.

The map Prince Richard used was the most up-to-date one available, reflecting the addition of imperial land to the kingdom's territory. The paper quality was also especially impressive, which made Prince Richard's painting all over it all the more unbelievable. Still, the elderly knight said nothing and simply watched Prince Richard work.

"Our opposition is so stupid that everything is going swimmingly," said the prince, "but rushing matters will only invite revolt. We should pause for a time."

"Indeed..."

The only people occupying the ballroom were the prince and the elderly knight. There was no need for the knight to be so formal in such circumstances, but even still he gave only a short reply. The prince was used to this, and he went on.

"I said we should put a pause on things, but it's true to say that a considerable amount of territory now falls under our direct control..." It was here the prince stopped, as he noticed a slight change in the expression of his company. "Hmm? What is it? Something on your mind?"

The elderly knight felt a touch of concern but spoke his doubts all the same.

"That your territory has increased is indeed good news. But now that the area is spread so wide, won't managing it become more difficult? Particularly on the outskirts. We are training bureaucrats, yes, but it will be some time before they will be ready for work. Mismanagement of land under your control will tarnish the royal family's reputation and also potentially allow the nobility space in which to fight back."

Prince Richard was quick to respond.

"Ah, yes, that," he replied. "That won't be an issue. The outskirts are under our control, and also the domain of the knights. I intend to let such areas be governed by the knights dispatched to the site...just as I intend to have you manage some territory as well."

"Won't that be the same as having the locations under noble rule?" asked the knight.

"Perhaps. And because that is a possibility I am banning hereditary rank in the order of knights. Areas under their control will be governed by the worthy, the loyal, or ideally both. And while those currently in control will allow their heirs the chance to enter knight training sans the usual entrance examination, that will last for one generation at most. The inheritance of rank will not be accepted. Which is not to say that a son or daughter won't follow in their father's footsteps but, rather, that they will have to earn the right to do so."

"I see. In which case I see the logic to your decision. But this of course raises another question: Can the act of governance be entrusted to knights?"

"Without monsters to slay and wars to fight, the knight order will have a surplus of time on their hands, will they not? So we will have them study governance. After all, if we leave all matters of

governance to our bureaucrats, and the knights have no idea what they're doing, we are inviting those bureaucrats to give in to dictatorial desires. I won't insist that the knights become scholars, but they will learn how things work and acquire a grasp of what our bureaucrats are doing."

Prince Richard continued, "The times are changing, and things cannot remain as they have since the ancient times and the times of the founding king. The order of knights and the bureaucracy will have to change. The reform we seek does not simply end with the nobility."

"I see... Which is to say you are only just getting started."

"That I am. And this domain here, close enough to be ruled and managed from the royal capital, I would like to entrust to you, Sild. You have been there for me since I was a child, and I ask that you see this as a token of my gratitude. When it becomes official, you will henceforth be referred to as Lord Sild, leader of the order of knights."

For a brief moment, Sild was at a loss for words. He did not falter, however, and he showed no shock; his many years of experience made his calm visage nigh impenetrable, and he let out only a short breath before replying.

"Understood. You have given me far more than I deserve, and for that I am beyond grateful."

*In times like this, I daresay it would be more than fine for one to show a little emotion...*

So thought the prince, who did not voice his thoughts and instead offered only a wry chuckle.

## The Residence of the Domain Lord in Merangal, Mahati—Eldan

"I simply will not—no, *cannot* accept such a suggestion."

The rebellion that had spread within Mahati's borders had been quelled, and its towns and cities were slowly returning to life as normal. Eldan had thus taken to gathering his advisors to hold a

discussion at which they could discuss how to prevent future rebellions and avoid making the same mistakes a second time around. It was at this very meeting that Eldan heard a suggestion he could not bring himself to abide by.

"But, my lord, they were able to build their rebellion *because* we allowed them such freedoms. When you consider that the recent events might themselves lead to future unrest, it is imperative that we take action..."

It was a middle-aged man with a boar's face who spoke. He was the one who had first brought up the idea, and he was not yet ready to back down. Eldan listened as he sat cross-legged, his elbows resting on the armrests of his chair.

"It is true that even now our domain contains a considerable number of human supremacists," said Eldan, his authority clear in his tone. "But...to see all of them punished for nothing more than their thoughts is beyond reason. Doing so may well inspire another revolt of its own. I agree that it is imperative we take action, but as Duke of Mahati, I cannot allow for a blanket oppression of these people."

If Mahati *were* to take such drastic action, it would be met with resistance, and Eldan knew that some of it might even arise from Dias in Baarbadal out west. If neighboring domains were to get involved, then it could also lead to the king himself taking action in response. Eldan was a domain lord in the Sanserife Kingdom, and the land he governed had been appointed to him by the king. He was all too aware of the many human supremacists in the kingdom's east, and so he knew his advisor's suggestion was one that could not be entertained.

"Then what action *will* you take, Lord Eldan?"

"Those who incited the rebellion and played an active role in it will be punished, regardless of their ideology," replied Eldan. "As for those who share the rebels' ideologies but did not take part in the uprising and those who continue to live here despite their opinions of the beastkin people... We will reach out to them with kindness. By which I mean we will provide them with support."

The human supremacists despised the beastkin, and their thoughts could not be changed overnight. But perhaps, in time, their

attitudes could become more favorable. If this were the case, then Eldan thought it best to give them aid.

"All of you here today have far more reason than I to hate humans in kind," he said, addressing the attendees of his meeting. "You may think them unforgivable. But to despise those with whom we live side by side and to continue to hate those we should cooperate with is to invite further losses."

Eldan then turned to address the advisor who had first raised the idea of mass punishments.

"Glin," he said, "if we beastkin are superior to humans, as you say, and if we are more powerful than them, then isn't it all the more necessary, now of all times, to offer something in the way of compromise?"

Glin gulped audibly and stopped himself from speaking back. There was yet more to say, and indeed he had even planned counterarguments for this very moment, but he felt the weight of the gazes on him and the heavy air they created in the meeting room. All of it told him that enough had been said.

All of those who had sworn allegiance to Eldan—from his human aides Kamalotz and Juha to his loyal dogkin and lionkin—were no fans of the human supremacists. And yet even the most ardent among them were hanging on Eldan's words, and Glin knew that to insist on taking a stand here would be to turn them all into his foes. Such was the weight of their gazes.

Glin did not hate Eldan, nor did he hate the human blood that ran in his lord's veins. He was grateful to Eldan and respected him...but even then he could not bring himself to forgive the humans who had made his people slaves. And so while he gritted his teeth, Eldan looked him in the eye and offered his advisor a smile before glancing for a brief moment westwards, in the direction of Baarbadal. In his gaze was a series of questions.

*Who was first to rush to our aid when the rebellion first broke out? Who was it who supported our domestic industries by buying up local produce in war-torn towns and villages, asking for nothing in return? And what race is he, this man who has supported us in so many ways?*

Eldan’s gaze was gentle, but the questions in his eyes were earnest and clear.

“I will follow your lead, Lord Eldan,” said Glin, his head dropping reverentially.

# The Plains to the West of Iluk—Dias

"Yeah, no, I heard him when he said that an ordinary guy wanted our help, but I didn't think he actually *meant* it."

"I figured it was just our drunk old chief trying to set the mood and spouting whatever he felt like."

"But it sure is nice to see that ordinary humans have made it this far. They're so puny and weak that simple illnesses usually wipe them straight out."

A few days had passed since the new cavekin arrived in Iluk, and three of them were chatting away happily as they went at the ground with digging poles. But unlike the usual digging pole, the tools the cavekin used were made with more steel and the ends of them were like wider spaces that each narrowed to a sharp point. They looked a lot like big spoons.

"Enough jibbering and jabbering," said one of the cavekin. "The baars are going to get away if we don't hurry it up, so dig! That's where it all starts!"

"We *are* digging!" replied another. "We could catch a galloping horse if it was in front of us!"

The third let out booming laughter.

"Roadwork is so much fun!" he said. "You dig, you stamp the soil down, and then you cover it all in gravel!"

The cavekin kept on chatting while they kept on digging, following the path laid out by all our baars, who were munching their way through the grass ahead.

The cavekin had their own approach to making roads, and basically it went like so: They turned over the soil, stamped it down flat, then covered all of that in gravel. Finally they laid stones over it, which they'd cut especially for the road.

Naturally, when the cavekin turned the earth over it ruined all the vegetation, and the baars thought that was a real waste. Needless to say, they were set on munching up *all* the grass along the road we were building. Everything down to the smallest blade of grass went in the baars' mouths as they followed Hubert, who had his map in hand and Sahhi in the sky to keep everything on track.

It was a roadwork caravan of sorts. Hubert and Sahhi led the way, the baars carved out the width of the road with their eating, and the cavekin followed behind. It was all going swimmingly too—all the earth was being turned over evenly, so the road was nice and flat.

The road we were building ran from Iluk all the way west to the border station we were planning to build. I say "planning," but actually the cavekin were already blazing through the work. Of our thirty-two new cavekin, ten were cutting stone in the wasteland, ten were preparing things at the border station, six were digging up the road, and six were at Narvant's workshop making tools for all the others. Every cavekin, man and woman alike, headed out to work every morning, and they had Mont and the guys helping them out at the border station.

The eastern border station in the forest had Klaus as its captain, but we still hadn't decided on a captain for the western border station, where Baarbadal met with the Beastkin Nation. That position was one of responsibility, and it was one that Joe, Lorca, Ryan, and even Mont all thought highly of. Each one of them was using their work as an opportunity to show just how suitable they were for the job of station captain.

I was on the receiving end of all of that, and honestly I wasn't sure who to appoint to it, but I was at least happy to see that it had lit a fire in them. As I was thinking about this, I heard a few voices call out from behind me.

"All right! That's the stonework done!"

"Lord Dias! Come over here for a second! It's important you understand how we go about our paving!"

"Narvant said to teach you what we're up to, so listen up, young'n!"

While three of the six roadwork cavekin were turning over the earth, the other three had brought over stones from the wasteland, and boy, were they nothing like what I'd expected. I was used to seeing thin stone slabs, but these were thick and had real odd shapes.

The cavekin said that the best pavers were closer to cubes than they were to slabs. They weren't exactly cubes, mind you, because some of them had bits sticking out of them and others had indentations in them, so the surfaces were crafted in a very particular way.

I'd always thought that when it came to paving a road, you just lined up some slabs and called it a day. According to Narvant and the cavekin, however, that was no way to build a reliable road, because the pavers cracked quickly and didn't stay in place. Sometimes that meant you couldn't use the road at all, but it was all going over my head.

When the cavekin saw me looking all confused, one of them picked up a piece of stone with a bit sticking out of it, and another picked up a stone with an indentation. Then they bashed the stones together.

At first I was surprised to see them do that, especially after they'd gone to all the trouble of cutting them into shape in the first place, but when the cavekin brought the stones up to me I saw that they were stuck so tightly together they'd practically become a single piece.

The cavekin told me that all the pavers they made worked like this. I was surprised...and a little doubtful, so one of the cavekin kindly explained.

"The border station you're building over there," he said, pointing west, "is where Baarbadal meets the Beastkin Nation, right? Well, sometimes your neighbors can become your enemies, and those enemies might try to attack you. Now don't get things twisted—we intend to make a border station that will defend against any enemy, but that's not to say your foes will never take the long way around to get into your territory. And when they see a stone path, what are they going to think? I'll tell you. 'Boy, them stones would work real

well in a catapult! They're just perfect for that.' That's what they'll think."

The cavekin pointed out that with hundreds of stones leading from the border station to the village, they would have practically unlimited ammunition. That was something our enemies would thank us for.

"But we're not going to make it that easy," he continued. "We stick our stones together like this and we make them a pain to dig up. By packing them in like this, getting them out of the ground takes a lot of work. You can try wedging steel between the stones to lever one up, but that's not easy when they're stuck together, you see?"

The cavekin said that this made things a *little* harder when a paver cracked and needed to be replaced...but the cavekin had tools and methods for getting around that, so really the only people they'd trouble were our potential enemies.

"Ah! I see!" I exclaimed. "That's incredible!"

The beards of the three stoneworking cavekin all bobbed up and down as they grinned and chuckled, but then they were straight back to work, inserting the stones into the flattened, gravel-covered ground. They put a stone in the center, then put stones to either side of it, and then they did the rest in a twisty sort of way that might have been an agreed-upon method but might also have just been dictated by how they felt. In any case, little by little the stones were laid down, and the road crept west towards completion.

I gave the cavekin a little assistance with their roadwork just to feel what it was like, but both the digging and the stone carrying were a way bigger strain than I'd thought. Digging up just a few steps' worth of road had my back and knees begging for mercy, and I couldn't help thinking about how literally backbreaking it would be to go all the way to the border station.

I was in good shape, and plenty used to heavy labor to boot, but this roadwork was a real struggle even then, and I figured that made it just as hard for the cavekin. But to my surprise, the cavekin never huffed or puffed, and they never looked tired, mad, or frustrated no matter how hard it got. They swung their tools around and dug up

the earth like it was nothing.

"Ha ha ha! Another day of work! Ha ha ha!"

"And the end of another day of work means another night of booze! What a combo!"

"And the more you work, the better it tastes!"

I took a seat by the roadside for a short break while I listened. The cavekin, however, didn't stop for an instant—no rest, no water breaks, just constant work.

"Guys!" I called out. "It's your first day, so let's not overdo it, okay? If you get tired, take a break, and if you need water just say the word and I'll bring some from the well."

The cavekin glanced in my direction as they dug.

"You worry too much," said one of them, stopping a moment and spearing his digging pole into the earth. "We haven't even broken a sweat yet. We're built for this! Our arms, our legs, our hips and backs—every bone in our body is made for this kind of labor. A bit of digging and lifting is nothing! For us, this kind of work amounts to what you humans might call taking a stroll. You don't get tired going for a stroll, do you? A long walk, maybe, but from Iluk to here won't tire you out. It's the same for us. You want to tire us out, we'll need to do a hundred times what we're doing now! All of that said, it's not all upsides for us cavekin. Our tough, stocky bodies make us slow and heavy, and we can't swim either."

"Wow... You cavekin sure are something," I said. "All the same, even if you don't get tired easily, you take breaks every now and again, okay?"

I was mighty impressed by the cavekin's abilities, and my reaction just made the cavekin and his two workmates chuckle. Moments later, and perhaps unsurprisingly, they were all back to work. They got into a rhythm with their tools, they spoke to one another occasionally, and with each minute they steadily made their way west.

I watched them for a while, marveling at how they kept up the same pace without rest, and when I felt like I'd recovered I picked myself back up. I was thinking I might help them out some more, but then I heard hooves approaching from the west. Soon enough I

saw Zorg approaching on a real impressive-looking horse and in something of a more decorative cloak than usual.

"Hey there," he said, deftly bringing his horse to a slow trot. "I've checked out the location of the western border station, and I've no issues with it."

"Glad to hear it," I replied as I ran over to him. "The location is outside of our arrangement, so I'm happy to hear there won't be any problems."

Zorg nodded as he hopped from his horse and gave it a few pats on the side and legs.

The western edge of the plains, which was the official border between Baarbadal and the Beastkin Nation, was outside of the area in our agreement with the onikin, which split the plains half-and-half between us. Some in Iluk (mostly Alna) had said that I could just do what I wanted because the area wasn't part of the agreed split, but I still thought it best to get the onikin's permission all the same. For that reason, I'd sent a dogkin to their village in the morning to ask them about it.

"That area isn't really the plains anyway," said Zorg. "The grass that grows there is of a different type from what we have here. I had our baars check it to be sure, but it's hard, it stinks, and it's not even edible."

