AUTHOR
Fuurou

X

MANNERS MAKETH THE NOBLEMAN

ILLUSTRATOR
Kinta



The Frontier Lord Begins with Zero Subjects

AUTHOR
Fuurou

X
MANNERS MAKETH THE NOBLEMAN

ILLUSTRATOR
Kinta



The Frontier Lord Begins with Zero Subjects


The Frontier Lord Begins with Zero Subjects



Dias raised his scepter on high, and the sky filled with a fire unlike anything the two men had ever seen. This was far more intense a blaze than any furnace, campfire, or bonfire they had ever experienced, and it swirled upwards to the open sky.
The moment slammed both men with the most powerful shock they had ever known. It went beyond any verbal description, shaking each to their core and forcing them to a course of action.



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.



Sulio

A proud, young Mahati lionkin sent to learn under Dias.



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.



Seki, Saku, and Aoi

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

Aymer's Report

Residents: From 196 to 231!

Yaten, a diplomat from the Beastland Kingdom, made his way to Baarbadal to meet its domain lord, Dias. Their meeting was held in the guesthouse, where it was agreed they would work together to strengthen the border and develop a mine to the north.

When the residents of Iluk came together to discuss the construction of a new border station, the cavekin Narvant offered to lead the project. He also stated that he would oversee Baarbadal's mining operations, build more furnaces, and see the continued construction of the road that ran from east to west. To do so, Narvant needed to call upon his fellow cavekin, which meant Baarbadal had to start brewing operations in earnest. During this time, the reason for Dias's distaste for alcohol was brought to light.

At the same time, the two forestkin—Senai and Ayhan—built an extraordinary beekeeping system, allowing them to gather extremely high-quality honey on a regular basis. Some of this was put to use making mead for the cavekin, and so Navant held a ceremony in the village square to call upon his fellow cavekin.

But who would have thought that those cavekin would just dig themselves up from the ground?! What a surprise! But even more surprising has been seeing just how industrious those cavekin are! They're the hardest workers I've ever seen!

The village then saw visitors arrive from both the east and west. The hot-headed Sulio arrived from the east with fellow lionkin Leode and Cleve. The three will live in Iluk for a time so as to study Iluk's ways. At the same time, Peijin-Octad, president of Peijin & Co., arrived from the west to express his hopes for ongoing friendly relations. He then informed Dias that earth dragons were likely to appear from the north.

The domain lord of Baarbadal handles his diplomacy with the aid of his many friends.

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, bee hives, wine cellar, mine.

Table of Contents

1. Cover
2. Color Illustrations
3. Characters and Aymer's Report
4. Walking Leisurely Along the West Road—Hubert
5. On the Way to the Kitchen Range—Dias
6. A Beautiful Day by the Stream—Dias
7. A Few Days Later, on a Horse Running Through the Plains—Dias
8. The Iluk Village Square—Dias
9. Walking the Main Road on Horseback
10. Getting Dressed to Visit the Eastern Border Station
11. Afterword
12. Bonus Short Stories
13. About J-Novel Club
14. Copyright

Walking Leisurely Along the West Road—Hubert

Several days had passed since the celebrations following Baarbadal's defeat of the earth dragons. The summer sun shone brightly, but a comfortable breeze kept the heat at bay as Baarbadal's lone civil servant, Hubert, strolled along the most recently built section of the road leading west. He was in no hurry, and with each step his straw hat swayed slightly as it caught the wind.

Preliminary work on the road east of Iluk, overseen by the neighboring Duke of Mahati, was now complete. The laborers were all set to move on to the next and final stage, which would see the road paved. The road that Hubert now walked had been started not long ago, and was set to run from Iluk through to the western border station. It was already almost half done, and Hubert's job on this particular day was to check the quality of the road and Iluk's various nearby facilities.

Hubert was not expecting to find anything in disrepair; Dias and the cavekin were honest and hardworking, and they were not the sort to slack off or leave things half finished. Still, it was Hubert's duty as Baarbadal's civil servant to check their work thoroughly and ensure that everyone was happy with the progress. For this reason, Hubert looked over the roads and made records when necessary.

With Hubert were Ethelbald and his wives—baars with whom the civil servant got along especially well—and a number of young senji. The group walked leisurely, and Hubert aired his thoughts as he wrote with charcoal on a roll of parchment.

"No bend in the road from what I can see," he said. "The road goes directly west. Now all we need to do is measure its width, and then I think it's fine to add to our map. We saw quite a lot of rain

last night, but the drainage is good, and the roads are dry... By the looks of things, these roads will last."

Hubert looked ahead as he continued.

"We'll follow the road a little farther, then head to each of the storage cellars for an inspection. I need to update our records of how much ice and foodstuff we have in each of them. I'm expecting some melted ice and some spoiled food, and while we can't check the storage cellars daily since we'd only be letting out the cold, we still have to be vigilant about regular inspections."

Ethelbald responded with a series of bleats, and Hubert looked down at the baar while they continued along their way.

"What was that? Magic as a way of checking the cellars without actually entering them? Well, I hate to say it, but first of all I'm not very well-versed in magic. That aside, I've never heard of any such spell. I must admit, it sounds both convenient *and* criminal. When you consider someone like, let's say, Lady Alna, magic always appears to be the handiest, most helpful thing in the world, but your ordinary mage isn't nearly so impressive."

"Baa?" asked Ethelbald.

"Well, let's take fire magic, for example. If you just want to light something up, you may as well use flint or, if it's available, the flame from a nearby torch. That tends to be far more efficient than muttering a long spell and then draining the majority of your magical reserves. And when it comes to war, it's actually incredibly difficult to set a person or a monster on fire when you don't have anything flammable around... It's certainly not as easy as one might assume."

Ethelbald bleated a comment, to which Hubert nodded.

"Yes, exactly. Your run-of-the-mill mage can't cast anything on the level of the firestarter wand we have here. That item is anything *but* ordinary... That said though, the fact that we only use it to start fires is so very like Lord Dias."

"Baa baa!"

"That too, yes. Every race is capable of magic, but the onikin are unique in the incredible efficacy of their spells. I think it's fair to say that their magic is well beyond that of the average mage. Occasionally one *does* hear of incredibly powerful human mages, but

they are considered of such importance they're usually kept in the castle, where they can put their skills to work researching or otherwise benefiting the nation."

The two continued to chat on the move, but stopped when they heard the heavy sound of something rustling through the grass. The senji, who had been quite relaxed until this point, responded with shock but quickly took up battle-ready positions.

The senji might have been caught slightly off guard, but they reacted with lightning speed, ensuring that they would notice the instant someone or something came within range. And yet the sound had come from nearby—just off the road, in fact—and so Hubert, too, let his hand drop to the dagger by his side, which Dias made him take on his walks.

It was then that it emerged from the grass: a creature that was like a baar, but somehow not a baar, even though it resembled one.

"It's... It's the baar-thing...!" Hubert cried.

The baar-like creature, as it was sometimes called, was a great mystery. It had appeared before Dias and the others on a number of occasions, and was apparently capable of amazing feats. And now that he was seeing it for himself for the first time, Hubert could see why Dias called it "baar-like" and a "baar-thing."

"You are really going to call me that...?" said the baar-thing slowly. "Have a heart, would you? Well, I guess it's at least better than that other oaf who keeps on trying to catch me whenever I show up. In any case, I come bearing gifts from my master. You've looked after his children and slain dragons, and for that you are to be rewarded. Now, I can't give you your gift directly...so all I can tell you is to check to the north and south of here. Also, take a good look at the area around that village of yours."

The baar-thing's voice had the strangest ring to it. For some reason, Hubert could not make out all of the creature's words. He could hear them, but he could not understand them nor make out their exact sound, and as he tried to think more deeply on the matter, he grew dizzy. The dizziness kept Hubert from being able to reply, and then just like that, the baar-thing was gone.

The young senji, all of whom were still in fighting formation, were

stunned by the creature's sudden disappearance. Ethelbald too, who had his jaw raised in an attempt to intimidate so as to protect his wives, was thrown into confusion and spun all about, looking for the strange baar.

"So *that* was the baar-like creature that gave us the sanjivani and the orichalcum," muttered Hubert. "But what did it mean when it said we should just take a look around...?"

Hubert now joined Ethelbald in scanning the area, and though he was somewhat reluctant, he decided to leave the road and head north. As soon as one left the road they were met by fields of grass, which grew tall and strong under the summer sun—the Baarbadal plains in all their glory.

The baar-thing had told Hubert to check to the north, but it had given him no further information to work with. Hubert began to worry, and despair gripped him as he pictured them wandering the plains and coming up completely empty-handed.

But that was when they spotted something.

Hubert had never seen anything like it on the plains. It was a section of the grassland, covered in small blooming flowers. It didn't make any sense. The grass in these parts never bloomed. And yet, in this one particular area he saw small white flowers that he did not immediately recognize. Curiosity consumed him, and he ran over to take a closer look.

"Huh? I thought these were petals, but it's white blades of grass..." he muttered to himself as he knelt down for a closer look. "Which means the actual flower is this small bud at the center. A grasslike flower...or a flowerlike grass, perhaps? I feel like I've seen this before, in a book somewhere..."

Ethelbald, meanwhile, was quick to dive in and eat a whole mouthful of the stuff. He chewed happily and ate ferociously, and it was not long before his wives were doing exactly the same thing. Hubert was taken completely by surprise, and the young senjis soon came in to sniff the grass, wondering if it was as delicious as the baars made it look. A moment later, they too partook.

"Whoa! This is legit delicious!" shouted one.

"You're right! It's still a bit raw because it's uncooked, but it

smells amazing and it tastes great!”

Ethelbald bleated happily, as if to say he’d never had grass so good in his life.

No longer able to contain his curiosity, Hubert plucked a blade of the white grass and put it in his mouth.

“Oh, it really *is* good,” he remarked. “It’s raw and bitter, and at the end of the day it’s still grass, but the wonderful scent of it tricks you! I can’t believe that such an herb exists. This must be the gift that the baar-thing was talking about! Perhaps it has medicinal qualities like the sanjivani...? But then, the baar-thing gave us no explanation, and it did when we received the sanjivani, so...”

Hubert took another blade of grass and looked at it carefully, his head tilting as he thought. All the while, the baars continued to feast.

At the Onikin Village—Dias

That baar-like creature had turned up again, this time in front of Hubert, and it said it was rewarding us. That reward turned out to be a kind of white flower grass. It had already given us sanjivani herbs and orichalcum, and both of those had strange powers, but the baar-thing hadn’t told us anything about the grass. It was a total mystery, so after Hubert told me what had happened I took a look around Iluk and found more of the stuff. As it turned out, Senai and Ayhan—or, well, their parents, actually—knew about the grass.

According to them, it had a number of different names: stomachache grass, coughing grass, and diarrhea grass. The names certainly didn’t have the nicest ring to them, and in fact they made you think you should probably steer clear of the stuff, but it turned out it was named such because it was effective for easing stomachaches, lung infections, and diarrhea. It was so good, in fact, that whenever people got sick, they were pointed straight to the white grass. That’s how it took on the names of the sicknesses it helped.

It wasn’t just a medicinal herb, however. The wonderful scent

made it good for smoking foods, and you could burn it to use as insect repellent. This had a double impact, the twins said, and the livestock got more healthy as a result.

Then there was the fact that you could use it as a soap, both for your body and for your everyday utensils, which helped to keep you from getting sick. Most importantly, however, when the livestock ate the stuff, it kept them fit and healthy. Younger livestock grew big and strong, and the milk and meat they produced was all the more tasty. Even animals you ordinarily avoided eating tasted better if you fed them on this grass.

To hear the twins tell it, it was a real wonder grass, and now we had it in abundance across the plains. I decided I'd head out to the onikin village to tell Moll about it, and when she heard about the grass she broke into a great big smile. I wasn't expecting her to say what she said next, however.

"Yes, I know that grass very, very well," she said. "In the ancient tongue it is called rinsgarter, and sometimes hazy snow flower. The grass is a favorite among baars and horses. You can't subsist on that alone, but having it will certainly keep everybody much healthier."

Moll then looked off into the distance as she recounted the past.

"Long ago, when I was still just a child, I saw that grass, but over time it disappeared, and not one of us knew why. We all came to believe that it had died out, so it is a great surprise to see it return to us in this fashion. I couldn't believe my eyes when I heard, and so I went out to see it for myself. Even then, I just about fell to my knees. Some of the others my age shed tears of joy—they believe that the plains of old have returned to us."

I nodded and considered the chieftain's words.

"So I guess our reward this time is the revival of a grass that the baars consider mighty important. The grass itself isn't what's so special, then; rather, it's the fact that it somehow came back after being gone for so long. A miracle if there ever was one, I suppose. But seeing as it used to be a part of the plains all those years ago, we don't have to worry about any unexpected problems, which is good."

It was a grass that was as pretty as any flower, and boy did it

make the baars happy. I thought about how it must have felt to see a sight that you never thought you'd ever see again, and I could understand why some of the older onikin had wept over it.

"It's not just about nostalgia, young Dias," said Moll, her sharp gaze rousing me from my thoughts. "That grass is even more nourishing than the usual stuff, and it grows quickly. Having it here on the plains allows us to raise more livestock, in other words. We used to raise goats and other livestock aside from baars, but when the grass died out we had to give up. People here are over the moon to know that we can expand our selection."

Moll nodded to herself as she went on.

"Our livestock numbers dropped when the grass died out, and we lost the majority in our clashes with the kingdom. But with more livestock we'll have more variety on our dinner tables, our children will grow up strong, and our adults will live longer, healthier lives. For us onikin, the return of that grass is like the granting of a wish we held in our hearts but had long given up on. No words could ever express how this makes us feel."

"I see... Well, all righty. And goats, huh? Aren't they usually found in mountainous areas? I don't think I saw any at the livestock markets in Mahati, but you see them a lot in the kingdom's east. I bet Goldia could get you some. He could get you some geese and white ghee too... You want me to ask him for you?"

There was a strength in Moll's gaze, and I knew she was serious so I wanted to help her. But the moment I did, a sly smile grew upon her lips and she chuckled.

"Oh, you would do that for us?" she asked. "You would do that free of charge, would you?"

Every time I gave her an inch, Moll tried to take a mile. She knew as well as I did that she was asking too much, and so she always worded it in a joking manner. Still, I was quick to make my position clear.

"Well, I can't do it for free," I said. "Livestock is expensive, but I'm sure we could work something out for some baar wool or other similar produce."

"My oh my," muttered the chieftain.

Moll reached for her cane and used it to pull a box towards her, from which she took several pouches. She opened them up and showed me the coins inside of them.

"We don't have to trade only in produce," she said. "We also have money. Zorg recently earned us quite the sum, you see. I'm certain we can buy a good number of livestock with this, so bring your friend over. Goldia, is it? Just bring him here and we'll handle the rest between us. We'll want some goats, some white ghee, and... Yes, those eggs the twins gave us not so long ago were very tasty, so perhaps some geese too..."

All the talk of livestock reminded me of something I'd been curious about for a while, and I decided to ask Moll about it.

"I've been wondering something," I started. "Baars are a lot like sheep. Do you ever raise sheep here? Caring for them is similar, as is acquiring their wool. It's pretty much the same thing..."

"No, no sheep," replied Moll quickly. "They only make the baars jealous. You can feel it from them. *'Why would you care for and feed an inferior product when you have us?'* You'd think goats and ghee aren't that different, but the baars are more lenient with them. It's just the sheep they can't stand."

"Jealousy, huh? Oh, and one more thing. It's uh...not exactly easy to ask, but do the onikin eat baar meat? I've never heard Alna ever speak about it, and it's not really easy to bring up in conversation..."

"It's only natural to be curious. As for an answer, all I can say is that it depends on the circumstances. Put simply, we rarely ever consider eating our baars, and it's unthinkable to consider killing one for its meat. But this is only natural; you can sell a baar's wool and buy far more meat than you would get slaughtering that same baar. Anyone who decided to do so anyway would not be welcome in my village."

Moll decided it was time for a lesson on culture.

"When the onikin call someone a 'baar eater,' it is meant as the gravest insult. A person who would eat a baar is clearly the kind of idiot who would eat their own arms and legs when they were done. However, the eating of baars is not *always* frowned upon. Should the individual baar wish it, and their owner accept their wishes, then

sometimes a baar is eaten when it reaches the end of its life, whether that be through old age, injury, or whatever else."

I had never heard about how baars were treated in death, and so Moll took it upon herself to teach me a little. Baars were very intelligent, so they understood the concept of death well. This meant they also considered life after their own deaths, and as a result they left wills.

It was common for baars to inform their owners of how to handle their bodies when death finally came. Some wanted to be buried, some asked for cremation so their ashes could be scattered across the skies, and others asked to be left as sustenance for the natural world, so they might return to it via the circle of life.

And then there were, on occasion, baars who asked that their owners cook them up upon their passing. Sometimes this was so a family could survive, other times this was so the baar could become a part of the family in another way and continue to live through them. Only when a family agreed to requests like these was the eating of a baar acceptable.

When a baar was eaten under such circumstances, the people who did the eating were not considered "baar eaters" in the derogatory sense. In fact, it was considered a great honor for a baar to make such a request, and it was proof of the love that was shared between the baar and its owners. Such people often became like priests to their tribes and were just as often promoted to village chieftain.

"I see," I muttered. "I really don't want to think about life when Francis and all the others pass away, but when that day comes, I'll do my utmost to see that their wishes are granted."

Moll nodded and smiled, then lifted up one of her bags of coins and shook it to remind me to bring Goldia over.

"Yeah, yeah," I replied. "I'll go talk to him about it right now, okay?"

And with that, I left Moll's tent. Outside, I took a look around at the onikin village. It was livelier than when I'd first seen it a year ago, and newly born baars were running all over the place having a grand old time. Onikin children had also been born recently, and I

could hear their laughing and crying here and there. It wasn't always easy to tell because the village and its yurts often changed, but I knew for certain that the village was growing, and I could see a relaxed confidence in the faces of the onikin who passed by.

I thought that maybe, just maybe, the atmosphere in the village was thanks to our having evenly split the Baarbadal lands between us. And while that thought was probably a product of my own imagination, it still felt meaningful, and so it was with a certain pride in my heart that I walked back to Iluk.

As I neared home, seeing the village from afar, it struck me that this place was getting bigger and bigger too. Taking it all in reminded me that we'd really come a long way, and built a whole lot of different facilities in the space of a single year.

I stopped a couple of dogkin I saw to ask them where Goldia was. With a bit of howling, they told me that he was in the western part of the village. I was mighty curious as to what he might have been doing there, so I thanked the dogkin for their help and set off down the road. I found Goldia a little ways outside of the village proper.

Goldia was standing among the plains with a paper and pen in hand. He looked very much like a man surveying a location for construction, and it wasn't hard for me to put two and two together. I knew what he was up to, and I had some real thoughts about it, but my first order of business was the onikin and their goats.

"Goldia," I called out. "The onikin people told me that they need some goats and other livestock. Think you can get some? The new grass that's sprung up means they can start expanding their livestock farming to more than just baars."

"Yeah, I can get you some goats," Goldia replied, not looking up from his paper as he scribbled some notes. "If they can pay for them, I'll get them ten, twenty—even a couple hundred. I'll make some time later and head over to their village myself so we can hash out all the details. On a different note, do you know what I'm up to here, Dias?"

"You want to build a pub, right? You told me about it a while back. I'm guessing by the distance from Iluk that you know it's going

to be rowdy in the evenings. And judging by the fact it's right here on the roadside, I reckon you've got your eyes on visitors to the guest house. I have a feeling you're going to tell me it's a pub *and* an inn."

"Color me shocked... I didn't think you'd know I wanted to build an inn too. You've seen right through me, and quickly too. You've changed since you got here, Dias...though I suppose it's more accurate to say you've grown. But yep, I'm building our pub here, and...come on, don't give me that look. Having a pub will make your job that much easier."

"How does that work?" I asked, my eyes narrowing with suspicion. "There's no connection between a domain lord's duties and the running of a pub, is there? If anything, I'm only going to get busier, what with all the extra drunkards we might see."

Goldia knew I wasn't going to tell him that he couldn't have his pub, so he grinned smugly as he began telling me about all the things a pub did. According to him, it wasn't just for the drinking of alcohol. For one thing, it was a place for new friendships to be made and old friendships to be strengthened. This happened through conversation, which was encouraged through the sharing of drinks. It was the pub staff's job to manage the customers, and that meant ensuring that angry drunkards were calmed or detained as needed, and that the sick and injured didn't drink too much.

Pubs were the kinds of places where people's work issues could be sorted, arguments and squabbles could be settled, and family problems like divorces and the like could be mediated. It was a place for people to come together, and it was the reason the word "pub" was short for "public house." It was a necessary staple of any village or town...

At least, according to Goldia.

"Isn't all of that sort of stuff supposed to be done at a town hall?" I asked. "Isn't it the domain lord's responsibility?"

Goldia shook his head.

"Maybe if it's a place as big as Iluk is now, but when you're looking at a village or town with several hundred or even several thousand residents, the domain lord can't mediate everybody's

problems. They'd never have any time for their actual work! That's why you have a pub. You get the involved parties together, along with the village chief or the town mayor and anyone else necessary so they can talk it all out and come to an agreement without ever needing to get the domain lord involved. It's for that very reason that pubs are often run by people close to the domain lord—family, close friends, and longtime aides. Of course, you get domain lords who allow for other drinking establishments, but if you're not careful about who's running what, you get low-quality drink and people get sick. That kind of thing is the reason domain lords usually like to make sure that trustworthy people run their pubs."

There were exceptions, of course, and not all places were alike, but according to Goldia, some seventy or eighty percent of the kingdom's pubs were run just like he'd explained to me so far. His big grin kept getting more smug with every word too, because he was basically telling me he was a real somebody to have been managing a pub of his own.

"You ever seen a pub with a pole or an ale stake hanging on the wall by the entrance?" Goldia went on. "That's the sign that a pub has been certified by the domain lord. If the place stops doing the work of a public house, or if it starts serving poor drink, the pole is removed. The system is set up so that if a place opens without a pole, it's a sign that they've gone against the domain lord. But in your case, I'm the one in charge of Baarbadal's official pub. I'm experienced, and we're practically blood brothers; who better to run the place than me?"

Goldia didn't even wait for me to say anything. He just went right on explaining things as though the answer to his question were self-evident.

A pub served alcohol, so naturally there was a wide variety on the premises. Some of it was very strong, and included the sort of stuff that could prevent wounds from festering and help rid people of illnesses. With the right people employed, a pub could also work as an apothecary.

In short, a pub was a pub, but it was also a court, an apothecary, and a community center. Then there was the fact it was also a

restaurant, and even a place for lodging. Sometimes it was also used to finalize negotiations and contracts, because it was a safe place for locals with influence to settle their business. In that sense, the pub was like a town hall, or a proxy town hall, because in the countryside some villages didn't even have a town hall, and getting to the domain lord's residence was a journey of weeks or even months. In such places, pubs managed what the domain lord and town hall couldn't...

At least, according to Goldia.

"The pub is also a place where outsiders and less reputable types gather, which makes it perfect for intelligence... Alcohol, you see, is a wonderful lubricant for tight lips. And I see that look on your face, so just relax! It's *me*! I've got things covered. I mean, I don't see any trouble brewing here in the immediate future, but your war buddies are going to get married and settle down someday, no? You can bet there will be some issues when it happens, so the best thing you can do is get prepared early. Problems in the home can happen to even the nicest and most straitlaced of folks, and not every couple gets along as well as you and Alna do. And don't you even fret about the guild. I'll make sure it's running as smoothly as always, and I'll get the onikin their goats and whatever else it is they want."

And with that, Goldia went right back to his planning, working out what kind of pub he wanted to build and what kind of facilities he wanted in it. At this time, the cavekin were all working on the border station, or otherwise preparing our mine to the north. There weren't any free hands, and every day was jam-packed, so even if Goldia settled on his plans and set the rope down for his pub, it wasn't going to be built anytime soon. All the same, Goldia wanted everything in place so they could start on construction when things calmed.

Still, when he finished with his plans he'd have to look at acquiring building materials, tools, and of course liquor...but I figured that the last part of Goldia's preparations was sure to draw some interest from the cavekin and give them a good reason to work.

“That reminds me, Goldia,” I said. “Once your pub is up, the cavekin are going to flood it, so make sure you have some chairs and tables suitable for their body types, okay?”

And well, Goldia took that request as direct permission from the domain lord to build his pub, and he smiled like a little kid given exactly what he’d always wished for. He was even more excited about his plans now, and it gave me pause. I realized that if we were going to have a pub, then we’d need something very special to go with it, and I left to look for Uncle Ben to discuss that very thing.

Goldia had told me that a pub went a long way towards crime prevention, but I still thought that some drunks would be tempted to do something bad with the alcohol loosening their inhibitions. Iluk would need something to counter that. Specifically, a place that would remind people to stay upright in all meanings of the word, and it was my belief that the perfect place for it was a temple.

A temple was a place where the gods resided, and a place from which they watched over us. At the same time, it was a place where they took stock of our actions with a strict eye. I thought that a temple in the village would remind people to do the right thing and also offer them encouragement when they needed it.

I imagined someone stepping out of the pub and into the cold night air, and in that moment seeing the temple, the sight of which would cool their head. Even that alone made it a worthwhile place to have, and so it was that I found myself walking to chat with Uncle Ben about it.

As usual, Uncle Ben was in the village square. That was where he spent his days, and it was where the villagers could find him whenever they needed guidance or advice. Today he was with Senai and Ayhan, and the three of them were all holding fruit and looking mighty excited about it.

“Dias!” said Uncle Ben, waving me over. “You’ve got to try one of these! You won’t believe the taste!”

There was a clay pot at Uncle Ben’s feet, and I knew right away it was one of the pot coolers that Ohmun had come up with. Uncle Ben removed the cloth cover of the pot to show me the fruit packed inside, then took one out and passed it to me. It was a type of

apricot, and it still wasn't fully matured, but boy was it cold! I took a bite, and the moment I did my mouth filled with chilled apricot juice, which cooled my body right to its core.

"I knew that the evaporative effects of the pot cooled its contents, but I never imagined anything like this," uttered Uncle Ben. "And to think that the heat of the sun and the dry wind make it all the colder. We have to add water to the pots more frequently on account of the heat, but that doesn't even matter when the pots work this well! The only weak point of these pots is how heavy they get because of all the sand and water, but even that's not an issue if you keep them in the right places, like say by the kitchen range or storehouses. These pots sure are a wonder."

Uncle Ben had a smile on his face as he spoke, and the twins both munched on apricots as they touched the pots, curiosity etched into their features. Inside the pot was another smaller pot, held in place by sand. Water was poured into the sand, and when the water evaporated, it cooled whatever was in the smaller pot...apparently.

We all knew that the pots were made to keep things cool, but it still surprised us to really experience just *how* cool they kept their contents.

"It's the power of the gods," said Uncle Ben. "The laws of the earth, immutable logic—in all of this one finds the gods. It is for this reason that study and inquiry into the unknown is so meaningful. We are but cogs that keep the world turning, and so we cannot allow such movement to ever cease. For should we stop, then so too do the world's cogs, and then the world itself."

His words stirred up some old memories in me. They were words I had heard countless times, and Uncle Ben watched me, waiting for the words that followed those he'd spoken.

"'It is because the cogs keep turning that the seasons pass, night and day come and go, the wind blows, and the waves crash,'" I said. "'The cogs turn the wheel of life. For as we learn from the great system that the gods have created, we build tools around which we center and enrich the lives we lead. Knowing this, we study and we search for meaning, for it is the path to the gods themselves, and the highest form of respect we can show them...' It's a good lesson,

and I think it's about time you had a more suitable place in which to teach it."

I'd managed to dig up those age-old memories and recite that old passage, and Uncle Ben grinned at me happily. Senai, Ayhan, and Aymer (who was by their side) all looked shocked at the fact that I'd just said something so profound. I didn't think it was all that surprising, seeing as I'd recited similar things back when Klaus and Canis got married, but I didn't mention it because that would be like stirring up a whole other kettle of fish.

Uncle Ben thought on my words and took a look around at the whole village.

"Even if the modernists are keeping an eye on us, they still haven't made a move," he said, scratching the back of his head. "So I guess it's as good a time as any. That said, with everyone so busy at the moment, we can't start on things right away. So in the meantime I'll start thinking about where to put the temple and what the building's going to look like. Being that it's going to be a home for the messengers of the gods, I'm going to have to speak to those messengers firsthand, so I'll see what the baars have to say too."

Uncle Ben seemed to be running through the prep in his head as he continued.

"Still, I can't manage a whole temple on my own, so do you mind if I call upon a friend to help me out?"

"Hm? Uh, if you trust them, then they must be trustworthy, so sure," I replied. "Who is it?"

"An old stalwart of the fundamentalists," said Uncle Ben. "So stubborn she just couldn't get along with the modernists. And as responsible as they come too—she covered all my travel expenses without hesitation when I came back from my pilgrimage. But she's so stuck in her ways I think she'll be making things really hard on herself, so I should call her over."

"In which case, let's send a letter out with Geraint."

Uncle Ben liked the sound of that, and the twins' eyes glimmered the moment they realized that the village would be getting a new resident. It was then that Hubert ran up, though it seemed like he'd heard the last part of our conversation.

"Lord Dias," he said. "Speaking of calling upon friends, would it be okay for me to invite somebody here too? She's an acquaintance of mine who worked at the castle and, like me, served with the utmost loyalty. I'm certain her experience will come in very handy here."

"Would a woman with that kind of experience even be willing to come to a little village like ours?" I asked. "And say you invite her here, what kind of work do you want her doing?"

Hubert's gaze turned a little more determined as he responded.

"She was in charge of etiquette when she worked at the castle," he said. "We don't have anybody here in Iluk with a deep knowledge of noble etiquette and manners as they relate to diplomatic discussions. I would like to make her our advisor in this area. She's widely connected, and knows everything there is to know about the kingdom's nobility and the empire's diplomats. She's sure to be a valuable asset."

"Etiquette? Uncle Ben's been doing pretty good in that regard. Are you sure we need another person?"

"With all due respect, yes. You, Lady Alna, the twins—you all seem refined as far as commoners are concerned, but there's much you still have to learn when it comes to holding yourself as a duke's family. Duke Sachusse and Count Sigurdsson were quite generous in this regard, but not everyone you meet will be so open-minded. Given that traveling from the royal capital to here is quite the journey, I think it's best we act sooner rather than later."