Once he'd finished checking on his horse, he took the harness off it and gave it a light pat on the back to let it know it was fine to graze for a while.

"Our baars...?" I asked. "Do you mean the ones that belong to Alna's parents?"

I wasn't used to Zorg talking about baars like they were part of his family, so I asked him about it. Zorg responded with a bashful look.

"Ah, well, actually..." he muttered, blushing as he spoke. "I've got a family of my own now, so to speak. I came into some wealth recently and I used some of it for a betrothal gift. The wedding is still a little ways down the line, but my wife is living with me now... She, uh...even made me this cloak I'm wearing. The whole thing got us a bunch of baars too, and they're who I took to check on the

grass out near the station."

I couldn't hide my shock one bit. "That's great news! Congratulations! When's the wedding? You have to tell us when you lock in a date, okay? We'll make sure to prepare you a wedding gift!"

"Uh... I can't really say anything for certain yet. But thanks. And of course, I'll let you know when we've got all the details sorted. Oh, and the chieftain is on board with the border station stuff too, but...when it comes to the mines in the northern mountains, she's a bit wary. Well, worried, really. I mean, there are poison springs out there, right? How are you going to deal with that?"

"Oh, you know what? I was worried about that exact same thing, but apparently that's not a problem. The cavekin tell me that their beards neutralize poisons."

"Huh? They what? Their *beards*?! Dias, I mean, seriously, are you completely—"

Zorg was skeptical, and I couldn't blame him. I explained to him who the cavekin were and showed him the amulet I wore made from beard hair. He stared at the amulet for a good long time, then looked over at the cavekin digging their road. He stayed like that for a time before he finally collected himself and spoke.

"B-Beards...neutralizing...poisons..." he slowly uttered, wiping the sweat from his brow. "I want to tell you to wake up and tell me the truth, but...I can see you believe them, and now that I've seen for myself just how hard they work, I feel I've got little choice but to believe them too."

The cavekin must have felt Zorg looking at them or otherwise heard us talking, because one of them turned to look at us.

"You just leave the digging and the building to us!" he shouted in a booming voice. "Soon enough we're all going to have workshops just like the chieftain's, and then we'll be crafting cutlery, sewing machines, siege weapons, and whatever else you can dream up. Just you wait!"

Zorg wiped some more sweat from his brow as he took in what the cavekin had just said, then shot me a look that said, *You sure you want to just give them free rein like that?*

I wasn't sure how to respond, and the cavekin went about their

business undisturbed, and it was then that Zorg remembered something.

"Oh yeah," he said. "The black ghee have increased in number recently, so be careful when you're south of the wasteland, okay? There's too many of them."

"Too many...? How did that happen...?"

"*You* happened, Dias," replied Zorg, glaring at me through narrowed eyes. "I don't know whether to blame you or to thank you, but they're breeding way more than usual because of all the dragons you keep slaying. I know you hunted your fair share of black ghee last year, but that was a trifle compared to what a dragon can do."

"Dragons? I mean, sure I hunted a few last year, but what does that have to do with the black ghee population?"

"When a dragon sees a herd of black ghee, it sees food. It's not necessarily every year, but most years they come by once or twice and feast on the local wildlife. They cull the black ghee population in the process."

"Hmm? But when a dangerous monster like a dragon shows up, what happens next? If someone doesn't kill it, it'll just keep feasting, won't it? Won't that mean the black ghee might go extinct?"

"The ghee don't just sit there and take it, Dias. Some of them go down fighting with their horns. A dragon isn't going to be bothered by one or two ramming ghee, but when it's ten, twenty, or a hundred, even a dragon's going to get hurt. Sometimes a dedicated monster-hunting platoon is sent out from the kingdom, but other times the dragons simply eat their fill and go back to their nests."

Zorg said that when dragons arrived, the onikin usually cast their concealment magic and shifted their village away from the danger zone. They'd lie low and stay clear until the dust settled, then move back when the dragon was gone.

"So we don't really know for sure where visiting dragons go or what happens to them," Zorg mused. "We fight them if we've no other choice, but every strategy comes with losses, so that's always our last resort."

"Huh... I see. And my slaying the dragons is why the ghee have grown beyond their usual numbers and gone as far as the

wasteland?”

“Yeah. They must know that the salt plains are down that way, and I bet they love that. But you won’t love it when they leave their shit and piss all over the salt, especially now that you’ve found a buyer. Get more guards out there, or build a fence... But don’t be heartless either. Let the ghee have access to some of the lesser quality stuff or lead them to somewhere else they can feed.”

“That sounds like a plan,” I said. “We’ll put the stuff we can’t sell somewhere suitable for the ghee, then fence off the rest of the salt plain. There’s a chance they might try to bust the fence down, but I doubt they’ll do that if they’ve easier access to salt elsewhere.”

“Yeah, sounds about right.”

Zorg’s horse returned, having had a chance to eat and rest up. It dropped its head and pushed into Zorg for some pats, and he did exactly that until it was nice and satisfied. Then he put the saddle back on, hopped on up, and headed back to the onikin village.

I watched Zorg disappear into the distance and decided to head on back to Iluk to see if anybody needed my help. The cavekin work was a bit of a struggle for me, after all. When I got back I took a look around and noticed some dogkin standing at the ready, their ears poking skyward as they listened to something from afar. An instant later the dogkin looked all excited and one of them ran over to me.

“Ellie is back! Everybody’s safe! They’ll arrive here shortly!”

“Oh, is that so? Glad to hear they’re all well,” I said. “But what’s got all of you so happy and excited?”

“The salt!” replied the excited dogkin. “They went and sold our salt! We’ve got payment coming!”

“You do too, don’t you? That was the main goal of their trip, wasn’t it? I sure hope they got a good deal.”

I decided I’d join the dogkin heading east of the village to greet Ellie and the lostblood brothers upon their return. It wasn’t long before we saw Ellie, her cart, and the lostblood brothers jumping this way and that, as well as all their guards. They all waved as they came towards the village.

“Welcome home,” I said. “Glad to see you all safe.”

Everyone replied to me with their own greetings, and then Seki, Saku, and Aoi all took off for the village. They sped to their own yurts and began helping one another unload their things—all stuff they must have bought on their trip for themselves.

Ellie chuckled at the sight, cleared her throat, and then brought forth a piece of paper titled "Record of Purchases and Sales," which she began to read. She told me that they'd sold all the salt and detailed the exact price, then went on to inform me that the baar wool had sold just as well as usual and people still loved it.

"As you've probably gathered, the salt sales were excellent," Ellie said, looking up at me from her paper. "And we didn't just sell to the locals in Mahati either. We had merchants from other domains purchasing the salt too. The flavor, the quality—they said it's top-notch stuff. I know we can't offer much in the way of production, but I made it clear to everyone that we'd have salt on the market periodically. I also spread the news that we made a large amount of land part of our domain and that the salt plain was a part of that. Thanks to that, I have a good feeling we'll see an end to the salt shortages relatively soon."

"But you didn't sell enough salt to impact the salt situation everywhere, did you...?" I asked.

"In terms of the amount we sold, no," said Ellie with a grin. "But by letting people know that we're going to have high-quality salt on the market, and lots of it, we impacted the market. Until now we've only sold salt to the guild, but this time we went the extra mile and advertised our product too. It's going to have a ripple effect, and how."

She continued, "Let me explain: All the merchants who were looking to make a killing by buying and stockpiling until they could sell it at exorbitant prices are now going to be hustling to get their salt on the market as soon as possible. If they don't, they might actually be looking at considerable losses."

Ellie told me that the current salt demand was the result of the overfishing, which only ever happened once every few decades. In terms of salt for everyday life, however, there was more than enough go around. But with new salt on the market, who was going

to pay for lower quality stuff at a premium?

"Some people were naturally going to think it was all a lie just to get more salt on the market," said Ellie, "but in this case the person announcing the new salt acquisition was none other than Duke Baarbadal, who even reported it all officially to the king himself. There's no doubting *those* credentials! The map of the wasteland arrived in the royal capital a little while ago, so rumors would have been swirling already. Now they'll really take off."

"That means all the excess fish will be salted and preserved, and spread across the nation feeding people. Some of that may even show up here, you know? We might get fish you don't see in these parts often, like salted herring and cod. Won't that be a delight for us all!"

I finally replied, "Salted herring... I ate so much of that during the war I got totally sick of it. But salted cod? Haven't had much of a chance to eat that. Cod goes great in soups, and roasted too, so I'm looking forward to that!"

After all of her long explanations, my feelings on fish were all I really had to share, and Ellie's eyes narrowed looking at me. It wasn't like I hadn't understood what she was talking about—I understood most of it. But I hadn't eaten fish in so long that the mention of it got the better of me.

In fact, I was thinking about it so much that my stomach started to rumble. The dogkin who were around to learn about the salt sales looked at me curiously, wondering if it was really that delicious, and we all got wrapped up in talking about how much there was to look forward to.

## A Few Days Earlier, at the Merangal Marketplace—Ellie

"The Duke of Baarbadal has acquired new land for his domain! That new land boasts a tremendous stockpile of salt! A mountain, in fact! This here is all the rock salt we were able to gather in just a single day! Can you believe it?! The duke doesn't want to gather *too*

much salt because he fears a sudden drop in market prices, and so our domain will be offering set amounts on a regular basis to help fund future development!”

Upon arriving at the marketplace and unloading their boxes from their cart, Ellie and her crew quickly set about forming those boxes into a storefront, at which point Ellie made her declaration to all within range.

Nearby merchants quickly began whispering to one another. Ellie had set up in the blink of an eye, and her intent was difficult to read. Was she promoting Baarbadal? Was she pushing sales? The merchants did not know. Many of the merchants were from outside Mahati, but even the locals looked just as confused.

All of this delighted Ellie. She had brought rock salt to Mahati a number of times and sold it to the guild. It had only ever been a small amount, however, and she’d never gone to the effort of advertising it, which made the sales more like a deal between friends. But even then, the keener salesmen of the area had still noticed and had thus come to the conclusion that Baarbadal only gathered enough salt for small-time deals and nothing more. But if Ellie’s declaration were to be believed, their conclusions had been *very* wrong, and Baarbadal was sitting on a huge reserve of salt.

The merchants wanted nothing more than to claim Ellie’s words were bluster, but Baarbadal was a new domain and almost entirely unknown. They could not know for certain. Eldan and those close to him had already made contact with Dias and knew of what he was doing, but much of this information had yet to reach the general populace and its merchants. They had next to nothing in the way of helpful intel.

What they did know, however, was that Ellie called herself the duke’s officially appointed purveyor of goods. Very few with such a rank would declare their duke’s name in order to spread lies, and this added credence to her words.

In reality, there was *some* mistruth to Ellie’s statement. The salt had *not* been gathered in a single day. Still, there was no way for any of the merchants to know that, and so many a merchant took off running to check on their shops and storehouses in other

domains. Those who remained approached Ellie's cart to check on the quality of the Baarbadal rock salt, where Seki, Saku, and Aoi were ready and waiting with small amounts on plates.

"Go ahead, please try some," said Seki.

"It's free of charge," said Saku.

"And very tasty," added Aoi. "You're looking at high-quality, pure rock salt."

The merchants thus tasted the rock salt and were thoroughly astounded. They purchased some to better understand its quality, then slowly left, all of them considering how best to act for the future.

It was then that Mahati's general populace began to gather, many of whom were surprised to see so much salt readily available when it was usually quite scarce. They snapped up the salt in prepacked boxes, and it was sold out in an instant. While all these sales were going on, Ellie made it abundantly clear to all that the salt came from Baarbadal and that it would be a regular staple on the market.

It quickly became known to the people as "Baarbadal salt," or otherwise just "Baar salt," and news of its arrival on the market spread like wildfire from the kingdom's west to its east.

Merchants who had been stockpiling salt panicked to get their reserves on the market, many going as far as dropping the price just to ensure that it would all be bought. Many even sent it out with their finest horses, all to ensure they got to the market sooner rather than later. The speed of it all was astonishing.

Ellie had seen all of this coming well in advance, and so she had made a point of dropping into the Mahati guild branch a few days before offering Baarbadal's salt on the marketplace. She'd informed them of what she had planned, and they'd responded by sending messengers out to their other branches and contacts. By the time Ellie did go to market with her salt, the guild was well prepared and saw no losses. It even profited, in fact.

Ellie had also visited Eldan in this time to share similar intel and Eldan was able to ensure that his own merchants survived unscathed. Some merchants in the royal capital were also able to avoid losses, having sold their salt to earn a tidy profit. These

merchants had sources within the castle, and when the king had received a letter and map from Baarbadal detailing its new domain, its salt plain, and its bitumen reserves, the castle had shared the information with its closest and most trustworthy merchants.

So it was that a portion of merchants celebrated their earnings, while the king himself smiled with joy at the letter he'd received from Dias—a joy that refused to dissipate, even with the early summer ceremony fast approaching at the capital, in which all his children would gather before him.

## Some Weeks Later at the Castle Reception Hall

Countless royal flags were on display, and everything from the walls and pillars to the window frames and ceiling were elaborately decorated in gold and silver. It was as lavish as one would expect for a king's castle, and before his throne were the chairs at which his children sat.

Closest to the throne, on the right of the king, was Richard, the first prince. First Princess Isabelle was slightly farther away, on the king's left. Second Princess Helena was the farthest from the king, seated next to her sister on the king's left.

The king faced his children, his neatly trimmed and impressive beard moving this way and that as he regaled them, over and over again, with the same story.

"A port town under my direct control sits by the southern ocean, you see," he said, still wallowing in the joy of what had occurred to the west, "and when it found itself in rather dire trouble, one moved to aid us with such swiftness I daresay he showed in his actions the very definition of what it means to be a loyal retainer. Surely you all agree? He has cultivated the plains *and* expanded our territory. This alone is worthy of praise, and yet this show of loyalty... Is he not outshining even his title of heroic savior?"

The king knew that the ties of royalty ensured that his relationship with his children was anything but ordinary. And indeed, various circumstances and events had placed great ravines between

all of them, made wider and deeper still by the unresolved matter of who would become the king's successor. Still, the king went on, waiting for a reaction or response from his children, all of whom responded with the moderation expected of them.

"I see."

"Indeed."

"How wonderful."

It was enough to make the king's retainers sigh, but the king saw the slight changes in his children and took from them their feelings and intent.

Prince Richard was on one hand happy and on the other displeased. He had likely seen the state of the marketplace and planned to act on the salt situation...only to have his plans crushed most unexpectedly. His happiness, then, came from two things: First, the fact that the work had seen a domestic disturbance settled, and second, that the territory Richard was likely to inherit had expanded.

Isabelle had done her utmost to make her face an expressionless mask, but her shoulders trembled slightly as she suppressed a laugh. Had she not been at an audience with the king, she likely wouldn't have held it in at all; she would have spoken what she felt as loudly as she pleased. The king did not know what was on his daughter's mind, but he knew that whatever emotions stirred in her heart were extraordinary.

Helena appeared slightly restless but maintained better composure than her siblings. Still, she could not hide the glimmer in her eyes. Was it admiration? Was she impressed? The king had always thought of Helena as somewhat eccentric, her thoughts impossible to read, and so he was surprised to see her react with such clear honesty.

The king observed each of his children. A satisfied smile crept to his face and he nodded to himself again and again. He repeated his story once more, and then, quite suddenly, his lips drew tight and his voice grew hard.

"It has come to my attention," he said in a scolding tone, "that the faithful retainer of whom I speak has encountered disturbances

of late. Rumors, yes, but I hear that some have sent messengers on their behalf. No ill intent, it would seem, but let me make one thing clear: I am a generous and above all merciful king, but I will not stand for *anyone* attempting to make life harder for said retainer. All the more so if one has their eye on the throne, for in doing something so stupid they will be making it clear they no longer understand the value and weight of the position they seek."

He then finished, "Richard, Isabelle, Helena... Heed my words, and do not forget them."

The king's children were frozen, surprised at the sudden severity with which their father spoke. But as their thoughts sped through their minds, all three mustered a reply, which they all happened to speak in unison.

"Yes, father."

The king smiled and nodded, then raised his hand. A servant in waiting then brought him a tray, on which sat a piece of rock salt.

"I bought this salt from one of our trusted merchants," said the king, showing it to his children. "It comes from the Baarbadal domain I have been telling you all about. It is a key ingredient in our banquet tonight...so that you might all taste and partake of the flavors of the west and its heroic feats."

Once he was done, the king raised his hand and gestured for his children to leave. The prince and princesses did as they were asked, quietly and politely excusing themselves but now unable to hide the complicated thoughts that occupied their minds.

## The King's Chambers—The King of Sanserife

With the royal banquet having come to a close, the king returned to his chambers, which were just as luxurious and lavish—if not more so—than the castle's reception room. The king bid his attendants to leave him alone, after which he reached a hand out towards the chair by his bedside.

On that chair was a book even more opulent than the room itself, decorated with inlaid jewels and fine embroidery. The king took the

book in hand and opened its cover, at which point a click could be heard. Following the click, the front cover split and separated, and a single piece of paper slipped out from within the book's hidden compartment.

The king had no further need for the book and so dropped it as he unfolded the piece of paper he now held and laid it out on his bed. It was a patchwork map made of several different pieces of paper, and the king took from his pocket yet another sheet of paper, which he fixed to the bottom left of the map.

The map was quite large, and it included the Beastland Kingdom, the empire, and the mountain ranges to the north. The area made up of clippings was the territory now belonging to the Sanserife Kingdom. The clippings composed a misshapen rhombus and seemed more like a painting than a depiction of reality. One recent clipping was from last year and was former imperial territory captured by the kingdom.

The king ran his finger south from the royal capital, then tapped the blank area that was the southern seas. From there, he put his finger on the text that read "Baarbadal," which was written above its former name—now crossed out. The king once more traced his finger downwards, first to the newly attached wasteland below Baarbadal, then farther south to a spot on his bed where no map existed. He tapped this spot too, then ran his finger right, where it met with the southern seas. A smile grew upon his face as he spoke, his voice no louder than a whisper.

"It is likely that south of the wasteland lies the sea... Given the location of the southern seas, in fact, there can be no doubt. And if the wasteland seas are made a part of our kingdom, the west and the east will be linked by a shipping route. Not only will the transport of goods and soldiers be hastened, but even simply traveling between the locations will be many times faster too. Still, time is running out, and ships must be prepared..."

The king nodded to himself, his smile filled with satisfaction. He gazed upon his map for a time before quietly folding it. He then returned it to its hidden compartment in the cover of his book, closed it with an audible click, and finally put the book on the chair

where he had first found it.

# Gazing upon the Six Young Baars in the Village Square—Dias

Some ten days had passed since Ellie and the lostblood brothers returned, and the days had all gone by peacefully, with nothing to note. Nobody visited from anywhere, nobody sprouted from the ground, and everybody already here just focused on their work. Everything was going smoothly.

The weather warmed with each passing day, the wind got stronger, we saw fewer rainy days, and we all started expecting the end of spring. In all of this, it seemed to be the young baars who made the most of it all. It was a warmth they were feeling for the first time, after all, and they had clear skies above and delicious grass shooting up from below. They could run all over the place and always find something to eat, but they were also a bundle of surprise and curiosity every time they found a bug or an animal of some sort. All of it served to make every day a new joy.

The young baars were also growing bigger and learning how to speak. They started to develop a degree of independence too, and that meant they often spent time on their own, away from their parents and siblings. You could see each of them developing their own unique personality. Some liked to run; some liked to sleep; some liked to eat; some liked other animals like the dogkin, the horses, and the geese; some liked the grandmas; and some...well, some of them just liked themselves.

It was getting to the point where you really couldn’t refer to the group of them as a single entity anymore. They were all starting to walk their own paths, and this was especially clear in the unique personality that Frannia was developing.

You see, the six young baars still weren’t entirely sure what they *were*. What I mean is, while they knew about baar wool and baar

fabric, they hadn't totally figured out the fact that it was a product and that the wool was their work. So while the adult baars did their utmost to stay clean as part of their daily lives, the young ones didn't care about cleanliness in the slightest. They rolled around on the ground happily, and they were fine with having grass, twigs, and even bugs all stuck in their wool. Sometimes they even got dirty on purpose just because of how much it shocked everyone.

Frannia, however, refused to get dirty. She was always aware of her wool coat and always trying to keep it pristine. She washed herself more carefully than any of the other young baars, and the moment she found something stuck in her coat she went running to have someone pick it out. But it wasn't just her wool—she even tried to keep her hooves clean too, and that meant I often saw her pestering Alna and the ladies to polish them.

Frannia didn't act this way because she was concerned about her wool. It wasn't because she was especially picky about cleanliness either. In Frannia's case, it was because she'd cottoned on to the idea that she was *cute* and was very proud of the fact that everyone adored her for it. Basically, she was always doing whatever it took to make sure she stayed cute or, better yet, got even cuter.

As part of all this, Frannia was experimenting with various poses in an effort to get people to tell her how adorable she was. That was how I found myself tidying up boxes in the village square while Frannia was trying her darndest to look cute in front of me.

She had her chin resting on one of the boxes with a look on her face that said, *Super cute, right?* When I didn't respond she tried winking, then fluttering her eyes in order to get a reaction out of me. When that didn't work, she tried wagging her little tail and even doing a complicated dance of sorts.

*All that effort, and she's more than cute enough just being herself...*

Everyone had called her cute as a matter of course, and thus it was the first word she properly learned. Now here she was, trying to be even cuter and really giving it everything she had to get there.

"Yep, you're still cute, Frannia," I finally said.

By that point I gave up and gave her a pat on the head. She

pushed her head into my hands as if to demand more pats and smiled so bright she was like the sun. Honestly I felt like Frannia was cutest when she just smiled naturally like that. I didn't say anything about it, though, because I was worried that it might start her down a path of being too focused on her smile. I just kept patting her quietly, and that was when I heard the footsteps approaching.

"Lord Dias! Lord Dias!"

I knew by the voices that it was dogkin, so I stopped patting Frannia to see what was going on. The moment I did her face twisted in annoyance. She gritted her teeth and her nose wrinkled up, and she let out a short little bleat of displeasure.

I couldn't do anything but muster a wry grin and give her a few more pats. I told her it was nothing to get so upset about, then turned to see what was up with the dogkin. A group of young sheps dashed over to me but immediately shrunk back and froze in place when they saw Frannia's face. They looked at her in wide-eyed shock, and when Frannia recognized that she smiled, clearly trying to brush it off in surrender.

The sheps were still a bit cautious coming up to me, standing on their hind legs so they could point to the forest.

"We received a message via howls from the forest," said one. "A visitor has arrived and they're on their way here!"

Then one of the other sheps pointed to the west.

"And there's another visitor approaching from the neighboring lands! We've gotten messages from both directions!"

"Hmm. Well, thanks for your reports, guys," I replied. "Can you use those howls of yours to ask who these visitors are?"

The sheps dropped down to the ground again, raised their heads high, and howled. They were clear and loud, and the sound seemed to echo across the plains. Moments later they seemed to get replies, though I couldn't hear them with my human ears. The sheps' ears perked up as they listened, and then they stood to their feet again and pointed west.

"The visitor to the west is the usual merchant, and...it seems they want to discuss money. As for the forest, that's one of Eldan's messengers, and...I think they have an important matter to discuss.

But both directions are asking for you personally, Lord Dias."

*The usual merchant is probably Peijin, and Eldan's messenger... Perhaps it's Kamalotz? It's impossible for me to be in two places at once, so perhaps I'll leave Peijin in Ellie's hands while I go to greet Kamalotz?*

I thanked the sheps again and gave them some pats for their good work. By that time Ellie and Aymer had arrived, having heard the sheps howling. Ellie thumped her chest confidently and told me she'd handle Peijin. Meanwhile, Aymer jumped into my shirt pocket, and together we hopped on Balers and headed east.

We headed down the road to Mahati, past the rest area and the guesthouse, picking up excited dogkin along the way. They ran with us until they got tired or were otherwise at the border of their respective guard locations and waved goodbye with their tails wagging as other dogkin joined us for another leg of the trip.

The rest areas gave the dogkin more freedom to be active and energetic, and they seemed to enjoy playing around and chasing us as the grasslands turned to forest. Seeing the plains like that made me realize that things were changing, little by little. With the roads being on the way to completion and people always coming and going, gone were the days when the plains were totally desolate.

*And perhaps someday, those days will be long forgotten.*

I thought about that as we galloped through the forest, led by the border station's mastis who had met us along the way. When we reached the station I thanked Balers for his work, gave him a good pat on the neck and head, then followed the mastis to see Klaus.

The gates to the border station were open, and I could hear people talking in that general direction. As we neared I noticed a big carriage, and from the voices speaking I realized that Eldan's messenger wasn't Kamalotz.

*Who is it, then, I wonder?*

That was when Sulio's impressive mane came into view, and all became clear.

"Is that you, Sulio?" I asked. "I'm glad to see you looking well, but...what brings you here with that big ol' carriage?"

I walked up to Klaus, who had been attending to Sulio before I

arrived. Sulio bowed politely, then held his head high and proud as he answered my question.

"I am here today on behalf of Lord Eldan and Lady Neha," he said. "I'm here with a gift of thanks for your recent support, and to convey a...a request from Lady Neha. I realize you must be very busy, Duke, but might I have a little of your time?"

"Absolutely, Sulio. By recent support, do you mean the rebellion?"

Sulio nodded, and behind him two young lionkin—both noticeably skinnier than Sulio—began unloading small boxes, barrels, fabrics, and lavish decorations from the carriage. It all looked very expensive. They lined it up in front of me, at which point Sulio nodded once more.

"Please accept these gifts as a sign of our appreciation for your support during the unrest that occurred recently in Mahati," he said. "Half comes by way of Lord Eldan, and half is from Lady Neha. It is mostly food and wine, but Lady Neha has put together a curated selection of clothing and jewelry that she believes are suitable for Lady Alna and your family. I also bring with me letters from Lord Eldan and Sir Juha. Please read them when you have the chance. As for the matter of Lady Neha's request..."

At this point, Sulio stopped for a moment to clear his throat before explaining things more thoroughly. As it turned out, the gifts from Neha were both a thanks for our efforts during the rebellion and an offering of sorts for us to hear her plea.

And that plea, it must be said, was pretty darn surprising.

Neha wanted us to look after Sulio and his two friends for the immediate future. I couldn't work out why in the world she would ask something like that of us, but Sulio told me that it had to do with the rebellion, which had been started by humans with a prejudice against the beastkin. Thanks to the rebellion being suppressed so swiftly, there was little in the way of damages, but there *were* still damages, and this only made many beastkin even less trusting of humans.

Eldan, his aides, and those thankful for his many reforms still longed for reconciliation, just like before. In fact, they wanted reconciliation even *more* now that the rebellion had occurred. At the

same time, they couldn't just ignore growing antipathy among the beastkin. Some of Eldan's own people held very extreme opinions, and he was really struggling to deal with them.

Neha thus believed that the key to righting the ship, so to speak, lay with Baarbadal. I was a human myself, and I'd led platoons of other humans to help quell the revolt. We hadn't asked for anything in return, and we'd tried to feed the loot we'd gathered back into the local economy.

Neha believed that at some point this sort of thing would have a positive effect. So it wasn't like she had a set plan of action, per se, it was more that she just wanted to start taking steps in that direction as soon as possible. For starters, that meant sending Sulio and his compatriots to us in the name of gratitude and goodwill. Through them living with us and learning our way of life, Neha hoped we could start building paths towards mutual understanding.

Neha also believed that bonds of love like the one that Klaus and Canis shared would also be a huge boon, and she wanted to see a lot more of those. For that reason she wanted to create opportunities for beastkin and humans to mingle, though the exact timing had yet to be nailed down.

There were also military reasons for sending the lionkin to us; Neha asked that we train Sulio and his compatriots to prepare them for similar uprisings in the future. As the lord of a neighboring nation, there would be times where my intervention could complicate things and I'd have to keep my nose out. She hoped the lionkin could be trained to act in my place, so to speak. Neha was prepared to provide everything the lionkin needed in terms of food and commodities, and she prayed only that I would respond favorably.

Once he was finished passing along Neha's message, Sulio brought forth a leather pouch filled with a considerable amount of gold and silver coins, which he held out to me. That was to cover the room and board, I assumed.

With the leather pouch in hand I looked at Klaus and Aymer, and the two nodded to say they thought I should accept the request.

"We'd be happy to have you," I said. "Let's take things nice and

slow."

"So tell me," I said, "what are your two friends called, and who are they?"

With Sulio and his friends now staying at Iluk Village, I decided it was best to get into the particulars while we headed back, so I rode Balers alongside Sulio's carriage and we followed the road to the village. Sulio was sitting in the driver's seat as he answered.

"Leode and Cleve," he said, glancing at them in the back. "In a word, they're my subordinates. Both of them boast the blood of great soldiers, but neither achieved very much during the recent uprising. They're low on the hierarchy, so to speak; we lionkin earn our ranks through our power and feats in battle. Neha is worried about their futures, and as such she sent them along with me. However, they also wanted out themselves, being that they're not particularly comfortable around the rest of the tribe... Their parents are hoping you'll make warriors of them yet."

Sulio said that because I'd handled him in our wrestling match and then gone on to stamp out the rebels in the west with ease, everyone thought that if anybody was going to make warriors out of Leode and Cleve, it was me.

"You earn your rank through feats in battle?" I uttered. "Now, I know you lionkin are born with right enviable physical prowess, and you've got those sharp claws and fangs too, but surely some of you aren't suited to combat, whether that be physically or mentally. What do you do then?"

"Well, I mean...nothing, really," replied Sulio. "If you don't achieve anything in battle, then your rank doesn't move, and all the upcoming youngsters pass you by on their way up. If you don't like it, you get to training and you throw yourself into battle."

"Hmm... And you can't make your name in any other sort of work? Like say, working the fields, or crafting weapons and armor, or selling and transporting goods? That sort of stuff also contributes to battle, right? I can't help thinking that if achievements in battle are the only way, it'll cause issues in times of peace..."

"We leave most of the support tasks to the races that specialize in

it," replied Sulio. "We lionkin are built for fighting and hunting. We're aggressive by nature... Clearly the gods who made us had that in mind for us, so that's where we put all of our efforts. I know it might be a little difficult for you to understand, Lord Dias, but perhaps think of it this way: You don't get humans born with legs who just choose not to walk, just as you don't get humans born with arms who choose never to hold anything. That's what fighting is for us lionkin. As for times of peace, that's when we hunt bandits and the like."

Sulio answered me calmly and without any hesitation, as though everything he said was just the natural order. I knew he didn't mean anything nasty by it, and he didn't question the lionkin way of thinking one bit, so I wasn't sure what to say. I was a different race entirely, and I didn't think it was my place just to say, *Well, don't you think you've got things wrong, Sulio?* At the same time, however, I thought it was a bit cruel to force your own people into a life of battle when some of them might not be suited to it.