I was a little hesitant about the idea, but when I looked at Uncle Ben, his expression said it all: *"I'm no noble so don't ask me. You're the duke, aren't you?"*

I let out a sigh, knowing that I only had one choice, and I told Hubert to prepare a letter for us to send out.

I wonder what she's like?

Moments Later, at the Village Square—Hubert

"Are you certain about this, Sir Bendia?" asked Hubert. "Though

it’s true we’re quite far from the royal capital, the modernists will not sit quietly when they hear news of a new temple.”

Dias had left while scratching the back of his head, and the twins had followed along. Hubert and Uncle Ben were thus alone when Hubert brought up his concerns. Uncle Ben reached a hand up to his ponytail and ran his fingers through it as he thought.

“Call me Ben,” he soon answered with a smile. “Just Ben is fine. And look, we’ll handle them, is what we’ll do. Nobody’s going to come forcing their way across our borders with our stations in place, and we’ve enough troops now that we can drive away anybody the temples send our way. There’s no way we can avoid butting heads anyway—not while the modernists approve of beastkin discrimination. So we’d best dig in and prepare ourselves sooner or later.”

“While I don’t doubt that you’re right, I can’t help thinking that we’ll need more than just you and your friend. I know you have your long pilgrimage under your belt, and that is certain to prove an asset, but it won’t silence our modernist critics either. Things might have been different if we had more in the way of results to act as a foundation. Perhaps if your pilgrimage hadn’t ended in failure, for example...”

Ben had spent twenty years on his pilgrimage, and though he had not made it to the holy lands, he had returned home safely, which was an achievement in and of itself. Had he remained at the temple, Ben no doubt would have been promoted to the position of high priest. Instead, he had left, and was now building a temple on the frontier. Hubert had to wonder if that alone would afford Ben much influence.

Ben, however, responded with a glib grin, and it sent a shiver down Hubert’s spine.

“What’s this now?” said Ben. “Who said anything about my pilgrimage ending in failure?”

Hubert paused and began to tremble. His entire body broke out in goose bumps, disbelief filling his features. Had Ben’s journey been...a success?

The holy lands were the place that Saint Dia and the nation’s

founding king had been guided to by the gods themselves. In Sanserife Kingdom's long history, several thousand had set off in attempts to discover the holy lands, but not a single person had found it. Or, if anyone had, they had never returned to share their tale. It was the temple's ardent desire to reach this location and read the holy verses that existed there...

Was Ben now saying that he had done it?

Hubert was at first dumbstruck, then wide-eyed with shock as it dawned on him that Ben had also never said that his pilgrimage was a *success*. This troubled him further, and he was left speechless. Ben, however, took in Hubert's expression and continued to smile, then walked leisurely back to his own yurt.

Hubert was left uncertain of what to do. Should he ask for the truth? Should he ask whether Ben had actually arrived in the holy lands? Or was it better to wait until Ben saw fit to speak of it himself? Hubert thought about his options for a time, then finally reached a conclusion.

He knew that Ben was not an enemy of Baarbadal and that he was Dias's uncle and teacher. He had thrown away a guaranteed promotion to a highly coveted position to come to this land alone. If such a man decided not to share details of his pilgrimage, then no doubt he had his reasons for doing so. And if that were the case, then for a mere civil servant to demand an explanation was nothing more than the utmost disrespect.

With this reasoning in mind (and a fierce curiosity itching at his heart) Hubert sighed, then made for his own yurt so that he might write a letter to his associate.

???—???

"I see... So it is as I expected. I was correct. Along this path...we can take back what is right. And while I do not like calling such a thing 'right,' it is what must be done...for the sake of the world."

There was something black in the man's hand as he spoke. A sharp light came from it, casting a soft illumination across his

features in the darkness. The man sat and pondered his plans impatiently, for while he could take action whenever he so wished, he had to remind himself that now was not the time.

And so the man continued to wallow in his thoughts, wondering when to play his next hand.

On the Way to the Kitchen Range —Dias

Once I was done talking with Uncle Ben I decided to wander Iluk Village. I didn't really have any other pressing work to do, and I found myself heading to the kitchen range, where the grandmas and the Iluk Wives' Club were busy getting dinner ready.

I spotted Alna among them, and with her were Sulio, Leode, and Cleve. It was unusual to see the four of them together, but I had a feeling they were together for a reason; it looked to me like they wanted to learn about food from Alna.

Sulio and his friends had come to Iluk at Neha's request. She'd sent them to help improve relations and learn our ways. The lionkin weren't just learning from me though—they were also studying under Mont, Hubert, and Aymer. Alna, too, had taken it upon herself to teach them about hunting and chores.

I didn't know if it was all that necessary for the lionkin to study hunting, let alone chores, but I figured if that was what they wanted to learn then they should have at it.

Leode and Cleve had learned a lot from me, and even more from Mont, and it seemed to light a fire in the two of them. They were nothing like when they'd first arrived in Iluk; they held themselves more confidently, threw themselves into their studies, and were always filled with curiosity. This must have rubbed off on Sulio too, because he was just as enthusiastic to soak up whatever anybody thought to teach him.

I could tell that Alna was very passionate about what she was teaching, so I watched things from a distance. I wanted to hear what she was telling them, but I didn't want to interfere.

"Those of us with the ability to speak...humans and demi-humans, are nonetheless a part of the natural world. We are not

special. We are born into the natural world and protected by it, and are able to live our lives happily as a part of the cycle of life. But if we forget this fact, then we will be made to remember it, through some painful lesson or another."

Alna let her words sink in before going on.

"Some in the kingdom are known for saying that looting and plundering are bad. And yet these same people often turn a blind eye to the looting and plundering of the forests and plains, and the massacring of animals. They act like they don't see what is happening right in front of their eyes. We often kill animals without so much as a second thought, but it's wrong to think that we ourselves are beyond a similar fate just because we consider ourselves 'special.' That is arrogance, and the fact of the matter is, when people or animals cannot defend themselves, they will find themselves attacked and their lives taken. We are no exception."

Well, I had to admit... I had *thought* Alna was talking about chores, but this was something else entirely. I wasn't sure how I felt about it, but it seemed like it was less a lesson on Alna's personal views, and more a look at onikin values and culture—that kind of thing.

"When one grows so arrogant they kill animals more than necessary, and when they destroy the very forests and plains in which these animals live, they will find that in time there are fewer animals to provide meat, and fewer plants to offer fruits, herbs, and seeds. This is the price one pays for their arrogance."

Alna once again paused. The lionkin listened intently.

"To be weak is not a sin. None would be foolish enough to call a newborn baby a criminal just because they cannot defend themselves. Though one must be strong enough to defend what is theirs, if one lets their strength cloud their eyes with arrogance they will see themselves punished."

The lionkin waited for Alna to continue.

"To desire to achieve great feats in battle is good, but what matters most is manliness. Nothing is more precious than the person who fights to defend their home and who hunts to see their family fed. But should you ever wonder if it is right to plunder to feed a

starving family, or if the inability to defend your family is itself a sin, then look within and ask yourself. Ask yourself from the moment you wake until the moment you sleep, over and over. The answer may not come immediately, but an answer *will* come, and once you have your answer, you will know how to act when it matters most."

Alna then reached for the woven basket at her feet, and took from it the birds that had been shot down on their hunting trip. Then with quick swipes of her dagger she sliced off their heads. She took the birds to a hole that had been prepared earlier and began to drain their blood into it.

"When we take life, we want to make sure it is delicious to consume," Alna added with a smile, "and so we take our time to dress our hunted prey with the respect it deserves. We are particular about our flavoring, how long we cook for, and what vegetables we cook. In doing so, we ensure that everything is eaten. The life we hunted becomes a part of our life. This is how we show our gratitude and respect to the lives we take in our hunts. But it is up to each of you to consider what questions you will ask yourself and how you will face the life in front of you."

Alna's pressure was so heavy that all of the lionkin suddenly stood at attention, their tails as straight as poles and their bodies tight with tension.

"Yes, ma'am!" they barked, their voices loud and full of strength.

The next day, everyone had breakfast wherever they liked. The village had gotten so big that it was no longer really feasible for all of us to eat together. Some ate at their workplaces, some in their yurts, and of course some still ate in the village square.

I was in the square too, and as I ate I thought a lot about what Alna had said the day before. When I finished, I looked around, wondering what I should do to start the day. Now that we had more residents, I didn't need to worry about cleaning up and other odd jobs, which gave me a big chunk of free time.

The dogkin, the cavekin, and Joe and the domain guard all handled the odd jobs and any heavy labor, and though I'd helped out for a while, I just wasn't necessary once Joe and the others were settled in and used to how things worked. I spent some time asking

people at breakfast if they needed a hand with anything, but everyone told me I should worry more about my duties as a domain lord rather than village odd jobs.

But just what is *a domain lord's duty, anyway?*

I could have just thrown myself into more training or done some guard duty, but that didn't really feel like a domain lord's duty either. Fortunately, that was when I remembered that we had too many black ghee around. Zorg had told me that they were overbreeding, so we'd been hunting them pretty actively and enjoying the meat they provided, but now that we had the white grass growing, I was pretty sure the black ghee would have their eyes on it just as much as the baars, the white ghee, and our other livestock.

Apparently the black ghee numbers were still too high, and I didn't want to let them run rampant to the point they ate up all the grass the other animals loved so much, so I decided I'd check out the white grass areas and hunt any black ghee I came across on the way. Just as I was about to get ready, Narvant turned up, and he was holding some paper, which was unusual for him.

"Young'n," he said. "Could you check this for me?"

I accepted the paper when he held it out for me and gave it a look. It was a schedule, and it detailed all the village's current construction projects: the road, the western border station, the northern mines, the pub, and the temple. Narvant had listed who would be working where over the next ten days, complete with the number of people assigned to the project.

"So you're not just finishing one and moving onto the next?" I asked. "Aren't you just making things harder for yourself, splitting everything up?"

Narvant burst into laughter.

"When you're in construction, sometimes waiting is part of the job. We've got a whole bunch of clay and trees that need to dry, bricks that need to be fired, and water that needs to be drained. There's a lot of stopping and starting. No use having a bunch of workers just sitting around, you know? Better to have them move on to another job while they wait. And seeing as you might have requests and orders for us later down the line, you'd best get used

to thinking about construction the way I'm showing you now."

"Huh. I see," I said. "So you keep most of the guys on the border station, but cut it down to a skeleton crew to handle the details while you wait for things that can't be sped up. And when that reaches the same point, the same thing happens again. Well, I don't know much about construction and I can't whip up a schedule like this, so when the time comes I'll be asking for your help, Narvant."

"No problem. Just remember that this is how we plan our construction. That way, if anything happens you'll be able to remember this conversation and come to me for whatever else you might need. You know I'll be there for you."

"Got it. Thanks."

I gave Narvant his schedule back and he grinned at me.

"So what are you doing today, young Dias?" he asked, looking off at my yurt. "I saw you were heading to your yurt. Thinking about taking a nap?"

"Narvant, it's way too early for a nap," I replied. "I was just going to get some of my armor. I figured I'd do a little black ghee hunting, to make sure they don't eat too much of our new grass."

Narvant ran a hand through his beard. His gaze dropped to his feet and he looked a little hesitant to say what he did next.

"I don't think it's a bad idea to protect that new grass, I really don't, just don't use that as an excuse to overhunt, you hear? Make sure you aren't bullying them black ghee. That grass is a gift from the gods, and they put some around Iluk, but they also saw fit to put some a ways from the village. That tells me that the black ghee have a right to it as well. If they decide to enjoy too much of it, well, I think the gods will do something about it."

Narvant paused for a moment before going on.

"I think of the black ghee as residents of the grasslands. They have a role here that is unique to their kind. The wolves in the northern mountains *could* come here where food is plentiful, but they don't because they're afraid of the black ghee. What I'm saying is, if you cull the ghee too much, you're just going to end up with a wolf problem to deal with."

Narvant's words made me think of the wolves I'd fought during

the winter. They'd been monsters, but genuine wolves weren't far behind them. I'd never seen a single wolf since, and now I knew I had the black ghee to thank for it...probably.

"I hear you, Narvant," I said. "I'll keep your words in mind while I'm out on my hunt, I promise. It's just... Well, Zorg tells me that there's too many on the plains, so that tells me I'm safe to do some hunting."

"You're a good kid, Dias," said Narvant. "A good, honest kid."

Then he smiled and left me feeling a bit embarrassed. I scratched my head and went to my yurt, where I readied my axe and equipped some of my armor. I only needed enough to cover my arms and legs. I could still repel attacks with that much, and even then it was probably overkill for simply hunting black ghee.

And to be honest, putting on the whole set was a real hassle—it took a lot of time and effort.

I went to where Alna was doing some washing and told her I was off to do some hunting. I had two dogkin join me as guards and messengers in case of an emergency, and we headed out to check out the white grass patches around Iluk Village.

It wasn't long before we saw Francis, Ethelbald, and their families together with the new baar families, all munching away at the white grass. There was a good amount of it all around the village, and there were a number of dogkin watching in all directions to make sure our baars were safe. Looking at it, it was the very definition of a peaceful summer day if there ever was one.

Seeing as everything looked completely under control, I headed to the next white grass patch, which was north of the village. When we got there we found our horses all happily eating their fill, and the donkey and white ghee were a little ways behind them doing the same. I'd learned that horses hated to eat grass that other animals had already been eating, but donkeys and white ghee had no qualms when it came to leftovers. So it was a cycle where the horses ate for a while then moved somewhere new, and when they moved the donkeys and white ghee came in and ate up what the horses had left.

The patch of white grass here was northwest of Iluk Village, with

about thirty percent of it in our domain, and the rest occupying onikin land. Thanks to the dogkin being so diligent about their training, the horses understood this, and when they reached the stakes that marked the border between our land and the onikin's, the horses settled in the grass to laze around and take a break.

When the donkeys and the white ghee saw this, they followed suit, I think because they didn't want the horses getting mad at them. But yeah, this was just another portrait of peace out on the plains, and so me and my two dogkin headed south.

The southern patch of white grass was actually southwest of Iluk proper, and about sixty percent of it occupied our land, with the rest for the onikin. It was a bit of a walk to get there from the northern patch, and when we finally arrived I saw a herd of about ten black ghee. When they noticed me, one shot me with a fierce glare, and I stopped at a distance to decide on a course of action.

It was only one of the black ghee that looked particularly aggressive, but the rest were all just taking it nice and easy. I got the sense that the calmer ones were all females. Some of them boasted real big stomachs that reminded me of the white ghee, and based on their expressions and their slow movements, I guessed they were eating to feed the baby ghee in their bellies.

When I took a closer look, however, I saw that some of them were newborns suckling away at their mothers' teats. Now, I'd heard that baby ghee meat was a real delicacy, but I felt in my heart of hearts that hunting these black ghee would be doing exactly what Narvant had told me to avoid, so I kept my gaze locked on that aggressive male as I slowly backed away and left. I knew that in the wild, sometimes beasts moved to attack you the moment your gaze went elsewhere, and so the dogkin followed my lead and we all backed away and out of sight.

I didn't really want to go back to Iluk with nothing to show for it, so I set out for the guest house. When I got there, I saw that it was being carefully guarded by a group of dogkin, all with their tails pointing upright and their eyes darting all about. All the valuables displayed in the guest house had been returned to Iluk, which meant there was only the furniture in it now, but even then guards were

stationed there at all times.

The work on the road from the east would reach the guest house soon enough, and that meant all the laborers would be there too. Eldan had vetted everyone before they came, so I figured they were trustworthy, but I'd been told by the others that it was important to show that we kept our important facilities secure and well protected. The guest house was a symbol of our domain, and we wanted it known that we had dedicated guards for it. To that end, we had the dogkin working in shifts so the location could be watched over day and night.

All the guards at the guest house were dogkin on the verge of adulthood, and I guess you could probably have called them young adults, really. This was their first big job since joining the village guard, and they took their responsibilities seriously. It was a test for them, really, and a chance for them to grow. They had to guard the guest house over a long period of time, work well with their peers, and deepen their relationships with one another.

I didn't really think it was necessary, what with the dogkin already being so tight-knit and responsible to a fault, but I realized that maybe someday not all the dogkin would be like that. Maybe we'd have different races joining the village guard too. All in all, it was nice to have a system like this in place in preparation for that.

The dogkin knew I was coming before I even reached the guest house, and their tails started wagging like crazy. But they didn't come running up to me even though I could tell they wanted to—they kept their positions and stood at attention. I had to say, they were doing a damn fine job.

"Good work, fellas," I said as I approached. "Any trouble here?"

I got down on a knee so I'd be closer to eye level with the guards, and the three of them barked back happily.

"Nope!" said the first.

"Haven't seen a single person!" said the second.

"But thanks so much for giving us some work!" said the third.

"I'm just glad to hear everything's going well," I said. "We'll be asking you guys to handle lots of jobs going forward, so keep at it."

All three of the dogkin were bright and energetic, but this last

comment of mine brought out another level in all of them.

"You bet!" shouted one. "We've got kids coming, so we'll be working our darndest!"

"Oh, is that so? Congratulations, bud," I said. "I sure hope they're as full of energy as you are. But uh...aren't you guys still young adults? You're all married already?"

As the thought came to me, I found myself a bit surprised. I hadn't expected any of them to bark about having kids on the way. The three dogkin looked just as surprised by my question.

"Once you grow up, you get married," barked one, "and once you get married, you have kids, right?"

"Hmm... I guess that's what it means to be an adult for you dogkin, huh?"

"Yep!" yelped another. "We aren't so gung ho about it when the pack is in trouble or starving, but we don't have either of those issues! The more you work, the more food you earn and eat, so everybody's rushing to get married and start families!"

"I see. So I guess you're all working hard for the future, then."

The three dogkin burst into big old smiles, and it made me stop to think about them. They got married young and it seemed like lots of them were starting families. If that were the case, we might end up running out of food supplies.

Senai and Ayhan were making some more fields, we were gathering all we could from the forests, and the goose population was growing, but even though things were good right now that didn't mean it would be smooth sailing into the future.

We could expand our fields and increase our livestock, but the plains didn't stretch on for eternity. Someday we'd reach the limits of what they could offer us. The same went for gathering in the forests too. That left us with the wasteland to the south, but that didn't have anything in the way of foodstuffs. Still, Hubert had mentioned that he wanted to explore farther into the wasteland and make the area past it part of our domain.

If the lands south of the wasteland were uninhabited, we could snap it up and make it ours just as fast as we had the salt plain. Hubert was saying that progress in Iluk was going steady, and he

wanted to start on preparations for an expedition. But to make it past the wasteland we'd need horses, and enough water and food to feed them for the journey because we didn't know how long it would take. To that end, we had to dig wells.

Now, if we could dig wells, we could look at turning the wasteland soil into something that could grow grass, and that grass could feed our horses. Unfortunately, the salt plain meant that we could dig, but we might not get pure water.

What was south of the wasteland was still a mystery, and we had to be ready just in case we found a country there that wasn't friendly. Such a country might even decide to invade, and we'd need to be ready. Preparing for all of the above wasn't something you could do in a day, though; it took crazy amounts of time and effort. In our case, there was a chance we could put in that time and effort and come out of it completely empty-handed. Worse still, we might actually end up losing out if things went real bad.

At the same time, the expedition could see us with more than we even hoped for. If we could grow grass in the wasteland, we could probably cultivate fields and turn it into a food source. But even if the wasteland proved...well, a waste, we might be able to use the land farther south. Case in point, Hubert seemed to think that there was an ocean to the south.

Oceans were a veritable treasure trove of foodstuffs. You had fish and shellfish, and we could use the salt from our salt plain to preserve what we caught, which would fill up our storage cellars in no time. According to Hubert, building a port to the south would also allow us access to trade via ship, and that would mean for even *more* food—enough to feed a population ten or even twenty times larger than what we had at present.

Now of course, you needed a trade partner for trade to work, but Hubert didn't think that this was anything to worry about. He said that if we had a port, the king would help us out with the rest.

"Now bear in mind that I'm giving my opinion as a domestic affairs advisor," Hubert had said, "but the king has exceptional foresight, and his decisions are sound. I can't speak to his abilities in war and diplomacy because they're not my field of expertise, but

when it comes to domestic governance he knows what he's doing. How else do you think we managed to fight a war that lasted more than twenty years? The king would have checked the map we sent him and seen the possibilities. If we start building a port, he is certain to provide us with what we need."

I was down on a knee thinking about what Hubert said for a good long while, and the three dogkin all tilted their heads in the same direction, curious about the long silence. When I noticed that, I gave them all a pat on the head.

We'd have to put a lot of time and effort into exploring new land, and there was no guarantee it would go well, but we were still capable of more, and I figured it was my job to think on that. So that's what I did.

I knew that racking my brains on my own was only going to get me so far, so I brought up the issue of the wasteland with the rest of the village.

Surprisingly enough, Senai and Ayhan had a plan.

They were going to put their magic to use by planting a weed in the wastelands. It didn't have a name, but it was a real hardy plant, and their plan was to start planting it around, little by little. They explained that it didn't matter how weak or small a grass or weed was. Once it sprouted and grew, the soil in which it rested softened. When that happened, bugs would come, and as the bugs grew in number they'd make for an environment conducive to wider plant life.

Freshwater wells and edible grass for horses wasn't something you could rush, so it was best to put that aside and focus on making the wasteland into...not a wasteland. So that's what the twins were going to do: They'd cast their magic, plant some seeds, water them with some crushed up verdant leaf stones as fertilizer, and then just let nature work its magic.

This was a long-term plan, which meant we wouldn't see results for a hot minute. Still, given that everybody was so busy with other jobs, it wasn't a bad way to go, and so after much discussion we all decided that we'd let the twins do their thing. The twins told us that the salt plain and the area around it weren't conducive to grass, so

they'd focus on heading south and skipping the salt plains entirely.

We didn't know what was beyond the wasteland, but we'd keep on with that plan with the faith that we'd make it down there at some point. According to the girls, results wouldn't be seen in months, but more like years.

The cultivation of the area was one way to address our food supply problems, but it wouldn't address our immediate food issues, so there was also the question of whether the wasteland was even worth cultivating at all. But with the twins heading things up, it wasn't like the work was going to cost us a lot in terms of effort or money, so I thought it was fine to go along with this while we thought up other options.

With that in mind, me, Alna, Senai, Ayhan, Aymer, and Sahhi all headed out to the wasteland the very next day. We were all on horses except for Sahhi, who naturally took to the skies as our guide. The twins were behind him and the rest of us followed, and while we were out there with a job to do, it really felt like we were out on an excursion of sorts, enjoying the summer sun and the refreshing wind.

The horses heated up quick, and their sweat made for a humidity that hit their riders pretty hard, but with the constant breeze through the plains, it really didn't bother us all that much. We were all basking in the good weather, and I looked up to the sky and was suddenly taken by just how vast it was when there wasn't a single cloud to break up the sight.

"Boy, the sky above the plains sure is ginormous on days like today," I said. "No buildings, no trees, just sky in every single direction."

Alna heard me and she brought her beloved Karberan closer to where I was and spoke up.

"That's because you're on horseback," she said. "You're up higher than you'd usually be, and nothing on the ground is going to block your view. The sky looks even more expansive when you ride to the top of a hill and stare up at it. Just another reason why we love horses. They're essential to daily life, they're adorable, and they give you sights you'd never experience otherwise."



Alna smiled then, and I let Balers lead the way while I chatted with her. When we reached the wasteland, we all helped the twins with their work, and then we went for a stroll. The days passed on by in this easygoing fashion while work went on for the road, the border station, the pub, and the temple.

Two Domains to the East of Mahati

It was a summer day upon which the two domain lords, Count Ellar and Viscount Earlby, returned home after a year of public service. They had been helping to rebuild the kingdom after the war and were now, finally, home.

Both men celebrated their return in their own ways. Count Ellar held a ball at his manor and invited his relatives to celebrate. The viscount, meanwhile, gathered his relatives along with his citizens and held a huge banquet in which all gorged themselves on food and drink. It had been a long time in both domains since such noble festivities had been held.

Both men had been away from noble society for a year, a time in which they had been made to live a lifestyle that was a far cry from what they were accustomed to. The reason for their public service was that either they or the family's prior leaders had refused to provide troops to support the nation's war efforts. As punishment, Ellar, Earlby, their retainers, and their troops were made to aid in the nation's recovery and restoration.

Both men knew how serious it was to refuse to mobilize, but they had seen Lord Kasdeks refuse and followed his lead without any real thought; they soon realized the folly of their actions. And so, after sending letters expressing their deepest apologies to the king, providing documentation detailing their meager military capabilities, and also offering a number of generous bribes to the castle's civil servants, Ellar and Earlby saw their sentences reduced.

Were they to find these punishments unacceptable, their fates would have been sealed then and there. Their homes would have been burned, their domains taken from them, and their heads

separated from their necks. Where once Lord Kasdeks would have protected them from such fates, he was now dead, and his faction was in tatters. Ellar and Earlby thus accepted their punishments without question.

When one considered the fact that the two men had shirked the very responsibilities expected of a noble, their punishment was, all things considered, almost too generous. And yet, for Ellar and Earlby, public service gave them nothing in return, and so it felt to them like torture. It did not help that the lord of the lands in which they worked, Duke Sachusse, detested them for their behavior and made their experience, in most every sense, a living hell.

Duke Sachusse had watched his lands erupt with the flames of war. He had lost a great many retainers, seen much of his family slaughtered, and been right there in the heat of battle, his sword the weapon it was meant to be and not just a noble ornament. To him, Ellar and Earlby were traitorous scum, and the two perhaps should have been grateful that their treatment only went so far as a glimpse of the underworld and no further.

As the two men reflected on the past in their own respective domains, they made their feelings known. Oddly enough, this happened almost simultaneously.

"That damned Sachusse!" barked one. "How dare he treat me like that!"

"The things that damned duke did to me are unforgivable!" shouted the other.

Ellar and Earlby had been fed with leftover rations, clothed in veritable rags requisitioned from the enemy, and made to use foreign tools that they did not properly understand. To add insult to injury, they were not provided these things at all; Sachusse made them *pay* an exorbitant sum for all of it!

They were refused alcohol and the joys of female company, and denied the ability to contact other members of the nobility for some reprieve. News of the current times was given to them only by way of Sachusse, who made sure they never saw the full picture. In fact, Sachusse wanted them to suffer even once their service was over, and so he made sure that any letters they received from their

families and wives were doctored, and that what little news they received was riddled with untruths. Ellar and Earlby were left painfully behind the times and unable to easily rejoin noble society.

The two men were starving for information on the kingdom upon their return, and in the midst of their parties they rained questions down on their families, their friends, and their guests. It was at this point that both men were, by some magic of coincidence, told the same thing, and reacted to the revelation simultaneously.

"That fool Dias was made a duke?!" cried one. "I don't believe it! Are you telling me that a commoner is now a duke?!"

"The king made Dias a duke?!" said the other. "A man like that?! A duke?! Unbelievable!"

In truth, Dias's promotion had not actually been so sudden. It was not a leap from commoner to duke. Dias had first been made count of the plains, and had been promoted to duke afterwards. Still, even Dias himself was unaware of this, and Ellar and Earlby had no way of knowing it either, so their misguided information gathering meandered on, and they learned that the King, his prospective heirs, and the nation's grand dukes unanimously supported Dias's promotion.

Further, Diane and Meiser, who despised Dias, had both fallen from grace, and Kasdeks had been replaced by Duke Mahati who, along with Duke Sachusse, was actively fostering friendly relations with Dias. The other dukes, too, supported Dias's rise, though their enthusiasm varied. This wide base of support meant that even when the lower ranked nobility, fueled by jealousy, spoke in protest of Dias's promotion, their complaints fell entirely on deaf ears.

"Hrmm..." murmured Count Ellar. "A clueless peasant promoted to duke... A man yet to be tainted by greed and ignorant of the sly ways of those in power. If he is indeed on good terms with the Duke of Mahati, perhaps it would be in my best interest to curry his favor."

"Has the world gone mad?!" cried Viscount Earlby at that same moment. "I won't stand for it! Just what do those fools think nobility is?! Have they forgotten the importance of titles and ranks?! Do they have any idea how much I fought, how hard I struggled just to earn the title of viscount?!"

It was at this point in time that the conclusions reached by the count and the viscount marked a difference in their persons. This difference split them even more as their plans impacted the information they sought to gather. Both men were in every way minor nobility, having sold the greater part of their domain to Kasdeks, which meant they wielded only enough influence to maintain their meager positions. That they had managed to survive until now was thanks in large part to their access to the western trade routes crafted by Kasdeks, which provided them an income.

"Aha. So Baarbadal and Mahati are indeed engaged in mutual trade. If we offer some of our own domain's goods, perhaps we might also see some of that trade come to us," mused Count Ellar.

"He might be a duke in name, but dousing a stinking turd in perfume does not a rose make! That damned peasant doesn't even know what it means to be a noble! He'll make a mistake! He'll screw up! And when he does we'll be there to let the rest of the kingdom know! Ridding the world of a false noble will only serve to raise the standing of the great Earlby name! Then the western trade routes will be *mine* to control!"

The two men reached their conclusions at their prospective parties, and in doing so began to walk very different paths in very different directions. The two domains that lay east of Mahati were about to get very busy now that their lords had returned home.

A Beautiful Day by the Stream—Dias

A few days had passed since we'd last gone out on our horses, and in that time we'd been hit by an unusual bout of rain. It didn't stop for a whole three days. Today, however, the sun was finally out and the skies were clear. That was why Alna bellowed out a message loud enough for the whole village to hear once breakfast was over.

"We've all got some washing to do!"

She was serious, and she was going to get *everybody*—well, aside from the cavekin, who were still busy with all their building—to help out. It was hard to clean the laundry when it was raining. There was no sun to dry your clothes, and even trying sometimes left them faded or moldy...and that meant a really horrendous stench.

Once your clothes got moldy, you couldn't get rid of the smell without doing some dedicated work, so it was important to wash your clothing whenever you had the chance. Today was that chance, and we had to really dive in.

Iluk had grown quickly, and the daily amount of washing was growing along with it. It was hard work, and when you considered that we had three days' worth of washing to do, I could see why Alna wanted some help. I knew how hard washing could be from my days in the war, and so I set off to the stream to help out.