I'd been stealing glances at Leode and Cleve as Sulio talked, and they struck me as slender, a bit frail, and more than a little timid. They were jumpy even when it came to the movements of the dogkin guards accompanying us back to the village.

*I can't imagine ordering those two into the thick of battle...*

Teaching them how to defend themselves was one thing, and I was confident we could train them up, but I just felt that pushing them into a life-and-death situation like war was... It wasn't going to end well.

*So what should I say? And what's the best course of action for those two?*

My head was always real foggy about those sorts of questions. Fortunately, when we emerged from the forest into the plains Sulio was so taken by the sight he cried out like he was trying to be heard from the other end of Baarbadal.

"Wow! So these are the grassy plains!" he exclaimed. "The heart flutters at the sight! It just makes you long to run, doesn't it?!"

Young Leode and Cleve looked out the window of the carriage, their eyes glimmering.

"Whoa, it's so different from Mahati," said one.

"So this is what the plains look like," muttered the other.

By the glint in their eyes and the tension in their ears, and the way they leaned over the railing looking all over, I got the sense that the plains made the lionkin feel a certain way. When I saw them like that, I thought it was silly to get into complicated discussions when they were all enjoying themselves so much. I decided I'd just let them soak up the new sights.

We were about halfway to Iluk when all the lionkin and Aymer—who was sitting on Balers's head—reacted to a sound from above and looked skyward. I followed their gaze and put my hand to my forehead to block the sun for a better look. There was a silhouette coming at us at top speed.

"Sahhi?" I asked as the falconkin came into view. "What's up? Why the rush?"

"Ellie told me to go and find you on the double," replied Sahhi, landing on my saddle, "but it looks like I didn't need to rush at all."

"Did something happen?"

The falconkin calmly dressed his feathers as he spoke.

"No, no, nothing crazy," he replied. "It's just...well, that merchant arrived here, right? He wanted to discuss the business from before, you know, up to the north? He's brought coins and tools and that kind of thing with him. Come on, you know what I'm talking about, right? You and that diplomat? The agreement you made?"

Sahhi was being intentionally vague about it all, and for a brief second—the very swiftest of moments—he glanced at Sulio. That alone told me everything. The merchant was one of the Peijin family, and the agreement was the negotiations we'd settled with the Beastland Kingdom. The business to the north was the mine we wanted to develop and the investment in it. Sahhi had obviously decided it wasn't a good idea to spill all the details in front of visitors.

"Well, okay then," I said, choosing my words carefully. "I guess you really didn't need to rush after all. But if Ellie wants me there, I suppose I'd best go."

I turned to address Sulio, Leode, and Cleve.

"My apologies, but I'll have to head off to see to some business. This road will lead you all the way to Iluk, and Sahhi will see you all the rest of the way. Do you mind, Sahhi?"

Sahhi was fine with the arrangement, so I told Aymer to hang on tight and got Balers to pick up the pace. It wasn't top speed, but it was impressive all the same. When we arrived in Iluk, the dogkin kindly directed us west towards the guesthouse. We thanked them as we sped on through, and when we got near the guesthouse I stopped Balers so he could take a short break at the rest area we'd built there. I pulled up some water from the well, relieved Balers of his saddle, and wiped his coat off with a sweat scraper.

During all that some of the young eiresetters ran up and excitedly told me that they'd take care of the rest. I gave them all pats to thank them, after which Aymer and I stayed just out of sight so we could take a look at the carriages stopped at the guesthouse proper.

"Uh...how many carriages is that?" I sputtered. "Five, six, seven... Looks like eight in total. Why would the Peijins bring *eight* carriages here...?"

"I think it's likely they brought exactly what Sahhi told you they brought earlier," said Aymer from my shoulder. "But all the same, the number is beyond what we expected and *far* beyond what we discussed in terms of investment. What *is* going on over there?"

"Beats me... But I guess we know why Ellie wanted us over here in a hurry..."

"Indeed. Is she speaking with the Peijins in the guesthouse?"

As we were speaking, a frogkin that looked like Peijin-Fa hopped out of one of the carriages and saw us. He ran over, his feet barely making a sound as he did so. I wasn't sure if he was panicking or confused, but Peijin-Fa spoke a bit faster than usual, and he was waving his hands around a lot too.

"Hello. Peijin-Fa speaking. A pleasure to see you again," he said. "I apologize for calling upon you like this and interrupting what I assume is a most busy schedule. There were a few...unexpected events, so to speak, and it was necessary for us to call upon you posthaste. Oh, and just a note on Lady Kiko's sons: I saw that they are safe and well under your care, and I would once again like to

thank you for being so good to them."

The frogkin went on as he led us between all the parked carriages.

"Yes, right this way. Just over here, please. Now, I realize that the number of carriages might come as a surprise, so let me explain. Half of what you see here is everything agreed upon in your negotiations with Lord Yaten. The other half of it was prepared for you on behalf of Peijin & Co."

Peijin-Fa explained that the boss of Peijin & Co., Peijin-Octad, had heard all about his sons' trade with Baarbadal and discussions with me, and it had gotten him very excited. He had prepared a veritable treasure trove to express his hopes that trade between us would continue.

"To put it simply, we've brought you gifts," said Peijin-Fa. "And allow me to present my father, Peijin-Octad."

The frogkin gestured his still-waving hands in the direction of a mat, woven from grass, that sat in the middle of the carriages. Sitting cross-legged on it was a healthy-looking frogkin wearing garb similar to what I'd seen Kiko and Yaten wearing. He uncrossed his arms from over his impressive belly and pushed himself forwards into a deep bow.



"It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Duke Baarbadal," he said, each word coming slow and easy. "My name is Peijin-Octad. I have heard all about your kindness and generosity towards my sons, and as their father I would like to humbly express my gratitude. For the leader of a trading company to arrive in new lands empty-handed would be to tarnish the very name of his organization, and as such I have prepared a small gift. I do hope you will accept it."

Peijin's voice was so low in tone I felt like it made the ground rumble under my feet. All the same, given what he'd just said about gifts and reputation, I felt like I *had* to accept what he'd brought—*especially* with him practically kowtowing to me. I told him to raise his head, and as he looked up at me I spoke...with Aymer's support.

"The honor is mine," I said. "I am Dias, Duke of Baarbadal. And please, there is no need to worry about your reputation here. The Peijins have been solid, trustworthy partners since my arrival on the plains, and I will never forget it. Thank you for preparing yet more gifts... I am beyond curious to learn exactly what it is you have brought this way."

"Well, then... Let me just say that hearing such words takes a load off of my shoulders, Duke. As for what we have brought with us, the carriages are largely filled with Beastland produce—foodstuffs, alcohol, cloth, and refined steel, plus a selection of tools we believe you'll need for constructing your border station and mining operation. I will let my son Fa explain it all in more detail later."

"I had considered bringing laborers too, but when I saw where you intend to build your border station I realized it was unnecessary. The speed with which you managed to gather labor for your project is truly impressive. Such is my folly for underestimating the abilities of a hero turned duke."

In closing, Peijin-Octad said that his company had been responsible for preparing the equipment sent on behalf of the Beastland, and all of it was of exceptional quality.

"Ah, you prepared tools for us too?" I commented. "You have made me a very happy man. As for the border station... It is our intent to ensure it has the space and facilities to allow for a smooth

inspection of goods. Outside of all the usual needs, we also intend to build an inn where traveling merchants can rest, and it will of course be made available to the Peijin family as well."

I also told Octad that he didn't have to worry about his company losing the special trade privileges they currently had. As far as I was concerned, they'd be free from inspections and entry tolls so long as nothing untoward occurred. All I asked in return was that Peijin & Co. continue to bring daily necessities to Iluk and the onikin village.

"Yes, but of course," replied Octad. "We of Peijin & Co. will honor your kindness by working as hard as we must to see that you and the plains always receive fair trade and the items you need."

Octad paused, then looked just a touch hesitant as he went on.

"Now, I don't mean to jump ahead of myself, but on our way here I happened to see your border station turf... Rather, your construction site. It certainly looks like it is coming along, both as a border station and as a military installation. When it is complete, merchants are sure to be at ease, knowing they can go about their work safely."

Then he started to loosen up, and with a few more words it seemed like he was on a roll.

"That said, as a merchant myself, I couldn't help thinking you could still make it a bit bigger, perhaps by allowing for a station square in which merchants might put up outdoor stalls. If you fear that such a space might interfere with the station as a military installation, then you might consider building a separate structure for such trade."

"Ah, and one thing that caught my attention was the location of your border station," he said. "I can't help thinking that you are playing things rather modestly. That is, with regards to the location of the border that you and Lord Yaten agreed upon. Do you have a specific reason for keeping the construction strictly on the side of Sanserife? Personally, I would have built the station right at the borderline...though perhaps you might use that extra space for trade. The beastkin, you see, they have a place for worship, a... Oh, what is it called again...?"

Octad flashed a glance at his son, who sprang over to his father

in an instant and leaned in to whisper a message right where you'd imagine frogkin might have ears.

"Ah! A temple!" exclaimed Octad, wringing his hands together as he spoke. "You see, in the Beastland Kingdom, trade is allowed along the road leading to a temple. The temple gives merchants permission and protection, which in turn allows for safe, secure trade. If you were to allow a similar thing along the road leading to the border station, you would have a lively flow of people and commodities. The road would become a place of constant exchange, encouraging deeper ties between our two kingdoms."

Octad spoke our language without any hint of an accent or affectation, but I didn't think it was because he had grown used to speaking it. It was more likely that, as with his son Fa, he had learned it at home and studied earnestly. That alone showed me just how serious he was about wanting things to go well with us here in Baarbadal, and so I thrust my hand out towards Octad.

The frogkin was shocked but recovered quickly. He hurried to his feet, patted his clothes down neatly, and, finally, took my hand in his own.

"I am glad to see that you are exactly the man my sons told me you were," he said with a wide grin. "It is such a marvelous thing to make a new friend at this age. Now, if I may be so bold, I would like to be of further use to you, Duke Baarbadal, and so I wonder if I might see your border station up close and, perhaps, offer some advice regarding its construction?"

I replied with a smile and a nod.

"Then let us be off immediately," said Octad, sitting back down upon his mat.

At that moment, the frogkin's nearby guards ran towards him, gripped the rails on either side of the mat, and *lifted* it from the ground, carrying mat and Octad both into one of the bigger carriages.

# Upon Arrival at the Western Border Station

Once we arrived at the construction site, I showed Peijin-Octad around. I went around the general layout of the station for starters, then explained where we were building the walls, the towers, the privies and wells, and everything else. Peijin took a look at all the ropes detailing the different areas before speaking.

"That's an interesting design," he commented, "putting rooms in the walls and turning it into a lodging area. That said, I don't think you should make the rooms on the Beastland side of the wall quite so big. The beastkin are best at fighting up close and personal. They're not so great when it comes to siege warfare, so they put a lot of focus on castles, strongholds, and other military bases—and they've put a *lot* into producing and developing siege weapons. That's beastkin warfare in a nutshell. They fight the battles themselves, but they let the siege weapons handle the fortifications."

We'd already begun work on the border station by this time, and the cavekin, Mont, and my war buddies were all out digging holes around the place, busying themselves by piling up rocks and materials for when we started on the construction proper. When Octad spoke, however, everyone paused what they were doing to listen.

"When it comes to siege weapons, the Beastland Kingdom mostly uses ballistae, catapults, and turrets. Put simply, anything that does one of two things: breaks fortifications or flies straight over them. Now, some might think that a border station doesn't have to go *that* far in defense, but by being on the border it's essentially the face of your nation as far as visitors are concerned. With that in mind, preparing siege defenses as part of the overall imposing sight of your station will go a long way to ensuring peace and good relations.

In a lot of cases, this silent pressure has a stronger impact than anything you might discuss at the negotiating table."

I was really impressed by the frogkin's insight, and it was while I was marveling at it that Alna whispered to me. I'd had a couple of the dogkin at the guesthouse go fetch her before I met with the Peijins, and she'd met with us on our way to the border station.

"He's been blue since I got here," she whispered, "and it just keeps getting brighter."

I'm not sure if Octad even knew that Alna had joined up with us, but all the same he went right on talking.

"Even if you can't defend the entire border with your station, having a big base of operations from which to work just makes security that much easier. Any bandits who see it are going to think twice, maybe a third time, and probably turn tail and run. Merchants, on the other hand, are going to feel all the more at ease trading their wares around somewhere so secure."

"If you make it so you've got a nice big marketplace where you do your inspections, they'll love you for it, I guarantee it. But let me be clear: All I'm giving you is advice. I'm just a merchant sharing my thoughts, so you need only take my words as reference. It's your border station, after all, and I think you should build it however you like."

In his closing, Octad burst into a big old grin.

"All the same, we're grateful you'd take the time to offer us your insight," I replied. "I don't know if we'll be able to implement everything you tell us, but we'll do our utmost to make this station a cornerstone for peace and strong ties, and that means making it the best possible experience."

Octad's grin seemed to stretch right past his cheeks when I said that, and he wrung his hands together like he'd been doing before, and that much more fervently now. Peijin-Fa was right there by his father's side with a similar smile, nodding his approval.

When Octad had finished his general summary of the border station, Mont and some of the cavekin, who were in charge of fortifications and construction respectively, approached him with some questions. He answered their queries with that impressive

eloquence of his, and a cavekin was there to jot everything down on their various blueprints or wherever they had free space. Alna and I didn't have any real experience or wisdom when it came to building a good border station, so we just watched quietly.

The day passed by more or less like that, and just as I was thinking that it was about time I returned to Iluk, the dogkin in the area froze. They were all helping to carry things and do odd jobs around the place, but now they all had their ears pointing high. They all stood up a little straighter as they looked around cautiously—and a bit scared by something. A few moments later, the ground at our feet began to shake.

"Pretty rare to get earthquakes around here," I murmured.

The tremors weren't anything particularly noteworthy, but you couldn't miss them either. I figured they'd settle soon enough, but they went on for quite some time. This worried the cavekin, though, who all dropped to their knees and put their ears to the ground.

It was a heck of a thing to watch, but me and Alna waited calmly for the moment to pass. Octad and his son, however, were frowning something fierce as they glanced back and forth.

The tremors went on way longer than any ordinary tremors, and right as I was wondering just how much longer they were going to continue for, they slowly dissipated. Me and Alna let out sighs of relief because honestly it hadn't felt like much, but Octad had his face up close to mine in an instant, and when he opened his mouth you could tell he was shaken.

"Duke," he said, "you have to get ready, and you have to do it soon. That there was a sign... Those tremors were a message, and they say that danger is coming."

Octad wasn't joking or trying to intimidate us; the tone of his voice was enough to know that. He was dead serious, so I met his gaze and took him at his word.

"If that's what you recommend, then that's what we'll do," I said, "but would you mind telling me exactly what danger you're talking about?"

"It's an earth dragon invasion," said the frogkin. "In the Beastland, we call them jiryu. Those tremors were a sign that

multiple earth dragons are coming to attack. It's a habit, perhaps an innate quality within them. They are dragons that make their attacks following earthquakes, and that is how they have come to be called jiryu, or earth dragons. Old records tell of a time, centuries ago, when the Beastland faced a similar invasion from *five* earth dragons..."

*Earth dragons... He means those turtles, huh?*

I'd fought one a while back, and I remembered Klaus saying that they were the sort of thing that usually you fought with siege weapons. It got me thinking about the size of the continent, which I only had a rough idea of. There was the Beastland Kingdom, Sanserife, and the empire. That was a lot of land, and if five earth dragons were covering all of it, then I figured we'd get maybe one or two here at most.

*Two turtles at once, huh...? That's manageable. Now that I have Narvant's armor I don't have to worry about the fireballs they spit, and I already know that I can break through their shells with my battle-ax. I'm pretty confident I can even take two at the same time, if it comes to that.*

And even if there were five of them all at once, I had a pretty good feeling I could manage that too. I honestly didn't think it would be all that much work. But as I was thinking that, Aymer must have read my expression, because she chose that moment to whisper to me.

"I know you, Dias, and I bet that right now you're thinking, 'I'm pretty confident I can take them all at the same time if I have to.' Well, you're the *only* person who can think like that because you're the *only* person who can do it. The rest of the kingdom won't be able to handle things the same way, including Eldan, so it's imperative that we share this intelligence. You may be asked for support again depending on how things go, and you may even find support coming *here*..."

She continued, "At the very least, we *must* inform Eldan. For starters, have the falconkin scout the lands so we can be certain the earth dragons are coming. They don't move nearly as fast as wind dragons, so as long as we can ascertain where they're coming from,

we can prepare countermeasures and fight back."

That made all the sense I needed, so I relayed that same message to everybody in earshot. This helped to calm Alna and the dogkin. Mont and the cavekin, though, they all started talking excitedly about the potential treasure trove of materials coming our way. The Peijins simply looked thankful that we'd listened to them; they smiled and nodded to each other, and then Octad quickly switched his train of thought and clapped his hands together.

"Given the emergency we find ourselves in, I must apologize, Lord Dias," he said, his low voice as serious as his expression, "but as soon as we are done handing you the goods we have brought, we will take our leave. It is in times such as these that we must pray that our people come together in cooperation, and we shall return soon with further word. You will see us again just as soon as things settle, but all the same I hope that our trade relationship remains strong."

Peijin-Octad bowed respectfully, with Peijin-Fa and his guards following suit just a moment later. I saw it necessary to reply in turn, and so I did...with Aymer's guidance.

"It is I who wishes for healthy trade between us," I said. "I pray that you all return home safely and that we can greet each other with bright smiles when next you visit. I have nothing but gratitude for the items you have prepared for us, both from the Beastland and from your own company. Let it be known that I shall pray for peace and prosperity in your home."

Octad grinned as he raised his head.

"I've got things under control," he said.

And if the confidence in his voice was anything to go by, he really did.

We all returned to Iluk Village, where all the necessary papers were signed to make our acceptance of Peijin's goods official. Then we saw the frogkin merchants off and held a welcome party for Sulio, Leode, and Cleve.

It was true that we had a problem looming on the horizon, what with earth dragons on the way, but that wasn't a problem that had

to be addressed immediately. Earth dragons were slow movers, which meant it would be some time before they actually arrived here. Or anywhere, for that matter. With that in mind, we could put off our countermeasure planning for at least a day.

In any case, Alna had seen to it that our three lionkin all had yurts of their own along with all the furniture and whatnot they needed for life on the plains, and the lionkin had already moved all their stuff into their yurts too. We held a party to help them all settle in.

We'd gotten a whole heap of food thanks to both the lionkin and the frogkin, so the welcome banquet was a real feast. There was also a good deal of alcohol, so everybody lit bonfires around the square in preparation for celebrating through the night.

The banquet was both a welcome party and something of a prehunt "to victory over the earth dragons" party at the same time. I think that's why Sulio and his friends were a bit shocked by the scale. And admittedly, it was a bit livelier than our usual banquets. There was singing and dancing as usual, but the village had just grown, so the festivities fed into themselves that much more easily.

The eiresetters and the cavekin had only just arrived recently, so we celebrated their arrival again too. The members of Klaus's border station also came to enjoy the banquet in shifts, starting with Klaus and Canis.

Everybody shared info regarding the coming earth dragons and held casual meetings of a sort, and that's how it was decided that Canis would travel to Mahati the following day.

The day after the banquet, a meeting was held to discuss strategy. In total there was me, Alna, Francis, Aymer, Uncle Ben, Hubert, Mont, Grandma Maya, the falconkin, and each of the dogkin tribe leaders. It was quite the turnout, but actually Aymer, Hubert, Mont, and Grandma Maya had all discussed things the night before and had come up with a plan, which Aymer shared with us from the center of the table.

"Our first priority is to actually discern that the earth dragons are coming," she said. "If they *are* coming, then we have to ascertain in exactly what direction they're going. For this we'd like to ask not just

Iluk's falconkin but their greater tribe. In return for their efforts we intend to pay them in food and gold."

The falconkin's flight and fantastic eyesight made them perfect for the job. And the more we had out there, the wider a range we could cover. The falconkin saw aiding in dragon-slaying quests as an honor. Combined with a reward, it was unlikely that they would refuse our request.

"If we find that no earth dragons are heading towards Baarbadal, then we don't have to do anything. If we learn that a single earth dragon will arrive in Baarbadal, then we can leave the task to Dias to handle alone. If we learn that multiple earth dragons are coming, then we will have to devise strategies to handle them. In any case, we will be conducting reconnaissance on a very large scale. Now, does anybody have any questions regarding things so far?"

I was curious about one thing, so I raised my hand.

"I'm pretty good with everything you said," I started, "but I do want to clarify one thing: Do the falconkin even want gold in the first place? If they don't want it, or if they don't understand the value of it, then they might just end up using the gold as decoration for their homes like the dogkin did. That might be a problem, right...?"

Aymer nodded as she took in my question.

"Don't worry about that," she replied. "The reason we're paying in gold is because we're concerned that by giving over too much food at once it might simply go bad. We will make sure to explain the use of currency to the falconkin, and we're planning to make an agreement in which the falconkin can use the gold they receive from us to buy food in Iluk whenever they need it."

"Well, all righty... Doesn't sound like a problem to me," I said. "So is the plan to have the falconkin scout the entire kingdom? Or will we have them patrolling the northern mountains where monsters usually emerge?"

"The entire kingdom is far too wide an area to cover, especially when we consider the east too. It's too much of a burden to place on the falconkin. We'll cover the area around us and the west of the kingdom. As for the rest, we'll ask Eldan and the guild to spread word via rumors. We can then leave the leaders of those locations to

look after themselves."

At present, we still didn't actually know for certain that earth dragons were coming. All we had to go on was what the Peijins had said...which was based on ancient legends, really. If I announced to the whole world that earth dragons were coming and then they didn't, it would be a real hit to my reputation. I'd also have to take responsibility for the fallout too.

"We've set our limits for now," continued Aymer, "but if we discover that earth dragons are coming, we'll make sure that word gets around. I don't think there's anything more we can do than that, other than get word out to people we trust..."

The mousekin looked a little vexed that our hands were tied, like she was embarrassed about not being able to do more. I didn't think she needed to worry about it that much, though. It wasn't like it was her fault, and thinking of that was when two people popped into my mind.

"I reckon it's fine to send word to Erling and Duke Sachusse," I said. "We're not exactly close, per se, but they're trustworthy. Alna said they were both blue, and I don't see either of them slandering us if we're wrong. Well, I'm pretty sure they won't anyway. It might just be an old legend we're sharing with them, but they'll prepare all the same."

Erling was a noble who'd come to visit the guesthouse on behalf of...Count Sigurdsson's family...? Anyway, when I mentioned him and Duke Sachusse, those who'd met or seen them—Aymer, Hubert, Uncle Ben, Alna, and Grandma Maya—clapped their hands and nodded their agreement. After all, it was the duty of domain lords and the nobility to protect their people, and Erling and Sachusse were sure to set countermeasures to stop any invading dragons.

The only problem was that Erling and Sachusse lived on the opposite side of the kingdom, which meant that a letter sent by way of ordinary postal methods might not get to them in time. With the falconkin and Eldan's dovekin helping out, however, we might still reach them in time, and so we decided to consult with Eldan on the matter.

"But then we might just be stretching the falconkin even more

thin," I said.

Sahhi had been watching over the meeting with his wives from perches we'd put in the yurt, and he spoke up to comment.

"We don't mind," he said. "We're residents here, and we've pledged to give everything our best for the sake of us all. As for the rest of our nest back home, if you can promise them full bellies and a stockpile of food, they'll be happy to work with you. And to be honest, if it's just flying around these parts, then...well, that's something me and my wives can handle on our own. If you get the whole nest involved for something so small, we'll all be bored out of our minds. And I mean, you want to use the whole nest, right? The whole kingdom is a little beyond us, but we can fly rather far."

Sahhi then looked at Aymer, whose gaze went west. "Or is there something *else* you want us to be doing?"

"Hmm. What I'm about to say now is not to leave this yurt, but I've been thinking it would be helpful to have some falconkin keep an eye on things in the Beastland Kingdom. I want their help with that. We're on good terms at present, and they've made a big investment in our development. Any damages they take may well result in losses for us too, so I want to make sure we're in a position to help them if need be."

Sahhi and his wives were residents of Iluk, which made them all citizens of Sanserife. Sending them across the border could result in problems. The rest of Sahhi's nest, however, weren't citizens, which made it a different story.

"It would be nice to have more of an understanding of the geography across the border," continued Aymer, "and any intel we get we can share with Peijin-Octad, which we can put under the banner of ensuring even safer trade. However, all of that is just a bonus, so to speak—the real goal is to get as many people looking for the earth dragons as we can. Given the damage they can cause, the last thing we want is for one to slip by and cause chaos somewhere."

Hubert and I weren't really sure that we were on board with what Aymer was saying. Alna and Grandma Maya, however, were all smiles. Mont and Uncle Ben had dropped into frowns as they racked

their brains in case there was something more we could still do. Francis and the dogkin all tilted their heads to the side, still taking it all in, and the falconkin looked pretty happy just to have work to do. In fact, they spread their wings and puffed up their chests as if to show that they were ready and raring to go.

There was more to talk about at the meeting than just the matter of the falconkin. Others raised the issue of needing to craft weapons specifically for the turtles...uh, earth dragons, and so Mont offered some suggestions. The crafting itself would of course be left to the cavekin. As it turned out, Mont had been educated in the ways of dragon slaying back when he was in the empire, and with that knowledge he detailed what tools and weapons were most helpful.

"The earth dragon ain't much as far as dragons go," he said. "Alna and the onikin would have a rough time on account of bows being their main weapons, but even a group of ordinary farmers could take down an earth dragon with the right tools and dedicated training."

Nobody else was quite as confident about *that* as Mont was, but his faith was unflappable, and I figured that if he believed in the idea that much, then I'd believe in him too.

When the meeting came to its end, Mont went straight to the cavekin workshop to get started. I helped out where I could, and the village went about life as usual aside from increasing the number of patrols.

In that way, three days passed uneventfully. Sahhi's whole tribe was out scouting the skies but had yet to see any sign of earth dragons. Visiting dovekin also informed us that the situation was the same in Mahati. None of us said anything aloud, but I think in our hearts we all started thinking that maybe the tremors weren't a sign of an invasion at all.

Mont had gotten himself all excited about the prospect of taking on a dragon, and Alna had been just as excited to think about all the potential materials, so some of the villagers couldn't help feeling disappointed. At the same time, me and the grandmas were all simply relieved to have our usual peaceful life, and the dogkin didn't

seem to really care one way or the other.

Among all of that, however, Grandma Maya was a bit different from her usual self. She was doing her divination every single day, and she even wrote a number of letters to an acquaintance of hers in the royal capital to inform them of her results. The falconkin delivered the letters to Geraint and the dovekin in Mahati, who took them the rest of the way. It took a month to deliver a letter via horse cart, but the dovekin could do it in a day, so I entrusted them with my letters to Erling and Sachusse too.

In those letters I warned Erling and Sachusse that an earth dragon threat might be looming but that it might just be the stuff of rumors and ancient folktales too. The letters apparently came as quite a shock to the two men, and I got to thinking that in a few more days I'd have to send them a letter apologizing for all the fuss I'd caused.

Those very apology letters were stewing in my brain when the falconkin patrolling the plains arrived to tell me that the Peijins had arrived from the west. I called out for Aymer and the two of us jumped on Balers and headed for the border station construction site.

When we got there we found the border station positively bustling, which was a bit of a surprise, because we'd halted construction until the earth dragon thing blew over.

Mont was running all the platoons through hunting drills with the new weapons and tools that the cavekin had made. Hubert was there too, helping them out with mapmaking and the like. Even Goldia, Ellie, Aisa, and Ely were there buying materials.

We found Peijin-Fa at a corner of the site, sweating like crazy. The moment he saw me he cried out.

"Lord Dias! I'm here with a message! An earth dragon has been sighted to the Beastland's west! Our astrologers have read the messages in the stars and determined that two or perhaps three will appear in this area as well. You must prepare yourselves!"

I hopped off Balers and passed his reins to a waiting dogkin. The message came as something of a surprise, so at first I wasn't sure what to say. I'd come to think that the earth dragons weren't coming

at all, but now one had been spotted, and the astrologers—who I assumed did a kind of divination—said more would arrive here.

We hadn't heard any reports of that from Sahhi, but I could tell by how tired Peijin-Fa's horses were that he'd come here as quick as he possibly could. So you could see how I wasn't sure what to tell him...but then we both looked up as we heard the flapping of wings, and then Sahhi came to a rest on my arm with a practiced ease.

"Dias!" he said. "We spotted them! We found the damn things! Two earth dragons appeared at the peak of one of the northern mountains. One is headed straight down, where it'll collide with Iluk Village from the north! The other looks like it will pass through the forest and continue through to the domain to the east!"

"But don't panic yet! It'll take them two or three days just to make it to the base of the mountain, and even then they've got to pass through desolate land before they hit the plains, so it'll be close to a week before we need to go to battle! We've already sent word to Mahati and expect them to be well prepared. And, uh...there's, uh...one other thing..."

Sahhi's report had been straight to the point until the very end, but suddenly he was stumbling over his words as he glanced at Peijin-Fa...whose eyes were as wide as his mouth was agape at the sight of the falconkin. I knew then that Sahhi had something to say but he wasn't sure if Fa should hear it. I remembered then that the falconkin were keeping an eye on the Beastland Kingdom too, and that put us in something of a pickle.

That was when Hubert came running up with his maps in hand. He silently opened one up to show Sahhi, who pointed to an area with his beak. It wasn't far from the border station—just on the Beastland side, a little to their north-east. Hubert nodded, then glanced at Aymer, who was hiding in my shirt. The two held a completely silent conversation with just their eyes. A few seconds later, Hubert turned to speak to the still dumbfounded Peijin-Fa.

"Mister Peijin," he said, "our falconkin Sahhi has tremendous eyesight, and at high altitude he is capable of observing vast areas. During one of his sweeps over our domain, he happened to discover another earth dragon in your nation, in the mountains just north of

the border."

Peijin-Fa's mouth snapped shut and he leaped towards his carriage. After rifling through it for a moment, he came back with a scroll that he quickly unrolled.

"Wh-Wh-Whereabouts is it?!" he asked. "This is a map of the Beastland's east. Can you please show me where you spotted it?!"

Hubert pointed to the area that Sahhi had indicated, at which point Peijin gasped.

"Are you certain?!" he asked.

Sahhi nodded. Peijin-Fa crumpled to his knees.

"What is it?" I asked. "A second earth dragon won't be easy to handle, but surely you have enough soldiers to fight it off, right?"

"I don't much like saying this to people of Sanserife," said Peijin, still unable to stand, his voice trembling as he spoke, "but the area is essentially barren. It's abandoned because the Beastland people have had to fight off invasions from your kingdom. Domestic politics have also seen the place remain without a ruler for decades."

You wouldn't think that anybody would live in a place like that, but Peijin-Fa said that in the years since it had been abandoned, the Beastland's east had become home to those with special circumstances and difficult pasts. For them it was easier to live without a ruler, and over the years many had come to inhabit the place.