When I got there I noticed three big piles of dirty clothes along with a staggering number of tubs and washboards. For some reason, they'd brought out a stove and a steel pot too.

"A pot?" I mused. "Are you making soap? You make it by boiling animal fat, right?"

Alna was busy giving the Wives' Club and the domain guard directions, but she stopped for a minute to answer me.

"We're just about to start washing, dummy," she said. "If we

started making soap now, it'd never be done in time. We're going to boil some of our laundry."

"Did you say 'boil'? You want to *boil* our clothes?"

"Yep. Any laundry that smells a bit funky gets sanitized that way. Discolorations can also be boiled away, leaving white clothes good as new or near to it. We won't boil anything more delicate like stuff threaded with animal hair, because that doesn't take the heat well. But boiling will work great for most cloth and baar wool. We'll crush up some soap and some herbs, add some salt, and it'll all come out great."

"Sounds a lot like cooking," I commented. "But I think boiling is something even I can do. I'm just awful when it comes to the rest of it...always handling things too rough or stretching them out of shape."

"Yeah... Unfortunate but true, that," agreed Alna, smiling.

She finished getting the stove ready, passed me the firestarter wand, and then went straight back to issuing orders to everybody else. She had laundry for the washing boards placed near them, and ordered Joe and the troops to handle any heavy lifting. Anything that wasn't going to be washed on the boards, like clothes that might get damaged that way, was to be placed in tubs and stomp-washed, so to speak. That responsibility went to the twins and dogkin.

Grandma Maya and her friends helped out wherever they could, mending anything that had holes in it. Meanwhile, firestarter in hand, I was on boil-washing duty. I put the pot in place, filled it with water and got it boiling, then once a load of laundry was in there I added soap and herbs. Alna offered guidance whenever I needed it. Occasionally I stirred everything a bit, but mostly I spent my time waiting for things to be done.

After everything was nice and hot I pulled the clothes out of the pot with the help of a baton, then plunked it in waiting tubs so the last bits of dirt and grime could be washed out. Then it was good to dry!

I had to admit, it was pretty rough work to be doing under the heat of the summer sun, but one day was nothing compared to Alna

and the others, who did it almost every day, and had to be thinking about meals and other chores at the same time.

Anyway, I watched over the pot until close to noon, and I was a right sweaty mess by the end.

"You know, I reckon it might be a good idea to make a dedicated washing space," I murmured, staring up at the sun. "Something like the kitchen range."

Alna happened to be passing by at the time, and when my words sunk in she was on me in an instant.

"Ha! Now *that's* an idea!" she exclaimed. "Why didn't I think of that when we were building the kitchen range?!"

It was an offhanded comment, but that sent Alna off to the races, and she started talking about how if we had a spot near the stream with a roof, where water was easy to draw and there were places to sit, we could even do our laundry when it was raining. It wouldn't dry as well as it would in the sun, of course, but Alna thought it would be mighty convenient all the same. Her imagination went wild and her smile grew every second, and her excited energy brought Ohmun over.

"I think you're really onto something!" she remarked. "We use so much cloth for our smithing, and we cavekin sweat so much when we work that we're always giving you more work, Alna. Let us handle building the laundry space for you."

I couldn't help thinking that the cavekin already had a mountain of work on their hands, but when I brought it up Ohmun pointed west.

"The road to the new border station is almost done, and the pub too. We'll have enough people free to at least whip up a roof and floor for your washing space. That said, I think it might be worth taking another look at the washing boards, the tubs, and the pots. We might be able to improve them. Sanat's a real prodigy when it comes to that, so let's talk it over with him."

Alna's smile was getting so wide I almost thought it would stretch past her face. She took Ohmun's hand, and just like that they were *both* off to the races. And well, I figured that if they had the free time and the manpower, it was a good idea. We cleaned our clothes

near daily, so anything that made it a bit easier was a good thing in my book.

Still, I was surprised to hear that the road was almost done—not to mention the pub. That was news to me, and it was right as I was thinking about it that Sanat came on over from the village square.

"Pub's done," he announced. "We're planning to make that border station and the temple from stone, but the pub's all timber—it didn't require anything complicated. Simple job, almost easier done than said. Attaching an inn to it is going to take some effort, but Goldia says we don't need that yet because we've got the guest house. The kitchen and the storage cellar took some extra time, but even then it was all in a day's work."

"Oh, well all righty then," I responded. "Thanks. You whipped that place up in record time, huh?"

Sanat chuckled."What'd you expect? We're cavekin."

That was when Sanat overheard Ohmun and Alna talking about the laundry space. When he cottoned on to what they had planned, he nodded to himself, knelt down, and started drawing a floor plan for it on the ground.

"Putting it by the stream is going to be a pain..." he muttered to himself. "We'll be working with a soft foundation, and then we have to consider potential flooding and changes to the flow of the stream. In that case, maybe we should build an embankment to keep things nice and secure...? I reckon we build that on the Iluk side of the stream..."

Sanat was in his own little world as he drew up his plans, and before I knew it he'd thought up another idea. All of a sudden, the laundry space had totally ballooned in scale. I felt like he and the other cavekin had earned themselves a rest, what with all the progress they were making on the road and with the pub. But Sanat looked to be enjoying himself, so I just watched and let him keep at it.

The next day, a bit after noon, Goldia decided to throw a party to celebrate the completion of the pub. He gathered together the village's resident drinkers to pitch in with the preparations, and by evening they were done. Everybody flooded into the pub, cups were

filled, and then there was an explosion of cheers so loud I thought it was an earthquake at first.

I was watching it all from afar—outside in fact, but Francis and Francoise started butting my legs and pushing me towards the door, bleating loudly.

"You're the lord of the lands," they were saying. *"You've gotta be there."*

After a few shoves, they took off without me and ran in. I followed soon after, and found the place packed with wooden tables and chairs. It wasn't just lamps lighting the pub either; there were skylights keeping the place nice and bright, and it happened to let in a wonderfully pleasant breeze.

The direction of the winds on the plains was seasonal, and I saw that the skylights were all designed to catch those winds and direct them inside. There were also gutters built into the skylights so that any stray leaves or whatnot caught on the wind would end up there instead of in the pub proper.

At the back of the pub was a kitchen that looked a lot like our kitchen range, and a door to the cellar where all the alcohol was kept. This place was where Goldia was going to be doing his guild work from now on. Not far from the kitchen was a long counter with stools for people to sit at, and by one end of the counter was a stage for bands, bards, and dancers.

That stage was where Francis and Francoise went. They started bleating out a song, and when everyone in the pub heard it they cheered all over again. The cavekin were at the tables; Alna, Narvant, Sanat, and Ohmun were at the counter; and Goldia was behind the counter with Aisa and Ely, who were helping him out in the kitchen. There were also a number of sheps in the kitchen, dressed in aprons and bandanas. It looked to me like they were cooking up food and serving it across the pub.

Alna saw me at the entrance and waved me over, pointing to the empty seat beside her. I walked over and took a seat while Sanat and Narvant chatted over their drinks.

"I've been thinking of building an embankment on the village side of the stream," said Sanat. "What do you think, pa?"

"Hmm? Sounds like a plan to me. If we can control the stream and keep the flow steady, we might even be able to send it all the way down to the wasteland. I reckon that'll help the twins with the cultivating they're trying to get going down that way. Hubert's the expert when it comes to water control, so I'd ask him for his input before you get started. If he's unsure about anything, you can get the rest from young Ben."

"Heh, even Ben's a young'n as far as you're concerned, huh? Well, I guess in terms of age it makes sense."

Narvant laughed.

"Everyone's young here! It's a hearty, energetic village!" he bellowed. "And nothing goes better with a village like this than a good drink!"

That was all he needed to say for the two of them to polish off their mugs and move on to a different topic. Ohmun watched them both with a placid smile and gulped down the rest of her cup, and when Francis and Francoise saw them, they started singing with even more heart, as if they were telling the whole pub to drink up.

Needless to say, that's exactly what everyone in the pub did. Chatter filled the air, and I found myself quietly enjoying the waves of conversation that met my ears.

"How's the mine going?"

"We're letting the gas out."

"The road's coming along though, ain't it?"

"We'll have to keep an eye on the horseshoes though; don't want the horses breaking anything because they're not used to walking on roads."

"Think we're about one tenth of the way towards having the border station done?"

"Well, the boss wants everything perfect. I've seen the plans, but is he expecting us to be fighting a herd of dragons?"

"But building the temple's going to be a blast. All those detailed carvings."

"Mining the stone, carving out the right size pieces, sculpting it all into shape. It's going to be quite the sight, I reckon...and a real showcase of cavekin craftsmanship."

“Baars on the pillars, baars on the walls, baars on the floors, baars on the arm rests, and then a big old baar statue... I’m pretty confident I could carve out that image with my eyes closed now!”

“I’m actually looking forward to constructing the new washing space.”

“Anybody got any good ideas for tools when it comes to laundry?”

“We’ll just have to make something up. That’s where it starts, and that’s how we’ll get a sense of how to improve on what we’ve got.”

“That just means we’re going to end up building a windmill for washing!”

“Ha ha ha! We’ll make a mess of everyone’s clothes in no time!”

After a time, it dawned on me that it wasn’t just drinking that people were doing. They were using the place for meetings and discussions, and the feel of it was a bit different from usual—the alcohol kept things bouncing along in a bright and easy manner. Some people had plans and tools in one hand and drinks in the other, but Alna was just sitting quietly and enjoying her food and drink.

“So this is the taste of Sanserife, huh?” she remarked. “It’s different from what Grandma Maya and the others cook.”

“You *can* call it that, but really it’s just pub food,” said Goldia. “It helps you drink, and it helps the drink taste better.”

“Hmm... It’s not bad, being on the receiving end for a change, and just eating what you’re served.”



She sure looked happy to be on the receiving end. Alna was eating and drinking, and she was helping herself to all the flavors that were new to her and all the dishes she'd never cooked before.

It made me think that the pub was actually pretty nice to have around. It helped people like Alna relax, it helped the cavekin brainstorm ideas, and I could easily imagine Joe and the village guard appreciating the selection of drinks when they turned up too.

With those thoughts in mind, I grabbed my chair and set it closer to the stage so I could enjoy the baars singing and dancing until the twins returned from the wasteland.

In a Wagon Heading Through Mahati—A Woman

The woman wore cobalt glasses, her golden hair wrapped in a bun and beginning to show the signs of age in a few white hairs. She wore a leather coat over her skirt, with leather boots and not a single item of jewelry. Resting on her knees was a suitcase.

The middle-aged man in the wagon had tried to strike up a conversation with the woman, but had received only a smile and a few simple words in response to his attempts. Hers was not a smile that came from the heart, but rather one meant to be polite. She sat upon her seat with her back completely straight, and no word the man said could make her budge. The rocking of the wagon, too, had no effect. It was as if her spine were made of steel.

The posture should have worn on the woman, both physically and mentally, but her pride and sense of duty would bend to none. Her mind was focused only on reaching her destination and meeting the man who awaited her there.

Her skills were to be used in service of the man known as the heroic savior of the nation. He was a man who had earned the implicit trust of the king and had risen to the rank of duke. However, his rapid ascent left him with yet much to learn, and so he had reached out, most extraordinarily, to ask the woman for her assistance in learning manners and etiquette.

The lands of Baarbadal were a far cry from the royal capital she was familiar with—largely empty, mostly devoid of development, and where its people lived not in houses but in tents. The woman knew that it would not be an easy life that awaited her out there, but she cared little about the difficulties. Her gaze remained steadfast, her thoughts only on meeting the duke.

Iron Mask. Iron Wall. Iron Heart. The Queen of Cool.

These were some of the names by which the woman was known in the royal capital, but now her heart leaped with even more excitement than the day of her own wedding. Still, one would not have been able to see this in her carriage, as she hid her feelings behind a veil of perfect composure. Not a single person in the wagon could have read her thoughts.

She had left her husband—a man who so hated to be alone—in the capital, and though this *did* bother her somewhat, she had learned that communication was possible by way of carrier pigeon. She decided she would write to her husband and have him join her once she was settled in.

But first, I must transform the duke into a true gentleman, and his wife and children into the most stunning ladies!

The woman thought about all of this, and her grip on her suitcase tightened so slightly that not a single person noticed it...but it was nonetheless a sign that the woman was eager to reach her destination.

Count Ellar's Manor, East of Mahati—Count Ellar

Since he'd sold the vast majority of his land, Count Ellar's domain occupied but a tiny corner of Mahati. To the north was the domain of Viscount Earlby, and to the south was a wasteland...a wasteland that had expanded over the years, making life difficult for his farmers. It was because his farmers were losing their livelihoods that the count had resorted to selling huge portions of his domain, but he had sold too much, and now lived a life many would have considered

unbecoming of a man of Ellar's rank.

Count Ellar had put great effort into improving what little arable land he had left, however, and was able to maintain financial independence through a partnership with dairy farmers. This income was further supplemented by access to the Mahati trade route, popular among merchants. Thanks to this, Count Ellar was able to provide a living for his people, and his people in turn loved and respected him for it.

His manor, then, did not fit with the otherwise modest domain. It was a lavish building with equally lavish grounds, and a throwback to the glory days. It boasted a huge garden, which wrapped around the manor like a flamboyant hug, and was surrounded by a fence with an old, but all the same stately, gate.

In a room in this manor, an office filled with aging furniture and works of art, was the count himself. He was in his forties, had quite the belly, and kept what remained of his hair tied in a ponytail. It was a hairstyle once worn by the nation's founding king, and the symbol of a distinguished gentleman.

Ellar lounged upon one of the room's sofas, his ash gray eyes taking in the report he held in his hands. It was a hefty stack of papers, but the count's gaze stayed firm, his hand absently toying with the hair at the back of his head.

"So the man visits Merangal, but touches not a drop of alcohol, indulges in no female company, and buys not a single article of clothing or jewelry? Instead he spends all of his coin on...livestock?" murmured the count. "And even more surprisingly, he purchases two hundred gold's worth of them? Amazing to think that he has such wealth but buys nothing more than livestock with it... Then again, with livestock one can cultivate fields, and they remain a food supply in times of need, so the logic is sound... It just... It does not fit the usual picture of the nouveau riche. After all, one could easily send a merchant to acquire such things."

Ellar's subordinate, who had prepared the report, said nothing in response to his master, his eyes glued instead to the floor.

"Hmm, so we don't yet know his reasons for the purchase," continued the count. "Let's put it into perspective: He is a commoner

given a noble rank, but he knows little, if anything, of our hierarchy... Could it be that he was born into a farming family, and therefore simply owning a great number of livestock is his understanding of luxury? Is that it? Because if that is the case, then perhaps it would be in our best interests to send more than just a portion of our specialty livestock as a gift..."

Ellar paused for a moment, his mind ruminating on the details.

"But if he has already bought animals of quality in Merangal, he may not think much of our livestock if they do not meet the same standards. Ours live only in these parts, after all...though there *are* the animals that arrived just a few years ago, which seem to love the arid lands especially..."

He could picture the animal, sturdy even in a hot, dry climate. It was then that his butler chimed in.

"This is but a rumor, my lord, but it would seem the Duke of Baarbadal has turned his interest to the wasteland south of his domain in recent months."

"What? Are you most certain? And you say he sent a letter to the Duke of Mahati asking for support? I see. Then perhaps we have a dog in this fight after all. You know what I'm talking about. The animals are useless for cultivating and they put a huge strain on our feed supplies. I daresay we can send them all. Yes, we'll do just that. Make all the necessary preparations."

Ellar's subordinate responded immediately, leaving his position against the wall to start on his new duties. He knew that they might need to provide saddles and other equipment, and so he left the count's office running calculations as he walked. Count Ellar watched him go, then placed the report on his desk and leaned back into the sofa. He spent a brief moment meditating on his position, then hopped to his feet, supremely happy to finally be back home in his own manor.

Viscount Earlby's Manor, East of Mahati—Viscount Earlby

At that same time, Viscount Earlby sat upon a shabby sofa in a small room, somewhere in a home that just barely counted as a manor. His arrogance, like that of his ancestors, had seen his domain shrink considerably, and it was this same arrogance that saw him glaring in frustration at the report in his hands.

The viscount was in his thirties, with wispy red hair (a similar color to his eyes, it must be said) tied in a ponytail. He was a handsome man and appeared far younger than he actually was, except that at this particular instant his features were twisted in irritation.

The Duke of Baarbadal was, in every way, one of the nouveau riche. A little digging should have uncovered all kinds of dirt on the man, and yet his record was pristine. He had not engaged in any illegal dealings, had never once abused his subjects, and did not indulge in women, alcohol, or gambling.

For all intents and purposes, the duke had only left his domain once, to visit Merangal in neighboring Mahati. Other than that, he remained holed up in the plains. Earlby refused to believe it; he himself was the sort of man who had to escape his own domain at least once every two or three months to indulge in the finer things in life, lest he lose his sanity entirely.

So certain was Earlby that Dias was hiding something that he'd spent good coin on thorough investigations, all of which had revealed nothing of note. All the viscount needed was the right intel. With it he could intimidate, threaten, and put his negotiating skills to good work. But without it, he did not have a way to get the ball rolling.

He's a commoner! A commoner promoted to the upper classes! He must *be hiding something!*

Dias now wielded power and authority unlike anything he'd known. He was capable of doing what he would have once considered impossible. He could escape most criminal offenses, and had come into what any ordinary commoner would have considered extraordinary wealth. It was only natural to think that he would take advantage of this, indulge himself, and go entirely too far. Digging up dirt shouldn't have even been necessary. Dias should have been

covered in the stuff—bathing in it!

Earlby jumped to his feet, his mind made up. In one swift motion, he tossed his report into the fireplace, which he had going even in the summer. It was common for his family to leave the windows open to allow a breeze in, and a small fire helped to ward off any insects that got in with the wind.

He watched as the paper was reduced to soot and floated upwards through the manor's chimney, dancing in circles as it flew ever higher. It was then that a cool breeze swept in. It felt like a gentle push in the back—a call to action, even—and Earlby turned his gaze west, in the direction of Baarbadal. His smile was one of supreme confidence.

The Iluk Pub—Goldia

It was a little after lunch, and the pub was draped in silence. Goldia was cleaning the tables and chairs when the doors burst open, and Senai and Ayhan came running in. The two headed directly for the counter, climbing atop stools and taking in the pub while Goldia finished his cleaning. They waited patiently for Goldia to finish, go behind the counter, and wash his hands in a tub of water. Only then did they place their orders.

"Milk please!"

"Better make that two!"

"Oh, and a third please."

Senai, Ayhan, and Aymer all placed their orders, and Goldia grinned.

"Coming right up," he replied.

He headed from the kitchen to the cellar, in which he stored various ingredients and drinks. At the back of the room was a bottle of milk, chilled on ice, especially for the girls. Goldia took it in hand and walked back up the stairs and to the counter and prepared three cups, one of which was specially made for Aymer.

The girls and Aymer watched as the cups were filled with white ghee milk. It had been freshly squeezed that very morning, then

boiled before being placed in the bottle that found its home in Goldia's pub cellar. It was fast becoming the girls' favorite drink, and they loved it with a dash of tea leaves or honey.

It seemed that the twins were in the mood for honey on this particular day. They took a small bottle of it that they'd been carrying and put a few drops in each of their cups. Upon mixing it all in, it only took a few loud gulps for them to finish with contented sighs. Their faces were painted with satisfied smiles and milk mustaches, which they wiped away as they savored the fading flavors.

The girls sat back and relaxed, as they were intelligent enough to know that it wasn't a good idea to go running around right after filling your belly. Goldia didn't want them getting bored, so he leaned in to speak with them.

"Heading to the wasteland today?" he asked, his gentle voice a contrast to his hulking appearance.

"Yep! We're planting seeds!" replied Senai.

"We're also going to take a look at the stream," added Ayhan.

"They've started work on it, and we're hoping it will increase the available water," explained Aymer.

It was always this order in which they spoke: Senai, Ayhan, then Aymer. Goldia nodded along and smiled as they all continued to tell him about recent happenings. First the stream, then the fun they had swimming, then the sudden increase in geese, then how an increase in the size of the stream would mean more places for the geese to play, and then how much they were looking forward to eating a delicious goose.

The average child would have been more taken with how cute the geese were and how sad it was to have to eat them. However, Senai and Ayhan often grabbed their bows and went out hunting, and to them the geese were little more than food.

When they'd talked to their hearts' content, the girls thanked Goldia and headed out looking just as excited and energetic as when they'd come in. Goldia watched them go, cleaned up their cups, then went about sweeping up the pub. When he was done, he took his guild ledger and settled down at one of the pub's tables.

The pub wouldn't see any visitors until later in the evening when everyone finished work, so Goldia liked to use the time between lunch and dinner to handle his guild responsibilities. Today, just like usual, that's exactly what he did, scribbling into his ledger as the sounds of Iluk echoed from afar—people calling to one another, the dogkin howling, and the livestock bleating, squawking, and otherwise communicating with whomever would listen.

The Southern Wasteland—Senai and Ayhan

The expedition group consisted of Senai on Shiya, Ayhan on Guri, Aymer on Aisha, and three sheps as their guards. They were in the southern wasteland, walking across a patch of land some ways from the salt plain. They had their breakfast early and set out right away. Once there they spent a little time surveying, then returned to Iluk. This was the daily schedule. If they'd been able to stay the night somewhere, their surveying trips could have been longer, but it was a little too much to ask of the girls, young as they were, and so each day they improved just a little on the last, taking each day one step at a time.

The goal of these trips was to locate somewhere that would be good for a stream to run through. Now that Sanat was working on improving the stream that ran through Iluk, the wasteland was open to the possibility of cultivation. Everyone had thought the area a lost cause, but now things were different. That said, even with the talented cavekin working on the stream, there were nonetheless limits to just how much they could push the flow of water.

These limits made it all the more important that any water directed to the wasteland was used wisely. As the two most knowledgeable in the field of plants and the natural world, everyone agreed that Senai and Ayhan were the best bet at finding the most appropriate spot. The girls loved forests and nature, and they loved the growth and expansion of such things even more, so they took to the task with great big smiles and greater gusto. They weren't going to let anything stop them, and they loved the adventure.

So as they went about their time in the wasteland, the girls looked at the lay of the land, observed the direction of the wind, and sensed the flow of magic around them. They stopped at times to let their horses rest, at which point the sheps unhooked leather bags from the horses' saddles and gave the animals water and a mix of dried grass and vegetables. While the dogkin saw to the horses, the twins planted seeds that usually did well in arid environments, gave them a little water, and offered them prayers.

This was the cycle of their work. As they observed the lands and continued their survey, Aymer couldn't help but mull over a point that refused to leave her mind, and she soon spoke up.

"Why isn't there any life out here in the wasteland?" she asked. "There are no plants, sure, but there's no *other* life either. Ordinarily something would still have made a home of the place."

"Isn't it because it's so dry here?" replied Senai.

Aymer shook her head.

"The lands where I was raised are even hotter and drier than this," she answered. "It's a place where the ground upon which you walk is soft sand. But even there you find insects and lizards that subsist by drinking the dew that forms over evenings. The mousekin survived by catching those. There was a wasteland there not unlike this one, but it had trees and grass growing upon it. They weren't very big, and there weren't many of them, but they were there all the same. Animals like birds gathered around them, as did insects. But how did this place come to be completely bereft of *any* life whatsoever?"

Aymer went on as the twins listened.

"When we first surveyed these lands, I assumed it was the salt plain that kept life away, but we're far enough from it that the effects aren't felt here. I can't help wondering if some other power is at play in the same way that something is interfering with the plains. Or at least, I thought that it was possible."

The sheps all looked puzzled, but the twins stopped in their tracks, thinking very seriously on the matter. They were considering what it could be that would have such an effect. As forestkin, the girls knew a great deal about cultivating woodlands, and wielded magic which helped them achieve that task. Even now, their parents taught them lessons on how to raise and protect the forest.

The girls were naturally bright, but they had also learned a great deal from those around them. Aymer had taught them of the desert, Uncle Ben and Grandma Maya had shared the wisdom that came with their age, and Hubert had shared with them the modern scholarship he'd studied at the royal capital.

With all their help, the girls had taken in and absorbed a great deal of knowledge. And while they were still young and their experiences limited, their minds were nonetheless sharp. Aymer watched them deep in thought and listened as they tried to put

words to what formed in their minds.

"Hmm," murmured Senai. "I sense that it's not as powerful as what's blocking the plains."

"But it doesn't have to be," added Ayhan. "This place was always dry, so a little is enough."

"We could do this much ourselves. Not that we'd ever try to."

"So maybe forestkin other than ourselves did something?"

"But it might be doing the same as the plains."

"Maybe, but the reasons are different... They might be protecting this place. Maybe they had to make sure nobody ever came here, and that meant wiping out the grass and the trees."

"It's the same reason that that knife was buried in the salt, I bet."

"And only the onikin could come? I wonder why..."

The girls held their discussion atop their horses, and the sheps grew even more puzzled. Aymer was just about to speak up when all their horses stopped, and a big lizard crawled out from under the shade of a rock. It was covered in thick scales that looked both durable and prickly, and colored so that the lizard would blend in with the browns of the wasteland. It released no miasma however, which meant it was no monster.

Aymer was shocked to finally see that the wasteland actually *was* home to wildlife, and it was then that the lizard opened its mouth and spoke in a deep, rumbling voice.

"Daughters of the forest, you are mostly right," it said. "Now let me ask you this: Do you come as aides of the ordinary human?"

Mostly right.

At the sound of these words, the twins' thoughts raced, and they realized that this lizard was not unlike the baar-thing they had encountered back on the plains. Their thoughts on the state of the wasteland, then, were largely correct, and the situation here was not unlike the situation in the grasslands. There was something here too, sapping away energy, and the lizard-thing was a messenger for it. One could tell at a glance that the lizard was not related to any forestkin, nor was it beastkin. If it knew enough to judge the twins' thoughts on a matter like this one, it was something different entirely.

The lizard had asked them if they were the aides of the *ordinary human*. Senai and Ayhan remembered Narvant using the term when they had first met him. It meant a person without any magical power—in other words, Dias. The twins were here at the wasteland to survey it in the hopes that it would make life better for everyone in Iluk, and so they nodded nervously in answer to the lizard's question.

"As I thought," said the lizard. "Then one has finally returned, and our meddling may well be over. We are not as kind as those of the plains, as we have no beloved children. But we have protected this land without issue, and it shall be returned. The ordinary human will not see it go to waste. Young aides, if it is water you seek to bring here, this is a good spot for a river to flow. You will also find groundwater a little ways ahead. We ask only that per the ancient promise, you use that water to grow a forest, and see the ordinary human protected."

Senai, Ayhan, and Aymer all tilted their heads at the lizard's request. The sheps were quick to follow suit in their ongoing confusion, and even the horses did the same. The lizard looked pleased by all the befuddled expressions, and it was then that a wind blew sand across the wasteland. Everyone closed their eyes against the sudden assault, only to find the lizard gone when the winds died down.

Everyone remained frozen in shock for a few moments. It was their second time meeting such a creature, and they did not doubt its power. They knew now that a river could be brought to where they stood, and that a well could be dug. Armed with this revelation, the twins finished their survey early and raced back to Iluk to share with everyone what they had just been told.

The Iluk Village Square—Dias

The twins returned from the south, left their horses in the care of the eiresetters, then dove upon the baars basking in the sun and started napping. I guessed they must have been pretty tired, but I

also worried about how sweaty they would get sleeping out under the summer sun. That was when Aymer came up to me and passed me a report, which she'd been writing since they all got back.

I took a seat in the wooden chair behind me and slowly read through the details, which said that the twins had bumped into a talking lizard that struck me a lot like the baar-thing we sometimes saw in these parts. When I finished, I plonked the report down on the table in front of me, which Aymer was observing with a mighty puzzled look.

"Ah... This is entirely unrelated to the report you just read," she said, "but what are you doing out here with these tables and chairs? And what are those dogkin up to?"

Aymer pointed to the two pairs of dogkin sitting across from each other at a table. She must have thought they were arguing.

"Oh, we were just running a mock trial," I answered. "I based the setting on a trial I went through way back when. You've got your plaintiff, your defendant, and advisors for both sides. They all hash things out between themselves, arguing about the facts and particulars of the case, the appropriate punishment, that kind of thing."

Then I gestured to the table and chair where I was seated.

"Watching over the trial is the king... Uh, but in our case it's the domain lord. His job is to pass judgment and see that an appropriate punishment is dealt. Hubert tells me that among a domain lord's duties, maintaining peace and safety through law and order is the most important. Driving out bandits, taking part in trials, seeing those trials through... I figured it might be worth practicing all that stuff."

Aymer's head slowly tilted to the side as she listened to me speak, and by the end of it I was worried she was going to topple straight over.

"Oh, well, yes," she said, seeming somewhat hesitant to speak. "I understand what you're getting at. I do. However, well, how do I... What exactly is the case you're overseeing in this mock trial?"

"We haven't had any real crime to speak of here in Iluk, so we've set things up so that the offender is on the right. The young dogkin

there played some pranks on the plaintiff, on the left, who decided to take them to court. I don't actually know the details, so the trial is a chance for me to dig into them. I told everybody that it's okay to tell lies for our dry run here, but the dogkin are just so good-natured... I'm a little dubious that they'll really be able to sell the act."

Aymer sighed.

"I see. I have one more question: Is there nobody else in attendance? No Alna, Ben, Hubert, Maya, or Goldia?"

"Well, Goldia is busy doing some cooking, and everybody else has business at the guest house, border station, or elsewhere. But I think they'll be back soon enough."

"So in other words, anyone who might have given you some advice is away at present. I'd be happy to offer some advice of my own, but I can't help thinking that there's no need for us to adopt the methods of the kingdom here, seeing as we have soul appraisal magic at our disposal. I imagine we'd want to make use of it to aid in matters of this nature. By carefully observing the flow of a person's magical energy, it doesn't even matter if they attempt to lie —we'll know if they're guilty as soon as they speak. That's essentially case closed, no?"

Well, my jaw pretty much hit the table when Aymer said that. Because, wouldn't you know it, she was right. We *did* have soul appraisal magic at our disposal, and it *did* see straight through lies. The sheps in attendance realized the same thing and their faces looked just like mine did. Aymer's eyes narrowed as she took in the sight of us all and continued.

"Yes, well... I don't think it's a bad idea to get accustomed to how trials are run in the kingdom. However, if you are going to do it, you ought to make a big event of it, and make sure there's seating for others who want to learn more about it. That way *everybody* can learn how crimes are judged in the kingdom, and what happens to those who break the law. All of it will go a long way towards crime prevention."

As Aymer spoke, another thought hit her, and she looked compelled to bring it up.

"As for judging crimes, I don't believe that to be something you have to do solely on your own. I think it would be for the best that you discuss things with your trusted advisors. Hubert, for example, can tell you how certain crimes are commonly judged in the kingdom, and you'll also want to look into how similar crimes were judged in the past. Handling all of that alone is simply asking too much of you."

"Oh yeah."

Aymer's words carried a lot of weight, and her face was very serious.

"On that topic, actually, I think it's totally fine for you to delegate the task of judging such trials to somebody else," she said. "I don't think it's a responsibility you have to bear on your shoulders personally. We've a far larger population than a year ago, and this is a duty you can share with others."

I let her concerns stew for a bit, and thought a lot about what Aymer was getting at before I replied.

"I appreciate the worry, Aymer, but I've had to shoulder these exact responsibilities a number of times in the war. I can handle it. And I don't like the idea of pushing this kind of job onto someone else just because I'm the man in charge, so to speak. It rubs me the wrong way, so I think I should do it myself. All of that said, the best plan would be to stop crime from happening so we never have to hold trials at all."

Now it was Aymer's turn, and soon enough she came up with an idea.

"In that case, I think I have a plan to help," she said. "Perhaps you could talk to the onikin chieftain and employ three or four onikin. You could even make them residents if they want. Either way, having onikin in the village with soul appraisal will act as a crime deterrent. Alna is oftentimes very busy with all of her chores, and so you'll want people to cover for her. I'd recommend employing them at the border stations as well; their soul appraisal and sensor magic will make it near impossible for criminals to enter Baarbadal easily. Come to think of it, aren't Joe and some of the other domain guard looking for wives? If both they and the onikin are amenable to the

idea, perhaps we can look at that as an option for bringing some onikin to Iluk."

"Yeah, you're right. They are."

I was mulling it all over when one of the sheps knocked on the table and raised their hand. The criminal, the victim, and the two advisors had all stayed silent until now, but now they wanted to speak.

"I think it's great if we all get along!"

"It's so important! Family is *so* important! Joe and the others need their families!"

"We can build strong ties with the onikin!"

"We love Lady Alna! Her tribe is awesome! We'd be overjoyed to see them more often!"

Aymer saw their comments as a chance to drive her point home.

"We're going to see lots of different people visiting Baarbadal now that it's growing," she said. "That means good people *and* bad. This would be a good way to really make our border nigh impenetrable. You'll want the onikin to be on board and happy about the idea too, so make sure you discuss it with everyone before you visit to make any official suggestions."

"Well, all righty," I finally agreed with a nod.

The air changed in an instant, and the sheps at our mock trial all leaped from their chairs and began to shout happily.

"As for that lizard-thing, if it's the same as the baar-thing, then there's nothing we can do but see how things play out. We can put aside our mock trials until after we've spoken to the onikin, so I guess we'll make that our first priority."

The sheps started running around, and they'd completely forgotten about their dispute as they sped through the village to share my decision with the others.

A Few Days Later, on a Horse Running Through the Plains—Dias

A few days had passed since Aymer made her suggestion. In that time I'd talked about it with the rest of the village, who were all on board with the idea of bringing some more onikin to Iluk, and I'd talked to Moll, who also agreed with the plan. With everybody in alignment, we went on with discussions relating to potential marriages.

Naturally, marriage was a big deal for both our people and the onikin, and it was important for all of us to make sure that the people actually *doing* the marrying were getting what they wanted.

That meant a lot of talking, so we decided to hire some onikin until everything was worked out. It was also a chance for the onikin to see and experience what life would be like in Iluk if they chose to become residents. We would pay them in baar wool, coins, or food—whatever they preferred, really—and station them at the village and the border stations.

Alna was managing it all with help from Ben, who'd offered to lend a hand when he heard what was going on. I left all the particulars with regards to payments in their trusty hands. On the onikin side, Moll was in charge with the help of Alna's family; Alna's parents, Zorg, or her other siblings were all set to come and report to us if they couldn't find someone or if they didn't have enough people.

I still hadn't really gotten to know anybody in Alna's family save for Zorg, so I hoped this was a good chance to meet the rest of them. That's what was on my mind as I directed Balers while he raced across the plains. I was on my way to the western border station to see how things were going.

I received regular reports from Narvant keeping me updated on

progress, but I didn't like the idea of not seeing it for myself on occasion. And also it was a good chance for me to check on the temple too. I'd also had a chance to see the progress on the west road while I was at it, and it was real nice—wide, straight, and Balers was positively flying over it. It was a mighty fine road if there ever was one.

I followed the road until the border station came into sight, then slowed Balers down so I could get a good look. As we trotted in, I realized that the place was even further along than I'd been expecting.

The ground had been dug up and stamped down, the stonework was in place, and earth had been heaped over it all to build a foundation. Stones had then been stacked on these foundations to construct walls that split the border station into different parts, complete with pillars and rooms surrounding a main square of sorts. It was a big mix of stone, timber, and steel, and it was starting to resemble the inn we'd stayed at in Mahati.

The difference between our border station and the inn was one of scope. We had huge walls being built on the border that were going to be as thick as they were tall. It was a formidable construction, and the walls looked easily sturdy enough to take a battering ram head-on. I had to imagine they'd stretch up pretty high too, though I felt like you'd have to bring down a mountain or two to get enough stone for it all.

"Now, I know the cavekin are exceptional craftsmen and hard workers," I muttered, thinking aloud, "but I can't help thinking this will take decades to complete, given how big it all is..."

At present, the stone walls only stood about as tall as a single person, and they stretched out to the left and right. They'd been built on top of a foundation, of course, so they might have looked bigger when seen from the other side, but even just this alone made for pretty decent defenses. Even so, the cavekin were planning to make it way wider and taller.

"I mean, I don't think the Beastkin Nation has any plans to attack anytime soon..."

I turned my gaze in the other direction, to the walls on the side

of the plains, which were thinner but still tall. They were about the height of two people, and there were towers on either side with construction already underway on platforms for guards to watch from.

Then there were the walls that joined the border walls to these ones, and they were just as big. I had to say, this was already less of a station and more of a fortress. The border station was the only place along the wall where there were gates too, and...yep, it really felt to me like completing the whole thing would take decades.

"Come to think of it," I muttered, "how are they even lugging all the stone around?"

I'd seen castles and fortresses undergoing repairs during the war, and there were always contraptions around that were made especially for moving stone. I didn't see any such contraptions around the border station though. Tools were scattered around the place, along with various huts for smithing, smelting, and whatnot with smoke billowing from them. But no contraptions for moving slabs of stone around, and no logs to roll them along either.

I did notice some carts, but it was right then, as I was scanning the square, that I noticed a group of cavekin, each walking along with a slab of stone on their shoulders. And these were huge, heavy slabs of stone, each one about half the size of the carrier. I couldn't believe that they were carrying them without any help whatsoever.

They carried the stones up to the wall, plopped them down, then took hammers and chisels from their belts and started chipping away at them. Once they had them in the shape and size that they wanted, they hefted them up again and—to my complete shock and awe—*tossed* them up towards the wall like they were just balls of baar wool.

You must be out of your minds...

My eyes were all but bulging out of my head as I tracked the stones in flight, and there was a cavekin waiting on the wall. He caught them with both hands and stuck them right into the foundation they'd built. I realized then that the stones were carved into such shapes that they all slotted into one another neatly. It was like the way they built their pavers for the road. Another cavekin put

a stone on top of the first, then a third on top of the second, and just like that, they had a section of the wall done.

The cavekin who'd thrown the stones up to the others started walking away—I assumed to get some more stone—and I hurriedly pointed Balers in their direction so I could speak to one of them.

"Hey, uh, are you guys sure those walls are safe?" I asked. "You aren't going to fill in the gaps or glue the stones together? You don't need to do any of that?"

The cavekin looked surprised by my sudden question, but he had a good laugh at it, and when he was done he answered me.

"The wall? She'll hold just fine. Them stones are heavy, you see? When you build them like we do, the weight of them works better than any adhesive ever could. That weight acts as a support, and they won't get out of shape because they're designed to clamp together nice and tight. Shocks, shakes, and tremors won't budge them."

The cavekin thought for a moment, looking for a better way to explain it.

"It's like those stables of yours in the village," he said. "You have a stone foundation and a pillar that clamps down onto that foundation so it sticks. Gravity keeps it from toppling. It's the same idea. But we're also planning to put some work in to make the walls good against siege weapons, so don't worry about that. We'll mix some sand in with the bitumen you can find in the wasteland. Paint that stuff nice and thick on the walls and let it dry, and you're done! Then it'll be a real pain for even us cavekin to break down!"

At this, the cavekin burst into laughter, then ran off to join the rest of his group. I watched them all go from my spot atop Balers, but I still couldn't wrap my head around it. I didn't understand it, but...with the cavekin working on the border station, I could see that it wouldn't take near as long as I'd thought to get everything up and running.

With my inspection of the border station done, I turned back towards Iluk. On the way I planned to stop by the temple that was still under construction. The temple was located west of Iluk, across the river and not far from the pub. We'd put it there by my request,

but also because that was exactly where the baars wanted it.

Ben saw his temple as a place to worship baars, who he saw as messengers of the gods, and so he thought it was best to ask them for their opinion on where to put the temple. Francis and the rest of the herd had given him an answer.

Near the temple was a small hill, and on that hill was a patch of white grass. According to the baars, it was *the* best tasting grass on the plains, and it grew faster than all the rest to boot. They'd actually enlisted the help of the dogkin to water the spot with some crushed up verdant leaf stones, so now the grass grew at an astounding rate.

Putting the temple near that patch of grass was a defensive measure of sorts; the temple meant that people would come to the area more often, and more people meant less wild animals. Less wild animals meant that the baar's favorite patch of grass would be like a private buffet.

I kept Balers going at a steady pace until I could clearly see the temple. It was considerably smaller than the border station, that was for sure. As I got closer, I noticed the baars on their favorite hill. There was Francis and his family, Ethelbald and his family, and all our new baars. They were all lying in the grass, bellies big and bulging from their buffet, and they soaked up the sun and basked in the soft breeze. The closer I got, the more clearly I could hear the sound of them all fast asleep.

Now usually, when baars slept, they tucked their feet underneath them quite neatly. At present, however, their big bellies stopped them from doing that, and so they were all splayed out to the side with their legs and bellies in full view. The six little baars had eaten so much that their bellies were facing the sky.

Francis was even chewing on some of the grass in his sleep, as though even in his dreams he was still feasting. I could only shake my head as I neared, and Francis heard me coming. His ears twitched and his eyes opened, and he scanned the area as he rolled to his feet. Ethelbald did likewise, and when they realized it was just me that they'd sensed, they ran over happy and relieved.

They were already well protected by the dogkin guards

accompanying them, so they didn't need to be so wary, but Francis was the baar leader and Ethelbald was his rival, and neither wanted to leave anything to chance. I hopped off Balers and passed his reins to one of the dogkin, then knelt down and gave the two baars a good pat.

I kept that up until both Francis and Ethelbald were good and satisfied, then walked over to the temple. The exterior was pretty much done by this point, with two big stone pillars at the entrance, at the top of which were stone statues of very dashing baars. They were a symbol of what the temple was all about, but...they were a real far cry from the baars I'd just seen in the fields.

There was a stone path running straight through the two pillars, leading to a four-walled building that had a triangular roof. It was a simple but stately design. Like the border station, it had been built from stone, but each brick had been neatly shaped to ensure that they were all the same size. It made the whole place look very neat and orderly.

It was the biggest facility in Iluk and was about the size of the village square. Still, compared to the temples I knew of, it was surprisingly small. We still weren't allowed inside because it wasn't complete, but the space inside was going to be purely devoted to prayer. Other related facilities—such as a place to study Saint Dia's teachings, a place for kids to play, a place to make books, and a place to cook—were to be built at a later date.

According to Uncle Ben, it didn't make sense to build everything when we still didn't have people to *run* everything. His plan was to add new areas when we had people to oversee them.

"Speaking of which, I wonder where Uncle Ben's friend is now? We haven't heard any word from her yet."

I was just muttering to myself on her whereabouts as I walked around the temple exterior. Francis and Ethelbald bleated at me as if to say that she probably still had a way to go, and it would be some time before she reached us. I was about to reply to them, but then someone else did.

"In terms of distance, I think she'd probably have just entered Mahati around now," said Uncle Ben. "I sent a letter to the duke

there asking him to look after her, so she'll get here without any trouble, I'm sure."

We all spun around, because none of us had even felt Uncle Ben's presence, and Uncle Ben grinned mischievously in return. We couldn't believe he'd try to get us like that, and we all shared a sigh.

The Markets of Merangal, Mahati—A Woman

Her name was Orianna Darrell, and when she had received word from her associate her resolve had turned as hard as steel. She began her journey to the domain of Baarbadal, where she would turn the heroic savior of the nation into a truly respectable noble. It was here, on her journey to the plains, that she found herself on the streets of Merangal in Mahati.

Mahati was home to a great number of beastkin never seen in the royal capital. Its air was filled with the drifting of strange scents that whet the appetite, and it was full of wonder and awe. Mahati felt like a different world entirely.

Orianna had arrived in Merangal the previous evening and spent the night at an inn recommended to her by the driver of her carriage. In the morning, she went to the city hall to deliver a letter announcing her intent to travel to Baarbadal, then returned to her inn to await the reply. She was unsure of how to spend her time in Merangal, but the innkeeper was kind enough to make a suggestion.

"The market is the best place for sightseeing. All manner of items are for sale, and so many in fact that you'll never be at a loss for things to browse. It's a lively place, but guards are always on patrol; even a lone woman can enjoy the place without fear for her own safety."

This intrigued Orianna. The previous evening's meal had surprised and delighted her. It was a generous helping of meat and vegetables, flavored with a great many spices, and though it had been perhaps a little heavy, it was so delicious that Orianna had practically licked her plate clean. The markets offered a chance to see these spices before they were used in any food, and so she

thanked the innkeeper and headed straight there.

When she arrived the air felt like it had changed, such that one might have said they were passing into another realm. Countless guards kept the location secure, but the safety of the location made for a bustling marketplace; the streets were packed with people lined up at stalls and shopkeepers shouting at any and all who might listen.

Orianna didn't even know where to start. She had no idea what direction to walk in, and though she wanted to make herself scarce, she kept her back straight as she took her first steps into the market proper. Many a merchant saw in her posture a potential customer—and a wealthy one at that—and many held up their wares as they called out for her attention.

"Take a look! I've got some beautiful items on sale!"

"These jewels are volcanic in nature, and you'll not find them anywhere else!"

"Spices, freshly prepared! As much taste as they have kick!"

The shopkeepers were boisterous and pushy, and Orianna felt a frown coming, but kept it at bay and strode onwards. With each step she hoped for a slightly quieter location that she might enjoy. She walked, and she walked, and finally she found a quiet corner of the market where she stopped to let out a sigh of relief. It was then that she noticed a cloth rolled out along the ground, and sitting upon it with a most dignified presence was a woman dressed in the white robes of a priestess.

In front of the woman were a number of books, and displayed before them was a small sign that read, "Books I have copied by hand." While there was no doubt it had been painstaking work, the asking price was extremely high, and Orianna was puzzled. Why would the priestess look to sell such expensive wares here instead of at the temple, where she might more easily sell them to the nobility? Orianna was suspicious of the priestess, but she felt compelled to speak, and felt all the safer doing so when she made certain that guards were nearby.

"My good priestess," she said, "may I ask why you are selling your books here, in the Merangal market?"

The white haired priestess, who looked to be in her forties or fifties, smiled brightly in reply, the wrinkles on her face stretching as she spoke.

"I need money to cover the rest of my journey to the Baarbadal domain," she said. "I was called upon by an acquaintance, and so I set off on what I knew would be a long trip. However, I found myself with unexpected company and ran out of money rather quickly as a result. I had no other choice but to set up shop here. These books are important to me, and I had never intended to sell them, but I know their pages like the back of my hand. More than anything else, however, I will never reach my destination without the money to get there."

Orianna smiled and replied politely, but in truth her thoughts were elsewhere. This priestess was just like her—she was heading for the same destination, and at the request of an acquaintance, no less. Baarbadal was developing steadily, and so it had begun looking for capable people; as a result, Orianna and the priestess had ended up in the same place, at roughly the same time.

In Hubert's letter to Orianna, he had explained that as long as she got to Merangal, the rest of her travel would be arranged and covered by none other than the duke of Mahati himself, who would see her safely to Baarbadal. If this were true of Orianna's circumstances, then no doubt they would be true of this priestess too...so why was she in need of travel money?

Orianna wondered if perhaps there'd been a miscommunication at some point. Perhaps the woman had gotten mixed up. Or was it possible that Orianna was the one who had gotten things wrong? As Orianna thought on all of this, she came to a decision and, mustering up her courage, reached a hand out to the priestess.

"As fate would have it, I, too, am heading to Baarbadal."



The priestess introduced herself as Fendia. The more the two spoke, the more they felt at ease in one another's company. Not only did they decide to travel together, but they also decided to lodge together, and spent a quiet night in the same room. Neither spoke much to the other, but both understood instinctively what the other wanted. Their upbringings and lifestyles couldn't have been more different, and yet they shared similar hearts... It was as if the two were long-lost sisters.

The bond of trust that quickly developed between the two women was perhaps why they both slept so soundly that evening. After breakfast the following morning, and as if by the work of the fates, Orianna received a reply from city hall. She and Fendia readied their things and left.

Merangal's city hall was a two-story construction which was likely designed to work as a military base of operations in times of emergency. There was something overbearing about the location, with watchtowers at each corner, and the neighing of horses could be heard from deeper within.

A noble was already there when Orianna and Fendia arrived. He had a group of some ten servants and was wailing at a large, brown-furred beastkin. The noble was demanding supplies and information, and lamenting loudly about how he had never been treated like this by the previous duke, with whom he had apparently been close.

Orianna and Fendia did not want to get involved, and so they gave the group a wide berth as they headed inside and were taken to the governor's office.

Inside, a different group of nobles were up in arms about a different problem altogether. Upon listening for a moment, Orianna quickly realized the issue: The nobles were being addressed by beastkin, which they did not appreciate. They made it clear, in no uncertain terms, that they did not respect the beastkin, and that they thought the race in its entirety to be beneath work as important as civil service. Their disgust had led to them getting very irritated.

Even when I lived in the capital, I had heard of how Mahati was improving life for the beastkin people...but is it possible that these nobles did not know? Or is it that they simply cannot stand it

regardless?

Orianna and Fendia walked by the group quietly and made their way up the stairs, to the impressive office of the governor.

Just Outside of the Onikin Village—Dias

It had been a few days since my trip to check on the border station and the temple. In that time, Goldia had returned from Mahati with what looked from afar like a literal flood of goats, and he set up a market just outside the onikin village to sell them.

"I don't know, Goldia," I said. "No matter how you look at it, this is just too many goats."

We were practically swimming in them just trying to stay on our feet, but Goldia simply crossed his arms and chuckled—a gesture that told me I didn't know what I was talking about.

"Goats are herd animals, Dias," he said. "Tear them away from their herd and it dampens their spirits. That makes it all too easy for them to get sick. It's a long way from Mahati to Baarbadal, and that wears on livestock. You don't want to have to deal with them getting sick when they're already tired, you know?"

Goldia let his words sink in before going on.

"That's why it's best to buy them by the herd. For one thing, merchants are more likely to give you a discount, but more importantly the goats are way more at ease traveling together, so for the most part they're nice and placid."

The goats were chewing on grass, rolling around on the ground, and staring curiously at the nearby onikin. Still, it wasn't easy work getting them here, and so the lostblood brothers and some ten or so members of the domain guard had helped out from Mahati to the border station. Then Joe, some of his men, and the dogkin took them the rest of the way. Goldia hadn't lost a single goat on his travels.

That said, Joe, the domain guard, and the dogkin were still surrounding the goats to make sure none of them tried to make a break for it. As a bonus, the domain guard being present was

enough for Moll and Alna to turn our impromptu market into an impromptu prospective marriage meet and greet.

Ellie and the lostblood brothers were all busy talking goats with onikin buyers while Moll and Alna stood off to the side discussing a different matter entirely. Alna was talking about how old the guys were, their personalities, how much money they'd saved up, and what they'd accomplished in the war. Moll was filling Alna in about how hardworking this or that woman was, how much baar wool she'd woven and embroidered, and the bedding and other things she'd made with it all.

Alna then jumped into talking about how families worked in the kingdom, while Moll started describing the other skills that the onikin women had, and all the craftwork they excelled at. While those two were throwing information back and forth, the actual men and women thinking about getting married were all observing one another in silence.

"If we end up with too many goats, we just raise the leftovers ourselves," said Goldia. "That just means more meat for us, so what's the problem? But Moll and Alna over there... You gotta wonder if that's how the whole marriage thing works, huh? I'm not criticizing them, mind you. I've never done it myself, and I've never seen it, is all..."

One of the goats came up to me while Goldia was talking, and I gave his curious head a pat while I replied.

"Yeah, I don't know heads or tails about arranged marriages," I admitted. "But if this doesn't work, it just means we'll have to think up another way to get it done. The onikin have it tough in some ways, so I figure it's best just to leave it in Alna's safe hands."

Back when Alna had told me they were going to arrange some marriages between the domain guard and some onikin women, I'd found the idea a bit perplexing.

"But how many women are there at the onikin village who'd be open to the idea of marrying Joe and the guys?" I'd asked.

"More than you'd think," Alna had replied.

She told me that for onikin men, life meant hunting, expeditions away from the plains, and defending the village from attacking

monsters. Danger was a natural part of their lives, and death was not uncommon. This meant that there were almost always fewer men in the village than there were women, and so there were quite a few onikin women who either couldn't find a husband or had lost their husband to the tragedy of life on the plains.

Not every woman who was single wanted to marry or remarry, and some of them were even *more* put off by the idea of marrying someone outside of the tribe. Even so, some were open to the idea, and enough that arranged marriages could at least be discussed. Some of the women were rather young while others were about Joe's age, but most of them were actually quite interested in the men.

Joe and the domain guard were all in good shape, they were polite and well-mannered, and none of them came off as violent or aggressive. The rebellion in Mahati had also seen the domain guard well rewarded for their efforts, and while accumulating their own baars wouldn't be easy, they could easily buy up some goats and white ghee.

Baars couldn't really be owned in Iluk, per se, but our village had our fair share of baars that we thought of as fellow residents, and so any other resident could save up money and buy enough baar wool to support their lifestyle, assuming they worked for it.

In any case, at the end of the day both we and the onikin tribe wanted to create stronger bonds, both for peace and for their families. What helped the onikin agree to the idea was that in the whole year I'd been here on the plains, nothing bad had happened—if anything, I just kept on stumbling into good luck. But the onikin women *were* left dissatisfied about one thing, and it was the fact that none of their potential husbands had any horses. The women had a whole ton of questions on that particular topic.

Can you guys ride horses? Why don't you have any horses? What do you think of horses? Do you know how important they are?

In fact, some of the women were ready to outright refuse marriage if their husband *didn't* like horses. I realized then that horses weren't just an Alna thing; they really were an indispensable part of life on the plains for the onikin.

Now, Joe and the domain guard had nothing against horses, and they even wanted some if they were ever available. They told the women as politely as they could to go a little easy on them in this regard, because they hadn't been living on the plains all that long.

That was when one of the women—uh, actually it was Moll—spoke up.

"If that's the case, then at least show us you can ride a horse. And don't go telling me that you don't know how. You can't call yourself a man if you don't know your way around a horse!"

You see, that sounded like a challenge as far as the domain guard were concerned. They puffed up their chests all proudly because they'd been put through Mont's hard training and they didn't think there was anything they couldn't do. Truth be told, they weren't actually all that experienced with horses, but they were gung ho all the same.

To put it bluntly, Moll had demanded a horse riding exhibition.

When I heard that, I imagined Joe and the guys riding horses through the plains, all relaxed and in control to display their mastery. What Moll really wanted, however, took what I had in my mind and crushed it underfoot.

First we had the seven military steeds that the domain guard prepared, which the onikin looked upon with awe. They were powerful horses, and the onikin were impressed enough to cheer when they showed up. The men were tasked with riding the horses at high speed...in order to chase after seven of the onikin's horses.

On those onikin horses were seven of the women interested in marriage, and the idea was that Joe and the domain guard would catch the women as a show of skill. Now, naturally things would get real dangerous real quick if the men *actually* tried to capture the women or resorted to lassos and the like, so everyone agreed that it was enough that the man touched either the horse or its rider to signify a successful catch.

And let me tell you, when things got started and those horses were off and running, the ground shook like you wouldn't believe.

"Get at it! Run! Run!"

"Ha! I guess it's only the horses that are impressive!"

"You gotta move your body in time with your horse!"

Before I knew it, a bunch of onikin men had shown up to watch and cheer everybody on. The remaining onikin women were also enjoying the show, and with all the shouting going on you would have thought we'd thrown another of our banquets.

"Joe and Lorca aren't bad riders by any means, but they just can't get anywhere near the onikin," I muttered.

Alna heard me and responded, watching it all with a glimmer in her eye.

"Women are lighter, and that means it's far easier for them to get their horse to top speed. That said, Joe's horses are top class and they've got what it takes to catch the onikin... The problem is that they can't get the best out of them."

"But what does chasing horses have to do with getting married?"

From the look on her face, Alna was appalled that I would even ask such a thing.

"If bandits attack on horseback, how else are you supposed to chase after them?" she said, sighing. "And what if you have to take your family and flee from danger on horseback? *That's* why it matters. That's why it's so important."

That wasn't the only reason, of course.

"When one knows their way around a horse," Alna continued, "things like hunting and trade go much better, and that means food is less of an issue. When you see the way a man handles a horse, you see their manliness. I mean, in your case...you're capable of wildly incredible feats even *without* a horse, so it doesn't matter as much, but for other men it's a different story."

"Oh, so it's like that, huh? Hmm? Wait. The women have taken out bows..." I said, pointing. "What are they doing?"

"Oh," said Alna, taking it upon herself to explain. "So they hold the bow in their left hand, and an arrow in their right. They nock the arrow, then pull the bowstring back to about their neck until there's a strong tension. With their left hand, they settle on their target. In this case, they're swiveling around so they can shoot behind them."

"No, wait. Wait, no," I stammered. "I know *that*! I want to know *why* they're using bows at all! Are they trying to hit Joe and the

others?!”

Alna gestured with her eyes to indicate that I should take a closer look at the arrows. That was when I noticed that the arrowheads were wrapped.

“The arrowheads have been crushed blunt, *and* they’re wrapped in cloth,” Alna said. “They won’t pierce anything they hit, and they won’t hurt too much on impact. They’ll just bounce off the target and that’s that. They’re using the bows because of how poorly the guard are doing. The women are mocking them.”

As soon as Alna had spoken, the women let loose a volley of arrows, which Joe and the others either avoided or knocked away with their hands. Those arrows were all it took to ignite something in the men, and they assembled into a clear battle formation with a burning intensity in their eyes.

It wasn’t that they were angry about the teasing—it was more that the long years of battle had developed in them an instinctive response to being attacked. From that moment I could see them switch from individual hunters to a single unit.

The domain guard had all fought side by side for years, and so they had a bond of brothers that went beyond words. They didn’t speak, and they didn’t gesture this way or that—they simply knew where their comrades were and what they were doing. It wasn’t long before they had the onikin women surrounded. For their part, the women were surprised at the sudden change in the men’s tactics.

“Men are such children sometimes,” muttered Ryan. “There’s no need to take things so seriously.”

Alna and I were stunned, to say the least. Ryan was already married, so he simply watched on with his hands clasped behind his head as he went on.

“Them onikin might end up being their wives and family, so why go and scare ’em like that? I reckon you oughta give them a proper talking to when this is over, Lord Dias.”

Before I could say a word, Alna let out a loud “hmph!”

“You think *that’s* enough to scare an onikin woman? If anything, they’re just impressed to realize that the men are capable of moving

in formation! That means they're plenty capable of hunting. Take another look and you'll see—they're not put off by the men. If anything, they're actually smiling now."

And it was true; the women looked like they were really enjoying themselves with every arrow they loosed, and it reminded me a bit of how Alna sometimes looked. It was like you could hear what was in their hearts.

A man who can hunt like this is sure to save a lot of food and money... Someone this manly will be a fine head of the household... A man who can ride a horse like this...

And so on and so forth.

"So is that to say they pass the test?" I asked.

I was half impressed and half exasperated, while Moll—who at some point had come up and was standing by my side—wore a satisfied smile as she nodded. Ryan, for his part, had yet to stop shaking his head.

In the end, Joe caught one of the women, Lorca caught another, and because fewer women in the game made it easier to box them in, a few more were caught as well.

"None of these marriages are anywhere near final yet," said Moll, though she was still smiling as she spoke. "This was just an introduction. The men still have to meet the women's families, and there's the matter of betrothal gifts to discuss too. Once that's settled, the marriage is too. The men lose points because they were dillydallying up until the end...and we'll want to see the other prospective candidates and their manliness too. Speaking of betrothal gifts, the goats are fine, but all that can be talked about later. We'll even give you a bit of a discount in the name of friendship."

Moll cackled with glee, and that marked the end of our introduction to the potential marriages between our people.

Puzzling Out the Perplexing Prospective Partnership Proceedings—Hubert

Hubert was watching things from a distance, patting some baars that the onikin had brought with them. This sort of marriage ritual was...very new to him. Could such activities even be called part of an arranged marriage? Was this really going to bring both sides closer together? These thoughts drifted to the forefront of Hubert's mind, but he did not voice them... In any case, he was certain he would be abominably awful at taking part in such a thing himself.

But then, Hubert had not come for an arranged marriage. However, as Baarbadal's civil servant, he of course wanted to see more people married and starting families in Iluk. As such, he had come to observe relations and see how Joe and the domain guard held themselves when interacting with the onikin tribe.

They drink in moderation, they don't get wild when they're drunk, they've no interest in gambling or playboy antics... Well, even if they have the desire, they keep it very much in check. I don't think there's much to be dissatisfied with. They're all well-mannered, clean living men who would put the castle's own knights to shame.