"But officially speaking, the area is uninhabited," continued Peijin-Fa. "An uninhabited, uncultivated land without a ruler will be mostly an afterthought. I'm sure the Beastland will eventually make moves to hunt the earth dragon, but by that time it's all too likely that the residents will be dead. Those living in the area have weapons for fighting off bandits, but they don't stand a chance against a *dragon*... We at Peijin & Co. have long been concerned about their circumstances, and so we support them with trade in secret. But this... I can't believe this is happening..."

I couldn't just stand there and listen, so I decided to speak up. If Sanserife was the reason the lands had ended up that way, then it was up to us to do something about it. It was our responsibility, and I was going to tell Peijin-Fa exactly that. Before I could, however,

Aymer tapped me on the chest. Then Hubert stood in front of me, looking me right in the eyes. And to top it all off, Mont sauntered up and kicked me in the shin with his wooden leg.

*It doesn't matter what the reason is, not even if it's to help people. The moment you cross the border, you're making an incident of things.*

That's the message they were all sending me, and in Hubert's and Aymer's gazes I saw a desperate plea: *Please, we don't have any other choice*, they said silently. I knew that the two of them were right, and so I turned my thoughts to whether there was something else we could do. But even then, I still couldn't bring myself to simply accept that our hands were tied.

"Hmph," grunted Mont, grinning as he kicked me in the shin again.

Mont walked over to the crestfallen Peijin-Fa and knelt down next to him.

"Hey, you!" he barked. "I'm just thinking out loud here, but we've got one heck of a kind and generous domain lord here. So danged kind, in fact, that he wouldn't grumble one bit if some beastkin crossed the border to take refuge from an invasion. Nope! He wouldn't say a word! And you know what? I reckon he'd even put up yurts for them and look after them all until the dust settled too! If you covered their travel and food, I don't reckon we'd hear any complaints whatsoever!"

Peijin looked as shocked as he did ecstatic.

"I, too, am just throwing my thoughts to the ether," he soon replied, "but nothing makes me happier than knowing such a domain lord exists. In fact, we Peijins would be more than happy to cover travel and foodstuffs... However, getting to the root of the problem could take days, if not months... In that time, the fields and houses of the very beastkin your lord would protect will be razed to the ground, forcing everyone to start once more from nothing. While I appreciate that such generosity exists, it behooves me to consider other—"

Mont heard every word and grinned anyway. He stamped his wooden leg on the ground to cut off the frogkin, then posed boldly.

"You're a real idiot for a merchant!" he said. "*Months*, you say? Don't be stupid! Bring the earth dragon here along with the refugees and that's your problem done and dusted! We went to a lot of trouble to prepare dragon-slaying gear and darn it, nothing would disappoint me more than having a lone earth dragon show up for Dias to go out and kill all by himself! So bring it here, set it up, and we'll knock it down! Monsters don't give a hoot about borders, and our domain lord won't hold it against you if you lead it this way. In fact, he'll let you! Naturally, though, he won't stand for complaints about us taking all the materials in the aftermath, though, you hear?"

Mont turned to me.

"Hey! Dias!" he shouted. "You handle the earth dragon to the north, okay? Me and the platoons will take the one here. Oh, and send those two lanky lionkin cubs this way, would you? Them idiots think muscle is the only way to achieve greatness in battle, and I reckon this little outing of ours will be a good lesson for them!"

By now, Mont had completely discarded all of his "thinking out loud" pretenses, and Peijin-Fa's eyes glimmered with a newfound hope.

"Are you certain?!" he asked.

"You bet," said Mont.

Mont spun to grin at me again, and that was enough for me. I chuckled as I set about readying yurts for the refugees while everyone else followed along or quietly got back to their own work.

# Back at the Yurt, Looking at Maps —Dias

The plan was to lure one earth dragon to the border station. Still, it wasn't like we could place that task on the shoulders of the coming refugees, so Peijin-Fa said he'd handle that. According to him, Peijin-Do was great when it came to that sort of stuff—he'd practically be dancing circles around the thing even with fireballs getting launched at him. As long as he kept his wits about him, he'd be totally fine.

With that in mind, the revised plan was to bring the refugees over first, then begin luring the earth dragon over a good distance from the refugees' home village. Once they entered the Baarbadal border, Mont and the Iluk Guard would take care of the rest. Mont would command Joe, Lorca, Ryan, and their platoons, who would meet the dragon head-on. Leode and Cleve would stay with Mont to learn a lesson in tactics.

Narvant and the cavekin were readying all the weapons and equipment, Hubert was managing all the provisions, and Uncle Ben was in charge of looking after our temporary visitors. The falconkin, meanwhile, would keep scouting from the air and shoulder the responsibility of long-distance communications. Being that we didn't know how things would go in Mahati, Klaus and the guards at the eastern border station would also be on standby and ready to go. Iluk proper fell under the protection of Alna, Aymer, and the Iluk Wives' Club, while Goldia and the others would transport any extra provisions as necessary.

As for me, well...I was all set to take on the remaining dragon all on my lonesome. Sulio was tagging along to see how I did it, but he wasn't going to be doing any fighting. He would stay at a safe distance to avoid taking any damage from the miasma. I hadn't even

been aware of it when I first fought an earth dragon, but the monster could spread its miasma across a pretty impressive radius.

When it came to miasma, only those without magic could handle the effects without issue. The only other way to get around it was with the special amulets that the cavekin made. I had both, but Sulio couldn't stay by my side because he'd get hit hard with dizzy spells. Even our platoons might find themselves facing headaches and nausea, but Mont explained that most of their fight would be fought from a distance anyway.

The cavekin didn't have time to make amulets for everyone, but they made as many as they could, and we knew they'd go a long way to keeping people safe. This still left the question of how our neighbors and allies were going to deal with the issue, but as it turned out, Grandma Maya had already sent word through to Mahati and the rest of the kingdom.

Grandma Maya knew a thing or two about magic, and by studying the cavekin's amulets she'd devised a spell that worked in a similar fashion...or so I was told. I mean, my knowledge of magic was essentially nonexistent, so I couldn't really understand the feat Grandma Maya had achieved. What I *did* know was that the spell wasn't quite as powerful as the cavekin amulets, but it would nonetheless allow the subject to withstand an earth dragon's miasma.

The whole reason Grandma Maya had been so busy of late was that she wasn't just doing divination. She'd also asked Eldan to help her spread this new spell of hers...or so I was told.

In any case, the new spell meant that everybody going into battle with the earth dragons wouldn't have to worry about the miasma running down their time. All of this made me think that the true star of this whole invasion was Grandma Maya herself.

Needless to say, everybody worked real hard together over the next few days to prepare for the battles ahead. The falconkin then arrived to inform us that the two earth dragons were all set to arrive in Iluk at roughly the same time, and so we all set out for our respective battlefields.

# The Desolate Lands North of the Plains—Sulio

Sulio was hidden behind the safety of a rocky crag together with a number of dogkin. It was from this handy cover that he bore witness to a sight that stirred in him feelings he could not even express with words alone.

Sulio watched as a man ran. The man was clad in golden armor that boasted a red sheen, and his back was straight. His movements looked unrefined and brutish, but the dragon facing him was desperately spitting fireball after fireball at him.

"Hup! Hup! Hup! Hup!" said the man.

He gripped a battle-ax tight in one hand and swung his other with great gusto through every step, showing not even a hint of exhaustion as he dodged a number of fireballs. That said, the man had been hit by far more fireballs than he'd dodged, and yet...he showed no signs of damage, and not even the cloak at his back showed any signs of being burned.

Common sense dictated that the man's armor and axe should have been searing hot, having been superheated by the fireballs, but the man didn't seem to care about it in the slightest as he took a long, arcing path around the earth dragon, closing in on the monster little by little.

According to Dias—the man in question—this particular earth dragon was noticeably bigger than the one he had slain in the past. It was larger, more powerful, and far happier to spit fireballs. It should have been a terrifying foe, but Dias was never burned by the monster's attacks.

In truth, the moment the fireballs reached Dias, they were bounced away and immediately extinguished, their heat dissipating in an instant. This was thanks to the set of armor he wore, but Sulio did not know this and from his rocky crag it looked in every way as if Dias were taking the fireballs head-on. Sulio was convinced that Dias was simply unflinching against the unbearable heat.

Watching the spectacle felt not unlike experiencing a waking dream, and Sulio could not comprehend the sight calmly. He did not know whether to be shocked, terrified, exasperated, or in awe. His

thoughts would not coalesce in any meaningful way, and so he could only watch in a stupor as Dias arrived within range of the earth dragon and readied his axe in both hands.

Dias let the momentum of his stride carry his axe in a horizontal swing, and the earth dragon responded in a panic by hiding within its shell. The axe collided with the monster with tremendous force, and a deafening roar echoed into the air as a result. Dias did not stop for an instant, however, and planted his legs firmly on the ground to power a number of follow-up strikes.

Dias rained blow after blow upon the shell, then leaped upon the shell itself and found a stable spot on which to stand. Then he began to methodically and rhythmically bring his axe up and down, chipping away at the dragon's hard shell, eventually causing shards of it to snap off in every direction.

Sulio could see that the constant attack was not simply whittling at the dragon's defenses—the loud cracks that rang through the air made it clear that Dias was splitting the shell open, allowing access to the flesh within. No longer safe in hiding, the dragon responded by emerging from its shell.

Dias had been waiting for this very moment, and he jumped from the shell as he brought his axe down upon the monster's neck. The dragon tried once again to hide, but it could not match Dias's speed, and in one clean slice the monster's head was separated from its body and sent rolling along the ground.

"Yeah, I've seen how you use your shells!" Dias gloated to the rolling head. "And that's all it took for me to work out a way to counter you!"

And with that, he raised his axe high so as to declare to the dumbfounded Sulio that the beast was slain.

## The Border Station Construction Site—Leode and Cleve

A pair of beastkin clad in stealthy green outfits and masks bounded through the air in great leaps, throwing steel objects at an

earth dragon as it stomped after them in pursuit. The beastkin were by no means particularly fast, but their powerful legs granted them exceptional agility, and with every fireball the earth dragon launched, the beastkin leaped gracefully out of harm's way or rolled deftly along the ground. It was like watching an acrobatic show, and Leode and Cleve let out awed gasps at the sight. The two lionkin were by Mont's side, and it took all their courage to push away their fears and peek out from behind the cover of their great shields.

The two lionkin glanced up at Mont, his face brimming with confidence. Before him stood three platoons on open ground, and they, too, wore the same bold assurance in their features. This struck Leode and Cleve as strange, because the soldiers were only armed with strange-looking sticks and spears. They trembled with worry as they tried to discern just how such weapons would ever be of use.

"They're all carrying gear that'll help them launch their spears," explained Mont. "That's why they're called spear-throwers. You settle the end of the spear in the cup and that readies it. A spear-thrower lets you throw a spear at blinding speed over long distances. I know they don't look like much, but they work like you wouldn't *believe*. Even a total novice can easily launch a spear as far as Dias giving it all he's got. You're looking at distance, speed, and power, and Joe and the rest of the Iluk Guard have been drilling, which makes them even stronger."

"If I may say so," said Leode, his voice quivering as he spoke, "even with enhanced speed and power, they don't look at all capable of bringing down an earth dragon..."

Mont's face scrunched up as he replied. Neither lionkin could say for certain whether it was a grin or if he was enraged.

"Yeah, it's true," he barked. "Spears alone won't bring a beast like that down. The best we can do is just get it stuck in that hard shell it has. We won't pierce that, nope. I don't reckon we have a shot in hell of cracking it open either. But that's the whole point... You'll understand when you see it."

Mont then turned his attention to the platoons under his command.

“All right, boys, get ready!” he shouted.

The beastkin and the earth dragon were much closer now, and so all the platoons readied their spears in their spear-throwers.

“Launch the spears!” commanded Mont.

The thin steel spears with arrow-like fletching soared through the air. The beastkin must have known about this in advance, because they calmly kept running as a rain of spears fell upon the earth dragon. About half of the spears hit the target, and about half of those bounced off harmlessly. In the first wave, only seven spears were embedded in the dragon’s shell.

“Ready the next wave,” barked Mont. “Launch the spears!”

The platoons were well ahead of Mont and had their spears ready even before he gave the order. At his signal, they launched another hail of spears, then readied more. After repeating the process a number of times, the earth dragon had become something of a spear mountain. It was also lumbering at a much slower pace all of a sudden, and upon noticing this Mont grinned.

“Ha! Heavy, ain’t it?!” he said. “The shell is heavy enough all on its own, but it’s more than any single dragon wants to carry when it’s loaded with spears! Back in the days of wooden shields I saw this same thing on the battlefield: A single spear in a shield made it completely unwieldy! In our case we can’t stop the dragon from moving entirely, but we can slow it down and make our job a whole lot easier! And if we could get to its back we could pull the spears out ourselves... All right, boys! Ready the great shields! The dragon is almost within firing range!”

All the platoons quickly ditched their spears and took up shields. Some five among them disappeared elsewhere together with the beastkin that had drawn the earth dragon here. Leode and Cleve watched on, both completely clueless as to the strategy in play, but they were as intrigued as they were terrified as their eyes rapidly scanned the battlefield.

## A Gorge in the Kingdom’s North—Erling

## Sigurdsson

"We have been told when our enemy will arrive, and we have prepared magical protection against the miasma... To lose here would be to bring shame upon ourselves! As nobles it is our duty to protect our people! We cannot afford to lose this battle! Not under any circumstances! Yes, we all value peace and abhor the very idea of war, but it is a *monster* we face, and that changes everything! What treads towards us is a creature that despises life itself! And today we will see it slain, no matter what it takes!"

The long, deep gorge ran from north to south, and Erling looked down from the edge of it, clad head to toe in heavy armor. In response to his words, the armored men around him cheered. They were a force numbering in the hundreds, all of them armed with different weapons. They were nobles, knights, and those of special authority, and they cheered to buoy their spirits, raising their fists skywards.

Erling nodded, pleased by what he saw, and unsheathed the sword that hung from his waist. It had been handed down through generations of his family, and though it was more for decoration than it was for actual battle, Erling's graceful movements and the glimmer of his blade only further spurred on his compatriots.

It was then that the robed among them—the mages—began to chant as they became aware of something. Erling and his soldiers knew then that the earth dragon was near, and they steeled themselves for the fight ahead.

The earth rumbled as a giant shape emerged at the far end of the gorge, and Erling and his men threw themselves into the battle of a lifetime.

## A Plain in the Kingdom's East—Frederick Sachusse

"I must say, the imperials' siege weaponry is certainly something."

Duke Sachusse looked over the weapons lining the plains, his

cloak fluttering in the wind behind him. Before him were catapults, ballistae, and armored carts. There were so many one could scarcely count them all, some of which had been acquired with the fall of imperial territory. They were set up like shielders, spearmen, and archers, and all faced towards the north.

"It is indeed nice to have magic that defends against the miasma," he continued, his voice rising as he spoke, "but it would be best to fell the beast from afar and not have to rely on it at all. Nonetheless, we have our mages here just in case, but know that to fall back on their support will reflect poorly on you all. You are the knights who defend the front lines, and you are warriors who lived through the war... Let us show the kingdom that it is protected by more than one heroic savior."

The knights by his side were the first to roar in response, followed by those working on the siege weapons, then the thousands of soldiers ready for battle. It was then that a black shape emerged on the horizon, and when the knights saw it they began to charge. Duke Sachusse moved to base camp so as to oversee the battle and took a seat on a decidedly lavish chair that looked quite odd in a place of war.