It wasn't uncommon for men to bottle their desires only to explode when they had a woman in front of them. And even when they did succeed in keeping their instinctive desires from breaking free, it still showed in their expressions and their body language.

This had been playing through Hubert's mind before the prospective marriage introductions were made, but there were no signs of any such behavior in the domain guard, and while the activities were odd to him, the men were earnest in their dealings with the women. Hubert was equal parts surprised and impressed, and he glanced in Dias's direction as those feelings washed over him.

Dias and his troops were well-known for their behavior in the war. They had never once looted or plundered any town or village they passed through. Their governance of occupied territory was fair and just, and it was very much because of this that postwar governance of these areas was so simple and straightforward. Civil servants like Hubert were beyond grateful for Dias's behavior, though admittedly it was hard to believe that such a military force even existed.

When people could not fight at Dias's side, he gave them some

silver coins and sent them home, or otherwise arranged for them to live comfortably in seized territory. I wonder if the wilder and more impulsive types were among them?

Hubert could imagine that such men would have been grateful to leave the regimented life of a soldier, and would have been over the moon to have been paid to do so.

Those who fought with Dias right up until the end weren't just survivors, then... They were the cream of the crop—the best of the best, completely comfortable under Dias's strict rules. Thirty-three men crafted into extraordinary soldiers—they made that much obvious by their achievements in quelling the rebellion in Mahati.

I daresay they deserve much better treatment than they are currently being provided...

None of Dias's war buddies had complained about their life here in Baarbadal, but starting a family was no simple endeavor. They would be supporting a wife and even perhaps children in the future.

Unfortunately, there's very little we can give them whilst we are still lacking in a steady income of our own. Our ventures into trade are earning us some money, but we're still spending far more than we earn. Perhaps we should increase the frequency of our trade trips?

With construction going smoothly, it was no longer necessary for the domain guard to be so involved with it, and Hubert wondered if perhaps they could be sent to help Ellie and the lostblood brothers, thus allowing for more trade opportunities.

Then again, with the road through the domain on the verge of completion, we'll be allowing more merchants in as well. The Peijins are allowed access as they please, but they will bring with them others, who will pay a traveler's tax. Even without the tax, however, we'll still be making an income through customers at our inn, our food sales, and guards and guides through to the neighboring domain. That's the income that will kick-start the rest of our plans...

The reason Baarbadal had maintained a steady amount of spending wealth was monsters, and especially dragon materials. However, monsters could not be counted on to keep a schedule, and Hubert did not want to stake the domain's future on an unstable

income source.

It was then that the baar being patted bleated at Hubert, stirring him from his thoughts. The bleats made it very clear that the baar was irked by the civil servant.

"Either put some effort into your pats, or tell me something interesting!"

This baar was not like the ones Hubert was used to in Iluk, and the gruffness took him by surprise.

"In that case, how about a lesson on the importance of rivers and roads for the distribution of goods?" he replied, muttering his thoughts aloud, though admittedly putting little thought into what came out of his mouth.

By the time he realized what he had said, however, the baar was already bleating its response.

"Ha! Now that's *a topic of conversation! Go on!"*

And so Hubert began giving the baar a crash course in trade and related logistics.

Iluk Village, A Few Days Later—Dias

With introductions out of the way, a surprising number of onikin women showed clear interest in continuing marriage discussions. Eleven, in fact. If the women had any reservations, it was simply that they didn't know what life was like in Iluk, and they weren't familiar with the lifestyles of Sanserife's people.

Would a new life hamper the one they'd known until now? Were there nonsensical laws that had to be obeyed? Was the culture something they could wrap their heads around?

All of the onikin women had heard that Alna was doing just fine and that she lived happily, but all the same they couldn't shake their anxieties of what was still an unknown to them. So, on this particular morning, those eleven onikin women were coming to Iluk to get a closer look at Baarbadal in its entirety.

Before we went to Iluk though, I had them take a look at the western border station, which wasn't far from the onikin village.

From there we strolled down the main road to get to Iluk Village, where the women took in all of Iluk's various facilities.

The border station still wasn't complete, but the women could see how much safer it would make things when it was done, and this made them happy. The road didn't really impress them at first, but when we explained that it would bring more merchants from both east and west, they liked it a whole lot more.

They were a little hesitant of the temple, because they thought maybe it meant we'd push religion on them. That said, they were much more accepting of it when they learned what Uncle Ben was going to teach there and how it was mainly about worshipping baars.

But what *really* lit up all the onikin women's eyes were the kitchen range and laundry space. Some of them even cried out in awe.

"What?!" exclaimed one. "This makes your work so much easier!"

"Alna!" shouted another. "You've been using this amazing kitchen for *how long* now?!"

"And you can do your washing over there?!" cried another, incredulous. "So in the winter you can just sit by the stove and keep warm? And boil water? And boil your laundry as necessary?"

"All right, *that does it*!" cried a fourth. "I'm getting married. Simple as that. What's the guy's name again? Hey, you, over there! Yeah, you. Where's your yurt?"

It was one thing when they saw the laundry space, but the kitchen range saw them erupt with chatter. Some of them were ready to get married on the spot. Alna was trying to explain everything to them but suddenly they were grabbing her to complain about this or that and playfully push her around for how good she had it.

While the women were excitedly chatting among one another, some of the sheps and eiresetters arrived to show the ladies our livestock. They had some forty geese with them, six white ghee, and six donkeys. The women only got louder the moment they saw all the animals, and the shep leader, Shev, puffed up his chest to speak proudly to the gathered women.

"We talked things over with Goldia and he's giving us the leftover goats to raise, which means we've got even more livestock now!"

The women heard the dogkin's words and immediately their minds conjured up images of meat and cheese, and they all were getting so excited I couldn't even make out what a single one of them was saying.

The eleven would-be husbands were all glad to see that things were going in the right direction. However, they were also a bit conflicted on account of just how energetic and perhaps overbearing the women were. It was written all over the poor guys' faces.

In a Carriage on the Road from Mahati to Baarbadal—Orianna Darrell

After meeting with the governor, Orianna and Fendia were provided with two exquisite box carriages and a retinue of guards. With that, the two women and their companions were assured a relaxing journey. The four guards were picture-perfect gentlemen, and were very used to the trip ahead, which meant they could ensure Orianna and the others never had any issues. It was Orianna's first time conversing in any real capacity with beastkin people, but it did not take long for her initial apprehensions to fade entirely.

The guards were not just there for protection, however. They were also excellent guides, and pointed out everything of interest in the cities, traveler's inns, and military facilities that they passed by. Orianna couldn't believe just how enjoyable the trip was, and as she sat in her carriage with Fendia, the two women were bubbling with excitement.

"Over there you can see the facility now known as the hall of arts," said one of their guards, pointing at a particular building. "It promotes culture and the arts, and one can enjoy everything from song and dance to painting and sculpture, and everything in between. Mahati's citizens are given free entry."

Out the window, past the guards riding alongside the carriage,

Orianna looked at the city the guard was covering as if he were a tour guide. He pointed to another small building and went on, as a pleasant breeze drifted through the air.

"Over there you can see a relatively new facility known as a guardhouse. It's manned by soldiers directly under the domain lord's command, who work to maintain the peace by keeping in touch with the local community. Both the guardhouses and the hall of arts were recommended by the domain's chief military strategist."

Orianna had heard at the inn that Mahati recently went through an attempted uprising. The domain's chief military strategist was frustrated that he could not stop it from occurring, and so was now implementing a number of tactics to ensure such rebellions never had a chance to even gain momentum in the future.

The hall of arts was one such countermeasure. The hall was a way for the citizenry to enjoy their lives and ease their daily stresses, but in it was another, more subtle message: The hall taught people to appreciate peace, because such joys evaporated when the embers of war burst into flame.

The guardhouses, too, offered a new point of view. The guards stationed at them had a more comprehensive understanding of towns and cities than those who were always on patrol and, as an added bonus, were far better at gathering local intel. The guardhouses were perfect for soldiers nearing retirement, who did not have their former physical prowess, and their presence at guardhouses made it clear that a soldier could have a long, secure career. This doubled as a way for the military to encourage more to join its ranks.

"The design of that hall, its purpose..." muttered Orianna. "It's so reminiscent of *him*."

Orianna gazed upon the hall of arts as her mind combed through various rumors she had heard in the past. She had once known a man who had served the palace, but had a penchant for overindulgence in both women and drink. He was a self-proclaimed lover of culture and the arts.

The man had attempted to sweet-talk a young woman whose education Orianna was responsible for, and the two had butted

heads on a number of occasions. Orianna had found herself praying that he might be expelled from the palace, and one day her prayers had borne fruit.

The man had not truly understood the nobility, nor their greed, and he had thrown himself into the midst of political conflict only to find himself defeated. He was deemed useless and thrown to the wayside, but he turned his sights instead to the battlefield, where rumor had it he returned quickly to his womanizing ways.

Orianna knew that the man had an exceptional mind, and she prayed that he was putting his skills to use, either for Sanserife or for someone of importance, but...she also knew his personality. If he had lost his life, having caused or been a part of something wild or unbelievable, Orianna would not have been surprised.

"Oh, I remember those people..." Fendia whispered, rousing Orianna from her thoughts.

Fendia was gazing out the window at a familiar group that was headed by two nobles, and it looked as if they were causing trouble as they had done several times already. Orianna and Fendia had noticed them a number of times now. They appeared to be following the same path as Orianna's carriages, but they were causing disturbances wherever they went.

They're vulgar and crass to a degree beyond even the capital's nobility. I did not think much of the capital's elite, but to think that those near the frontier are this bad...

The thought reminded Orianna that she herself was heading to the actual frontier, and that the duke there was born a commoner. She wondered just what sort of a person he was and whether she was even capable of helping him. Fendia seemed to read this in her traveling companion and smiled warmly at her.

"You need not worry," she said. "The Duke of Baarbadal's character is the stuff of legend. He is the nephew of the great Bendia, who saw to his education firsthand. That alone should help put you at ease. Bendia kept his own achievements secret for the sake of his nephew, and Bendia is now erecting his own temple. I've no doubt the duke is an impressive man."

Orianna was unsure how to respond, but it was then that a guard

—and not the one acting as their tour guide—approached the carriage.

"I've visited Baarbadal a number of times myself," he said, "and Lord Dias has always been nothing but kind and generous. The man's friendly to all. He is well-liked by all who have immigrated to his domain, and Mahati's laborers say he pays well and feeds them with feasts. There are never any issues to speak of. In fact, the duke pays so well that laborers practically fight over any work from him—indeed, many are lamenting the fact that the road from Mahati is now complete. I can only imagine there will be even more sadness when the forest border station is finally done too."

"I see," said Orianna thoughtfully. "The man who wrote to invite me to Baarbadal wrote similarly, but for a man in the neighboring domain to heap such praise upon him certainly says a lot."

The guard grinned.

"I respect Lord Eldan above and beyond anyone else," he said, "but Lord Dias may take the number one spot when it comes to his ease of character and sheer friendliness. I'm not sure quite how to put it, but he has a kind of power that just draws you to him. I cannot put it into words, but it is entirely different from the grand sense of majesty one gets from Lord Eldan."

It was at that moment that the guard turned his gaze forwards in a sudden movement. The other guards around the carriage did likewise, and the carriage began to slow. Orianna and Fendia reacted with confusion, and one of the guards then approached them.

"It's Lord Eldan," he explained. "He'd like to greet you personally."

Orianna could not hide her shock. She hadn't imagined that the Duke of Mahati would deign to speak to her personally. After a brief moment of silence, Orianna scrambled for her hand mirror to ensure that her hair, makeup, and outfit were all up to scratch. Fendia, meanwhile, remained a portrait of calm as she tidied her robes and reached for her cane.

The two women then stepped out from their carriage as the door was opened for them, and prepared to meet the young hero and Duke of Mahati, Eldan.

Orianna steeled herself for her audience with the duke. She knew

full well that visitors from afar were often a means of information, and so she was fully prepared to speak about whatever he might ask. After all, the farther a land was from the royal capital, the more visitors from it were considered valuable; they could provide vital news on the current state of the nation, what was in vogue, and who was doing what...which meant discussing the balance of power between the nobility.

It was all too common for lords of the frontiers to use their guests for exactly this purpose, and so travelers were often treated like treasures of a sort. This was all the more so when it came to people like Orianna, who occupied a position of some respect and was thus trustworthy. But even a less trustworthy vagabond could still be a source for rumors and hearsay, and so it was not uncommon for a frontier lord to speak with all visitors.

Though the announcement that the duke would see them was quite sudden, he nonetheless hosted them at his residence, *and* had a host of servants look after them, *and* ensured they were provided hot water for a bath, *and* provided them with a mountain of fruit and sweets, *and* treated them to meals the likes of which would most certainly have cost a hefty handful of gold.

All of this lavish treatment told Orianna that the duke expected her to tell him everything she knew, and so she organized the information in her head, working out what would be of most value and what the duke might simply enjoy.

But to Orianna's surprise, Eldan Mahati sought not a single scrap of information. He hosted the traveling party in his home for a few days and made sure that everyone was well-fed and rested. He did all of this and asked for not a single thing in return.

This had all left Orianna exceedingly perplexed. She could not read the duke's motives. And when she heard from her caretakers that the duke was completely ignoring the group of nobles following close by—nobles who demanded his personal attention, no less—she was all the more puzzled. Orianna was of noble heritage, yes, but her family was merely the branch family of a count, and they occupied but a scrap of land. She had always thought of herself as a noble in name only.

So then why was the Duke of Mahati giving *her* such wonderful treatment, and not the neighboring nobles, with their more prestigious family names?

Orianna could make neither heads nor tails of it, and she would not even entertain the preposterous idea that it was for no other reason than that she was heading to serve the Duke of Baarbadal...

Meanwhile, as Orianna remained completely confounded, Fendia did not get wrapped up in any similar confusion, and instead basked in the simple joy that was Duke Mahati's lavish hospitality. The priestess's behavior only served to further mystify Orianna, but even then the duke insisted on treating them well, and Fendia thus made the most of it.

Orianna simply wasn't bold enough to do likewise. It was beyond her.

Having not a hint of the duke's motives instead instilled a terror in her heart, and while she knew it would be simplest just to refuse such treatment, she wouldn't dare even imagine doing anything so disrespectful without being able to make up for such offered hospitality in kind. And so, she had no choice but to accept the extravagant wishes of the duke until he was satisfied.

The Iluk Village Square—Dias

Today we'd put up a whole lot of new yurts. Joe and Lorca were getting married, and another five members of the domain guard were getting engaged. And all their wives and fiancées were moving to Iluk. Seven men getting married, and seven new residents moving in. The women were all very gung ho about it, and while the betrothal details still hadn't been worked out for some, they'd still decided to come to Iluk to work.

As for what work they'd be doing, we'd have them handling the important—and sometimes dangerous—responsibility that was screening visitors to Baarbadal. Naturally, the importance of the work meant very generous pay, and that made the women all the more eager.

Soul appraisal was a very helpful and versatile magic, but the seven onikin women moving in weren't as good at it as Alna. Their accuracy was somewhat questionable and according to Alna they could be easily tricked, so it wasn't good to rely solely on their judgment. She explained that anyone who knew their way around a spell or two could block their soul appraisal, and that certain items could be worn to block such magic from working entirely.

Even then, nobody disagreed that soul appraisal magic was really, really handy.

In any case, even if we couldn't use soul appraisal openly all the time, we could still use it covertly when dealing with suspected mages. When it came to magic-blocking items, we had Klaus and his men inspecting new visitors too, *and* the dogkin's noses getting a sense for people as they came in. In other words, we had things more or less covered.

To be honest, I wasn't worried about the accuracy of the soul appraisal so much as what we were even supposed to do if we found a bad egg among our visitors. Were we supposed to punish them

just because they had bad intentions? And how big of a lie did someone have to tell before we were supposed to do something about it?

I was worried about what decision to make as the domain lord and that maybe we'd actually have to hold court sessions like we'd practiced, but then I remembered what Aymer had told me on that same day. I got her, Hubert, Alna, Uncle Ben, and Goldia together in the village square so we could discuss it.

"What do you all think?" I asked after I explained my concerns. "I mean, things only get more complicated if we're dealing with a member of the nobility, right? Any trials we hold will be easier with our onikin residents increasing in number, but we still need to settle on our expectations. I'd prefer to have things worked out now rather than scrambling to react to some weirdo rolling into our domain and causing some kind of weird trouble."

Everyone except for Hubert immediately turned to look at Hubert, who cleared his throat and shared his thoughts.

"Well, for one thing, we could use the book that records the royal capital's precedents. That is sure to be a helpful reference," he said. "However, it won't come cheap, and so until we have the money for such luxuries, I think it would be best to rely on our shared knowledge to reach a consensus."

Hubert thought for a moment.

"As for handling the nobility, I think it would be best to confer with Lady Darrell, whom I expect to arrive fairly soon," he continued. "She's been an instructor to many young noble sons and daughters, and I'm certain she knows all about preventing and avoiding trouble among the nobility, as well as how to deal with it when necessary. She'll be someone we can rely on for such events. Her lessons are all very practical and based on real-world examples of how to react and hold yourself under specific circumstances. I don't think we have to worry about much else other than the unprecedented."

At this, Hubert once again paused. He looked very much like he was preparing himself for a big announcement. He cleared his throat again, then stared me right in the eye and held my gaze, speaking with all the confidence he could muster.

"Please bear in mind that everything I've just said about how to handle things is provisional. Which is to say, we may find ourselves facing problems that don't have precedents, or problems that cannot be easily solved even after in-depth discussion. This is to say nothing of the fact that some problems may require on-the-spot decisions too. In cases such as these, I think you should simply trust your heart and make the call, Lord Dias."

Hubert made sure I'd understood what he said, then went on.

"You are the lord of Baarbadal, and so any judgment regarding our direction and punishments for misdeeds can be made at your sole discretion. You don't have to worry about issues coming up as a result of what you decide. The people here, all of us, trust you. And should some nobleman or noblewoman decide to complain because of a decision you make, you are completely within your rights as duke to overrule them. You can even mobilize your military if need be. Your authority is enough to see most of our problems solved."

Honestly, I just didn't know at all what to make of *that* statement. So I didn't do anything. I just stood there, letting it stew. I'd have been fine with everything Hubert said up until the last part. I'd have been fine with waiting for Lady Darrell to arrive, and I even felt like my worries were being lifted off my shoulders.

But Hubert's closing statement only felt like more weight, and it was a bigger responsibility than anything I'd carried until now. So much so that I even let out a low moan.

"No. No, no," I said. "That won't work. That can't be true, can it?!"

"It is entirely true under royal law," replied Hubert, coolly and calmly as you like. "That is simply the way of the nobility. Though, I suppose it must be said that the military *is* a last resort, and if your decision is mistaken, your residents will likely lose their trust in you, and your reputation will be left in tatters... Needless to say, it's not a go-to move, so to speak. Be that as it may, you shouldn't forget that it's an option available to you. You very much have the authority to mete out the harshest punishments you deem fit, and mobilize your forces to expel those you do not want in your domain."

But Hubert wasn't done yet.

"Such behavior may sound tyrannical, but at certain times it may well secure the safety of your lands and people. To be a member of the nobility and a domain lord is to carry this responsibility on your shoulders. I know it feels like a burden, and I know it carries great weight, but as long as you occupy a position of power, you must be ready to use it when the situation calls for it."

I opened my mouth to say something, but then I remembered what I'd told Aymer. She'd said I could leave punishments up to someone else if I wanted, but I'd told her I wasn't comfortable pushing that onto somebody else. She'd talked about trials and then crime prevention, but only now was the truth of all of it really dawning on me.

Eldan had told me something similar back when he'd given me his lectures, but none of it had felt real back then. Now, however, we had a whole lot more facilities, and Baarbadal was really on the rise. Hubert had said what he said because of how important my position was, and at this point I was finally aware of it.

So I closed my mouth back up without saying anything and instead nodded my agreement. I still had some doubts and reservations, but I would do what I had to as a noble to protect the people of Baarbadal. I felt my fists clench as my resolve set in, carving itself into my heart.

I mulled over the topic for a few hours after that, but eventually came to the conclusion that just thinking on my own was only going to get me so far. I decided my best bet was to get everybody's opinions and talk with them so as to glean some of their wisdom.

Now apparently, Lady Darrell was supposed to be an expert on the matter, and I also had Mont around to ask about the empire. I had to imagine that Eldan had seen more than his fair share of crime and trials in Mahati too, which meant I could always ask him for advice.

At the same time, I wasn't about to forget the weight of my responsibilities, and it was my intent to see them through in a steadfast manner. Still, I just knew that it was way better to get input from people way smarter than me rather than just hash things out on my own.

I felt refreshed once I'd reached that conclusion, and so I got back to business. I was told that the yurts for the new residents were up and went to check on them, and on the way I happened across Ellie and the lostblood brothers, who looked about as deep in thought as I'd been just moments ago. They were standing around with the leftover goats that we hadn't sold—two males and two females—and I wondered if maybe they were struggling with what names to give them. So that's exactly what I asked.

"Hey there, something wrong? Trouble coming up with names for the four new goats?"

Ellie and the lostblood brothers shook their heads, and then they showed me the contents of some leather pouches they were holding.

"What's in them bags?" I mused. "Whoa! Look at all that coin! How'd you fall into that kind of cash?!"

The pouches were all packed full with gold and silver coins, and Ellie scratched her cheek with a finger as she tried to explain.

"It's the ice," she soon confessed. "It sold *so* much better than we could have expected when we took it to Mahati. At first our plan was just to sell the ice to the duke, but as it turns out the wealthy in Mahati are already capable of acquiring enough for themselves. So we decided to take the ice to the markets, but at first it didn't sell at all. That was when Seki came up with the idea of chilled drinks..."

Apparently that was where things spiraled.

"We turned our cart into a stall, where we sold fruit juice with a dash of honey, complete with a little rose water for fragrance. All of it was nice and cold thanks to the ice, and day after day sales just kept going up. The ice itself was pretty expensive because we'd planned to sell it to Eldan, and transporting it takes a lot of work, but even then we sold *all* of it. That's pretty much the whole story."

Seki grinned smugly when he heard his name, and when Ellie had said her piece he jumped in to continue the rest of the story.

"A lot of ordinary folks just don't know how to use ice," he said. "It's the same in the Beastland Nation—they only ever see ice in the winter, so they don't ever think about buying it at other times. But *everybody*—nobles and commoners alike—knows the refreshing

feeling of a chilled drink on a hot summer's day, and that's all it took to get people interested. To sell it, we drank some of the juice ourselves and made a really big commotion about how good it tasted. That brought our first customers in. With the economy going strong in Mahati at the moment, it wasn't long before the ice was sold out. The goats made us some money, sure, but the ice got us somewhere in the range of ten times more!"

Saku and Aoi then decided to tell me more about what happened, and how they'd learned that there was still a pretty big demand for ice in Mahati... Even more than we'd expected, in fact. I couldn't quite work it out, though. I mean, if there was a demand for the stuff, why didn't Eldan just gather more and sell it himself? But according to the lostblood brothers, the long, hot summers in Mahati meant Eldan and the other rich folk there had trouble even just acquiring enough for themselves.

Still, there were cooler parts of Mahati, and snow was known to fall in the forest between our domains, as well as in the mountainous north. Eldan and folks like him set up stone ponds of a sort, which they filled with water. During the winter, the water froze, and gathering the ice over time meant that a decent stockpile could be amassed by spring. Still, a decent chunk of that ice melted before summer, and because it was used all through the hot season, the idea of selling it just hadn't occurred to anybody.

We used our fair share of ice in Baarbadal, but because there was almost always a nice breeze in the air, we didn't actually need all that much. We'd gathered a lot of ice, but most of it was specifically for selling, and that meant a windfall in profits.

"We only started gathering ice in the spring, from the northern lakes," I mused. "We can gather even more next winter, I reckon... More than we gathered this year, that's for sure. Does that mean we'll profit even more?"

Ellie and the lostblood brothers all quickly shook their heads.

"Papa, the more ice we gather and the more we sell, the more the prices will drop," said Ellie.

"And don't forget that the other merchants all saw our sales," added Seki. "You can bet a number of them will be thinking about

bringing their own to the market."

"People are already buying up land where you can collect ice," said Saku, "and everybody is going wild building ponds to get started."

"We'll sell ice next year, of course, but don't expect the same craze," Aoi reported. "If we've got a port and a ship we can pack full of ice, then we also have the option of selling it in the south where it gets especially hot. Also, now that we know how fresh we can keep our foods with ice and our pot coolers, we could just as easily raise lots of livestock and sell their meat...though it might be better to go with fish if we can catch them somewhere."

By now, Aoi was on a roll.

"Actually, moving all these goats here made me realize how hard it is to move whole herds of them. If we dressed all our livestock here and then just sold the meat, we could make a real killing, no? It'll be light work because we won't be transporting the heavy stuff like bones and organs, and it'll be so much quicker!"

When Aoi was done, Ellie, Seki, and Saku all turned to look at him with pointed stares. Clearly none of them had considered the idea themselves, but now none of them wanted to let this chance slip through their fingers. They all started heaping praise on Aoi, and Ellie ruffled his hair.

That was enough to set our four resident merchants off on another topic entirely. They started talking about whether Aoi's idea was even possible in the first place, what options they had for testing it, and what tools and carts they'd need to do the job. While they were chatting among themselves, Mont showed up with Sulio, Leode, and Cleve in tow.

"Hey Dias, I heard you wanted to speak with me?" Mont started. "Hubert sent someone to fetch me. Said you wanted to know about the empire's laws and its domain lords. Well, I hate to break it to you, but I'm not going to be able to give you much."

I was about to reply to him when I noticed Sulio and his two pals staring at the lostblood brothers, who were staring straight back. All six of them looked mighty curious about one another. It was real confusing for me, and I didn't know what all the fuss was about.

That was when Ellie stepped up by my side and whispered to me.

"I think this is the first time they've all seen one another up close, no? They would have briefly passed one another by, maybe said a word here or there, but you have to imagine they've got some strong thoughts regarding race and history. I mean, we haven't had any issues trading in Mahati, but still..."

That was true enough, but I still didn't really know how to feel about it. Mont, however, got fed up real quick and gave the three lionkin a firm kick in the backside. That made it clear he was expecting them to say something, and finally the lionkin and the lostblood brothers started talking.

Now, as far as I knew historically, the beastkin in Mahati were all descendants of Beastkin Nation residents who'd been trafficked. One explanation given by scholars was that as beastkin discrimination grew worse, the beastkin started an uprising which ended with them settling to the west and founding their own nation. These scholars believed it likely that the beastkin once residing in places like Sanserife's east—where beastkin were now rarely, if ever, seen—moved to the Beastkin Nation at this time. It was either that, or they were purged from the lands in the midst of the uprising.

I couldn't help but wonder about people and why they'd so quickly forget Saint Dia's teachings, which explicitly spoke against discrimination and violence against others. Then again, given the rise of the modernists, I couldn't help but think that maybe there weren't that many people who really tried to live by the old teachings.

In any case, all of this twisted and tangled history was the reason that the Mahati lionkin and the lostblood brothers were acting so awkward. And judging by the looks on all their faces, it felt not unlike confronting a relative you'd heard about but never actually met in person before.

Even after getting that kick in the rear, Sulio and his pals didn't know what to say. The lostblood brothers were salesmen, so they were all smiles and gave polite introductions, but their drooping ears and tails gave them away—none of them knew what to do. So we had the beastkin of the west, the beastkin of the east, and

Baarbadal where they met. It made for a weird atmosphere, but at the same time I thought it might also be weird for me to step in.

"Come to think of it, isn't Eldan's mother originally from the Beastkin Nation?" I asked Ellie. "Wouldn't that mean that perhaps...someday...she might want to visit home? She'd be coming from Mahati, and now that the road is done, you have to imagine that would be the easiest and most direct route, right? So first to the eastern border station, then to Iluk, then to the western border station. When will travel like that start?"

Ellie was puzzled by my question, and took a few seconds before replying.

"What do you mean by 'when'? Wouldn't it start as soon as Baarbadal is ready for it? Isn't that what both Mahati and the Beastkin Nation are waiting for?"

"Huh? No, but I mean, if one side wants to visit the other, they just need to say the word and I'll do all I can to help them out. It's that simple, isn't it...?"

"But if Duke Mahati or his mother want to go west, it's up to us to make sure they travel safely through our domain to get there. We'd have to hold a welcome banquet for them along with formal ceremonies and whatnot. I think Duke Mahati is holding off on any such travel because he doesn't want to put that pressure on you yet, papa. Now, you don't have to go quite so far for the Peijin family, but you'll still want to assign them guards and perhaps even guides. And if either side wants to talk with you, then we have to prepare the guest house too."

"Hmm. Now that you mention it, you're right... It's not like we can just build the road and that's that, huh?"

"Exactly. And if you get beastkin from the east and west meeting, you get the beginnings of exchange between them. Tragedy separated them, but if they strengthen their bonds, you'll get more merchants and more goods flowing between them, and with all that you get more problems to deal with. What's important for us is that we make sure we're ready to handle all of that when the borders are open."

Ellie continued, thinking about issues we'd need to address.

"We'll need to get people collecting taxes from passing travelers, and also make sure we've got guards regularly sweeping for monsters along the main road. Then we'll want to set up guards at the border between our land and the onikin territory to make sure they stay safe and never have any unwanted visitors. So people, weapons, tools, and prep. I think Lord Eldan and the Beastkin Nation are both waiting for us to have all of that in place."

"Well, that makes sense to me," I murmured. "But uh...what are we lacking at present?"

"Well, if you look at it one way, we've got everything we need, but if you look at it another, we're still not up to scratch. What I mean is, you can leave Klaus and Mont to handle the border stations, trust the falconkin and dogkin with domain security, and have Alna and the Wives' Club greet any important guests. The problem is that we won't have the space to do anything else. We won't be able to maintain life in Iluk because we'll be so busy with all of our visitors. If you were going to open the borders now, you'd have to limit the number of people who come through at any given time, or otherwise limit the number of times that a person can pass through."

Ellie seemed to think that we could go full steam ahead or wait a little longer to make sure we were well prepared, but either way the decision was mine to make. It wasn't like Eldan or Peijin were sending me letters telling me to hurry things up; rather, they were both kind enough to just wait until I gave them the all clear.