## Gazing upon the Slowly Approaching Earth Dragon—Leode and Cleve

The earth dragon lumbered onwards, now not unlike an oversized pincushion, its shell filled with spears. Mont's platoons marched forwards to greet it, equipped with great shields made from timber with steel frames. As they entered into attack range, the earth dragon spat fireballs at them, and the soldiers found their shields splintering, snapping, and burning with each impact. They were thrown to the ground and rolled to a stop, at which point they sprang back to their feet, took another shield from the available stockpile, and marched once more into the fray.

"I know what you're thinking," said Mont to the lionkin by his side. "'What in the blazes are they doing?' Right?"

Leode responded to Mont's words with a timid nod. He and Cleve were dumbfounded as they watched the Iluk Guard get battered relentlessly by fireball after fireball.

"The fuel for a dragon's fire, and their fireballs, is miasma and magical energy," Mont continued. "Miasma is like magical energy for monsters, but...unlike magical energy, it's got real staying power. It exists in their magical stones, which the cavekin make good use of in their furnaces. But what it means is, earth dragons can spit hundreds and hundreds of fireballs and still be full of miasma."

He continued, "You might think that with all that endless miasma, a dragon could just keep on hurling fireballs for eternity, but that's not how it works. Y'see, when dragons breathe fire like that, it raises their body temperature. And when a dragon overheats, they have to cool down. That means they need rest or water, but either way the result is no more fireballs."

As he spoke, Joe, Lorca, Ryan, and all the members of their platoons were being tossed every which way as they were blasted by the force of the earth dragon's fireballs.

"*That's* what Joe and the platoons are doing right now—they're pushing the dragon to its limit," declared Mont. "And don't give me them looks either; they've all got shields, and as long as they keep a tight hold on them they'll all stay safe."

According to Mont, the next step in their strategy involved getting up close and personal with the earth dragon, so it was imperative that they take its magic out of the game. To leave it with its most powerful weapon would only invite heavy losses.

"Earth dragons are pretty smart," Mont said. "If they know you're trying to overheat them, they'll sometimes *pretend* like that's what's happened. So listen up, because this is gonna be important if the two of you ever find yourself in my position. You gotta look carefully. Look at the way the monster's eyes are moving, how it's breathing, and how it's swiveling its neck around. Look at each step it takes. Observe it and make sure you know the game it's playing. No commander of troops worth his salt can afford to screw up a judgment like this one. And Juha? He's the master when it comes to such things, so when you go home you learn what you can from

him, you hear? As for our friend here...”

Mont went on to explain that miasma was purified by fire. The longer it burned, the more it dissipated, and when the miasma was gone, so was the fire. For that reason, the fire that dragons breathed didn’t spread often, at least by itself, meaning there wasn’t a great threat of larger fires. All the same, a larger fire *was* still possible if anything flammable was nearby, and that’s exactly why the section of the plains the dragon had been brought to had been carefully prepared. Leode and Cleve both noted that the grass had all been dug up and the soil patted down.

By this point, both lionkin understood the greater aims of Mont’s strategy, and yet all the same it seemed to defy reason as it played out before their eyes. None of the troops uttered a single complaint as they were blasted around the battlefield, and the lionkin were taken by a mix of both awe and horror.

Over and over again the Iluk Guard were burned and blown away, their armor muddied by the ground they tumbled upon. Countless shields were destroyed. Those who were injured were dragged away to the safety of the back lines, and eventually the earth dragon turned its head to the sky and let out a long breath. A black smoky substance trailed upwards, like soot from a chimney.

Mont watched the dragon through slitted eyes, completely frozen for a few moments as he determined the dragon’s state. Was it putting on an act, or was it truly exhausted? Finally, he barked his next orders.

“Now! Bring out the net!”

It was then that four of the domain’s military steeds appeared, on which were four of the Iluk Guard. They dragged a huge net between them—certainly large enough to ensnare an earth dragon—and headed straight for their foe. Even with a snarling monster before them they did not falter. Upon closer inspection, Leode and Cleve were surprised at just how massive the net was. And with it being crafted from incredibly thick rope, not even a dragon would chew through it easily.

The four horses parted, two to the left and two to the right, with the smoke-heaving dragon caught in the middle. When they got

within range, the soldiers heaved the net upwards with everything they had and used their momentum to help carry the net over the dragon's shell. Once they saw that the net was moving in the right way, they released their grips and ran straight past the dragon.

"Joe! Lorca! Ryan!" shouted Mont. "Now! Go! Go! Go!"

The three men had discarded their shields and once more held spears. They dashed towards the earth dragon as it struggled to escape. The net, however, had caught on the many spears impaled in the dragon's back, and even with its tremendous strength it struggled to free itself.

This was the very opportunity that the three platoon leaders had been waiting for. They used the netting as footholds and the lodged spears as grips, and this held them securely in place even as the earth dragon whipped about to remove them. Then, with their equipped spears, the platoon leaders took aim at the dragon's neck and legs. In an instant, however, the dragon slid its head and limbs into the safety of its shell, blocking off the openings entirely.

"We've got it, boys!" barked Mont. "Those of you who are able! Grab the edges of that net and *pull*! Joe, Lorca, Ryan! If that dragon even pokes its nose out, you give it a good stabbing!"

A good number of uninjured troops—those who still had some strength left in them—ran to the net and began dragging the earth dragon, shell and all. Meanwhile, Joe, Lorca, and Ryan all moved to secure positions atop the shell and stood with their spears at the ready. Behind them all and securing the rearguard position were cavekin and the horses from earlier, everyone helping to pull the dragon along.

"The spears that Joe and the others are using have heads made from dragon parts," Mont explained. "For spears, you don't need to worry about making the whole thing out of the fancy stuff; the head is enough. Get a good purchase on the dragon's neck or legs and you'll easily stab right through to the bone. The spears we threw earlier have blades made of the same stuff. That's the reason they dug nice and deep into such a tough shell. Steel spears *can* do the same, but the strike rate is significantly lower. We had to use up all the leftover dragon materials to make all the spears, but we'll get a

whole heap more materials for the effort, so we're all good."

Leode and Cleve looked up at Mont, unable to believe their ears. How could he talk like this when the battle was still being waged? Mont read the question in their faces and he pointed to the deep hole the dragon was being dragged towards—a hole that Leode and Cleve had both helped to dig.

"Earth dragons are clever sons of bitches," Mont said, "and they'll smell pitfall traps from miles away. So if you're gonna put them in a hole you have to force it, which is exactly what we're doing. But get them in a hole, and they won't have an easy time digging their way out...and while they're trying, you can fill that hole with rocks to get them good and stuck. After that it's just a matter of waiting for the monster to stick its head out so you can stab it, but if they don't play nice then you have to make it so they do."

While Mont was explaining everything, the soldiers reached the hole, at which point Joe, Lorca, and Ryan all jumped from the shell, and the dragon fell in with a tremendous thud.

"Now we just fill the hole with rocks and water. Dragons gotta breathe too, and we'll get this one when it does. If it insists on being stubborn, though, we'll mix some rock salt into the water. Earth dragons are similar to turtles, y'see, and while they're mostly fine in fresh water, they don't take to salt water very well. That'll make it move, I guarantee it. And the moment we see that head, we'll strike hard and fast! If we don't, the dragon will cool down and we'll have fireballs to worry about all over again!"

Mont breathed a sigh of relief as he looked down at the dragon at the bottom of the hole. Leode and Cleve looked up at Mont, both of them a swirl of fear...and a whole host of other emotions. Mont felt their gazes and let out a different sigh—this one exasperated—before shaking his head and addressing his two charges.

"You want to tell me we're cowards fighting unfairly, and that we're cruel, and that we should pity that thing. I'm right, ain't I? Well, you can save that for when we're fighting our own kind. Did you even see what we were up against? That thing is *gigantic*. It has a nearly impenetrable shell and it breathes freaking *fire*. If y'ask me, the *dragon* is the one cheating. We're the ones that should be pitied,

going up against something born with all those perks!”

Mont was not yet done.

“Our advantage is that we can make good use of tools. We use our wits to exactly that end, and I ain’t never going to give up what few advantages we have. Never! You two lionkin are no different! You could fight in exactly this way to earn your victories in battle, so don’t you dare forget a single thing you see here. You cool those heads of yours and you sit down and really think about it.”

And with that, Mont called out to the back line. He gave the order to bring the stones to fill the hole in which the dragon was trapped, to ready water for the channel they’d created to feed into the same hole, and to ready the rock salt. Everybody did as they were told, and that day, by the time the sun was setting, the earth dragon that had come by way of the eastern Beastland border was slain.

# At the Giant Shell in the Village Square—Dias

It was the day after we'd gone to battle against the earth dragons. The shell of the earth dragon I'd slain was sitting plumb in the middle of Iluk Village, and that's where we'd had our victory celebration.

I'd hit the shell a couple of times during the battle, but unlike the first earth dragon I fought, I'd beat this one without crushing the shell completely. The cavekin had done a bang-up job of cleaning up afterwards, which left us with a mostly pristine dragon shell. So pristine, in fact, that it had become something like a monument to commemorate the occasion. Everyone partied around it as they ate black ghee skewers and chugged wine. Sometimes people went up to touch the shell or take a closer look at it, and everybody had their own way of just feeling glad that we'd come out on top.

Standing at the very top of that shell—and looking mighty proud of herself, I might add—was Frannia.

"Beeah," she bleated.

It was a declaration of sorts.

*"I am number one."*

Well, the other young baars weren't going to stand for that, and so they started to climb the shell too. I was watching them from a corner of the square when Narvant sauntered up to me holding a cup of wine in both hands.

"I reckon we'll set about pulling the other earth dragon out of its hole tomorrow," he said. "Mont developed a surefire way to ensure an easy victory, but the cleanup isn't half as simple. So this monument is going to stay here in the square for a little while yet. I don't think we'll get to it until we finish the work over at the western border station. They're both big'ns, though, so we'll end up with a

lot of material regardless of whether you sell it or put it to use. Have you put some thought into what you want to do with them?"

Narvant finished one of the cups in his hands in a flash, and clearly that wasn't enough because he followed it with the other straight afterwards. The ever observant dogkin were quick to act, and a number of them carried over a barrel of wine, to which Narvant grinned like a child. I opted not to comment about it as I replied.

"I'll send one of the magical stones to the king, and the other you can use for your magical furnaces," I said. "Alna and the onikin say they can use the tendons for their bows, so I'm happy to hand those over, and I think it's better to use the shell for equipment rather than sell it. We'll be having Joe and the others watch over the western border station, and they'll need gear as good as Klaus's."

"Hmm... Seeing as the cavekin get a magical stone out of it, you won't hear any complaints from us," said Narvant. "And crafting earth dragon armor is about as exciting a project as they come! But are you sure you don't want to sell the stuff? There's a lot of food and drink being consumed here at this party of ours, and that'll cost a hefty chunk of coin. It's not running you low on funds, is it?"

"Goldia and the other merchants all recommend that we *don't* sell any of the dragon parts right away," I replied. "Earth dragons appeared all over the kingdom, and in the Beastland Kingdom too, which means their materials will be more prevalent on the markets, bringing the price down. They say that the smarter way to make money is to put the materials to use and show everyone their potential. After a little time, when they become rarer and more valuable again, we can think about selling the leftovers. As for the food and drink, we've received a whole lot over the last few days and weeks, so we've still got a decent stockpile. We're good as far as money is concerned until well after summer."

"I see... Well, if that's what the dedicated merchants think, then I guess that's what's best. We'll all have to do some thinking during the summer, but I reckon you've got that covered, don't you, young Dias?"

"We can always go hunting if it comes to that, and whatever else

it takes to save us some money. But I'm more worried about your workload, if I'm being honest. You're constructing the border station, and soon you'll be making a bunch of equipment too... It's not too much for you, is it?"

"Not in the slightest!"

Narvant grinned as he broke open the barrel of wine, dipped his cups in, and poured the wine down his throat. He drank from his right while he scooped with his left, then drank from his left while he scooped with his right...

It was a bit excessive for my tastes. I was about to say something, but I paused and reminded myself that the cavekin could drink all they wanted because their beards kept all the toxins clear. I figured I'd just let him and his cavekin pals have their fun, at least for today.

While Narvant and I had been talking, all the young baars had made their way to the top of the earth dragon shell, and it was a woolly game of King of the Hill. There was lots of fun bleating going on and this only made things livelier for everyone partaking in the festivities.

Things only got more energetic after that, and then a carriage arrived from the west, carrying Goldia, Aisa, and Ely. They'd all been at the border station helping out with supplies. The eiresetters immediately moved to take care of the horses, and when Goldia came up to me, he and Aisa and Ely all looked pretty serious.

"The refugees are all settled, and they'll all head for home some time tomorrow or the day after," he reported. "The Peijins had prepared us a few days' worth of food thinking the battles would be prolonged ones, so we're going to store it all in our cellars. They'd also prepared us *more* as an official show of gratitude, and we expect that to arrive in the next few days."

Goldia hesitated for a moment before he went on.

"Look, I know we're old friends and all, but now that we've gotten this deep into helping you manage things here, we were all thinking we'd like to be official residents. So, uh...how about it? We can still manage the guild while we're living here, and we're going to be seeing a whole lot more of each other anyway when you consider

trade with your neighbors to the west. Aisa, Ely, myself, we hope you'll welcome us as residents as of today, and a number of our guild members when they come in the near future. We're familiar faces, and practically family, so you shouldn't have to give it a second thought."

Goldia thrust his hand out towards me. We'd already been treating them as residents up until now, and they'd done so much to help me and our whole village, so a part of me thought they were pretty slow on the uptake, but I knew it was important to put a stamp on things. I took Goldia's hand and we shook on it. Goldia grinned at me, and Aisa and Ely put their hands on top of ours.



“You’ve all been nothing but helpful until now, so let’s look towards a bright future together,” I said.

They all met my gaze with confidence, and their smiles grew brighter.

“That’s good news if there ever was some!” cried a cheerful Narvant as he continued to indulge in wine. “And that’s something to drink to! Join me!”

He then brought over his now half-empty wine barrel, which Goldia took in both hands and shockingly brought right up to his lips. He drank that wine down like it was water.

## In a Quieter Corner of the Village Square—Sulio

“Hmm, I see. So that’s how the others defeated the earth dragon,” muttered Sulio.

The lionkin was sitting on a rug a little ways from the festivities, chomping on a black ghee skewer. His companions, Leode and Cleve, both nodded.

“And then Mont told you to study battle tactics under Juha to learn how to fight without fighting...” Sulio mused. “I will not criticize the man, but he was decidedly lacking during the rebellion. I cannot help but doubt his abilities as a teacher.”

The timid Cleve raised his hand to comment on the matter.

“Actually, Mont explained that to us while we were cleaning up after slaying the dragon,” he said. “He said that Juha is exemplary for his mastery of logic. It is how he observes and processes everything, from profits and losses to desires, rage, grudges, and even love. This makes him uniquely skilled when it comes to reading the feelings of ordinary people, but it means that his glaring weakness lies in his inability to read those who are not motivated by things like profit or greed and instead take action entirely on impulse. He fails in battles against those who do not act logically.”

Mont had told the lionkin that Juha had been unable to understand the intent of the leader of the rebellion. There were clear

actions that the rebel leader would have taken if they had wanted the rebellion to succeed, just as there were clear targets they would have occupied if land and profit had been the ultimate goals. However, these goals had seemingly been abandoned in the midst of the uprising, leaving Juha—and Eldan's other advisors—completely and utterly baffled. The leader of the rebellion had been nothing if not unpredictable.

Sulio's eyes turned to slits as he thought this through. He looked decidedly vexed.

"Hmm...intriguing. It *is* true that the rebel leader's identity remains shrouded in mystery, and I, too, could not make sense of their actions. But if what you tell me of Juha is indeed true, then it is a wonder he managed any success at all in the last war..."

"Mont explained *that* to us too," said Cleve. "And actually, whenever Juha came up against an enemy he couldn't read or someone who had lost their mind to the pressures of war, it was Lord Dias who handled things for him."

Whenever Juha was troubled by someone to the point he was unsure how to proceed, and whenever he struggled with a particular opponent, Dias simply strode on up without so much as a thought and demolished them.

"With Lord Dias dispatching enemies so swiftly, Juha could focus on building up their forces while Dias played the perfect support role. Mont said that sometimes Lord Dias was *so* direct in his approach that he went wild but that at his heart Dias worked via logic Juha understood. Juha considered this when giving orders, then plonked Dias on the front lines. Dias, for his part, had developed a sense for his enemies' goals and thoughts over many long years and simply let his instincts guide him."

"That makes a lot of sense," commented Sulio. "That is certainly baked into the way Lord Dias conducts himself. When he fought the earth dragon, I couldn't help noticing that he isn't particularly fast or incredibly strong. There are beastkin far quicker than him and beastkin who boast far more strength. But could those beastkin fight and beat an earth dragon on their own? No, they wouldn't stand a chance."

The beastkin of which Sulio spoke would have shown hesitation where Dias had shown none. They would not have been able to capitalize on the tiny openings the earth dragon presented. And climbing the earth dragon's shell? Impossible. Dias let no openings go unpunished, and he never doubted his own decisions... He fought as if hesitation were a concept that simply did not exist.

"Any ordinary person would tremble at the very sight of a fireball," continued Sulio. "In approaching a monster of such size and strength, doubt would creep in, if only for an instant. The same goes for climbing a dragon—or even attacking one. But not Lord Dias. And now I understand it is a matter of experience. We have fought for our Lord Eldan for little more than a few months at most. Our combined experience accounts to not even a year."

Sulio's head sank as he fell into thought. He mulled over everything with a fine-tooth comb. He understood now exactly what Juha's weakness was, and he understood just as clearly how Dias covered for that weakness. Now, however, Juha did not have Dias at his side or anybody comparable. He needed someone to fill those boots, and the only person fortunate enough to be able to learn those skills was Sulio himself.

Leode and Cleve, too, found themselves pondering on the last few days as they watched the lively banquet in the village square. Weakness or no, Juha was a man of exceptional talents, and there was still much they could learn in the art of war from Mont too. And so they wondered: If they were to commit themselves to learning here, and then under Juha, could they make names for themselves as top-class tacticians? The two lionkin now knew that wits and wisdom could see dragons slain, and it dawned on them how much simpler human and beastkin opponents were in comparison.

Sulio, Leode, and Cleve all set clear goals for themselves that evening, and with their futures in sight on the horizon they turned their attention to enjoying the banquet before them and indulging in the food and wine laid out for all.

## About a Month Later—Across the Sanserife

# Kingdom

The people of the kingdom were ecstatic. Earth dragons had appeared suddenly and without warning, but they had been slain. Under ordinary circumstances, the appearance of such monsters brought great calamity and huge losses, but there had been little in the way of any such thing.

Merchants, blacksmiths, carpenters, and scholars alike were itching to get a hold of the dragon materials, excited to develop and process them for weapons, armor, and accessories. Some even saw potential for building materials. The earth dragon invasion was enough to cause a surge in the nation's markets.

The north had taken the worst hit in the dragon attacks, but even then its residents, villages, and farming land had survived entirely unscathed. Some ten knights had died valiantly as they defended their home, and while there was sorrow at their passing, much greater were the feelings of joy, both for the heroism of those who were lost and for the materials they had secured with the defeat of the dragon.

Word of Count Erling's bravery spread throughout the kingdom, and many shared stories of how he had led his forces from the front lines. The news did much to garner support for Second Princess Helena's faction.

In the kingdom's east, the defending forces' only losses came in the form of its siege weaponry, much of which was destroyed. This led to heated discussion in the royal capital over whether or not to replenish what had been lost, but Duke Sachusse was not content to simply wait on the verdict. Instead, he reached into his own coffers and ordered the construction of even more weapons.

Duke Sachusse had received reports informing him that an earth dragon had also appeared in the empire, and though the imperials had suffered heavy losses they had nonetheless emerged victorious. This was the reason the duke had moved to vastly increase the domain's siege weaponry—he feared that the empire might launch another invasion, this time with weapons crafted from dragon materials.

In this way, siege weaponry in the east was improved, and its craftsmen became all the more skilled as a result. The duke saw his reputation soar, having now slain a dragon without a single human casualty. And much like the second princess's faction, First Princess Isabelle also saw support for her faction grow.

Among all of this, Prince Richard's faction did nothing of note to increase its own standing and acquired not a single piece of material. While this was not a fatal blow by any means, it did put the prince in something of an awkward position.

The Duke of Mahati had pledged support for Prince Richard's faction, and upon successfully defeating the earth dragon that encroached upon their lands, they had offered its magical stone as a sign of goodwill. They had not, however, sent any materials. While ordinarily one would consider it a blessing to escape an earth dragon's attack, in this case it felt like a stroke of bad luck for the impact it had on the prince's reputation.

All the prince could do was offer support for the north, which had suffered the greatest losses. That the other domains had suffered only minimal damage was yet another point the prince considered unfortunate with regards to his own position. The balance of power between the kingdom's factions was shifting, but the one whose name was spoken loudest in the aftermath of the dragon attacks was one who stood apart from them all.

*Duke Baarbadal.*

The people of the kingdom were beginning to lose count of just how many times the duke had slain dragons at this point.

With the arrival of the earth dragons, the duke's forces had found themselves facing two dragons *simultaneously*. But not only had they defeated the dragons without a single loss, the duke had defeated one of them *alone*. The other had been defeated by his domain guard, a small fighting force that had been training no longer than a year in their new domain. Their crafty maneuvering in the face of such danger was thus lauded by all.

But there were yet more rumors swirling with regards to Baarbadal and its grassy plains, once thought bereft of any real use. For starters, they had begun the construction of a main road and a

border station to the west, where the plains met the mysterious nation of the west heretofore considered uncultivated. That the duke had done all of this in the space of a single year left people in shock and awe.

And while there were those who believed the tales far too tall to possibly be true, the duke had yet again sent one of the dragon's magical stones to the king along with official documentation that detailed the domain's plans for its road and border station. In the face of such concrete evidence, those who cried that the rumors carried no weight were summarily silenced.

Meanwhile, the many traders making the most of the favorable economic climate turned their gazes on the potential that lay in the lands of Baarbadal. They knew that with roads and border stations being built that the domain had a growing population and money in constant circulation. This was not to mention the dragon materials they no doubt had a stockpile of and the investment that the guild itself had poured into the area. To top it off, there was its proximity to the Mahati trade ring and the rumors of it developing a mining industry. This was far too much for many to ignore.

So, with the balance of power between the kingdom's factions still fluid and ever-changing, and the Duke of Baarbadal's political reputation in a favorable place, a number of merchants set their sights on the Baarbadal domain and headed there in their carts just as soon as they were able.

# Afterword

As always, I'll start with words of thanks.

To all of you who are following the story here; everybody supporting it on Shosetsuka ni Naro; all the readers who send fan letters; the editing staff; the revision staff for their fantastic work; the book's designer; its illustrator, Kinta; and Yumbo and his assistants working on the manga adaptation... Thank you all so much! It's because of you that we've reached volume 9!

Now, about volume 9. In this volume we see the cavekin population explode, which in turn makes industry in Iluk a whole lot more lively. Parts of Iluk are going to echo with the clanging of hammers and the clanking of sewing machines.

Personally, I quite like the sound of sewing machines and factory machinery. When I'm out on a walk and I hear a sewing machine, I can't help but feel happy just to know that somebody out there is making something. It's the same with old-fashioned sewing machines too, though it's not often I actually get to hear them. Museums, memorial halls, shops that specialize in traditional methods... I just like the sound of them when I hear them.

And being that it's an author who happens to enjoy these sounds, I think it's safe to say that Iluk is going to be home to them for the foreseeable future...and actually I'd really love to gaze upon the sight with my own eyes. It makes me all the more motivated to make sure you enjoy the village just as much as I do.

I mentioned this in volume 8, but as you might have noticed from the cover slip, *Frontier Lord* has surpassed total sales of 1.3 million! This is all thanks to you! Thank you all so much! I feel empowered to make the book so much more fun so we can raise that number even higher.

In volume 10, we'll get a never-before-seen character. We'll also get a couple of returning characters you might have been waiting for, which means Iluk is going to get all the more lively, and there's a whole lot to look forward to!

I look forward to writing you all again in the volume 10 afterword!

Fuurou, March 2023

# Bonus Short Story

## Pledge on a Spring Dawn

Early one morning I awoke to the sounds of rambunctious voices and morning preparations. When I sat up the sounds became clearer, and I began wondering what was going on. It wasn't uncommon for the early morning to be a bit hectic, but this was a different sound from what I was used to hearing. I got up out of bed, got myself ready for the day, and went outside to check on things.

The moment I stepped outside the yurt, I saw everyone going about their chores. I also saw all the cavekin women busying themselves as they cooked up breakfast.

"Ho! Ho! Hey! Ho!" cried one. "A delicious breakfast coming right up!"

"Ho! Ho! Hey! Ho!" cried another. "And delicious booze awaits its arrival!"

"Ho! Ho! Hey! Ho!" cried yet another. "Fuel for another day of work!"

"Hey! Ho! Ho! Ho!" cried a fourth. "The blessings of the earth, the breath of the skies, and the gift of the fairies! For all of it we work! We drink! We eat!"

The cavekin women stood in a circle, happily singing together, their bodies swaying left and right as they gripped the handles of a gigantic pot at the center of them, swinging it rhythmically left and right. I'm not sure if "pot" is exactly the right word for it, but it was a big old steel pot-looking thing. It looked to me like they'd made the pot themselves, and great clouds of steam wafted from it together with the most wonderful scent. Vegetables, meat, spices... I realized then that they were making a soup and that, judging by the size of their pot, they were making a whole lot of it.

"Ha! Ha!" boomed Narvant, laughing at the sight of me staring dumbfounded. "Now that we're residents and all friends here, we thought we'd treat you to a hearty and traditional cavekin meal! Back in the day we gorged ourselves on this stuff every single day! Let me tell you, young Dias—it's worth waiting for!"

Narvant then turned his gaze to a spot just a little ways from the square, where our low tables and carpets for breakfast had been moved.

"The cooking wakes you all, and the scent whets your appetites; that's our invitation to breakfast, and the traditional cavekin way!" he continued. "And breakfast will wake you right up, let me tell ya!"

He then led me over to the tables so he could show me what they'd already prepared.

"Mountains of bread!" he shouted. "The crustier the better! Sausages packed with cheese and spices! Thick cuts of meat roasted with just a dash of seasoning! Stew with beans, meat, and yes! More spices! Add a little cheese and you've got a real winner on your hands!"

All the spices were already tickling at my nostrils and making my stomach grumble, but I could tell right then that we were looking at a spicy meal. I was practically drooling just looking at it. I gathered that the cavekin were big fans of salt and spices with their food, and I had to admit that it was about as tempting as tempting got.

A number of guard dogkin were by the table, and other dogkin were already up with them. Most of them looked ready to dive in and get started right away, and they were literally drooling! I got the feeling that maybe things would get crazy if they weren't allowed to get started soon.

I walked over to where Alna and the twins sat, wondering about whether we should wait for the soup to be done or just dig in already, and that's when I noticed some cavekin men lugging barrels of wine into the square.

"Booze! Ha! Ha! Booze!" shouted one.

"Nothing like washing down spicy food with good booze!" shouted another.

"Drink up and stomp down hard! Feel the earth under your feet!

That'll give you all you need to keep swinging your hammers well into the night!"

The men, too, were singing as they went, lining up barrels of wine in front of us all. I saw the envy in Alna's eyes, but she gave up on those particular hopes when she saw me shaking my head. She poured some water into her cup and chugged that down instead.

"Uh, look," I said. "I won't stop you in the evenings, but let's not go drinking in the mornings. With the cavekin it's different... They *need* the alcohol. That's just how it works."

Alna nodded her agreement, and Narvant sauntered over and nodded too. He knew what I was getting at.

"Don't you worry! The cavekin get the real heavy spices, but the rest of you'll get a lighter version of things," he said. "And for the kids and Grandma Maya and her friends, we went even lighter! So you don't need booze to enjoy what we're cooking! And it looks like the soup's almost ready, so as soon as Ohmun brings it over let's dig in!"

Narvant looked over at the big pot, and I followed his gaze. It was only then that I noticed a kind of stepladder by the pot. I guess it must have been in my blind spot until then, or otherwise I'd just been too close to notice earlier. Anyway, Ohmun was standing on that stepladder with a huge wooden spoon, giving the whole thing a good stirring. She stirred and she stirred, and sometimes the soup contents flew up into the air—which I guess cooled it some—and then she stirred it all some more. While she did that, the rest of the cavekin women brought over smaller pots, which they held in both hands.

Ohmun spooned up soup from the big pot to fill the smaller ones, and little by little all the pots were loaded. The smaller pots were then brought to the table and served to us. That was when I could tell that it was a milk-based soup filled with vegetables, sausage, and chunks of meat.

The soup was a luxurious mash-up of all the good stuff, and for a moment I couldn't help thinking about just how much of our food the cavekin had used for a single breakfast. But then I saw the smiles on Alna's and Ellie's faces as they waited for their own

servings, and I knew then that the cavekin had made sure to ask permission before making their grandiose breakfast. Maybe they'd even paid a little for it.

"Eat up! Eat up! Drink and drink! Let the spices send their power coursing through your blood! When us cavekin eat like this we can do anything from mining to smithing! And even if it's too much to ask for every day, doing this every once in a while will still put a smile on our faces!"

Beaming with joy as he finished, Narvant took a seat by my side and a bowl of soup in hand. Everyone sitting at the table—Alna, Ellie, the grannies, and the dogkin—all picked up their bowls and spoons as well. Now that Iluk had grown to a considerable size, we split breakfast into groups; those who woke early ate first, and when they finished others would take their place. This went on until everybody had eaten.

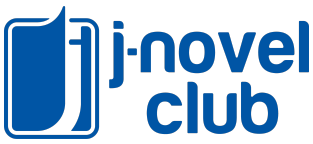
I was the only odd one out in terms of our breakfast routine because I was the man in charge, which meant sometimes people came to me with questions or requests, so I stayed at the breakfast table from start to finish. But everyone else wanted to get started quickly to answer their rumbling stomachs and make room for the next in line, so I took my own bowl in hand and said a quiet thanks to the gods to show my gratitude.

The spices were plenty strong and the thing I noticed immediately when I ate the first spoonful of soup, followed by the cheese, meats, and veggies all mixed up together. It was the total opposite of Alna's breakfast, which was less overt—or maybe confrontational—about its flavoring, but this soup was still mighty tasty. I felt like it was a powerful meal and one that was a bit on the wild side with how slapdash it was put together.

To put it in perspective, it was a shock to the system, and at the same time as being delicious it sent sparks through my body and mind, kicking out any sleep I might have had left in my body.

All those spices sent warmth coursing through my whole body, and I could see how the meal might be important to the cavekin, who lived in caves where it gets pretty chilly even during the summer.

All the cavekin boomed with laughter as they started downing the wine they'd brought out, their faces flushing red with joy.



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The Frontier Lord Begins with Zero Subjects: Volume 9
by Fuurou

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