"Neither side will get anything if Baarbadal crumbles and fails as a domain," said Ellie, "and neither side wants to lose you as a bridge between their nations. Still, maintaining our border stations and roads will take money, and you'll want to open at some point to provide the money to cover those costs. What you spend on people, repairs, and prep will be made up for with taxes, trade, and then some. That's why we wanted to build the road in the first place, remember?"

I grunted thoughtfully for a moment to figure out how I wanted to answer.

"Well, all righty then. Guess I'd better round up the village reps

for a talk, then do another inspection of the border stations. I haven't seen Klaus's border station in a good long while, come to think of it, so I better make sure it's in good shape for when we open the gates to visitors."

Ellie nodded her approval, and it was then that the six beastkin, who still looked mighty awkward with one another, looked my way and nodded their approval too.

"Then we'll start *our* cultural exchange just as soon as you've made all *your* preparations," said Seki.

"We've no problem with that idea," added Sulio.

I realized then that while they'd been struggling to talk to one another, the beastkin had *no* trouble eavesdropping on me and Ellie. They'd decided that my plans were a great excuse to not face the awkwardness they felt with one another. Ellie's eyes narrowed in response, however, and with her arms crossed and her chest puffed up, she stared them all down.

"Seki, Saku, Aoi," she said quietly, her tone carrying great weight. "You know I won't stand for *that*. If you can't get along with the lionkin, then you will join them in their training and studies. You will share your meals with them, and most importantly, you will learn all they have to teach you about trade in Mahati. I don't care if you have to bust open a few kegs of our best wine—think of those lionkin as you would VIP customers, and see them fed well. No drinking for you three, however. You're still too young."

The three lostblood brothers looked ready to speak up, but had learned from firsthand experience that resistance was futile. They nodded, shook off their nerves, then bowed to the three lionkin.

"In that case, we'll be accompanying you for the immediate future," said Seki.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance," added Saku.

"And you can bet your buns we've got a feast coming for dinner!" Aoi shouted.

The three lionkin looked a bit taken aback, but all the same they didn't seem to mind having the new company. The six formed a group and marched off with their chins held high, Mont and his butt-kicking leg close behind.

Walking the Main Road on Horseback

It had dawned on me thanks to Ellie that, with our road stretching from east to west, visitors might travel from one end of our domain to the other and beyond. I hadn't actually thought about the journey all that much until now, but it was a pretty important matter as far as our residents and the onikin were concerned. With that in mind, I thought I should check it all out before we started getting that kind of travel.

The plan was to start at the western border station, take the road that Narvant and the cavekin had built, and follow it all the way east, stopping at each rest area to feed our horses and let them rest. I thought it was a good way to see if there were any pain points in need of addressing.

The first rest area had some stone benches and tables complete with roofing. There was a well and a privy set up nearby, and a simple stable where one could take care of their horses and give them a break. There was even a stone oven like at our kitchen range.

I was told that the benches and tables were stone to prevent theft, and I guessed that was something you had to be on the look out for when you had lots of people coming and going through your land. The stable, the well, and the privy were all very simple builds, which meant they were just as easy to put up as they were to repair.

I wasn't alone at the rest area though. I was on Balers, for one thing, but also there was Alna on Karberan, and Senai and Ayhan on Shiya and Guri. We'd decided to turn my inspection into something of a family outing. It was a good excuse to get out as a family, and everybody was in high spirits, including the horses.

"Horses don't like it when their drinking water gets dirtied, so it's

probably a good idea to have someone clean this place daily," Alna said. "It'll make for more work, but the effort will pay off when we start earning tax from travelers passing through."

"I want some place to put rubbish!" announced Senai. "Otherwise people will just leave it in the grass!"

"You should have numbers ready for all the horses so people can tell them apart easily!"

Everybody had suggestions, and the twins were especially observant. Probably because they were helping out everywhere and learning a lot from Aymer all the time. It really impressed upon me that they were growing up and maturing with each passing day. In any case, I made sure to scribble down everybody's suggestions so I wouldn't forget them, and soon enough we were back on the move, this time to the west guest house.

The west guest house area had the big guest yurt, but it also had a rest area of its own, albeit one that was much sturdier and more respectable than the one we'd just stopped at. There was also a small yurt for the guard dogkin, and a small hut in which there was a staircase leading to a storage cellar. The storage cellar was empty of most of the ice that we'd kept there, but at present it still had some snow and ice in there to keep some food nice and cold for the dogkin.

As we neared the guest house, the young shep guards started wagging their tails excitedly. They were all drinking from cups, and I couldn't help noticing all the cups had names etched into them. The cups were made at the same time as those strange pot coolers, but...well, they were mostly just cups, but they were better than wooden cups at keeping liquids cool.

The dogkin adored them, especially now that it was summer. They chilled water in the cellar, then drank it when they took their breaks. Some of them had also heard about how Ellie and the lostblood brothers sold ice in Mahati, and they'd taken to adding all sorts of flavorings to their drinks.

It wasn't just the dogkin though. Everybody enjoyed chilled water in their own way. The people who patrolled the domain, those who trained often, the cavekin doing heavy labor, the villagers helping

with daily chores—everybody loved having a way to cool their bodies in the heat while keeping hydrated. The pot coolers and the cellars were having an impact beyond anything I'd imagined.

"Don't drink too much or you'll give yourselves stomachaches!"

I left the dogkin with that before our traveling party made its way to Iluk Village, at which point we ended the first leg of our journey. The next day, we departed Iluk Village and kept following the road east, passing by the guest house and the rest area before entering the forest.

There weren't as many trees along the roadside as when I'd last been in the forest, and it made room for a refreshing breeze to wash over us. In it was the scent of the woods, like an herbal aroma of sorts.

"We planted lots of different herbs and grasses by the roadside that smell really really nice!" Senai explained.

"And they ward off insects too!" added Ayhan.

I was shocked. I hadn't even known there were plants that did that.

"Insects sure are annoying here in the forest," I said. "I bet that all the travelers, merchants, and carriage drivers are all going to be over the moon. That was a wonderful idea, girls. Thanks."

The girls beamed at me, and then started talking to each other and brainstorming to come up with more great ideas. Alna and I just enjoyed watching the girls as we made the most of that wonderful breeze with its beautiful aroma and its insect-repellent properties.

We passed by the forest rest area, straight on until the eastern border station came into view. I could see they'd done some logging in the area in front of the station, because it was a wide-open space. At the far end of it were fields that the twins were looking after, and when the girls saw me looking that way they gave me a full explanation.

"We planted as much as we cut! We'll grow them in the fields until we plant them elsewhere!" said Senai.

"We're planting trees that have delicious fruits and nuts, and trees that will make really good lumber!" added Ayhan.

"Then we'll have even more food, and more stuff to sell as well!"

"We have to start now because it's going to take a long time!"

I nodded approvingly as we passed by the fields, filled with little tree saplings all lined up neatly. Then we passed by the laborers' yurts and their workspace, and finally the border station proper came into view in all its glory. It had come a long way; the wooden fence was even bigger than when I'd last seen it, there were more guard towers, and they'd even started building a stone wall. There were some yurts with decorated and embroidered cloth for passing travelers, and wooden gates and pillars the likes of which I hadn't seen in Iluk.

"Sounds like something's up," I muttered.

Some dogkin came to greet us with their tails wagging excitedly, and some of the laborers looked over at us curiously, but Klaus was nowhere to be found. I could hear some people speaking on the other side of the border gate, but I couldn't make out their voices. But the twins' ears began to twitch as they listened in.

"I think it's a woman...?" said Senai. "And she's introducing herself...very politely?"

"I think she's a visitor," added Ayhan. "Klaus is over with her."

I wondered if maybe it was one of the women that Hubert and Uncle Ben had invited to Baarbadal, because the timing seemed about right. It was then that one of the border station mastis ran up to give me a report.

"A most amazing visitor!" the dogkin barked.

I tilted my head. What did "most amazing" even mean? I decided that it was better just to find out for myself than stand around confused, so I hopped off of Balers and passed his reins to a waiting dogkin attendant, then headed for the gates.

In a Carriage Passing Through the Forest—Orianna Darrell

At the end of several days of lavish, extravagant hospitality, Duke Mahati had passed Orianna a letter for Duke Baarbadal. In it was a report regarding the group of nobles that had passed through Mahati

at the same time as Orianna, and their suspected objective. He asked that Orianna report these findings and aid in the handling of the nobles.

Orianna had long ago decided that she would do her utmost in service to the duke, and so she was all too ready to accept the request. However, she could not help but feel some uncertainty. Her expertise was in matters of social etiquette. Political conflict felt like a very different challenge entirely.

Nonetheless, she felt it worthwhile to at least inform the duke of the report before anything happened, and made up her mind to help in whatever manner she could. And so she boarded the luxurious carriage that the Duke of Mahati had prepared for her, and with Fendia by her side they made their way through the forest.

"Oh my," Fendia sighed. "How very adorable."

Adorable?

Orianna gazed out her own window and saw *dogs* running alongside the carriage. Each of them wore a necklace fashioned from bone, and in their eyes was a clear and present intelligence. Orianna wondered whether it was even appropriate to call such creatures animals.

But if they are not animals, would that make them beastkin? Why would they be running beside us? What is our driver going to do about this?

If the dogs were indeed beastkin, one would have expected the driver to ask the dogs what they wanted, or otherwise stop the carriage to deal with them. Even if they were simply dogs, one would have expected the driver to find out if their owner was somewhere nearby. And yet the driver acted as if this were nothing out of the ordinary, and the carriage continued on its way.

Perhaps the driver knows these dogs, and so he knows why they are accompanying us?

This was the only logical reason that the driver was not at all surprised at or addressing this strange occurrence. But assuming the driver *did* know who the dogs were, that did not make it any clearer to Orianna. Were they beastkin? They looked nothing like the beastkin that Orianna had seen in Mahati, and so she wondered:

Were some among the beastkin truly as adorable as these small creatures?

Orianna had spent most of her life in the eastern part of Sanserife, so her knowledge of beastkin went only as far as the books she had read and the rumors she had heard. In the east, that meant stories of how the beastkin were barbaric and violent, and terrifying to so much as lay eyes upon. The reality, Orianna discovered, was that while the beastkin did indeed look different, they were neither barbaric nor violent. If anything, they were simply another form of intelligent life.

The beastkin would be no problem to have as neighbors, fun to have as friends, and as lovers... Well, that was perhaps a matter of personal preference, but Orianna felt that the beastkin would be just as capable of professing earnest, honest love.

All of this led Orianna to understand that the views held against beastkin in the east were twisted and discriminatory. And if the dogs running alongside her carriage were indeed beastkin, then she had nothing but ire for the pathetic people who had come up with their twisted stories about them.

Orianna was a certifiable dog lover, and one who had spent her free time studying animals in general. She had even published a book on the topic. Thus, the contempt she held for those in the east who would start such tasteless rumors and spread such hearsay was of such intensity she would dare not ever put it to words.

And if those dogs out there are *beastkin, then perhaps we can communicate...*

Orianna found herself nearing her window and opening it slightly. It was then that she heard masculine voices from the carriage behind her own. In that carriage were the men that Fendia had picked up on her journey to Baarbadal.

These men were the reason that Fendia had been left trying to sell her books at the Merangal market. They had followed Orianna and Fendia in silence, and turned down Duke Mahati’s attempts at hospitality, instead retiring to the room they were provided so as to continue training their impressively muscular bodies. It was admittedly difficult to see any sort of connection between the men

and Fendia, but they were in fact temple paladins.

It was the duty of the temple paladins to protect both the temples and the faithful who attended them. To that end, the strengthening of their bodies was to them a display of faith, and their absolutely chiseled physiques were an expression of the power of the gods. The temple paladins were known to match even a knight when it came to swordsmanship and the military arts, but as far as the public record was concerned they were merely priests.

The paladins who were accompanying Fendia were among the most zealous and conscientious the temple had ever known. They gave their days to ceaseless training and were happiest when they saw their temples well protected. They were also extremely stubborn in their views, and made no attempt to hide their opposition to the modernists.

Upon seizing control of the temples, the leading modernists had used the paladins as a military force, exercising violence not to protect the temple, but their own interests and authority. The paladins that worked for the modernists were rewarded with high-ranking positions but were at heart simply tools to strengthen the clergymen's standing.

The paladins traveling with Fendia, however, had not been able to stand for this, and had spoken out against the modernists in an attempt to have them change their ways. But the modernists were cunning, and by that time they had already secured ties to the royal family.

The noble paladins could not stop the momentum the modernists had built, and the more they spoke out, the more they found their authority and rank slipping away. It was then, as they grappled with their powerlessness, that they heard Fendia was leaving.

She had been happy, almost excited, and certainly not reluctant in the slightest to be leaving the temple. In fact, the paladins felt purpose in Fendia as she prepared her things, and so they took it upon themselves to follow her. At first they did so in secrecy, hiding as they sought to get a better understanding of the priestess's greater motives.

The paladins sneaked looks at the letter Fendia frequently read

and eventually saw that the letter had come from none other than the great Bendia himself. The paladins cried with joy and revealed themselves to Fendia, finally professing their desire to accompany her.

Fendia had known the paladins were following her right from the very start. They were all practically giants, and not one had been any good at hiding. Naturally, their attempts to spy on her as she read her letters had been completely obvious—brazen, if anything.

However, she knew that each one of the paladins stood against the modernists, so she allowed them to do as they wished. After all, what they lacked in foresight and general intelligence they made up for with their honesty, integrity, and piety.

To put it another way, they were lovable idiots.

Fendia's opinion on the paladins admittedly left Orianna scratching her head, but even Orianna had to admit that the paladins were indeed honest and pious to a fault. She did not expect them to cause any issues on their travels.

"Hmm," muttered one of the paladins. "Based on their movements, am I not mistaken in thinking we might *not*, in fact, be looking at dogs?"

"But if not dogs, then are they the so-called lions we have heard about?" asked another.

"My brothers, do not forget we are at the frontier," added a third. "They are wolverines! Of that there can be no doubt."

"Hrmm..." murmured the fourth. "Do you think Master Bendia is fond of wolverine meat?"

The men spoke full-throatedly and without any reservations, and the nature of their conversation was nothing if not extremely worrying. Still, Orianna decided that the paladins were Fendia's problem to handle, and so she tried to avoid looking in the general direction of their carriage.

She saw the noses of the adorable doglike creatures wrinkle with displeasure at the very idea of being eaten, and Orianna felt some regret at not better preparing the paladins before their departure from Mahati. Still, she placated herself with the knowledge that the paladins were simply too much for her to handle on her own.

And besides, I'm far more interested in the dogs than I am the paladins...

The carriage began to slow, and the doglike creatures disappeared somewhere. The air filled with the voices of people at work, and when Orianna poked her head from the carriage window she saw that they had come to a most impressive border station. In truth, she could scarcely believe that such a formidable facility had been put up in just a year's time.

This fully functioning military stronghold is a testament to the work of the heroic savior of the nation!

Orianna felt shock and awe gripping her heart, and she slowly alighted from the carriage once the driver opened the door for her. A man appeared from a door near the main gate, decked out in armor, and he approached them. Orianna assumed he was the person in charge.

Given his armored appearance, Orianna had expected a gruff introduction, but the man was eloquent and polite, and it was clear he understood the basics of noble etiquette. He already knew why Orianna and Fendia were here, and was prepared to lead them into the border station proper.

If the Duke of Baarbadal puts a man like this in charge of the border, then perhaps he is a more refined individual than I expected.

It was then that the gates opened and a man appeared, surrounded by the dogs who had been accompanying Orianna's carriage. He was huge, to say the least, and at a glance he appeared like a man who did not know restraint. Orianna was not about to speak rudely, but he did not strike her as one who understood manners.

He looks like a commoner through and through, but his strength is undeniable. Could he be...?

Just to be on the safe side, Orianna offered the most polite introduction she could, one expected in noble society, and the man responded in kind, as if he had only just learned such introductions himself.

Still, it made Orianna dizzy. This was *the duke himself*, but he had come to greet them personally and offered a greeting that showed

he saw them as equals. That was enough to make Orianna feel faint, but it also filled her with a sudden zeal.

This man was so popular with the doglike creatures that Orianna was practically sweating with envy, and in that moment Orianna's heart was set. She dropped to a knee and, in a display of absolute mastery over etiquette, declared her intent to serve this man, the Duke of Baarbadal.

At the Border Station Meeting the New Visitors —Dias

Six people had come to Baarbadal. First, there was our new etiquette instructor, Orianna Darrell. Then there was Fendia, who Uncle Ben had invited. Following Fendia were four paladins: Patrick, Pierre, Primo, and Paul.

The four paladins kept their hair cropped even shorter than mine. Their bushy eyebrows were furrowed, their mouths were shut tight, and each one of them looked like they worked out as much as I did. They were all dressed in priestly garb, and each one of them held a steel scepter in their hands. The scepters were for ceremonies and the like, but their design was really something else.

Let me explain: The end of the scepter was pointy like a spear, and below that spearhead was what looked like blades fashioned into something of a decorative pattern. When you got down to where the handle of the scepter was, you found curved, hooklike barbs. However much I looked at them, all I saw were weapons; none of them would have looked out of place on the battlefield.

The four paladins all introduced themselves, and when they noticed me staring at their scepters, they each spoke up in turn.

"I see you've an eye for quality, my good duke! And these are indeed quite the rarity!"

"These hooks catch blades, you see? Catch a sword in one of these and with a little twist you can break the blade clean in half...and they're capable of so much more!"

"Now you might think this looks sharp, but all the edges have

been dulled! Not a cutting edge to be found! It's all decorative, I assure you, no matter what anybody says! Yes, you can crush a beast's skull with one of these, and you could decimate a log, and armor is practically useless against their might, but no blades at all!"

"Our scepters are ceremonial, meaning that not even the royal family can take them from us. We're allowed to carry them wherever we go—meetings, negotiations, even parties! We're priests, and that means we're incapable of assassinations or any of that sort of business. But security and self-defense? Well, nothing beats one of these scepters, so rest assured that you can entrust the safety of your family to us!"



At that, all four of the paladins puffed their chests up and drove their scepters into the ground. I was really at a loss for words, but the dogkin who had escorted their carriages were by my feet watching them *very* carefully. There was a real caution wafting from each of them, and that put me on guard too.

"My lord!" screamed a voice from one of the border station guard towers. "The women and the men are all blue!"

It was one of the onikin women working at the border station. She'd been careful to stay out of sight so she could use her soul appraisal without any of our visitors noticing, and now she was telling me the results...which wasn't a bad thing, per se. It was just that her method lacked...subtlety. I just felt that the wiser route would have been to send a message through the dogkin or otherwise communicate to me with a signal of sorts.

In any case, Alna and the twins must have heard the report too, because that was when they decided to join me. Our six new visitors were all really shocked to see them—I'd almost thought their jaws were about to fall right off.

Oh, right. They're all from the eastern side of the kingdom. Of course...

Lady Darrell and the others were like me, in that none of them had even seen a demi-human or a beastkin until their trip here. Though even that left me scratching my head, because I knew they would have seen a bunch in Mahati. That, and it was well-known in Mahati that I was married to a demi-human, and I figured that Lady Darrell and the others would have heard about it.

So why are they all so shocked, then?

"Oh... Wow..." murmured Patrick. "So it's true... Master Bendia's nephew, the heroic savior now a duke, lives by the traditional teachings..."

"Our journey has not been in vain, my brothers!" added Pierre.

"A duke born of the temples," said Primo. "Is this not a first in the kingdom?"

"The golden age of the saint...it has returned to us..." uttered Paul.

The paladins were all on the verge of tears, but Lady Darrell paid

them no mind as she gracefully walked to Alna and the twins and politely introduced herself. Alna and the girls thus followed suit, introducing themselves in the ways of the onikin.

"I am Alna, Dias's fiancée and daughter of Urtz."

"I am Senai, daughter of Dias!"

"And I am Ayhan, daughter of Dias!"

Lady Darrell smiled at this and gave them a satisfied nod before turning back to me.

"My lord Duke," she said, "I have in my possession a letter for you from Duke Mahati. In it you will find a report detailing the arrival of a group of nobles, suspected of ill intent, who are heading this way. They are of no comparable rank to your own, and it may be tempting to overlook them, but if they are coming here anyway, knowing this themselves, then we must assume they have a plan."

Lady Darrell laid it all out, then went into explaining her proposed response.

"In countering these nobles, the manners and bearing of the nobility are your greatest weapon. With them you can intimidate your opponents, break their resolve, and bring them to their knees before any blow need be thrown. Your authority may well even turn would-be foes into friends and allies."

This really was something, but Lady Darrell wasn't done.

"Lady Alna, Ladies Senai and Ayhan. When people look down on you for being demi-human, or commoners, it is not with words that you will respond but your bearing. Doing so will ensure the least stress. The nobility hate to suffer losses—whether in their duties, their domain, or their reputation—and so they look to bring such losses upon their enemies. They insist on such foolishness even when it might result in their own downfall. Such are the ways of the nobility. And it is against such nobles that manners and etiquette can be put to their greatest use."

"I'm a simple man," I replied, "but I get told to mind my manners a lot. Uncle Ben keeps drilling me about it, Eldan made it clear I have to always keep them in mind, and my parents always had to keep reminding me too. I imagine you'll be in the same boat, but I'll be counting on you for your help, Lady Darrell."

I didn't completely understand everything she'd said, but I knew she was speaking the truth, and as far as I was concerned, if manners meant we could avoid trouble before that trouble even started, then I was all in. Still, Lady Darrell looked a little shocked at my response, though her expression softened into a smile, then seemed to come back to herself and was a little flustered.

It was then that Lady Darrell looked at the dogkin at my feet. She looked a touch surprised, and so I followed her gaze and found that the dogkin had little frowns on their faces. Their caution towards Patrick and his three paladin friends had yet to abate.

Oh, right. I completely forgot about this because the onikin said everyone was blue.

"All righty," I said, "will somebody tell me what's going on? Why are you dogkin so mad?"

I looked from the dogkin to the paladins, who had all taken to talking among themselves after their incredibly emotional display. I could tell by their faces that they knew exactly what was going on, and they explained it all in a panic.

"Oh! So the little ones are *dogkin*!"

"Our humblest apologies, we, um, uh...thought they were wild animals."

"We've never seen beastkin of their type before, so please, we beg your forgiveness."

"And yes, we realize that talking about hunting them for their meat was very much going too far..."

I took their words in, but I was still a bit conflicted. The dogkin had necklaces and clothes, and even if they were just animals that alone should have told a person that they belonged to someone. Well, the paladins all read that doubt in my expression and quickly formed a line. They all stood with their backs perfectly straight, and then in one smooth movement they all bowed right over in perfect sync.

"We are so very, very sorry!" they all shouted.

Some of the dogkin had actually been growling up until then, but the paladins' apology had so much force behind it that they were left stunned. They looked up at me, then looked over at the paladins,

then started telling Patrick and his buddies that they didn't need to go *that* far, or worry about it *that* much.

"Though I can't really say this is a *good* example," said Lady Darrell, a smile creeping to her face with each word, "it at least shows you the impact of good manners. Now it is time for us to do our utmost to prepare before that group of nobles arrives here in your domain. I daresay they will make an excellent chance for you to practice the skills I am going to teach you."

I wasn't sure I completely understood, but I nodded all the same.

Early in the Morning, Brushing a Dogkin in the Village Square—Orianna Darrell

Orianna had arrived in Iluk to work as its resident etiquette instructor, and woke early after having spent her first night in one of the village's strange tent houses. She took a seat at a chair in the village square, put one of the dogkin children on her lap, and took to brushing it. This was how she passed the time as she observed Dias going about his morning training.

It was Orianna's belief that understanding your students was paramount to providing them the best, most appropriate education. In observing someone closely, a teacher came to understand who the student was, what they were capable of, and how best to teach them. She believed firmly that this was the true path to the most fitting lessons.

And so it was that, upon observing Dias, she learned that he had a solid foundation. She had heard that Dias was raised in an orphanage, but in fact he had lived under temple roofs *before* entering the orphanage, where he had received a basic education from his parents.

When Orianna had observed Dias over dinner, she saw that he was well-mannered even at the table, and knew how to conduct himself. She felt that perhaps this had come as a result of his time at war.

And yet there were other examples of the effects of the military

on his person. Sometimes—though not always—Dias would stand with his back straight, power coursing through his entire being as he gave orders to the dogkin or his other subjects. His gaze in these moments was warm and focused entirely on the person or people with whom he spoke; there was no hesitation nor confusion in any part of him. His intent was crystal clear.

Orianna knew that the way Dias held himself in these moments was something that generals in the Sanserife military underwent special training for. However, Dias appeared to have simply seen it enough times that he learned it via osmosis. Even now, habits built over years of war remained, revealing themselves in the minutiae of everyday life, completely unbeknownst to the man himself.

Ordinarily, this sort of thing would tire a person out and put immense strain on their body, but for Dias it was just part and parcel of who he was. Orianna was thus unsurprised to see that Dias was in incredible shape, as evidenced by his morning training regimen.

Every morning, when the women woke to see to their chores, Dias also woke to exercise. He swung his axe countless times, ran laps around the village carrying heavy items or nearby dogkin, did an amazing number of squats, and followed it all up with some exercise where he would drop to his stomach only to spring to his feet an instant later. He repeated these exercises over and over, until he was practically sweating a river.

In terms of time, Dias's morning training lasted until the women finished their morning chores...but when he was done training on his own, he would call upon others for sparring sessions. Today, it was the four paladins who were helping Dias with his morning practice. They stood at the ready with their scepters in hand, while Dias faced them with a big chunk of blunted steel wrapped in cloth. The mock weapon resembled his battle-ax.

The four paladins circled Dias while Fendia watched on. Dias was used to being surrounded, however, and when the paladins launched their strikes he evaded them with ease, turning defense into offense as he moved in and knocked one of the paladins down, securing a path out of immediate danger. The remaining three paladins came at him one at a time, and each one moved with a fierce determination

and skill that was obvious even to the untrained eye.

Even then, however, the paladins were no match for the duke. In the end, the four warrior priests were left heaving, their eyes bloodshot and blue veins pulsing at their foreheads. It was obvious that they had taken the session seriously, though one wouldn't have known that if they'd only been watching Dias, who looked bright, cheerful, and very much like he'd just been out for a stroll.

"You're all pretty good!" he boomed.

Patrick and the paladins had been assigned the duty of Duke Baarbadal's bodyguards, and Dias was nothing if not impressed by their abilities. He was beaming, in fact. The paladins, on the other hand, had almost been broken by Dias's solo training, and their battle had been even harder. They were at the very limits of their consciousness, and were totally lost as to the secrets of the man's impeccable performance.

They had gone up against the duke himself, and began discussing how to fell such a man and what strategies would work best against him. In Orianna's opinion—and those of anybody logical, she assumed—one simply would not raise their weapon against Dias in the first place.

And from what I hear, Dias takes no breaks after his morning training and works until sundown. Patrick and his comrades are in fantastic shape, and yet they pale in comparison to the duke. Perhaps they are simply...built differently?

Dias has a solid foundation, is good-natured and honest, and does not appear to know what "tired" even means. Which raises the question: Which teachings would suit such a man best?

Orianna had a number of methodologies at her disposal. She knew the standard noble etiquette and the expectations of military leadership, but...did such methodologies truly fit a man of Dias's character? Though he was rough around the edges and a commoner, he *was* the heroic savior. As such, most were sure to accept Dias as he was. The problem was not Dias, then; it was those who deemed his background a problem.

Dias would have been a handful were he too vulgar and ill-mannered, but he had clearly been raised well. Therefore, forcing

him to adopt and learn unfamiliar rules and ways of being was less preferable than providing him something more natural.

I can teach him the way of kings, but should I?

In truth, Orianna had never once taught this methodology to a pupil but was nonetheless equipped to do so. It was an education for those who commanded royalty, instilling in them a bearing and presence necessary for their authority. Teaching a man or woman at the level of duke was not particularly strange, and in fact one might have even said it was all the more necessary for one leading a frontier domain.

As far as Orianna knew, Duke Sachusse had similarly undergone such an education. He was said to be perfect in his knowledge of etiquette, having studied all three of the methodologies that Orianna taught. However, Orianna did not think Dias capable of mastering all three, though she had faith he could learn one.

And so she pondered on her conundrum as she watched Dias lift all the sweaty, exhausted paladins from the ground without so much as a complaint.

For Alna and the girls, standard noble etiquette is enough. They will pick up the rest by following Dias and Bendia. They are not as fit as Dias, but they all have excellent posture and remarkable focus; they will pick things up quickly. But with their elegance by his side, Dias is best suited to more*, meaning yes, he deserves the way of kings.*

Having come to her conclusion, Orianna let out a long sigh, and it was then that she felt the eyes on her person. A number of dogkin children had gathered at her feet, and all of them stared up at her intently. The reason for their stares lay in her lap, where a dogkin slumbered peacefully. This bliss was what all the other dogkin wanted, and so they had gathered around Orianna.

Orianna thus passed the slumbering dogkin to their parents, careful not to wake them, and then happily began brushing the others one by one, in much the same way as she had the first.

I will finish here with these lovelies, have breakfast, and then we shall start our lessons in earnest. Trouble brews, and it approaches soon... Dias and his family must at least be taught how to hold

themselves and let their authority be known in their very presence. Their postures, their gazes, and their very auras must be enough to keep any potential foes in check. I simply hope I can turn them into men and women of such power.

But until breakfast was ready, Orianna was content to stay in her seat, brushing all the dogkin who had gathered around her feet.

With Etiquette Class About to Begin—Dias

Lady Darrell had arrived in Iluk, introduced herself with unrivaled grace, and made friends with the dogkin in the blink of an eye. Now, she was teaching us the importance of good manners, but when it had actually come time to start, she'd covered her face with her hands and looked skywards. She didn't say a word, and she didn't even reply when I tried to speak to her. She just stayed there silently, her head pointed to the sky.

I couldn't work it out. Patrick was by my side on account of him being my bodyguard, and he piped up with a question.

"She started acting strange after training, when you washed yourself, yes?" he asked.

"She did?" I asked back.

I took a moment to think back on what I did after I'd finished training. I'd been a sweaty mess after training and sparring, so I took a dive right into the village stream, clothes and all. I made sure to properly wash my clothes, my body, my face and my hair, then started a small fire by the riverside to dry off.

After that was breakfast. Following that, Pierre, Primo, and Paul all accompanied Alna and the twins as their protection, and Patrick was with me here in the village square. She wasn't by the stream when I'd jumped in, but she *was* there with Fendia when I was drying off by the fire.

I guess that was when it all started...?

"But I just dried my clothes," I said. "Did something else happen that I forgot?"

Patrick thought back on it all for a moment, then gasped as it hit

him.

"It was probably your firestarter scepter! It was a shock even for us paladins—I mean, it's just so convenient!—but perhaps it was too much for Lady Darrell to comprehend?"

"Oh, right. Yeah, I'd forgotten that I used it. But I mean, what's so special about it? It's just a rod that starts fires..."

"Huh...?" uttered Patrick. "Lord Dias, that scepter is imbued with *very* mysterious powers. Where did you find such a thing?"

"Hmm..." I did my best to comb through my old memories. "Uh... I just picked it up somewhere here on the plains. When I did, I discovered the whole firestarter part, so I kept it. I mean, it's *very* handy for starting fires, right? Still, for some reason only me and Uncle Ben can use its power, so in the morning one of us circles the village starting fires for villagers who need them."

"Huh. I see. It's just...almost unbelievable to think that you would just stumble across something so helpful. The gods have certainly blessed you with much in the way of good fortune, my lord."

That was when Fendia came over to us. She'd been watching and listening quietly, and now she thought to speak up.

"But truly...the gods smile upon you, Lord Dias. This village has been full of surprises since the moment we arrived."

"I don't know if I'd go *that* far," I said. "You'd be surprised what you find if you do a little exploring. The poison dagger was right over in the salt plain, and from what I heard, my hand-ax was discovered in a lake somewhere. It wouldn't surprise me if my self-mending battle-ax was the same, just lying around until someone came along and found it."

Just as I finished speaking, Lady Darrell let out a real big, heaving sigh from between the hands covering her face. This made me even more confused at first, but when Lady Darrell spoke next I felt like she'd made up her mind about something.

"I now know, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that the way of kings is *the* essential methodology for you to learn, Lord Dias," she said. "I'll also have to reconsider some of what I'd planned to teach Lady Alna and the twins, but before that it is imperative that we start with you and make sure we get things right. On that note, I

must ask: Were there any nobles in your family line?”

My head went blank, but I searched it as best I could for the information Lady Darrell had asked for.

“Nope,” I eventually replied. “Not that I know of. My parents and Uncle Ben took up temple work following their forebears. I don’t think *any* of them had any relatives among the nobility... Ask Uncle Ben if you want to be completely certain, but I think if I’d had nobles in my family tree then it would have come up when I was promoted to the rank myself. I would have been made to take up that family name, I reckon. I’ll look into it and make sure, but I’m pretty sure there are no nobles among my ancestors.”

“I...see. And one more question, if I may: When Hubert saw that scepter of yours, did he say anything?”

“Uh...nope. Nothing that I recall...”

“Well, I see that I’ll have to make time to adequately lecture him on the importance of fundamental knowledge regarding his position as a civil servant.”

“Huh? Uh, is that necessary?”

“Yes. It very much is for his sake.”

“Well, if you say so... Just don’t put too much of a burden on yourself, okay?”

Lady Darrell responded with a deep nod, and for some reason Fendia was right there nodding along with her. It looked like we were finally ready to get into our etiquette lesson. Lady Darrell decided to hold classes in the square, and anybody was allowed to attend if they wanted. Patrick was there, a whole heap of dogkin, all the baars, and even Sulio and his pals came along.

We started with how to stand, which meant keeping your back straight, puffing your chest out, and keeping your arms and legs taut right down to your fingers and toes. Then Lady Darrell taught me how to walk with my gaze straight and my stride bold, making sure I was aware of every moment, every twitch of my muscles as I lifted my feet or set them down, and even the weight I put into each step. With those things down, we moved on to all the kingly ways of sitting, nodding, and shaking your head, then various expressions and gazes.

It was an etiquette lesson, but it was also just fundamentals in how to hold yourself throughout daily life, and Lady Darrell was a great teacher. Whenever she had to scold you for something, you always knew exactly what you'd done wrong or had to improve, and most importantly why it was important to get right. I thought her lessons were really quite swell, and I didn't mind them one bit.

In a lot of ways, Lady Darrell's etiquette took me back to boot camp, when I'd first enrolled as a volunteer soldier...except that this was much easier and there was a real sense of purpose driving it. The first lesson ended up going by in a flash.

"Much is expected of kings," said Lady Darrell, "and while it is not a simple thing to explain, at their core kings carry with them a special presence that exudes the extraordinary. People must be awed by a king at a glance. They must feel the fear that comes with knowing they can never reach such lofty heights, and yet desire to taste such authority themselves."

A king, she explained, influenced people with his presence alone, and that was the skill that she looked to impress upon me through her lessons.

"You will be awe-inspiring, imposing, and stately," she continued. "Even just standing, you will move the hearts of the people."


XXX

That was what Lady Darrell said in closing, just as it was nearing lunchtime. She'd been standing straight since class started, gesturing and demonstrating everything she taught. I imagined that would have made her real tired, but you wouldn't have known that just looking at her as she bowed politely and walked gracefully to her own yurt.

I watched her go, and then I started trying all the things that she'd taught me. I did everything exactly as she told me, but for some reason it just didn't feel like it went all that well. This struck me as really odd, because it had all felt great when she was there overseeing it.

I was there for a while struggling and trying to make it work. Then I looked over at Lady Darrell's yurt and felt a newfound respect for just how good a teacher she was. I kept on working through the movements, and then when lunch was ready I took a break, ate, and then Lady Darrell started on our afternoon session.

Alna and the twins had all been busy in the morning with their own chores and whatnot, but they came to the square for the second class. Lady Darrell mainly worked on the girls' bearing and table manners, and they were some damn fine students—she told them what to do, and the girls just did it. While Alna was walking in a slow and graceful manner, Senai and Ayhan were at a table complete with plates and cutlery.

"Lady Alna, please don't be so tense in the way you hold yourself," said Lady Darrell, giving them all feedback. "As for you, Senai, a little more calm will do you well. Ayhan, you're a quick learner and your carriage is perfect; learn to be a little more clear in your speech and you will be one step closer to becoming the portrait of a truly refined lady."

While Alna and the twins were working on their manners, I was reviewing my own lessons. Lady Darrell saw how I was doing, nodded to herself, then walked the square with flawless grace as she began to lecture us about the nobility.

"The bearings, manners, and common sense of the nobility are a display of pride in one's position. The founding king developed the idea of the noble hierarchy to make for ease of governance, but

there is one other reason for it too. You see, the founding king was a most intelligent individual, and he foresaw that in the future corruption would seep into the ranks of the nobility."

The example that Lady Darrell gave was that of future members of the royal family handing out noble ranks purely for personal gain, strategic alliances, or even just attracting the opposite sex.

"The founding king knew that if the nobility increased too much in number, it would put great strain on the common people, and that the nobles would forget their duties. To avoid such an outcome, he established laws for the nobility."

According to Lady Darrell, those laws were nothing if not strict. For example, nobles *had* to own land, which was to say that owning land made you a noble. If you lost that land for whatever reason, you lost your rank with it. Rank could also be revoked in the case that a noble engaged in improper governance or deranged behavior, in which case a guardian was selected who would inherit said noble's rights. There were also rules stating that because the duty of a noble was to ensure safety and security in their domain and protect their subjects, they had to be able to prepare the money and people to do so.

The rules were very complicated and intricate, and enough to fill a tome.

"Thanks to these laws, the nobles who did not fulfill their duties in the war received the appropriate punishment for their behavior," said Lady Darrell. "At the same time, those who sold portions of their land and took on debt in the name of their responsibilities saw their actions rewarded. Living as a member of the nobility is not as carefree a life as many would believe. To live as a noble is to be bound by their laws, but even the strictest of laws have their loopholes, and the unscrupulous make use of these to sate their avarice. To these people, those without knowledge of noble etiquette are nothing more than prey on which to feed."

She then took it upon herself to tell us a story of what was possible.

It began with a powerful commoner who rose suddenly to the noble ranks but who received no education in their ways. One day,

this man, through his words and actions, committed a noble faux pas that called his rank into question.

It was then that a sly noble moved in, claiming that the man had, by noble law, shown that he was not of sound mind. The sly noble then offered to act as the man's guardian, knowing that his domain would need a steady hand to ensure its safety. With his foothold secured, the sly noble then used his newfound power to usurp the man of his rights and take his domain for himself. The domain's subjects then became little more than slaves and the man who was once so powerful ended up with nothing at all.

"Let me be clear," said Lady Darrell. "It is exceedingly rare for such things to occur. And one would need to go through the palace court to be allowed to act as guardian for a duke in the first place. Interviews would also have to be held by several people, including certified doctors and/or priests, to prove that the duke was indeed not of sound mind. However, even they might be tempted to make demands of their own at the cost of a favorable outcome."

To hear Lady Darrell tell it, it wasn't entirely uncommon for nobles to lay the groundwork for such plans by currying favor with those in positions of power, sometimes even as high up as the royal family. When they saw easy pickings in one who didn't know noble law, they grew all the more ravenous. They used any means at their disposal to take as much as they could, then used other methods in the years following to scheme and take even more.

"While one could point to the sly nobles as the culprit in this situation, noble society and the general public will say fault lies with the victim too, who left themselves open and vulnerable," Lady Darrell concluded. "So please understand when I tell you that learning manners, etiquette, and the ways of the nobility are essential to ensuring that your lands and people are protected. They are just as important as your strongholds, your weapons, and the soldiers who use them."

I thought back to Eldan's lectures all that time ago, and I remembered that he'd actually said something similar. However, at the time I couldn't see any of that kind of thing in my future. It had all just seemed unfathomable to me.

But as I was thinking that, I felt Alna's piercing gaze on me and spied a glare through narrowed eyes. That was all it took for me to know that *she'd* never forgotten what Eldan had taught us back then. She'd learned about Sanserife food and general table manners from me and Uncle Ben, and now I understood that she'd done that because of what Eldan had told us. All I could do was scratch the back of my head sheepishly.

"I have a question for you, Lord Dias and Lady Alna," said Lady Darrell, having just watched the interaction between us. "If such unscrupulous nobles were to arrive in Baarbadal, how would you handle them at present?"

"Well, you're talking about wicked types looking to take all we've worked for, right?" I mused. "I guess I'd give them all a proper smack in the head, lecture them on the folly of their ways, and send them packing."

"Amazing. You wouldn't turn them into target practice for our bows?" Alna sighed. "You are far too kind, Dias."

Lady Darrell's eyebrow twitched, and for a moment her expression grew tense.

"What's most important is that you don't let things get to that point in the first place," she said. "Regardless of their intent, they *are* members of the nobility, tasked with defending the kingdom. If at all possible you really *must* handle such matters with more tact and elegance... The nobles on their way here are likely dubious types, and the last thing we want is to send them home bruised and battered or stuffed like a pincushion. That's exactly why we must do our utmost *now* and learn everything we can..."

For a brief second, the tension running through Lady Darrell's face relaxed into something much softer, and she exuded an unspeakable sense of presence. I felt so much pressure under that look that I wilted on the spot and nodded my agreement before I could even think. My reaction was exactly what Lady Darrell was hoping for, and her smile was one of supreme satisfaction.

Our resident etiquette instructor then threw herself into her work with all the more gusto. And a few days later, just as she'd predicted, nobles arrived at the eastern border station, leading to a

minor fuss.

Getting Dressed to Visit the Eastern Border Station

I had the etiquette down, and I knew what I had to about holding myself with the appropriate carriage for my station, but things didn't end there. I had to engage our visitors in conversation, and so I had to learn all about the ins and outs of noble communication, gather information on recent events, and dress appropriately.

In terms of clothing, I needed to have something befitting of a duke, complete with gold or otherwise decorative accessories...but thankfully, that was already covered. The clothing I'd worn when I met with Duke Sachusse was more than acceptable, and Lady Darrell was pleased.

"No noble in their right mind would ever complain about the work of the Artois Trading Company's own president. He—ahem—*she* has an eye for detail that has drawn interest from even the royal family, and I see in this case she's even made use of baar wool. If only we had the luxury of time... I would *so* love to have something tailored for myself..."

Outside of my formal wear, there was also my set of armor, which the cavekin had crafted for me. According to Lady Darrell, this could also be considered formal wear on account of my military feats.

"This too will impress the coming nobles," said Lady Darrell when she saw it. "And upon closer inspection it is so incredibly well put together. It would be impossible for any of the blacksmiths in the kingdom to craft anything of such quality. You have the nation's leading tailor and blacksmiths who are masters of the craft...which must mean the tools you make and use here meet similar standards, not to mention the materials you have to work with... What in the world is happening here on the frontier...?"

Seeing as both my formal outfit and my armor were both okay, we got into a discussion about which to wear on this occasion, and Lady Darrell recommended the armor. She said that if the coming nobles were looking to find fault with me and weren't interested in friendly relations, then my armor would put some pressure on them right from the get-go.

At first I was planning to go out with my battle-ax to *really* show them who they were dealing with, but if you went too far with your intimidation tactics they could sometimes be misconstrued as declarations of war. With that in mind, I decided to simply keep a sword at my side.

I remembered then that Sachusse had his cane with a sword in it, and that got me thinking that the nobility sure were fussy when it came to weapons.

"Instead of your battle-ax, please bring your firestarter scepter with you," said Lady Darrell. "It's in vogue for the nobility to carry such items, and it will give your appearance a certain regal charm. But don't bring it as it is; make sure you wrap it in cloth so you can reveal it at the perfect time. Don't worry about *when* that time is. I will give you a signal, at which point you should unveil it and show what it is capable of."

I mean, *that's* how fussy we had to be.

I couldn't understand how in the world a rod that made fire could be considered a noble's accessory when that's all it even did.

But if someone of Lady Darrell's stature said it was important and I should take it with me, then I knew there was a good reason for it. I asked what that reason was, but Lady Darrell said that when I knew something it was always written all over my face, so she promised to explain it all to me later. And well...yep, she was right.

So with my outfit and accessory decided, it was time to move on to conversational strategies, but in this regard Lady Darrell said the nobles probably wouldn't be expecting much because I was just a commoner not so long ago. So until our visitors arrived, we learned what we could about them.

The two nobles leading the group were Eldan's neighbors to the east. They'd sold huge swathes of their respective domains to

Eldan's father and so didn't have much territory to speak of.

One of the nobles, Count Ellar, was a mostly run-of-the-mill noble—capable, intelligent, and friendly...though he used his amicable approach to find weakness in others so as to rise above them or otherwise turn them into his puppets. Viscount Earlby, the other noble, was a bit of an eccentric, and while capable he was short-tempered and impulsive. He was never wrong as far as he was concerned, and that made him aggressive in his dealings with others. If he hadn't been an only child, Lady Darrell believed he would have met his fate already.

In any case, word from Eldan said that the count and viscount bumped into each other in Mahati, got on like a house on fire, and decided to team up. They hopped in a carriage together and continued their journey to Baarbadal.

With that news having arrived, it was time to get ready. I put on my armor, then took one of the swords that Narvant had made for Mont and the guys and attached it to my belt. Then I wrapped the firestarter in cloth, hopped on Balers—who was waiting outside of the yurt—and headed to the border station.

Joining me were Lady Darrell, Hubert, Aymer (inside my armor), Alna (under the veil of concealment magic), Sahhi up above, and a retinue of dogkin guards. Even Uncle Ben and Fendia decided to come along, and followed behind the rest of us in a cart.

When we arrived, the onikin at the border station told me that Ellar and Earlby were a red the likes of which they'd never seen before. They hadn't even seen bandits as bad as those two. When we learned that, we all readied ourselves as if we were heading into battle. Admittedly, what worried me most was whether or not I could really display all the skills that Lady Darrell had tried her darndest to impart on me... So with my back as stiff as a rod, I took the rest of our travel time remembering all the lessons we'd been through.

I stayed tall on Balers's back, and I tried not to look like I was in any sort of hurry as I scanned the area. I kept my arms and legs taut, right down to my fingers and toes, but I wasn't rigid in my movements. Everything was smooth, purposeful, and elegant. I tried to keep in mind the fact that I was the lord of these lands, and as

such I represented the entirety of them. I told myself that impulsive reactions were the enemy.

My feats upon arrival to the frontier had traveled far and wide, and even to the king...though I had to remind myself not to feel like it was weird that the king would hear about what I was up to. I also had to remember that when I had doubtful thoughts like that (or any thoughts at all) they made themselves really obvious on my face, and so I did my utmost to remain expressionless. Lady Darrell had told me there was no need for polite smiles on my part, because a duke did not need to worry about such things.

As the border station came into sight, I thought of Lady Darrell's unique expression, the one that was stoic, almost blank, and yet at the same time gentle and motherly. Word of our plan had already reached Klaus, and all of his people were at the ready, opening the gates upon my arrival.

I had Balers trot slowly and deliberately through the gates as they swung open, then had him take the pose that Alna told me only truly well-trained horses were capable of, where he stopped and stood on his hind legs for a bit. I fed him a good helping of salt and sugar, gave him a good pat on the neck, and looked out beyond the station.

There were two groups there, both of them waiting upon my arrival. It looked like one was led by Count Ellar, and the other by Viscount Earlby. The moment they saw me they looked shaken—their eyes went wide, and their expressions melted into no discernible emotion whatsoever. I didn't know whether to call it fear or panic, but either way it was obvious that I was *not* what they had been expecting.

Balers trotted over to them slowly, then I hopped off and gave him a pat on the neck before turning to address the noble groups.

"You have my gratitude for coming all this way to my domain," I said. "I am Dias, and the Baarbadal domain is under my watch. I understand that you are Count Ellar and Viscount Earlby. Tell me, what business do you have here?"

I spoke just like Lady Darrell had told me: deliberately, powerfully, and with just a touch of pomp. I'd practiced the delivery a lot, and

Lady Darrell had assured me that the nobles would respond quickly, but...for some reason they just stood unmoving, mouths agape. I knew they were both as red as the sunset sky, but I also knew they were nobles; introductions were part and parcel of basic etiquette.

Well, that's what Lady Darrell had taught me, but Count Ellar and Viscount Earlby didn't budge. They were standing like statues. It took a little time, but finally they spoke.

"I... I must thank you ever so much for coming out to greet us personally," said one. "It is an honor to find that you even know our names."

"T-Truly, it is an honor," agreed the other. "I am in awe of your courtliness."

The two introduced themselves politely and with friendly smiles. I never would have known they were scheming something if I hadn't been warned ahead of time. They lied as easily as they breathed, and if Lady Darrell hadn't prepared me I might not have been able to hide how disgusted I was by them. Fortunately, Lady Darrell had drilled me when it came to practicing expressions, and I was doing my darndest not to fail her now.

Thanks to all the work I'd done looking at my own face in Lady Darrell's hand mirror, I was able to stay composed and offer just a subtle smile to the two nobles. I wondered how well it would work on them.

"I cannot express how grateful we are that you would greet us personally when you must be so very busy at present," said Count Ellar. "We have prepared gifts for you, in the hopes they might mark the beginnings of friendly relations between us. It would mean the world to us if you would accept them."

"While I have been unable to prepare something that matches the good Count Ellar," said Viscount Earlby, "I would still like to present you with the finest offerings we had at hand."

Lady Darrell had expected that the nobles would do exactly this. The one aspect of the gifts that surprised us, however, was the fact that Count Ellar had brought *animals*...and mighty strange ones at that.

The animals he presented me with were kind of not entirely

unlike horses, though their faces and big bodies *were* quite different. The biggest difference was that the animals had these big old humps on their backs that were covered in beautiful cloth and saddles. It seemed to me that these were animals you could ride. Count Ellar had brought three of the animals which, together with their saddles and whatnot, were his gifts.

The viscount, however, had brought exactly what Lady Darrell expected: jewels. They were kept in a beautiful box, which also looked quite expensive in and of itself. Gold and silver were considered a bit too blunt to work as gifts and were difficult to transport in large quantities. All of that meant that jewels tended to be the go-to gift between the nobility.

Compared to jewels, the animals that the count had brought were a bit more work, being that they'd need to be fed to maintain their big old bodies. Still, the gifts made me a bit worried if what we'd prepared on our side was a fitting response. All the same, I raised my hand, at which point Hubert arrived with a steel tray on which there was some baar cloth and wrapped rock salt. He handed this to one of the count's servants, and then Lady Darrell handed him another tray carrying the same, which he took to the viscount's servant.

The count got a touch more cloth than the viscount, though both received the same items we had previously given to Duke Sachusse. Baar cloth was in demand and sold for a high price, but was still mostly unknown throughout the greater part of the kingdom, so it would have just looked like cloth to anyone who didn't know any better. Still, Lady Darrell and Hubert assured me that things were different being that Duke Sachusse had received some, and it was widely known that Eldan adored baar cloth.

Basically, if three dukes said that a cloth was top-notch stuff, then all the nobility would, even if that cloth was of poor quality and tore real easily. Hubert explained to the attending nobles' servants that Duke Sachusse had received the same cloth, and the count and the viscount were once again left momentarily speechless. When they recovered, they were all smiles as they rubbed their hands together.

"Oh my!" exclaimed Count Ellar. "This is the famed baar cloth of

Baarbadal! We heard it spoken of a number of times while we were in Mahati, but I never imagined I would come into possession of some myself! Why, I'm filled with such joy I can barely contain myself!"

"T-Truly!" added Viscount Earlby. "To receive a cloth that even the great Duke Sachusse approved of is an honor among honors, and I may well have a new outfit made of this for the next party I hold!"

The two had heard of baar wool. This much was true. The rest, however? All the gratitude and joy?

All lies.

The viscount had no intention of having any outfit made, and I knew that because far beyond the count and the viscount was a dogkin sitting on a tree branch, who let me know if the men were telling the truth or lying. First the onikin in the watchtowers used their magic to discern the truth, then they sent a signal to the dogkin.

As for how the onikin were sending their signals, it came down to a whistle that emitted sounds humans couldn't hear. Lady Darrell had come up with it, and the cavekin had made it a reality. They called it a dog whistle, and they had decided on the number of whistles equating to truth or lies.

Admittedly, I was pretty dubious of a whistle I couldn't hear having any real use, but if the dogkin in the trees was anything to go by, the dog whistle was proving itself a huge success. Still, the dog whistle and the signals were only one part of it.

To be honest, it was the results of the soul appraisal that were *really* wearing on me. Both the count and the viscount were using the baar cloth as a way to talk about current news, which was a chance for them to try and worm their way into my good graces. They went on and on, talking about the royal capital, the state of the royal succession, what was in vogue among the nobility, and rumors they'd both heard about the empire.

And again, it was all lies. Even the stuff they'd said about Mahati —that could be easily verified by just asking someone.

Lies, lies, *lies*.

I couldn't believe that the count and viscount were spouting them

one after the other with those sickeningly cheerful smiles plastered on their faces. I was starting to think that maybe there wasn't a single shred of honesty in either one of them. These were guys with souls redder and hearts blacker than even a bandit, but they'd come bearing gifts, and they knew how to smile, flatter, and suck up to no end. It was the sort of thing I was just completely incapable of.

Lady Darrell had gone to great lengths to assure me that not all nobles were like these two—just that these two were especially awful—but I felt like I finally had a better understanding of the nobility.

And *boy*, was I getting all tired and depressed over it.

I was exhausted just listening to them, and thinking about how I wanted more than anything else in the world at that very moment to tell the count and viscount to shut up, then close the gates on them and head back to Iluk so I could sit down and pat all our baars until my hands went numb. Count Ellar cleared his throat, seeming to notice my feelings, and changed the subject.

"By the way, Duke Baarbadal, were you aware that in Mahati at present..."

And just like that, *he started bad-mouthing Eldan*! Lady Darrell had told me this might happen. She said that sometimes nobles would tell you awful stories about other nobles just to see how you reacted. They gauged your reaction, read what you really thought on the matter, and weaponized it.

Basically, if I said that the count's story was intriguing or I agreed with him, he'd keep it up, leading me on until I said something incriminating. Then he could take my words and say that *I* was bad-mouthing Eldan, or that *I* was scheming to steal from him or whatnot. He'd either take that straight to Eldan for use in his own negotiations or otherwise keep it as something to use against me. It sounded like just off-the-cuff chatter, but in truth it was anything but.

"You're lying," I eventually groaned.

I was at my limit. I couldn't take any more. I felt sick and was getting more and more fed up, so the two words kind of slipped out, just like that.

"O-Oh, but Duke Baarbadal, in Mahati the duke is..."

For whatever reason though, the count ignored me entirely and barreled on straight into a similar topic. He eventually dropped the topic of Eldan and moved on to something pointless about his own domain, but even that was built on a foundation of lies. I just started talking over him.

"That's a lie too," I said. "And that. *And* that. Oh, there's something true for once—so you *can* tell the truth sometimes. But now you're lying again. And again. Another lie. Look at that, you told the truth again. But wow, that lie was a *big* one."

After a few more of those, as could be expected, the count began to slow down until his mouth stopped moving entirely. His face was completely drained of color, he was sweating, and his whole body was trembling. The viscount took a look at his friend, then broke out into exactly the same symptoms. It was beyond me.

The count had been talking to me, and I'd spoken over him, outright calling him a liar for no good reason... Well, I mean, naturally I had the soul appraisal so I had *every* reason. But I had no *discernible* reason for calling the count a liar.

If anything, I was being as rude as humanly possible to a pair of nobles, and the count could have used that to criticize my character, even. Instead, he was totally frozen for the third time today, and Viscount Earlby was right there with him.

What in the world is going on with these two?

The two men started backing away very slowly, their voices trembling as much as their bodies.

"He can read lies in the words of others..."

"Just like the founding king... But I thought that was the stuff of legend..."

At this point I was only baffled, because I didn't have any clue how the founding king fit into any of what we were doing. But it was then that a breeze blew through the forest, billowing through the cloth that covered the scepter in my hand. Both Count Ellar and Viscount Earlby fell to their butts, both looking pitifully filled with terror, with their servants in very much the same state.

Sitting upon Hard Stone, Grasping for Something, *Anything*—Count Ellar and Viscount Earlby

The two men had collapsed in terror, and in their attempts to find something safe to hold, were left grasping at the stone road on which they sat, their hands shivering.

All the while their thoughts raced as they tried to answer the most pressing question in their minds: *What in the world are we supposed to do now?*

Before the count and the viscount stood Duke Baarbadal, a man who wielded an undeniable power of some kind. He had seen through the count's lies. Not just once or twice, but repeatedly and without fail—enough that it could not simply be deemed coincidence. He responded immediately to any statement, able to discern its truth in an instant, and this instilled in the two nobles the understanding that Duke Baarbadal had a power that rivaled even the founding king.

This revelation explained everything. Now they finally knew how a simple commoner, an orphan, and a man who had not even had a proper education, could rise to the rank of national hero. With his power to control friend and foe alike, the Duke of Baarbadal was as powerful as the king of legend.

Dias's powers also explained his sudden promotion to the rank of duke, and by his bearing, his manner of speech, and the exorbitant amount of coin he *must* have spent on his set of armor, Dias had impressed upon them the fact that he had yet greater heights to reach.

The final sign of the duke's awesome power could now be seen in the scepter in his hand. It was like that wielded by the founding king himself, and so the count and the viscount wondered: *Did he acquire it through his ability to read hearts?*

The two men knew what they themselves would have done. They would have used that terrifying ability to intimidate and control, to order the grave of the founding king excavated so that his scepter

might be acquired. And if Dias had indeed gone to these lengths, then it stood to reason that he now wielded the same powers as the founding king himself. But it was also possible that Dias had acquired other tools of the gods, which meant that he was capable of single-handedly uniting the entire continent.

Both Count Ellar and Viscount Earlby thought back to the legends they had heard of the founding king. They thought of the ridiculous stories they had heard to which they had snorted and laughed.

The stories said that the king could read hearts. They said that he could conceal his presence entirely and disappear in an instant. They said he always had a perfect understanding of how many enemies he faced and their locations. And they said that he had in his possession the twelve tools of the gods, which could be used only by himself and Saint Dia.

Among the tools were the unbreakable battle-ax, the scepter that could render entire armies to ash, the carpet that healed all injuries and illnesses, the dagger that poisoned only the enemy, the hand-ax that danced through the sky, the shield that repelled all attacks, the bow that required no arrows to fire... The stories went on.

With these tools at his disposal, the founding king had rid the lands of the monsters that had infested them, gathering the people he'd found and building the Sanserife Kingdom as the gods commanded. Sanserife developed at astounding speed under the founding king's rule, and the people no longer needed to fear monsters. Peace had ruled the lands, and it was believed that glory would follow for eternity...but the powers the founding king wielded could be wielded by no other.

Neither the king's children nor his grandchildren were capable of any of the founding king's great feats, nor could they utilize the tools of the gods. People believed that it was not the fault of the royal family, but rather that the tools themselves had lost their power. The tools thus brought with them nothing but doubt, and were eventually spread far and wide...but as a result, the grandeur of the royal family began to fade, and the kingdom split and fractured, losing most of its land until it settled into its current formation.

But if the power of the tools of the gods could once more be

assembled under one man... This was the thought that itched at the minds of the count and viscount, and it was swiftly followed by others. Why would Dias do such a thing? What was his ultimate goal? Such was the weight of their thoughts that Count Ellar and Viscount Earlby could not even speak, let alone clamber to their feet.

After all, if the duke could read their minds, then they had to be careful even in what thoughts they could let themselves entertain. Historians were split on the matter. Some believed the tales of the king to be completely true, others completely false, and yet others that his glory came by way of his ability to read minds. Records of the king's reign seemed to indicate that the founding king could not read minds entirely, but the count and the viscount believed now that Duke Baarbadal had seen through their very souls.

Is this truly a man we should stand in opposition to?

The count and viscount knew there *was* an option open to them: They could claim the scepter was an act of treason and conspiracy against the royal family, and report Duke Baarbadal to the royal family. Would it be worth spreading the idea that Dias was looking to unify the entire continent, much like its founding king, through military force?

But it was a preposterous idea, and both of the nobles knew it. The royal family would not believe such outlandish rumors without conclusive proof, and even getting to the king himself would require negotiating with the appropriate nobility, not to mention exorbitant bribes... It would be extremely costly, both in terms of time and money.

But if Dias were to know that they were scheming such an idea, no doubt he would prepare countermeasures anyway. They would be assassinated or invaded long before they could ever take any meaningful action. The risks were simply far too great.

In which case, was it possible, now of all times, to truly turn over a new leaf and profess a desire for honest, friendly relations? Until this moment, both the count and viscount had been thinking only of how to use Dias for their own ends, how to bring about his downfall, and how to make him their puppet. Every single one of their servants was well aware of the plans, and so the entire entourage

was like a collection of giant sign posts pointing out their schemes.

Would the mere mention of friendship at this point in time stink too much of falsehood?

But wait, if he can read our minds and hearts, and if we were to truly wish for friendship, earnestly and honestly, then perhaps...

The two nobles considered the same thoughts at exactly the same time, sitting silently upon the road at the border station gates, as Dias watched them curiously. It was then that he looked down at his chest as though he were looking at something, or perhaps even listening to something.

Then Dias removed the cloth completely from his scepter and pointed it skywards. Much foresting had been done around the border station, and so the section by the gate had little in the way of trees. A cool breeze drifted by and the sky was clear above them.

But as Dias raised his scepter on high, that same sky filled with a fire unlike anything the count and viscount had ever seen. This was far more intense a blaze than any furnace, campfire, or bonfire the men had ever experienced, and it swirled upwards to the open sky.

The moment slammed both men with the most powerful shock they had ever known. It went beyond any verbal description, shaking each to their core and forcing them to a course of action.

For one, servitude.

For the other, escape.

Once their minds were made up, the count and viscount sprung into action immediately, leaping to their feet and barking orders to their still-stunned servants.

After Lightly Swinging the Firestarter Around—Dias

Lady Darrell had whispered a quiet order, which Aymer had picked up with her sensitive ears and relayed to me. When I heard it, I simply did as told and sent as much fire billowing into the sky as the first time I'd ever used the firestarter. Once enough flames had spun round that I worried I might have raised the temperature

around the border station, I let it peter out until all that was left was a little wisp around the dragon's mouth at the end of the rod. I shook that out, and then the fire was gone completely.

"I apologize for how sudden this is," exclaimed Viscount Earlby, leaping to his feet, "but one of my servants has suddenly fallen very ill and is in need of emergency attention. Now that we've made our introductions, I'll take my leave!"

True to his word, the viscount and all of his servants really did look as pale as sheets. I was going to ask if he wanted to sit down for a bit, or if he would like some herbal tea, but according to the dogkin in the tree the viscount was lying to me. So I kept my mouth shut.

Viscount Earlby took my silence as permission, gathered his servants, and raced away as if he were fleeing a battlefield. Count Ellar watched his partner leave and laughed so much his belly wobbled. When he turned back to look at me, he was a completely different person, his face filled with the warm smile one would have ordinarily expected from a kindly old grandfather.

"Well, even if he has another scheme up his sleeve, you can leave him to me," said the count. "Our domains sit side by side, and it's all too easy for me to keep an eye on what he's up to. I also happen to be well situated for acquiring intelligence on the nearby domains and visitors from the capital. I'd be more than happy to share that with you as soon as I get it. I ask only that you remember the name and face of the humble Count Ellar."



Count Ellar was about my age, but his looks and attitude had given me the impression that he was much older...and according to the dogkin, he hadn't told a single lie this time. Aymer was in agreement.

"I can hear Alna and the others at the border station," she whispered. "He's not just telling the truth—all his ill will has totally evaporated. He's turned a sparkling blue."

I was so shocked that I let out a gasp. How had he gone from one extreme to the other? What did it mean? The sudden change actually made me a bit worried about whether I could trust the count's words, but Aymer could see that on my face.

"I agree that the sudden change is cause for concern, and you would be best to be cautious in your dealings with the count," she said. "However, given the response from the onikin, it is safe to at least respond to his gesture in kind. The animals he brought for us are called camels, and they're just as friendly as horses. More importantly, they're sturdy and excellent when it comes to traversing arid environments. If the count has camels, he must know desert areas quite well, which means it could prove very useful to have him on our side."

That reasoning made sense to me, and so after looking to Lady Darrell, Hubert, and Uncle Ben for their approval, I asked Count Ellar if he'd like to join me in the border station for a chat.

We headed in through the gates and to a wooden table and chairs that Klaus and his guards had prepared for us. The count and I sat opposite one another, and the count immediately launched into a series of questions. What did I think about this? What about that? How did I feel about this person, and that place, and those customs, and these laws?

I couldn't work out why it was that the count was asking me all of his questions, but that blue didn't so much as flicker. So I answered as best as I was able.

Eventually, he asked me what it was I wanted to do most, what I planned to do going forward, and where I hoped to end up. I had to think about that for a little while, but eventually I found the words I was looking for.

"At the moment, what I want to do and where I want to end up are pretty much the same thing," I said. "I want to grow our village, enrich the lives of our residents, increase our domain, and see Baarbadal develop with time. I was made domain lord before I knew much of anything, but I built a village and now it has lively residents. A bigger village, more residents, and better lives are something we can all enjoy, and I think watching our lands grow and change is going to be just as much fun. I want those days to continue, so I think I want to end up at a place where we have a great big village with lots of residents, all living peacefully."

The count smiled and nodded, and...well, he launched straight into more questions. He stopped asking about *me* and started asking about the *nation*. He asked me what I thought of the king, who I wanted to see on the throne after him, and what I thought about his possible heirs. Then he asked if I wanted to buy up land like Eldan's father had done, and if I had my eye on gaining even more power than I already had.

I didn't actually have to worry or think too much about this line of questioning because, honestly speaking, none of it really interested me.

"The king...?" I uttered. "Well, yep, he's the king. I've only met the guy once. As for who's next, I mean, I just hope it's someone suitable. I mean, no matter who wears the crown...we'll probably keep on living here in Iluk the way we always do. We're so far from everybody that the whole topic just feels completely disconnected from us, honestly. As for your question about buying territory, I don't think we need to. And besides, it's much easier to look for uninhabited territory like our wasteland and then just snap that up. I'm not much interested in more power either. I mean, is there even a rank above duke?"

I got a sense that something was up with Lady Darrell and Hubert then, like they were about to move to do something. I turned around to take a look at them, but the two cleared their throats politely and stood up straight.

"That was a rather complicated and tricky question at the end there," explained Aymer. "Hubert and Lady Darrell reached out to

stop you, but when they heard your answer they realized they didn't have to."

I scratched the back of my head and wondered if it really was all that weird of a question, and then I turned back to the count. Nodding with satisfaction, his smile had yet to waver. It seemed to me he was done asking his questions.

"Thank you ever so much for answering my questions, and especially those that were...shall we say, risqué? But now I have a very firm idea of your hopes and dreams, and the path you intend to walk into the future. Once I have had a chance to return home and adequately prepare, I will head to the royal capital posthaste. Oh, and do not worry about the management of my own lands and keeping watch over Viscount Earlby; I will entrust that to my son."

"Huh? Sorry, you lost me. What are you going to do in the royal capital?"

"I'm going to set a support system in place for you, of course," replied the count. "I'll ensure that the royal family and the residents of the capital are informed about what you are doing so there are no misunderstandings, and hold meetings with the nobility to explain your stance. In doing so I'll be able to find allies who might aid you in your efforts. Ordinarily, this sort of work would be done by members of your family or otherwise your aides, but I understand that this will be difficult given all the work currently underway here in Baarbadal. But I am an expert in such matters, so you can leave the task with me. Naturally, I wouldn't dare overstep my position, and everything I do will be done under my name... My actions will be that of your ally, and nothing more."

"Hmm...? Well, if you're going to look for help, I couldn't ask for better," I said. "But the meetings and the ironing out of misunderstandings... Is that really necessary?"

"My good duke, it most certainly is. Until now you've been able to go about your daily life without any trouble, but you may not find the future so accommodating. A single incident could be all it takes for the dam to burst, causing a flood of problems that reach even your distant domain. My job in the capital will be to ensure that you are protected from such things well in advance."

To hear the count tell it, the meetings he wanted to hold were for the sake of networking. Parties and balls were held often in the capital, and while some nobles were criticized for their constant revelry, such things were nonetheless tradition, and to ignore that tradition was to invite danger.

"But if I attend such parties and make it clear I am doing so on your behalf, then this will go a long way to putting many of these traditionally minded nobles at ease. My attendance as your representative will let people know that the nation's heroic savior is a noble just like them, and in their feeling a little closer to your person, you will nip a lot of potential trouble in the bud."

By working in my stead, the count could help to hold back the voices of criticism. It was networking at a distance, he said, and it had its benefits.

"Truth be told, I...have made many missteps in managing my own lands. I had to sell a great deal of it, and even now I am not sure how long I can retain my title. I have no military strength to speak of, and almost nothing in the way of military experience. It is safe to say that, as a nobleman, I am hopeless. However, I excel in the field of social networking, and seeing as you have been receiving instruction from the one and only Lady Darrell, I promise to be of great help to you."

The count then turned a knowing gaze on Lady Darrell. I hadn't even actually introduced her yet, which meant that the count must have known her. He'd also already known by her attendance that I'd recently taken her lessons. That meant he'd known all of that and still offered his services. After some thought, I replied.

"I think I have an idea of what you're getting at," I said, "and I understand that you mean well. Please allow me a moment to discuss things with my advisors before I give you an official answer."

Count Ellar's smile and nod showed that he had no issues with that. It was then, however, that Uncle Ben and a few others—who'd been keeping their distance all this time—moved in and began to speak with the count, taking him out of earshot. I was pretty curious about what they might be talking about, but Uncle Ben shot me a quick look that told me to stay out of it, so that's what I did.

While Uncle Ben and the count were chatting, Sahhi dropped down from the sky onto my arm. His wives dropped down elsewhere in the border station, and he gave me a quick report on things. When he was done, we had a bit of a chat.

"Whoooooa..."

The voice came from near Uncle Ben, and when I looked over, I saw that it was Count Ellar. He had a really odd look of awe on his face.

On the Way Home—Count Ellar

After properly introducing himself and discussing things with Dias, Count Ellar boarded his carriage and started on the trip home, smiling quietly to himself as it trundled along the road. Across from the count sat an elderly servant, who could not help but be troubled by the fact that things had gone so differently from how they had originally planned. Ellar could see the worry written all over his servant's face and addressed it.

"There is no need to fret so much, my good man," he said cheerfully. "We have picked ourselves a winning horse. And a most marvelous steed it is, it must be said. I've no eye for foreseeing the future, no wisdom when it comes to building an enterprise, and not a hint of guts. Why, I'm as pathetic as they come. That said, over the years I have developed an eye for character that I am quite proud of. And my eye tells me that the duke is an extraordinary man. He is the second coming of the founding king."

Count Ellar had no idea what Dias would do next, but he was certain that there was no downside to siding with the man. Success lay in befriending him. Dias had saved the nation, slain dragons, cultivated distant lands and broadened the kingdom's territory, all in just a single year. Not only that, but people were flocking to him.

"He is destined for yet more greatness," continued the count, "and if we serve him, then some of his greatness will trickle down to us. The former Duke Kasdeks, the king, the potential heirs to the throne—none of them can hold a candle to Dias. I saw that the

moment I saw the beastkin working at his side. By allying ourselves with Dias, even someone as hopeless as myself can know good fortune."

The count's words comforted the servant, who nodded along with his master's words. Finally able to relax, the old man slumped into slumber, leaving the count alone with his thoughts.

The duke commands not only beastkin, but birdkin too. If the fishkin join his ranks, then he really will *be the second coming of the founding king. Which makes me wonder: If the founding king were born now, in a time when monster numbers have dropped considerably, what might he have achieved?*

Perhaps in Dias, we might see that question answered.

Judging by the old-fashioned way in which the old priest introduced himself, he is a fundamentalist. The modernists have decimated our nation's traditions and history, but the temple being built in Baarbadal follows the old ways. This means the more traditionally minded nobility are certain to ally themselves with Dias.

But most importantly, equality between human and beastkin means I can avoid any potential ire directed towards my own family line...

Count Ellar thought back to the family tree he had once seen, kept in an envelope he was told never to unseal, hidden in a storehouse he was told never to enter. The family tree was torn, nearly illegible in spots, and for some generations incomplete. The issue, however, was not in what was not written, but what *was*.

The first of the Ellars had taken a beastkin as his wife. Their child had grown up to inherit the position of lord of the family, and the bloodline had continued, presumably all the way to Count Ellar himself.

I have no discernible beastkin characteristics, and so the beastkin blood in me has likely thinned over the generations. If the modernists were to discover that I am a human with beastkin blood running through my veins... I shudder to imagine the consequences.

I know that perhaps it would have been best to simply burn that paper, and yet it tells the story of our family line, our history and traditions. I simply do not have the courage. I have to assume that

my father and his father before him felt exactly the same way.

And I do not doubt that there are many others with family histories just like my own.

The founding king himself had no issues with the beastkin. In his time, humans and beastkin lived side by side. There would have been no kingdom otherwise. So is it not natural that many of our first generation ancestors wedded and loved beastkin partners?

There must have been so many other families whose founding ancestors, like my own, married demi-humans and beastkin, and started families with them. There would have been no concern for one's bloodline, and a place where humans lived entirely alone would have been unthinkable...outside of the closed societies of the temples, that is...

I don't think it is any coincidence that the priest by Dias's side resembled him so. He was born in the temple, where bloodlines were not often mixed... That is likely the reason he is capable of wielding the tools of the gods. Until now, everyone has believed that the tools of the gods were deteriorating, their powers weakening. Even the royal family thinks the same.

But as for the blood of the royal family... One can hazard a guess at what happened...

Count Ellar's fingers traced the shape of the ring on his hand, on which was carved his family seal. He smiled to himself, and let out a sigh—one that marked a job well done.

At the Same Time, Watching Count Ellar Depart—Hubert

"Do you really think it was a good idea to show them *that* much?" asked Hubert, watching the count's carriage disappear over the horizon.

"Yes," replied Lady Darrell, standing by his side. "I don't see any issue in showing them our border station, Lord Dias's character, one of the tools of the gods, and the beastkin serving him. He is a *duke*, after all, and removing him of his rank would require all the other

dukes *plus* the king to be in alignment. A count and viscount are powerless against him."

Hubert sighed.

"Yes, but even nobles of their stature might still kick up a fuss. That may result in trouble down the line..."

"They can say whatever they like, but very few—if any—will take them seriously. And before anybody can take any sort of action, they will first have to ascertain if the stories they have heard are true. That will bring them here to Baarbadal, bringing an excellent opportunity to see for themselves the type of person Lord Dias is."

Lady Darrell reminded Hubert that the border station was already well equipped for entertaining guests, and that everything would go fine as long as Dias interacted with those guests as he had the count and viscount. Their job as advisors, then, she explained, was to merely keep a loose hold of the reins in case there came a need for a subtle course correction.

"Let us not forget that Lord Dias is a duke who has won the favor of two of his peers," Lady Darrell continued. "It behooves him to be a little more bold. Doing so will draw ever more distinguished guests to the Baarbadal domain. I don't mean to step beyond my role as etiquette instructor, but Baarbadal *has* been putting a somewhat excessive effort into its defenses, so I daresay it's about time we played the other cards available to us."

In that sense, Lady Darrell felt that the count and viscount had been a most excellent test of sorts, given that she had gotten a sense for their character on her way to Baarbadal.

"In any case, we need the people," she concluded. "The plan is to explore the wasteland and beyond, yes? Do you seriously expect to handle the entirety of it alone?"

Hubert nodded. He agreed with everything Lady Darrell had said. Still, his lips pursed. He had never been good when it came to plots such as these, and he had not had any good plan for drawing people to Baarbadal; after all, there was very little to entice them. Lady Darrell, however, had forged her skills in the fire of the classroom, bending the royal capital's stubborn nobility into well-mannered individuals. He was certain that her opinion was right.

The two then spun around to continue discussions with the lord of the lands...only to find that he was gone. They looked all around, wondering where Dias could have gotten to, when they heard a booming voice from a nearby watchtower.

"Wow! Look how far you can see from up here! Maybe if you make the platform a little wider it'll be easier to throw things like spears and rocks?"

At some point, unbeknownst to Hubert and Lady Darrell, Dias had climbed to the top of a watchtower. Perhaps it was just that he couldn't wait for the count to leave before seeing it for himself. Both Hubert and Lady Darrell had some stern thoughts about the matter, and so they walked towards the tower to voice them.

A Few Weeks Later, in a Tavern at the Royal Capital

The tavern was packed with patrons, smiling faces at every table, the air alive with chatter. Prince Richard's efforts at reforming the lands at first had no real connection to the common people. The tavern's clientele, too, thought nothing of it. But as the land directly controlled by the royal family grew, along with the territory directly governed by the order of knights, goods began to flow more freely and the economy improved. The proof of those efforts were all the more obvious in the tavern; everyone had a drink in hand as they bantered about the prince's reform.

It was the topic of the day, and none tired of it as they downed their drinks. Many also praised Richard for his efforts. The economic conditions made people all the more happy to spend their coin. In turn, the tavern barkeep ordered huge quantities of foodstuff and alcohol each and every day. Even then, however, most of it was gone before midnight, and customers who arrived late had to settle for the tavern's least popular options.

In a room at the far end of the second floor was Narius. He'd hired the room for a few silver and now sat at its table, sipping a bowl of cod soup.

“Not bad,” he commented. “Not bad at all.”

Narius sensed someone entering. However, they came not by the door, but rather the open window. He took a swig from his bottle of wine and spun around to see a grinning girl with a head of red hair.

“How’s it going?” she asked.

“Well...the economy’s great everywhere, but the air here? Not so much. The capital’s economy is good, just like all the other areas under the control of the order of knights. The west and the formerly occupied areas are no different, and the north is going well too, thanks to that earth dragon they slew. It’s everything else that’s the problem.”

The girl looked up at the ceiling and tapped the side of her head, committing Narius’s every word to memory.

“The nobles that had their lands taken are the biggest potential problem,” Narius continued. “Well, *former* nobles, I should say. They’ve all got chips on their shoulders, and everybody is afraid that they’re next. The reason they don’t speak up or do something is that His Highness’s military power keeps growing. Now, you can keep people under control that way, sure, but...when the balance of power shifts, or a scheme is put into play that the military can’t handle...well, what then, eh?”

At this, the girl tilted her head, curious.

“But all the nobles who lost their territory either did bad things or refused to cooperate in the war, right? Aren’t they getting their just deserts?”

“I’m not saying you’re wrong, but the type of people who’ll take a punishment like that and wear the responsibility *aren’t* the types to behave that way in the first place. But I suppose it’s fine if you’ve got people on your side who can nip their revolts in the bud like what happened in the west...”

“Well, the guild *is* putting a lot of effort into the area. Disputes are bound to happen.”

“Yeah, maybe... But hey, your mother and father are doing just great out west, from what I hear. The guild chief too. Everybody’s having a grand old time.”

“What? Seriously? What kind of a parent shoves all their

responsibilities off onto their children while they traipse about in a new domain?”

“Ehh, that sounds like a family matter to me,” replied Narius, cringing at the girl’s question. “And it sounds a lot like you’re asking me to bad-mouth my superiors.”

The girl’s knowing grin said everything for her, and she reached into her knapsack and revealed from within a bottle of wine. It was a very special vintage, and no sooner had she put it on the table than she was gone, having escaped through the window much in the same way she had entered.

“The guild’s good to me, the prince is good to me... What next, I wonder?”

Narius looked at the bottle for a time, then popped the cork and took a swig.

Afterword

As is tradition, I'll start with thanks.

Thank you to everyone who has supported this story until now, and everybody reading it on Shosetsuka ni Naro. Thank you to everyone who sends me fan mail, the team that works on all the book's editing and revising, the designer, Kinta, for all the illustrations, and Yumbo for their work on the manga adaptation together with their assistants and editors.

Thank you all so much! Without you I'd never have reached volume 10!

Yep. Volume 10. My dream of double digits has come true!

I never imagined I'd get this far, and I'm just so thankful to everyone who supports Dias's adventures. He's a long way from done, however, so I really hope you'll join me in seeing where he goes!

Volume 10 was all about the nobility... Or at least, all about acting like the nobility, thanks to one of our new characters. Lady Darrell, Fendia, Patrick and his buddies—I came up with them all very early on, but had to put off their introductions. That meant that Dias's study got put off too, which probably makes him even more of a headache for poor Orianna.

Going off on a tangent here, I think you just have to get used to stories weaving their own tales when you write them. Sometimes you hear about characters acting of their own accord, and that's very much the case with *Frontier Lord*. Sometimes Dias's unique view of things means that nothing else will motivate him to action, and sometimes Alna is so busy with her chores that she doesn't pop up in the story. With everybody having their own schedules and motivations, the story sometimes has a life of its own.

What all the above means is that sometimes things don't go as you originally planned...which brings us to what's going to happen in volume 11. I have new characters coming in the next volume. They're characters you can think of as fantasy genre staples, and they're really going to open the world up for Dias...

Well, that's the plan, and I hope you'll stick around for the ride.

I hope to see you again in volume 11!

Fuurou, August 2023

Bonus Short Stories

Manners Maketh the Nobleman

I'd chopped up some firewood and was taking it to the kitchen range when I saw the Iluk Wives' Club. They were at the rest area near the well, where I'd often find them sitting in a circle embroidering something, munching on snacks, or sometimes just chatting to kill time. Today though, I could hear Lady Darrell's voice, and I knew she must have been teaching them something.

It reminded me that she was also coaching Senai and Ayhan in the ways of trouble between nobles. Something about how in the past a nobleman's daughter had been caught up in some issue or another.

It didn't mean much to anyone but the twins, but all the same Lady Darrell had said anybody could come sit in on her lesson if they wanted. That had brought over some of the dogkin and falconkin, and even a few of the grandmas and onikin women. They were all listening very intently.

I wonder if she chose to hold this near the kitchen range because it's about daughters of the nobility, and women in general?

In any case, I didn't think I'd be of much help when it came to a topic like that one, and I didn't think any of the guys would be particularly interested, so maybe the kitchen range was the perfect spot for Lady Darrell's lesson. Not to mention, the proximity to the range itself meant that tea and sweets quickly spread through the group...and some of the dogkin were more interested in *that* than Lady Darrell's lecture.

Lady Darrell didn't mind in the slightest, however, and kept her focus squarely on the girls, who were scribbling down notes just as fast as they could write them. Aymer was watching over them while they worked, making sure that they didn't make any spelling

mistakes or write things down wrong.

I watched the lesson out of the corner of my eye while I put the firewood down. Then I helped bring up some water, and when I was done with that—and feeling mighty good about myself—Lady Darrell spoke up.

"Lord Dias, a moment of your time, if I may?"

"Huh? What's up?" I asked, wiping the sweat from my brow with a towel.

I walked up to Lady Darrell and the twins, both of whom were looking at the paper in front of them with a fierce curiosity. I guessed then that maybe Lady Darrell had hit them with a pretty complicated question, and they were struggling with the answer.

"I just gave the girls a scenario," explained Lady Darrell, "and it made me curious to know how *you* would handle a similar circumstance. Do you mind?"

One of the grandmas was kind enough to hand me a cushion to sit on, and I took a seat while I nodded for Lady Darrell to continue.

"Let's say that a person of authority at the royal castle, perhaps even one of its retainers, is scheming your downfall. They frame you for a crime you have no recollection of—which is to say, you are falsely accused. What would be the most proper course of action to solve this problem of conspiracy against your person?"

To be honest, I didn't have to think about the question. I answered straightaway.

"Hmm..." I murmured. "That's a bit of a vague question, and I feel like I was asked it some time in the past, but...you know what? I reckon I'd march straight over to the castle and punch that retainer square in the face. I'd punch him until he confessed to his schemes, and... Huh, I guess that'd settle everything, wouldn't it? I mean, come to think of it, depending on the conspiracy it might just be quicker to lop off the guy's head..."

Lady Darrell dropped into silence, and her cheek twitched a certain way I'd seen a few times now. But the twins? Well, their eyes lit up with awe and wonder.

"Wow!" they exclaimed.

"Ha! That's our Lord Dias!" barked one of the dogkin.

I heard the grandmas chuckling too.

"Uh, hm... Lord Dias," said Lady Darrell. "I think you've mistaken my question for another, but in any case... I don't see how you've solved the problem..."

It was clearly a struggle for her to get the words out, but I listened to them, and this time I thought on it a bit more.

"Huh? Really?" I muttered. "I mean, if you ask me, dealing with the leader of a conspiracy is the best way to end it, no? Like cutting off the head of the snake, as they say. And you said the guy was in a position of authority, right? If he's bearing ill will against me, then no doubt he would've planned some countermeasures to my possible reactions. So it might not be so easy to solve outright. Still, when it comes to them scheming types, you really shouldn't fight on their terms, which I suppose in this case is the castle laws, or the trappings of noble society. What you *should* do is ignore their plans entirely and just sock them in the face. When you cut off the head of the snake, the body doesn't have a brain to power it, so it just dies out. I'm telling you, I think it's the fastest solution to the problem."

"Erm... Might I ask who taught you that lesson and your most...unique solution to this particular problem?" asked Lady Darrell.

"Well, I don't know if you could say *taught*, exactly, but a similar thing happened once in the past and Juha explained it to me. He said that you should never fight a schemer where they're most comfortable. He told me my way might not be *correct*, per se, but it *is* a direct strike on the enemy's weak point. I think he said something along the lines of, uh... 'Just as it is difficult to strike against conspiracy with authority and influence, so too is it difficult to plan against unstoppable violence. Very few would jump in to save a literally broken ringleader, and so it's a matter of who dares wins...' Well, I think that's what he said, anyway."

The grandmas were laughing now.

"That makes so much sense!" exclaimed the twins.

Lady Darrell sprung into action right then and there, fervently trying to correct the girls. She told them that my methods only worked because it was me, that it was a special case, and that by no

means should they try to imitate what I'd just suggested. I didn't say a word because I didn't want to step on Lady Darrell's toes, but I really did think it was a pretty effective way of handling the problem.

At That Same Time, in the Domain Lord's Residence in Mahati—Eldan

"Is it...*actually* possible to solve a problem like that by such means?"

It just so happened that, at the very time that Dias was giving Lady Darrell an answer on how to end a conspiracy against his person, Eldan was discussing that very topic in his office at his manor in Mahati. With him was the inimitable Juha who, for no particular reason, was running through some stretching exercises while they talked.

"Yes," replied the military strategist. "It is certainly not *impossible*, but to put it succinctly, it depends on the circumstances. When planning a conspiracy, one needs to do two things: Gather the funds to see it through, and get their hands dirty in the world of underhanded dealings. You'd also have to be making connections, negotiating, potentially buying people off... All things that, if they were to come to light, could be brought to trial."

Juha's lecture continued through his exercises.

"The leader of a conspiracy is often thought to be in a supreme position of power, above and beyond it all...but by the means we have just discussed, the curtain is torn away, and the facade is revealed. They are rendered powerless by a completely unexpected punch in the face—a rampage they never could have predicted... And when they are captured and the evidence against them is gathered, they find themselves suddenly in crisis."

According to Juha, noble society was a world of shrewd alliances built on the potential for power, authority, and riches. A sudden assault on the leader of a conspiracy would reveal the loyalty of his

followers, but more likely than not result in them siding with Dias and rallying against their former leader to secure their own futures.

"And that is, in fact, exactly what happened," said Juha. "Dias has no interest whatsoever in the power balance of noble society, and even less in vast riches. Many of the conspiracy leader's once-allies saw the attack as a chance for them to make bank and, as a silver lining, claim that their rescue by the nation's heroic savior played a part in it. At the end of the day, they all ignored their schemes, their countermeasures, their traps, and their brownnosing, because in the end...not one of them wanted to be punched in the face quite like *that*."

Juha sighed.

"It is the combination of ridiculous power and a complete disinterest in any sort of greed that grants Dias this secret weapon of sorts. Do not, under any circumstances, attempt to mimic his ways."

"Yes, well..." murmured Eldan, "I, too, would consider how to profit and beat my competitors when given such advantageous circumstances. It's almost unfathomable to think that Dias would have no such thoughts in mind, his only goal to see the perpetrator punished. I can only say I am glad to have him as an ally and not a foe. Hmm... Yes, this only makes the point that much clearer."

Eldan then turned his gaze westwards, and he felt just a twinge of sympathy for the fools who attempted to instigate conspiracies against the now Duke of Baarbadal. At the same time, however, he thought it beyond stupid that anybody had even tried.

Watching Over Lady Darrell's Lecture—Dias

"In closing, let me be clear: As members of the duke's family, you have a number of different responses you can take in response to a plot being brought against you," said Lady Darrell. "There is the king's judgment and the palace courts, both of which I'd recommend for the two of you. I cannot stress enough that you simply don't

need your bows to solve such problems, and please, listen to me: *Lord Dias is a special case!*"

It dawned on me then that I hadn't quite given Lady Darrell the answer she'd been hoping for, because the twins had started thinking real outside of the box after my response. Lady Darrell was in a right panic about it, all flustered and trying to set them back on the right path before they got the wrong idea.

The founding king had been mighty worried about trouble among the nobility, and so he'd put a number of laws and safeguards in place to deter such things. They were supposed to guard against plots and conspiracies, and usually they did when everything was going well. The whole reason that *I* had gotten caught up in things during the war was on account of me being a commoner, and some people had seemed to think they could take advantage of that.

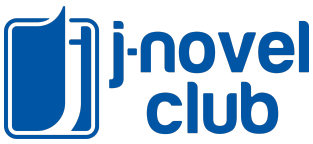
But I'm a duke now, and the twins are daughters of a duke, so, well, I guess the best way to solve our problems is the way that Lady Darrell is recommending.

Though whether that fits with how the twins feel is probably another issue entirely...

In any case, Lady Darrell continued her teachings, and it seemed that by sundown she had the twins back on course...with a continuation of things planned for the following day. Lady Darrell asked for some time to recuperate before she held her next class.

Yep, I reckon we owe that woman a real good raise...

That's what I was thinking as I walked off to chat about it with Ellie and Hubert.



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 11 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

The Frontier Lord Begins with Zero Subjects: Volume 10
by Fuurou

Translated by Hengtee Lim Edited by Ribeyrolles

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2023 Fuurou Illustrations © 2023 Kinta
Cover illustration by Kinta

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2023 by Earth Star Entertainment This English edition is published by arrangement with Earth Star Entertainment, Tokyo English translation © 2025 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: September 2025